Neutrons and Simulation Reveal Coupling of Dynamical and Mechanical Properties of Cellulose

Objective:
• Understand how hydration influences cellulose mechanics and dynamics.

Approach:
• Molecular dynamics simulations and dynamic neutron scattering experiments probed the structure and nano-second dynamics of cellulose fibers at different temperatures and degrees of hydration.

Results:
• Hydrated cellulose exhibit higher fluctuations than dry samples. Surface hydroxymethyl atoms determined the experimental hydration dependence.
• 20% hydrated cellulose is more rigid than dry cellulose fibers. (We note that most field-dried biomass wood or grass has 20% moisture.)
• Increase in conformational disorder of the surface with temperature follows the cellulose rigidity (persistence length). This implies coupling between structural and mechanical properties of cellulose.
• Paper accepted for publication in Biomacromolecules.

Significance:
• Detailed description of how hydration-dependent fluctuations and disorder at the cellulose surface lead to enhancement of cellulose fiber rigidity. This supports the importance of moisture in biomass structure and strength.

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