



The Growing Role of Structural Mass Spectrometry in the Discovery and Development of Therapeutic Antibodies

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The Growing Role of Structural Mass Spectrometry in the Discovery and Development of Therapeutic Antibodies

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The comprehensive structural characterization of therapeutic antibodies is of critical importance for the successful discovery and development of such biopharmaceuticals, yet poses many challenges to modern measurement science. Mass spectrometry has evolved into a rapid and sensitive tool for assessing the structures, stabilities, and dynamics of such proteins. Here, we review the current state-of-the-art mass spectrometry technologies focusing on the characterization of antibody-based therapeutics. We conclude by discussing the future of structural mass spectrometry, and its role in enabling the biopharmaceutical pipeline.

1 Introduction

Over the past few decades, biopharmaceuticals have emerged as an exceptionally important class of therapies, evidenced by the number of approved therapies in this class for indications ranging from cancers to autoimmune diseases.¹ While biopharmaceuticals represent a diverse group of molecular subclasses, monoclonal antibodies (mAbs) and related therapeutics, such as antibody-drug conjugates (ADCs) and bispecific antibodies (bsAbs), are undoubtedly the most promising and fastest growing of these subclasses, owing to their high specificity, high efficacy and fewer side effects.^{2–6} As the benefits of biopharmaceuticals are often attributed to their complex molecular compositions and diverse conformations, the challenging task of their comprehensive biophysical characterization is exceptionally important during discovery and development.

Mass spectrometry has emerged to produce a family of methods aimed at addressing the structural complexity of

biopharmaceuticals. With concomitant advances in sensitivity, resolution, accuracy, and speed, MS has been widely deployed for the characterization of therapeutic mAbs. In addition to elucidating mAb primary structures, MS methods are capable of probing the higher order structures and dynamics of therapeutic mAbs. In this review, we will focus on recent progress in the development of structural MS tools for the characterization of mAbs and mAb-related therapeutics (Figure 1). Structural MS refers to those MS-based tools focused on the biophysical characterization of protein samples, including the extraction of 3D structure information from MS datasets. In discussing this work, we aim to illustrate the versatility of MS in context of mAb structural characterization. We conclude by discussing the future potential of structural MS in the context of rapidly evolving biopharmaceutical analysis workflows.

Sequencing Intact Antibodies

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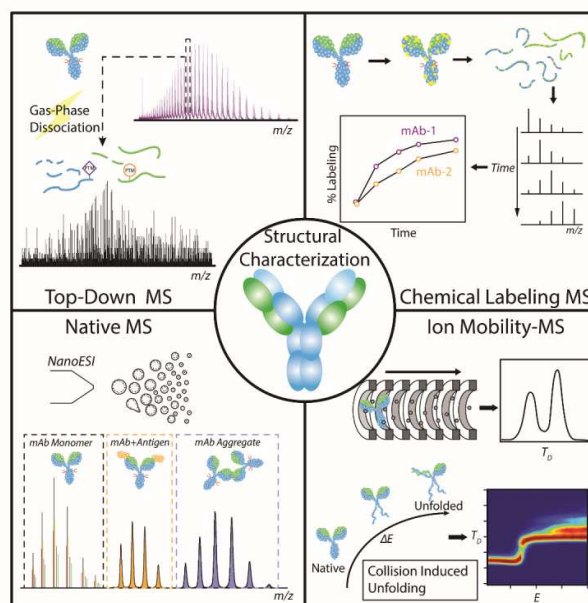


Fig. 1 A schematic diagram illustrating four key structural MS-based technologies used for the characterization of mAbs and mAb-related therapeutics: Top-down MS for sequencing and PTM analysis (upper-left), Native MS for assessing intact mass, target binding stoichiometry, and oligomer populations (bottom-left), Chemical labeling MS for probing the conformation and dynamics of mAbs (upper-right), and ion mobility-MS for characterizing higher order structures and stabilities (bottom-right).

1 Typically, “bottom-up” protein sequencing methods, involving
 2 the reduction, alkylation and proteolytic digestion prior to
 3 LC/MS/MS, are used to interrogate the primary structures of
 4 therapeutic mAbs.⁷ Although such strategies are well estab-
 5 lished, quantifying all the post-translationally modified
 6 (PTM) or degraded states for a given mAb can be challenging
 7 using such approaches.⁸ Top-down mass spectrometry can
 8 to overcome these challenges by directly introducing intact
 9 mAbs into gas phase for PTM assessment and sequencing.
 10 Ideally, each mAb isoform is isolated and analyzed individually
 11 for a more comprehensive analysis of mAb PTMs and
 12 sequence variants. Despite advances in top-down sequencing
 13 technology, complete mAb sequences remain challenging to
 14 obtain partially due to the highly structured regions of
 15 antibody domains protected by disulfide bonds. As such, top-
 16 middle-down approaches, which involve cleaving mAbs into
 17 large peptide fragments via limited enzymatic digestion and
 18 tandem MS analysis, are often used to supplement both top-
 19 down and bottom-up sequencing data. (Figure. 2) The
 20 application of both top-down and middle-down MS workflows
 21 toward mAb analysis have been extended through the use of
 22 high-resolution MS and a range of ion activation technologies.
 23 For example, high resolution Orbitrap and Fourier transform
 24 ion cyclotron resonance (FT-ICR)^{10,11} are both leveraged
 25 in order to reduce mass overlaps within the complex spectra
 26 resulting from intact protein fragmentation events. In addition,
 27 such platforms are often equipped with a broad range of ion
 28 activation technologies, ranging from slow-heating techniques,
 29 e.g. collision induced dissociation (CID), to rapid ion activation
 30 approaches, e.g. ultraviolet photodissociation (UVPD), with
 31 each providing complementary sets of mAb fragments and

enable substantially increased protein sequence coverage values.¹²

Early top-down analyses of mAbs revealed that the variable regions of mAbs can be rapidly characterized by performing in-source CID fragmentation followed by tandem MS, in partnership with accurate time-of-flight (ToF) measurements of the intact mAb.¹¹ This approach was then further developed by increasing the transmission efficiency for intact mAbs on hybrid linear quadrupole ion trap-Orbitrap (LTQ-Orbitrap) platforms, enabling both intact mass and sequencing data to be acquired on a single platform.¹³ Although this approach was able to differentiate IgG2 disulfide isoforms, as well as glutamine and pyro-glutamate variants, the mAb sequence coverage obtained was limited. Workflows incorporating middle-down analyses have achieved greater sequence coverages, permitting the identification of site-specific methionine oxidations¹⁴, as well as detecting drug-product-related impurities and variants¹⁵.

For both top-down and middle-down MS mAb analysis, electron-based ion activation methods have been used to produce extensive sequence-informative fragmentation and breaking disulfide bonds while retaining thermally labile PTMs. For example, online liquid chromatography (LC) has been coupled to electron transfer dissociation (ETD) and high-resolution ToF-MS for the comprehensive top-down structural characterization of two different mAbs.¹⁶ This workflow yielded quantitatively improved sequence coverage when compared to previous protocols, ranging from 15 to 21%, including sequencing information from mAb constant regions that proved transparent to previous CID experiments¹³. Subsequently, a hybrid Orbitrap FTMS workflow incorporating ETD was described and used to sequence samples of

1 Adalimumab (the biotherapeutic Humira from AbbVie) at 10
 2 timescales, achieving ca. 33% sequence coverage.¹⁷ While 11
 3 impressive, this level of sequence coverage has proven 12
 4 challenging to improve upon in recent top-down sequencing 13
 5 experiments, owing primarily to the significant gas-phase 14
 6 stabilities of mAb ions.

7 In order to further improve mAb sequence data, middle- 15
 8 down ETD-MS data has been integrated with previously 16
 9 described top-down protocols to produce double the 17
 10 sequence coverage compared to previous top-down only 18
 11 analyses. Importantly, the incorporation of middle-down 19
 12 sequencing data has served to unlock sequence information 20
 13 from the entirety of the mAb complementarity determining 21
 14 regions (CDRs), measure mAb glycoforms, and characterize 22
 15 Lys-clipped variants.¹⁸ Another approach to broadening mAb 23
 16 sequence coverage in both top-down and middle-down MS 24
 17 sequencing experiments is to move to alternative ion 25
 18 activation technologies. For example, top-down sequencing of 26
 19 mAbs with electron capture dissociation (ECD) on an FT-ICR MS 27
 20 platform has been shown to provide a greater number of total 28
 21 cleavages than analogous CID or ETD experiments performed 29
 22 on quadrupole (Q)-ToF-MS platforms, and a comparable 30
 23 number of cleavages when compared to ETD sequencing 31
 24 performed using Orbitrap MS.¹⁰ In addition, 193-nm UVPD has 32
 25 been reported to offer detailed sequence analysis for intact 33
 26 mAbs, as well as PTM site localization.¹⁹ The acquisition speed 34
 27 of the UVPD tandem MS experiment makes it an attractive 35
 28 option for performing rapid mAb sequencing experiments on 36
 29 an LC timescale. Further development of hybrid MS ion 37

activation techniques, such as a combination of ETD and 38
 higher-energy collision dissociation (ETHCD)²⁰ and ETD 39
 combined with UVPD (ETUVPD)²¹, promises to further drive 40
 the performance of both top-down and middle-down mAb 41
 sequence analysis in the future.

Measuring the Stoichiometries of Antibody-associated Complexes

The introduction of soft ionization sources, such as matrix- 42
 assisted laser desorption ionization (MALDI)²² and electrospray 43
 ionization (ESI)²³, over thirty years ago enabled the transfer of 44
 large biomolecules to gas phase in their intact form, and have 45
 significantly strengthened various MS methods used to study 46
 biological molecules.^{24,25} While the vast majority of mAb 47
 sequencing experiments use ions produced under denaturing 48
 conditions in order to improve sequence coverage, native MS 49
 experiments seek to make mass measurements of mAbs while 50
 preserving their structure under native conditions.²⁶ The vast 51
 majority of all native MS experiments utilize ESI-based 52
 approaches to form ions directly from native-like solutions, 53
 where pH and ionic strength can be easily controlled to 54
 produce conditions that preserve mAb structure and 55
 function.²⁷ To enhance the intensities of mAb signals in native 56
 MS experiments, Nano-ESI (nESI), utilizing a miniaturized ESI 57
 emitter and nL/min flow rates is often used in order to reduce 58
 ESI droplet sizes, increase overall ionization efficiency, and 59
 increase the overall tolerance of the ion source for salts and 60
 other common biotherapeutic excipients.²⁸ Ammonium

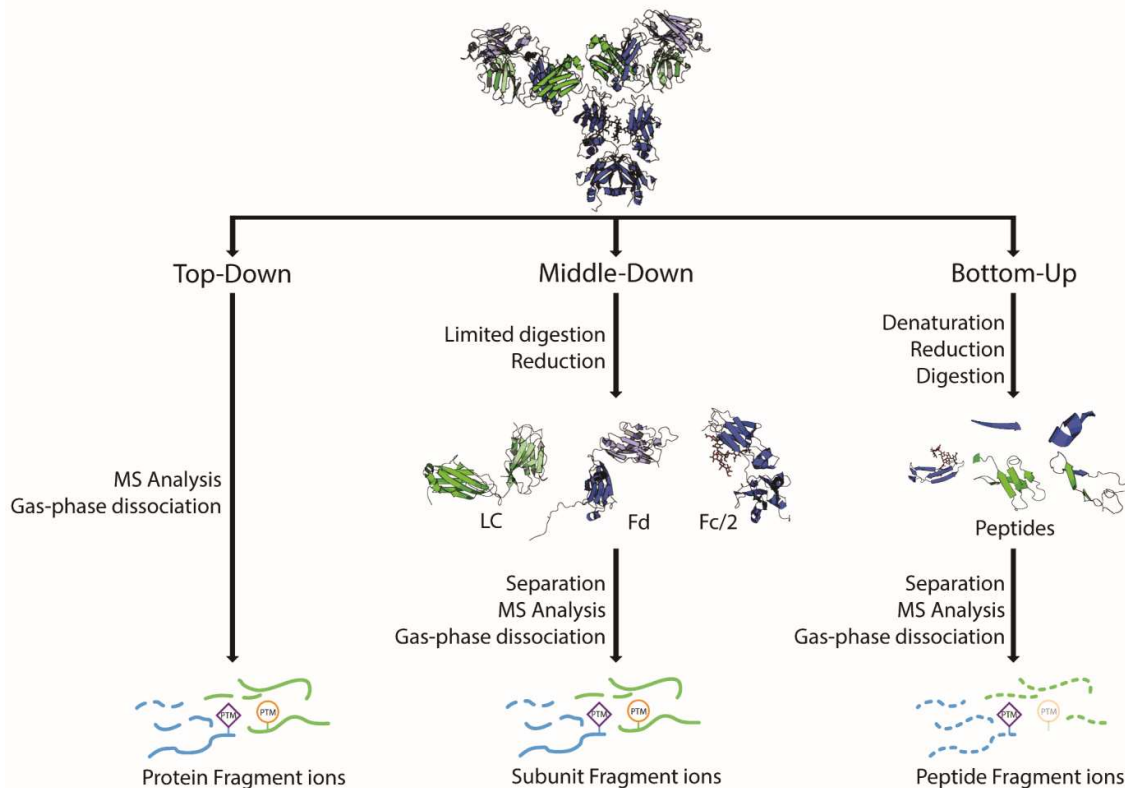


Fig. 2 A schematic diagram comparing Top-Down (Left) and Middle-Down (middle) MS workflows with Bottom-Up MS protocols (Right) for mAb sequencing. For bottom-up MS approaches, proteins are digested into small peptides for LC separation and MS analysis, where peptides are selected and sequenced. Some labile PTMs may be lost during bottom-up workflows. In top-down MS, all proteoforms are directly sequenced in the gas-phase using advanced MS/MS strategies. For middle-down workflows, MS/MS analysis is performed on large fragments or mAb subunits after limited proteolysis in order to maximize both sequence coverage and PTM retention. (LC – light chain; Fd – heavy chain fragment generated from reduction of the antigen binding fragment; Fc/2 – heavy chain fragment obtained after reducing the Fc fragment.)

1 acetate salts are often used to establish the ionic strength for
2 samples to be analyzed by native MS due to their general
3 volatility. Owing to their folded conformations, fewer total
4 charges are deposited on the mAb, resulting in a narrower
5 charge envelope shifted towards greater mass-to-charge (m/z)
6 values when compared to MS data often acquired under
7 denaturing conditions as part of top-down sequencing
8 experiments. Thus, the equipment used for native MS
9 experiments are typically modified in order to maximize the
10 transmission of high m/z ions. Owing to their wide available
11 mass ranges, modified Q-ToF instruments have been the
12 dominant platform for native MS.^{29,30} More recently, Orbitrap
13 and FT-ICR mass analyzers have been described for robust
14 native MS experiments, offering higher resolving power than
15 typical Q-ToF measurements.^{31–34}

16 In the context of mAb analysis, native MS provides
17 accurate intact masses as well as information on glycoform
18 heterogeneity, antibody-antigen binding, and any oligomer
19 states present.^{35–38} For example, native MS data acquired
20 using a modified Orbitrap platform has been used to assign
21 and quantify the heterogeneous glycoforms within a mAb
22 sample.³⁶ In these spectra, a mass resolving power of up to
23 12000 at an m/z of 6000 could be achieved, allowing for the
24 confident assignment of antibody glycoforms. In addition to
25 the identification of PTM states, high-resolving power native
26 MS has also been demonstrated to both qualitatively and
27 quantitatively characterize antibody mixtures.^{39,40} For
28 example, Q-ToF based native MS has been used to resolve and
29 quantify nine out of ten antibodies present within a mixture,
30 whereas such a mixture could not be similarly unraveled by
31 cation exchange chromatography.³⁹ Furthermore, using high
32 resolving power native MS, a mixture containing fifteen
33 different antibodies, with mass differences ranging from 20.94
34 to 1149.41 Da were baseline resolved.⁴⁰ Triplicate native MS
35 measurements showed excellent quantitative reproducibility
36 exhibiting less than 1.2% relative error in the ion intensity
37 values recorded for the resolved mAbs.

38 The ability to preserve noncovalent protein-protein
39 interactions during the ESI process in native MS workflows
40 enables the direct measurement of antibody-antigen binding
41 stoichiometries and stabilities. Pioneering work in this area
42 demonstrated that complexes formed between the
43 recombinant V antigen (rV), a 37-kDa protein secreted by
44 *pestis*, and its complimentary mAb could be readily detected
45 and characterized. These native MS measurements revealed
46 that the rV antigen forms a tightly associated dimer at
47 micromolar concentrations, that a 1:2 binding stoichiometry
48 prevalent for the antibody:antigen complex, and quantified
49 the resulting antibody-antigen binding specificity. Later work
50 used native MS to investigate the immune complex formed
51 between the recombinant JAM-A protein, as well as a
52 antigenic protein (Ag) overexpressed in tumor cells, with both
53 murine and humanized mAbs.⁴¹ These data were used to
54 determine both the mAb:antigen binding stoichiometry and
55 selectivity, revealing similar values for both humanized and
56 murine mAbs. As above, the advent of higher resolving power
57 native MS platforms has also been leveraged for the analysis of

antibody-antigen complexes.³⁶ Native MS is also a useful tool
for characterizing antibody aggregates, which are common
degradation products for therapeutic proteins, causing activity
loss, decreased solubility, and enhanced unwanted
immunogenicity. Because aggregation can occur during
production, formulation and storage, it is critical to monitor
aggregate formation through multiple stages of
biopharmaceutical development. To this end, the
chromatographic separation of protein oligomers was
integrated with native MS in order to successfully detect
soluble mAb oligomers induced by pH-stress.³⁵ In addition,
native MS has been used to analyze the antigen binding
stoichiometry of a functional IgG hexamer.⁴² The resulting
large multi-protein complex was further characterized by
tandem MS, which provided critical information on the spatial
arrangement and stoichiometry of the subunits within the
assembly.

Antibody related drug products, such as bsAbs and ADCs,
have also recently been characterized by native MS workflows.
For instance, native MS was used to monitor Fab-arm
exchange, a physiological process in which portions of two
IgG4 mAbs recombine to form a chimeric bsAbs.⁴³ Fab-arm
exchange was mimicked *in vitro* through the addition of a mild
reducing agent, and the dissociation kinetics of IgG4 were
monitored by native MS. The results highlighted the
importance of the C_H3 domain in the process that gives rise to
the ultimate chimeric bsAbs. Native MS was also used to
characterize cysteine-linked ADCs, yielding average drug-to-
antibody ratio (DAR) values comparable to more time
consuming hydrophobic interaction chromatography (HIC)
analyses.^{44,45} Recent work has also demonstrated the benefits
of native MS for characterizing highly heterogeneous lysine-
linked ADCs.^{46,47} Average DAR values can be accurately
deduced from native MS spectra collected for deglycosylated
lysine-linked ADC samples using high resolving power native
MS. Furthermore, charge reduction approaches coupled to
native MS analysis of ADCs has been used to reduce spectral
complexity and decrease mass overlaps for the broadband
measurement of highly accurate DAR values.⁴⁶

Probing the Higher Order Structures of Therapeutic Antibodies

A detailed understanding of higher order structure is critically
important for developing protein therapeutics. For example,
mAb misfolding can lead to a loss of antigen binding affinity,
as well as altered aggregation and degradation pathways, all
combining to give rise to reduced mAb efficacy and increased
immunogenicity.^{48,49} Hydrogen/deuterium exchange (HDX)
coupled to MS has been used for over twenty-five years to
study the dynamics of proteins in solution,^{50–52} and is now
increasingly applied to mAb analysis. Modern HDX-MS
experiments can quantify the flexibility and stability of mAbs at
the intact protein, peptide, and amino acid-level (Figure. 3).
HDX-MS workflows are typically initiated through the
exchange of labile backbone amide hydrogens by diluting

1 protein samples into a D₂O-containing buffer, which
 2 quenched by lowering the pH after a fixed amount of exchange
 3 time. The amount of deuterium uptake can be assessed
 4 both top-down and bottom-up workflows, utilizing rapid
 5 activation tools in MS/MS mode experiments to assess
 6 exchange levels for individual residues within the protein
 7 while the latter approach is currently more commonly
 8 deployed. As the HDX rate is related to protein folding
 9 structure and dynamics, differences in deuterium uptake levels
 10 can be mapped on to protein structures to identify epitopes
 11 antigen-antibody interactions, as well as examine local
 12 conformational changes of mAbs provoked

32 fucose from the native population of antibody glycoforms did
 33 not lead to detectable changes in mAb conformation.

ADCs have also been broadly characterized by HDX-MS,
 where comparative data can uncover alterations in mAb
 dynamics perpetrated by both inter-chain disulfide reduction
 and the presence of conjugated drug molecules.⁵⁸ HDX-MS has
 also been used to assess antibody aggregates, aimed at
 understanding operative mechanism of mAb self-
 association.^{59–61} For example, HDX-MS analysis of Bevacizumab
 aggregates induced from multiple freeze/thaw cycles were
 observed to possess exchange profiles indistinguishable from
 native mAbs, whereas a similar analysis of thermally-induced

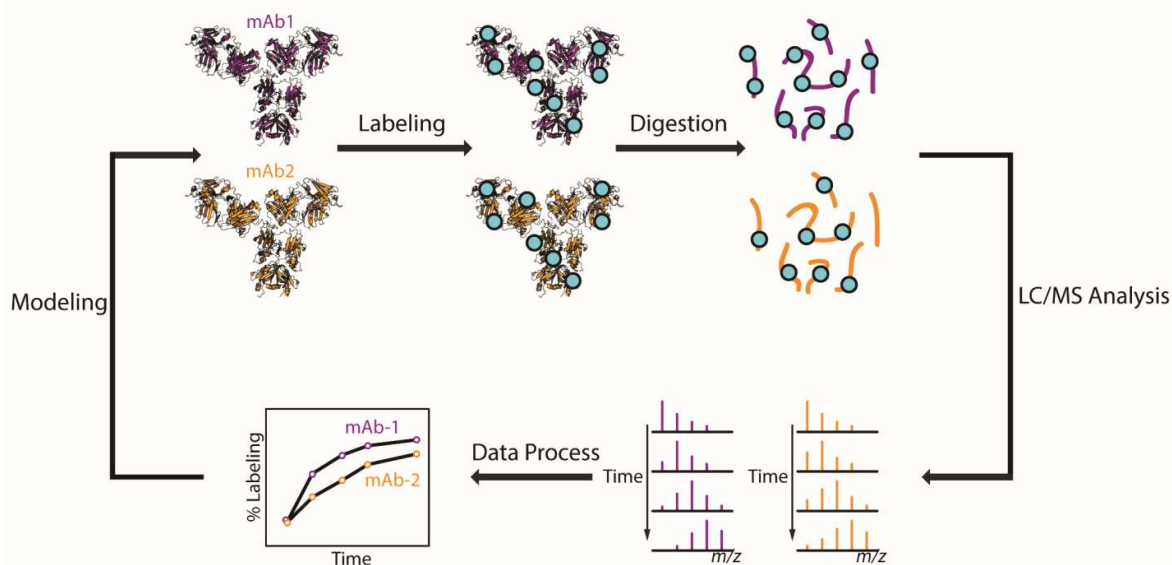


Fig. 3 A generalized workflow for chemical labeling-based structural MS experiments. In the workflow shown, two antibodies are exposed to a chemical label before quenching the labeling reactions. The labeled antibody is then subjected to proteolytic digestion, followed by MS analysis. The mass of each peptide is tracked at each time point and presented as kinetic plot. The data are processed to compare different mAb samples and search of variations in mAb structure and flexibility. If the mAb structure is known, or if a structural model is available, molecular modeling can be performed in order to map conformational differences.

13 modifications.^{53,54}
 14 HDX-MS can be employed to assess mAb conformation
 15 and dynamics upon chemical modification, offering benefits
 16 both therapeutic design and quality control protocols. For
 17 example, HDX-MS has been used to assess both the global and
 18 local conformational dynamics of an IgG1 antibody.⁵⁵ Changes
 19 in mAb conformation related to deglycosylation were
 20 examined using differential HDX-MS analysis, revealing two
 21 regions within IgG1 that possess altered protection and were
 22 rationalized as critical to FcγRIII receptor binding. These
 23 conformational effects of other PTMs, such as galactosylation,
 24 fucosylation, methionine oxidation, aspartic acid
 25 isomerization, and asparagine deamidation have also been
 26 investigated by HDX-MS.^{56,57} In particular, HDX-MS has
 27 revealed that the complete galactosylation in IgG1, where
 28 mAb glycoforms contain a terminal galactose, results in
 29 increase in structural rigidity within the C_H2 domains in a
 30 manner correlated with Fc receptor binding affinity.
 31 In contrast, this same study demonstrated that the removal

44 aggregates revealed large changes in exchange behavior within
 45 mAb CDR regions.⁵⁹ Distinct mechanisms for the above stress-
 46 induced aggregation events can be extracted directly from the
 47 collected data, further highlighting the capabilities of
 48 comparative HDX-MS analysis. More recently, the combination
 49 of HDX-MS and a spatial aggregation propensity (SAP)
 50 algorithm allows identification of self-association hotspots in a
 51 mAb CDR region, underlining the potential of HDX-MS analysis
 52 to direct engineering of therapeutic antibodies in discovery
 53 and early development stage.⁶¹ Furthermore, newly developed
 54 HDX-MS strategies along with the traditional method have
 55 been shown to provide useful insights into the formulation
 56 development of mAbs.^{62–64}

A separate chemical reactivity-based approach for
 monitoring protein structure utilizes oxidation chemistry to
 label protein side chains in a manner correlated with their
 solvent accessibility. Typically in such oxidative footprinting
 experiments, susceptible amino acid side chains are
 irreversibly labeled through hydroxyl radical mediated
 oxidation at submillisecond time scales. The products of this

1 oxidation chemistry are then recorded by MS, providing
 2 information complementary to HDX-MS experiments.⁶⁵ While
 3 the details concerning available experimental workflows and
 4 general applications of oxidative labeling techniques have
 5 been covered by recent reviews,^{66–68} here we focus on the
 6 uses of this technology for therapeutic mAb analysis. In
 7 a manner similar to HDX, the fast photochemical oxidation
 8 proteins (FPOP) has also been used to assess mAb higher order
 9 structures and map antibody epitopes. For example, recent
 10 work describes the utilization of FPOP for characterizing IgG
 11 disulfide variants, in which such data identified local
 12 conformational changes in the mAb hinge regions, as well as
 13 detecting altered protein dynamics within the CDRs for IgG
 14 mutants in comparison with wild type.⁶⁹ This study featured
 15 the integration of multiple complementary MS-based methods
 16 in order to rapidly characterize antibody mutants. Specifically,
 17 FPOP data was supported by both top-down and ion mobility-
 18 mass spectrometry (IM-MS) analyses in order to provide a
 19 comprehensive view of both mAb conformation and
 20 composition. In addition, FPOP has been used to determine
 21 the specific residues involved in the epitopes for an anti-
 22 interleukin-23 (anti-IL-23) antibody.⁷⁰ Although oxidative
 23 labeling techniques have not been as widely used in
 24 biopharmaceutical industry as HDX due to ongoing challenges
 25 associated with automated sample preparation and data
 26 processing, it is clear that continuing efforts will integrate this
 27 family of tools into the ever evolving roadmap for
 28 biopharmaceutical discovery and development.

29 Simultaneously Assessing the Size, Shape and 30 Stability of Intact Antibodies

31 Ion mobility (IM) can rapidly separate ions based on their
 32 charges and shapes in gas phase under the influence of a weak
 33 electric field.^{71,72} IM separation can be performed on a wide
 34 range of platforms combined with MS detection, such as the
 35 drift tubes (DTs)^{73,74} and travelling wave ion mobility (TWIM)
 36 separators^{75–77}. In a typical IM experiment, packets of ions are
 37 introduced into an ion guide pressurized with inert neutral gas
 38 under the influence of a relatively weak electric field. The
 39 larger, more-elongated ions collide more frequently with these
 40 gas molecules, and thus take a longer time to traverse the IM
 41 separator when compared to smaller and more-compact ions.
 42 The output of IM separations is the orientationally-averaged
 43 ion-neutral collision cross sections (CCS) for the ions analyzed,
 44 and this information can be readily extracted either directly
 45 from ion arrival times, or through careful calibration with ions
 46 of known CCS.⁷⁸ Furthermore, theoretical CCSs can be
 47 computed from protein structure models, as well as used as
 48 constraints for molecular dynamics simulations, enabling the
 49 detailed assessment of protein structural states in the gas
 50 phase.^{79–81} IM-MS has been employed for the structural
 51 analysis of proteins and protein complexes, the separation of
 52 small molecule pharmaceutical compounds, the resolution of
 53 isomeric metabolites, the deconvolution of complex polymer
 54 MS spectra, the identification of carbohydrate structures, and

the interrogation of multi-protein complex topology.^{82–86}
 Furthermore, once isolated in the gas phase, ions can be
 collisionally heated and unfolded in an effort to both record
 protein stabilities and use gas-phase unfolding patterns as a
 means of differentiating iso-CCS ions.^{87,88} Such collision-
 induced unfolding (CIU) methods are often used in partnership
 with IM-MS data in order to study protein higher order
 structures.

While IM is just beginning to be used to analyze mAb
 structure and stability, a number of reports showcased the
 ability of IM-MS to separate structural isoforms of antibody-
 based therapeutics. For example, early results in this area
 illustrated that IM can rapidly differentiate IgG2 disulfide-

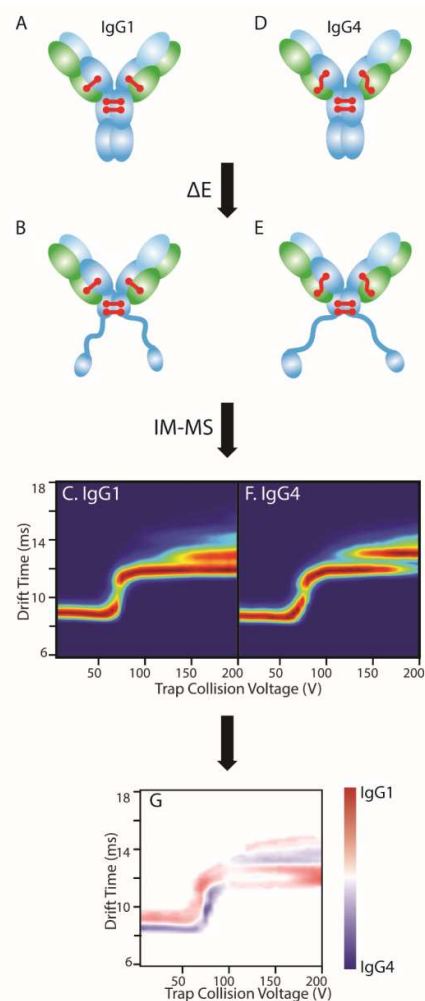


Fig. 4 An example of collision-induced unfolding (CIU) analysis for IgG isoforms. Intact IgG1 (A) and IgG4 (D) are collisionally heated and undergo unfolding (B, E) in the gas phase prior to IM measurement. The IM data are then extracted in order to generate a plot of IM drift time against collision voltage projected as a contour plot (C, F). Once compiled, this CIU fingerprint data are compared in order to detect differences in mAb (G). Figure C and F are adapted with permission from Reference 97. Copyright ©2015 American Chemical Society.

bonding structure based isoforms.⁸⁹ IM-MS data has also
 shown that intact mAbs are more conformationally diverse
 than proteins or protein complexes of comparable sizes, as

1 represented by the peak widths achieved during IM
2 separation.⁹⁰ This work, as well as a later report combining
3 CCS data from both DT, TWIM devices with molecular
4 dynamics simulations strongly indicates that mAb ions undergo
5 significant compaction in the gas phase, centering on the hinge
6 region of the mAb structure.⁹¹ In recent work, a combination
7 of IM-MS and HDX-MS was used to probe the global and local
8 dynamics of a series of IgG1 Fc variants.⁹² While IM data were
9 nearly identical for lower charge states of three IgG1 Fc
10 variants were, significant differences were observed in the IM
11 data acquired for higher charge states. Overall, the IM-MS data
12 indicated that the IgG1 Fc mutants were more susceptible to
13 gas-phase unfolding when compared to wild type mAbs,
14 consistent with their stabilities in solution. IM-MS data for
15 intact therapeutic antibodies have also been used to rapidly
16 assess the similarity of innovator mAbs and their biosimilars.⁹²

17 In general, antibody isoforms that exhibit CCS differences
18 of greater than 3% can be routinely resolved by IM
19 separation.^{77,78,94,95} In many cases, however, local
20 conformational changes caused by PTMs or mutations can be
21 too subtle to be captured by IM separation alone. In such
22 cases, CIU can be used to rapidly resolve such conformational
23 states through differences in their unfolding patterns and
24 stabilities in the gas phase. CIU data is frequently displayed
25 as a 'fingerprint', where the IM drift times or CCS values are
26 plotted against the collision voltages used to heat ions and
27 generate protein unfolding. (Figure 4) Such experiments have
28 been used for a broad array of applications, and the general
29 utility of CIU in the context of small molecule drug discovery
30 and development has been previously reviewed.^{96–98}
31 Relatively recently, CIU data has been shown to quantitatively
32 discriminate between IgG subtypes that differ only in terms
33 their disulfide bonding.¹⁰² For example, IgG1 and IgG4 possess
34 the same number of inter-chain disulfide bonds, and only
35 differ in the disulfide connectivity pattern between their heavy
36 and light chains. In both cases, three main features were
37 observed during CIU. However, detailed comparisons enabled
38 by CIUSuite software¹⁰³ revealed clear differences within the
39 CIU datasets. Continuing work in this area has seen CIU used to
40 differentiate innovator and biosimilar preparations of
41 infliximab, in which minor differences in mAb glycosylation and
42 glycation across multiple sample lots produced measurable
43 shifts in mAb unfolding.¹⁰⁴ More recently, the combination
44 of native IM-MS and CIU distinguished complexes formed
45 between a single antigen and various antibodies binding to
46 different epitopes.¹⁰⁵

47 In addition to coupling with native MS for intact protein
48 analysis, IM-MS has also been used extensively to separate
49 and analyze complex peptide carbohydrate mixtures. The
50 potential of IM-MS to distinguish lot-to-lot variability within
51 mAb N-glycosylation profiles was recently reported.¹⁰⁶
52 Although such techniques have not been applied to
53 therapeutic proteins yet, the utility of IM-MS for in-depth
54 structural analysis of carbohydrate and glycoconjugate
55 has been illustrated generally, thus illuminating the clear benefits
56 that such workflows will provide for the characterization of
57 therapeutic antibodies.^{107–109}

Conclusions and Outlook

Structural mass spectrometry offers a variety of approaches for the in-depth characterization of therapeutic antibodies. Such technologies can probe all levels of mAb structure, including their primary structures and PTMs, enabling the detailed assessment of mAb variants within complex mixtures. Higher-order structure data can be extracted directly from MS-based technologies as well, enabling the stoichiometry of antibody-antigen complexes, mAb stability, dynamics, and overall size to be assessed rapidly from relatively impure samples.

There are many challenges associated with the further development of structural MS techniques for mAb analysis. Clearly, therapeutic proteins equally modified on different sites are exceptionally challenging to separate by MS alone, greatly complicating their differential analysis. Furthermore, the data interpretation steps for many structural MS techniques continues to be a bottle-neck generally, but also specifically in the context of mAb analyses. In addition, automated sample handling and high-throughput sample delivery systems have yet to be completely integrated with structural MS workflows. Despite the clear synergy of structural MS-based approaches, integration of these data types has remained challenging. Clearly, the facile integration of such data would enable generating high-quality structural models for large biopharmaceuticals that resist characterization by NMR or X-ray crystallography. Overall, we expect that continued developments in all of these areas will further drive our ability to discover and develop the next generation of therapeutic antibodies, as well as substantially improve our ability to assess biosimilars, thus enabling the continued growth of this exciting class of therapeutics and their profound impact on human health.

Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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