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# Assessment of different crosslinking mechanisms on PVA-based membranes to achieve water resistance with iron imprinting sites

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## Abstract

Water-resistant PVA (polyvinyl alcohol) electrospun membranes with different crosslinking mechanisms were synthesized using the facile electrospinning technique. The crosslinking mechanisms were differentiated by introducing 2 different functional groups of different crosslinker agents into the molecular structure of the membrane. The evaluation of water resistance was conducted by both micro- and macro-structural analyses, such as Fourier Transform Infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM), Energy Dispersive X-ray Spectroscopy (EDS), X-ray Diffraction (XRD), water contact angle (WCA), and immersion test. Infrared spectra confirmed the formation of new bands at around 1700 $cm^{-1}$, which are acetal or ester groups, indicating the successful crosslinked process. Additionally, the lowered intensity of hydroxyl groups also signifies that the membrane is water-resistant. The XRD patterns showed the signature peak of PVA at the angle of 20°. Furthermore, the reduction in iron content, as shown by EDS spectra, was attributed to the surface imprinting process. SEM images displayed the formation of nanofibers, with mean diameters of 103 nm and interconnecting nanobead structures. The results showed that WCA was significantly enhanced, up to 91°, with minor loss in structure during water immersion test for 24 h. These findings confirm the hydrophobic characteristics of the membranes and their potential application in water-related fields.

## Keywords

poly(vinyl) alcohol
surface imprinting
water resistant
crosslinking
electrospinning

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## Key findings

- Formation of acetal and ester groups, as the main crosslinking mechanism, lead to hydrophobic characteristics.
- Crosslinking mechanism provides more amorphous regions to the membrane.
- Lower solution viscosity lead to the formation of nanobeads, initiated by electrospraying process.

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## 1. Introduction

Water is an important factor that sustains life in various environments, constituting approximately ±60% of the body mass in most living organisms, including humans. However, water often becomes a carrier for various dangerous substances or pollutants due to advancements in industries, including organic dyes, pathogenic substances, heavy metals, and persistent organic pollutants [1–4]. Among the pollutants, heavy metals are a group of potentially toxic substances that cannot be easily decomposed and tend to accumulate in the body. These metals are naturally present in rivers, lakes, and seas, making water the primary medium for environmental accumulation [5]. A study conducted by Ugaz et al. [6] at an abandoned mining site in Spain showed severe pollution in the surrounding river despite the cessation of

mining activities for a century. Metals, such as As, Co, Cr, Cu, Fe, Ni, and Pb, were identified as the main contaminants, exceeding allowed thresholds.

A similar study was conducted by Kamarati et al. [7], where water samples were collected at 3 different points from the Santan River in East Kalimantan before and after the rain. All samples were at concerning pollution levels due to dissolved iron exceeding the established quality standards [8], specifically at the second point, which had surpassed 1 mg/L, due to its close proximity to the coal mine. Another investigation by Rusydi et al. [9] focused on the dissolved iron content in 28 different groundwater sources in the Indramayu area of West Java. The results showed that the average content was 10.3 mg/L, with 40% of the total samples contaminated due to human activities.

To address the issue, the implementation of a water treatment system to purify iron contamination is necessary. Adsorption technique is most often adopted [10], utilizing an adsorbent capable of not only adsorbing pollutants but also serving as a sensor, thereby enhancing the selectivity towards certain contaminants. An effective approach to achieving this is by surface imprinting [11, 12]. The process includes printing a template of metal ions on the surface of a material to increase its affinity [13]. Several studies were conducted to explore and implement the method, as detailed in Table 1.

The utilization of nanofiber-based membranes synthesized using the electrospinning method shows the potential for reusability and high porosity [18, 19] in a sustainable ferrous metal adsorption process. PVA, a polymer widely used for the synthesis of nanofibers, is known to be nontoxic and biodegradable due to its abundant hydroxyl content. These qualities make the polymer environmentally friendly and compatible for use as an adsorption membrane [20]. However, hydrogen bonds may occur between hydroxyl groups and water, leading to the high solubility of PVA [21]. Various recent studies [22–25] succeeded in overcoming this problem by modifying the molecular structure through a crosslinking process.

The study focuses on modifying the structure of the PVA combined with a natural polymer, gelatin (GE), for membrane fabrication using 2 different crosslinker agents, namely citric acid (CA) and glutaraldehyde (GA). These agents have different mechanisms for forming waterproof or hydrophobic membranes.

**Table 1** Surface imprinting method on various polymer-based adsorbents.

| Polymer | Imprinting agent | Target | Ref. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cellulose | $HNO_3$+EDTA | $Pb^{2+}$ | [14] |
| PEG-2000 | HCl | $Cd^{2+}$ | [13] |
| PMAA | HCl | $Pb^{2+}$ | [15] |
| Sericin/PVA | HCl | Methylene blue | [16] |
| Chitosan | HCl | $Pb^{2+}$ | [17] |
| PVA/Gelatin | HCl | $Fe^{3+}$ | This study |

The crosslinking mechanism was observed through FTIR characterization to determine the group responsible for imparting the hydrophobic properties of the membrane, followed by macro-testing through the measurement of contact angle and water immersion test. Membrane morphology was examined through SEM characterization along with elemental assessment and EDS analysis. Additionally, the crystallinity of the membrane was assessed by X-ray diffraction analysis.

## 2. Experimental procedures

### 2.1. Materials

Low-molecular-weight poly(vinyl alcohol) (PVA) (approx. 10,000 Da), gelatin (porcine skin, type A), ferric nitrate nonahydrate ($Fe(NO_3)_3.9H_2O$), acetic acid ($CH_3COOH$) glacial 100%, hydrochloric acid (HCl) 37%, glutaraldehyde 25% in water, and acetone ($CH_3COCH_3$) were bought from Sigma-Aldrich Chemical Reagent Co., with high purity (>99%). High-hydrated citric acid ($C_6H_8O_7$) and analytical grade deionized water ($H_2O$) with a purity of 99% were obtained from Kimia Market (Bandung, Indonesia) and OneMed (Surabaya, Indonesia), respectively. All chemicals were used without any further purification.

### 2.2. Synthesis of PVA/GE 15/5 wt.% membrane

Gelatin (5% w/v) was dissolved in a solvent comprised of acetic acid and water in a 1:10 ratio at room temperature until complete dissolution. Subsequently, PVA powder (15% w/v) was added, and the mixture was stirred at 85 °C to obtain a PVA/GE 15/5 wt.% homogenous solution. During continuous stirring, 200 mg of the template imprinting salt, $Fe(NO_3)_3.9H_2O$, was introduced, changing the solution to yellowish-clear in color. Finally, 1 g of citric acid powder was added to initiate the crosslinking process. A similar procedure was conducted without the addition of citric acid.

The electrospinning process was conducted under identical parameters for both solutions, including an operating voltage of 16 kV, an 18G blunt needle, a 12 cm needle-collector distance, an injector rate of 0.4 mL/h, and a chamber relative humidity of 50%, passively controlled by silica gel. The collected membranes were dried overnight in a desiccator to vaporize the excess solvent.

The crosslinking mechanism of a citric acid (CA)-composed membrane, named PVA/GE 15/5 wt.% ~ CA, was activated by heating at 170 °C for 10 minutes. This changed the clean-white membrane to a slightly yellow color. A mixture of glutaraldehyde and acetone (1:50) was used to immerse the CA-free membrane, labelled PVA/GE 15/5 wt.% ~GA, for 2 h at a controlled pH of 2 using 1 M HCl. Finally, the membranes were washed with 1 M HCl several times to trigger the imprinting of $Fe^{3+}$ sites on the surface before being dried in the desiccator.

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### 2.3. Characterization

The main aspect of the crosslinked process was observed by determining the modified molecular chain interaction of each functional group using a Fourier Transform Infrared spectrophotometer (type IR Prestige-21 SHIMADZU) within the wavenumber range of 4000–500 $cm^{-1}$. The morphology of the membrane was observed by a Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM type VEGA3 TESCAN) operating at 15 kV operating voltage, equipped with an X-ray detector to analyze elemental composition by Energy Dispersive X-ray Spectroscopy (EDS spectra ~20 keV; Bruker). Crystallinity was characterized using X-ray diffraction (XRD; Rigaku Miniflex 600 series) at room temperature through Cu Kα radiation. The measurements were conducted at a scanning rate of 10°/min in the 2-theta angle range of 5–60°. Data refinement was conducted using the Rietveld method with Profex 5.2.4 software to determine the crystal phase and peak position [26]. Additionally, the water contact angle of the membrane was photographed using a 5 MP camera at f/2.4 (macro configuration) and analyzed by ImageJ 1.54f, assisted by Drop Analysis LB-ADSA (Low Bond Axisymmetric Drop Shape Analysis) plugin [27].

## 3. Results and Discussions

### 3.1. Molecular chain and crosslinking mechanisms

Figure 1 shows the FTIR spectra for uncrosslinked, citric acid (CA)-crosslinked, and glutaraldehyde (GA)-crosslinked membranes, respectively. All samples showed similar absorption bands without significant changes. This signified the absence of an adverse impact on the primary polymer structure of the membranes [28]. The broad absorption band at 3500–3200 $cm^{-1}$ corresponded to the stretching of the hydroxyl group, –OH, indicating intramolecular hydrogen bonds within the membrane [29]. Since hydroxyl groups form hydrogen bonds with water molecules, reducing the absorbance of these groups during the crosslinking process was crucial for enhancing the membrane's waterproof properties [30].

The absorption at 2925 $cm^{-1}$ suggested the C–H stretching of the alkyl group, followed by the $CH_2$ bending vibration at 1427 $cm^{-1}$ and the stretching bond of C–C at 848 $cm^{-1}$ which all indicate the characteristic bands of PVA [31, 32]. The main indication of the presence of gelatin was the absorption band of the amide group at 1700–1200 $cm^{-1}$. This comprised amide I (1700–1600 $cm^{-1}$), amide II (1575–1480 $cm^{-1}$), and amide III (1330–1230 $cm^{-1}$), showing C=O, N–H, and C–N stretchings, respectively [33, 34].

The crosslinking mechanism by glutaraldehyde was observed in the acetalization process of the reaction between alcohol and the aldehyde group at 1700–1600 $cm^{-1}$, which signifies the C=O functional group [35]. However, the addition of gelatin makes observations difficult because the absorption bands coincide with the amide groups.

Acetalization was observed by decreasing and narrowing the absorption of the hydroxyl group as it reacted with the aldehyde group to form acetal, as shown in Figure 2. According to Huang et al. [36], the formation of acetal can also be observed at wavenumbers 1140–1000 $cm^{-1}$, signifying the broadening of the –OCO– functional group after being GA-crosslinked. This broadening exhibited a 27% increase compared to what was before the crosslinking process in the 1141 $cm^{-1}$ band.

A different mechanism was demonstrated by CA-crosslinking, where the formation of an ester group occurred from the product between the carboxylic acid (–COOH) and alcohol (–OH) groups [37]. Figure 3 shows the infrared spectra at 4000–750 $cm^{-1}$ of the membrane before and after being crosslinked by citric acid. A new band appears at ~1720 $cm^{-1}$ in the CA-crosslinked membrane, signifying stretching of the C=O band [38]. This proved the existence of intermolecular chains between PVA and citric acid, indicative of ester formation [31, 39]. However, it is clearly seen that the hydroxyl groups before and after crosslinking overlap each other, leading to the conclusion that there is no decrease in the number of hydroxyl groups even after crosslinking, in contrast to that after esterification.

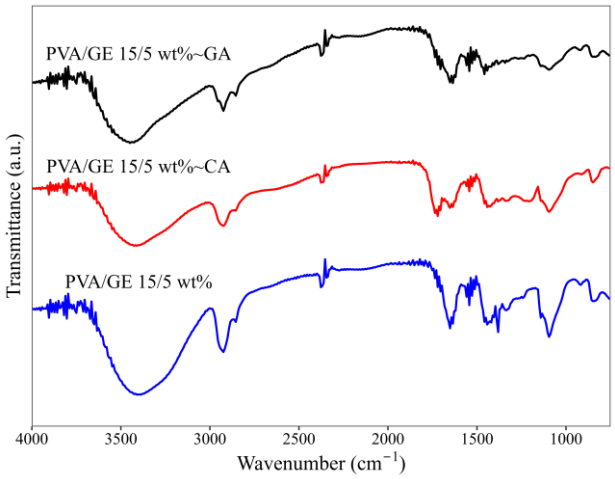


**Figure 1** FTIR spectra of uncrosslinked membrane and crosslinked membranes.

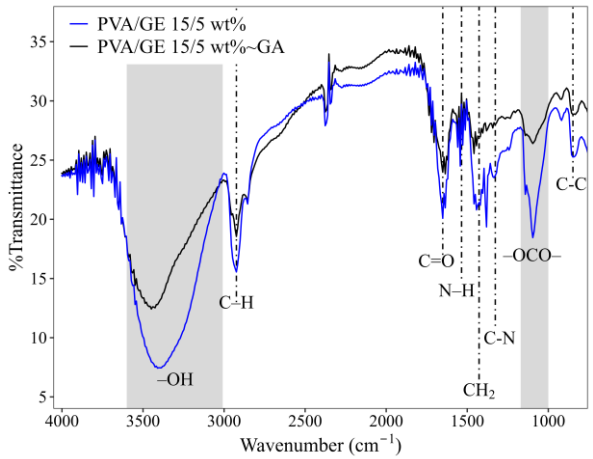


**Figure 2** FTIR spectra of PVA/GE 15/5 wt.% membrane (blue) and PVA/GE 15/5 wt.%~GA membrane (black).

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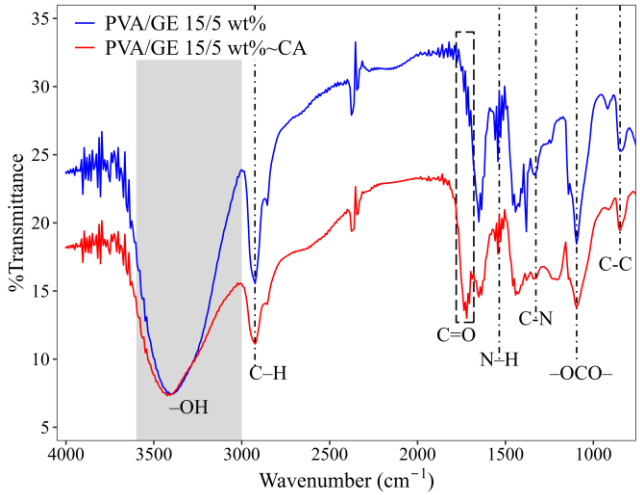


**Figure 3** FTIR spectra of PVA/GE 15/5 wt.% membrane (blue) and PVA/GE 15/5 wt.%~CA membrane (red).

This might be due to the high hydration degree of citric acid used, so that the combination with polymers leads to the greater content of hydroxyl groups in CA-free membranes. Then, it is suggested to utilize anhydrous forms of citric acid for further study.

### 3.2. Membrane morphology and elemental analysis

The formation of nanofibers was determined by examining the surface morphology of the membrane under a microscope, specifically when the images were displayed at the nano/micron scale. SEM is a suitable option for visualizing the surface morphology of materials at high magnification and is equipped with elemental mapping capabilities.

Figure 4 shows the morphology and fiber distribution of the membrane with a magnification of up to 10,000 times, showing predominantly nanobead formation interconnected by thin fibers. The gradual evaporation of the solvent, facilitated by maintaining humidity at 50%, aided in elongating the solution under the applied voltage, leading to the formation of nanofiber structures on the collector due to the increased viscosity from evaporation. However, the membrane was dominated by the nanobead structure.

Insufficient viscosity could lead to nanobead formation, which is when solutions are sprayed instead of elongated, known as the electrospraying process. Both electrospraying and electrospinning methods were related to each other and shared the same parental event, referred to as electrohydrodynamics [40]. Figure 4a shows a fiber structure with a centralized diameter distribution below 100 nm, with a mean diameter of 103 nm. After the imprinting process, the membrane structure experienced deformation, as shown in Figure 4b, due to the influence of the acidity of HCl, thereby reducing the fibers formed but maintaining nanobead particle structure [17]. The number of fibers decreased drastically, with the average diameter slightly increasing and measured at 118 nm.

EDS spectra, as shown in Figure 5, present the concentrations of elements in the membrane, which is dominated by the molecular chains of carbon and oxygen due to the use of organic polymers such as PVA and gelatin. In addition to being a natural polymer originating from porcine cartilage, gelatin is responsible for the calcium and silicon content in the membrane [41]. The iron content was detected in trace amounts, signifying the success of the synthesis process in forming a complex of oxygen atoms in the membrane structure [42]. Due to the imprinting of the membrane surface, the EDS detector does not detect any iron elements but confirms the presence of chlorine elements. This clearly showed the success of the process in removing iron content within membrane structures.

### 3.3. Crystallinity of membrane

The crystallinity of both membranes was observed by the diffraction pattern of XRD within the 2-theta angle range of 5°–60°, as shown in Figure 6. Both samples demonstrated an amorphous characteristic pattern with a maximum peak at about 20°, corresponding to the signature characteristics of PVA as well as gelatin diffraction patterns [43, 44].

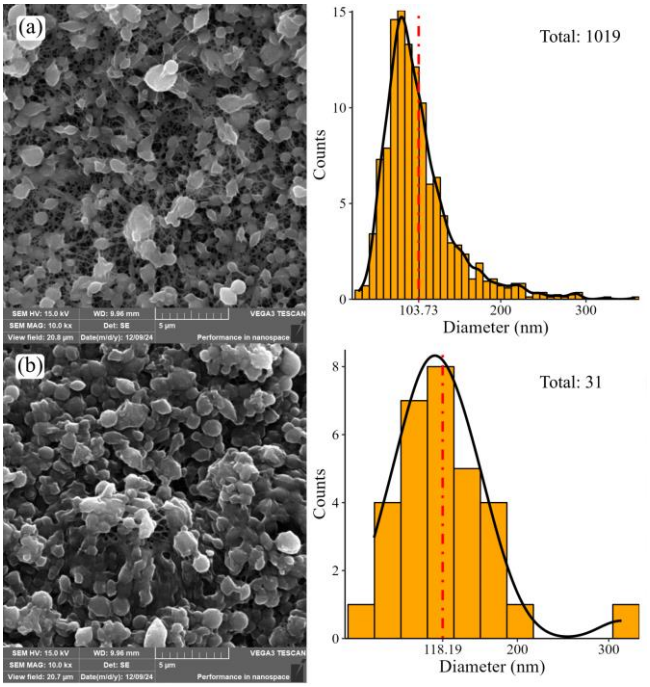


**Figure 4** Morphology and fiber distribution of PVA/GE 15/5 wt.%~CA membrane: before (a) and after washed by HCl (b).

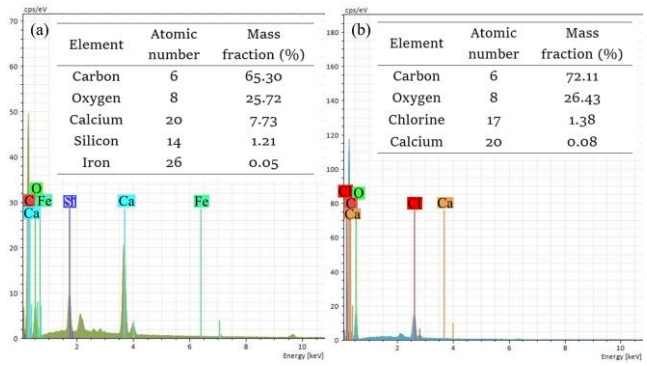


**Figure 5** EDS spectra of PVA/GE 15/5 wt.%~CA membrane: before (a) and after washed by HCl (b).

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As proposed by Chen et al. [23], the crosslinking process adds more amorphous region to the polymeric structure, leading to low crystallinity of the membrane. However, the peak position barely shifted, signifying the inability of the imprinting process to shatter the structure of the polymer [45].

Peaks at 19.17° and 18.99° for HCl-treated and untreated membranes, respectively, correspond to the (200) plane of $Fe_2O_3$ (AMCSD code 0019940). This slight shift of peaks might be due to the extracted iron after HCl treatment leaving the structure of the polymer. In addition, the deconvolution peak of HCl-treated membrane is shown in Figure 7. The single peak is composed of three different peaks, which show a minor peak of gelatin at 16.44°, indicating a triple helix structure of gelatin [46, 47]. The highest peak at 21.73° corresponds to pure PVA as the main polymer used, and the trace content of $Fe^{3+}$ is indicated by the peak at 26.08° [29].

### 3.4. Assessment of stability in water

Based on a macro perspective, the results of the chemical crosslinking process in the membrane were observed through the water resistance. This showed the stability of the membrane structure after interacting with water molecules or similar polar solvents. Assessment methods applied to assess stability against water are water contact angle (WCA) measurements and direct immersion tests.

Figure 8 shows the difference in the results of measuring the WCA for crosslinked and non-crosslinked fiber. Images were captured using a 5 MP camera set at macro configuration (f/2.4), and the WCA was measured using ImageJ version 1.54f with the plugin named Drop Analysis LB-ADSA (Low Bond Axisymmetric Drop Shape Analysis) [27, 48].

The results suggest that the crosslinking process has drastically increased the water resistance of the membrane, with improvements from 46° to 91° and 87° in CA and GA, respectively. This was attributed to the chemical interaction between the fiber molecular structure and the crosslinker agent, manifested in the resistance properties of the membrane [49]. Additionally, crosslinking by citric acid showed a better result compared to glutaraldehyde.

The immersion test was conducted by immersing the membrane sheet, which had been previously weighed ($m$), in water at room temperature for 24 h at 80 °C for an hour. Subsequently, the membrane was dried and weighed ($m'$) to detect whether any structure was lost due to dissolution. The assessment was measured through the percentage of weight lost ($w_l$) [50], based on the following equation:

$$w_l = \frac{m - m'}{m} \cdot 100\%. \quad (1)$$

The immersion test provided that the membrane of CA-crosslinked lost a significant amount of mass compared to GA-crosslinked in both immersions at room temperature and 80 °C, as shown in Table 2.

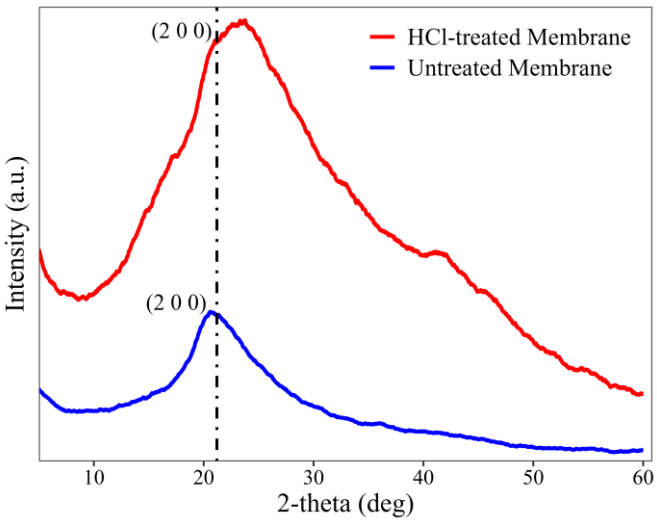


**Figure 6** XRD patterns of PVA/GE 15/5 wt.%~CA membrane: without (red) and with HCl treatment (blue).

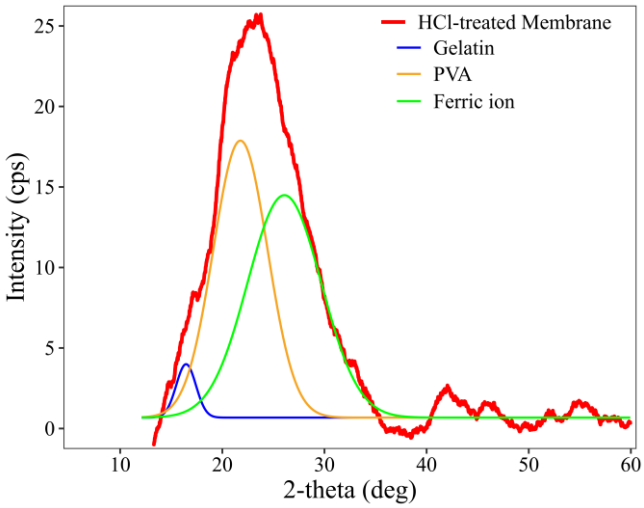


**Figure 7** Deconvolution of HCl-treated membrane pattern.

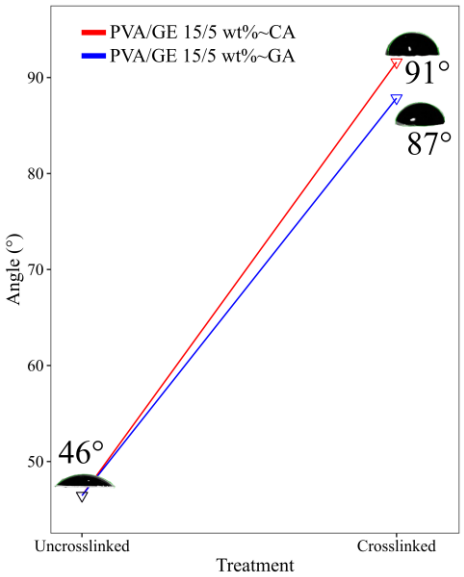


**Figure 8** Measurement of water contact angle (WCA) on PVA/GE 15/5 wt.% membrane with CA- (red) and GA-crosslinked (blue).

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**Table 2** Immersion test results.

| Membrane(s) | Temp. (°C) | Weight lost |
|---|---|---|
| PVA/GE 15/5 wt.% | Room | 100% |
| PVA/GE 15/5 wt.%-CA | Room | 12.0% |
| | 80 | 14.3% |
| PVA/GE 15/5 wt.%-GA | Room | 7.7% |
| | 80 | 8.2% |

This weight loss is related to the hydroxyl content within both membranes, with PVA/GE 15/5 wt.%-CA membrane losing the most weight. Due to its reactivity, hydroxyl group could form water molecules with free hydrogen ions in water, resulting in the weight loss in the membrane [51]. Meanwhile, the uncrosslinked membrane dissolved completely at the point of contact with the water, losing 100% of its mass. It is acceptable that higher temperature causes more damage to the membrane due to fast movement of water molecule; however, the damage caused based on weight loss does not appear to be much different compared to immersion in room-temperature, and the membrane still retains most of its structure.

## 4. Limitations

Based on observations, the membrane was dominated by nanobead formation due to the low viscosity of the solution and the use of low-molecular-weight PVA. The high amino acid content of gelatin makes the functional groups of crosslinked products harder to examine. Therefore, future studies should focus on the synthesis of nanofiber membranes by higher molecular-weight PVA and the combination of other natural or synthetic polymers, with optimization both on electrospinning setup and crosslinking mechanisms. These include investigations on heating temperature variation, time exposure, and/or the effect of combination crosslinkers.

## 5. Conclusions

The approach of different crosslinking mechanisms was applied to achieve water-resistant PVA/GE 15/5 wt.% membranes synthesized using the electrospinning method. The macro assessment concluded that the membrane exhibits water-resistant properties, as shown by a significant increase in the water contact angle after the crosslinking process, measured at 91° and 87° for citric acid (CA)-crosslinked and glutaraldehyde (GA)-crosslinked membranes. The water immersion test comes to the same conclusion. The percentage of weight loss happens to be quite low in GA-crosslinked membrane compared to CA-crosslinked membrane, measured at 7.7% and 12%, respectively. This indicates that the membranes remain intact when immersed, in contrast to the uncrosslinked membrane which readily dissolves. Micro assessment with FTIR characterization showed that each crosslinking agent successfully conducted its crosslinking mechanism, namely acetalization by GA and esterification by CA, confirming a new band at ~1700 $cm^{-1}$ for both mechanisms. Morphology of the membranes by SEM imaging confirmed the formation of nanobeads and nanofibers, where the deformed structure slightly shifted the average fiber diameter from 103 nm to 118 nm due to the effect of the imprinting process. Furthermore, HCl imprinted iron sites on the surface of the membrane, signified by undetected iron elements by EDS characterization. It is important to acknowledge that XRD characterization confirmed the amorphous region of the membranes, with the crystal phase of $Fe_2O_3$ at ~19° 2θ angle. The results provide significant insights into possible mechanisms to achieve water-resistant properties of membrane to unfold the potency of reusability and efficiency in water treatment.

## • Supplementary materials

No supplementary materials are available.

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## • Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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