Antimicrobial efficacy and mechanisms of silver nanoparticles against *Phanerochaete chrysosporium* in the presence of common electrolytes and humic acid

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Abstract

In this study, influences of cations (Na^+, K^+, Ca^{2+}, and Mg^{2+}), anions (NO_3^-, Cl^-, and SO_4^{2-}), and humic acid (HA) on the antimicrobial efficacy of silver nanoparticles (AgNPs)/Ag^+ against *Phanerochaete chrysosporium* were investigated by observing cell viability and total Ag uptake. K^+ enhanced the antimicrobial toxicity of AgNPs on *P. chrysosporium*, while divalent cations decreased the toxicity considerably, with preference of Ca^{2+} over Mg^{2+}. Impact caused by a combination of monovalent and divalent electrolytes was mainly controlled by divalent cations. Compared to AgNPs, however, Ag^+ with the same total Ag content exhibited stronger antimicrobial efficacy towards *P. chrysosporium*, regardless of the type of electrolytes. Furthermore, HA addition induced greater microbial activity under AgNP stress, possibly originating from stronger affinity of AgNPs over Ag^+ to organic matters. The obtained results suggested that antimicrobial efficacy of AgNPs was closely related to water chemistry: addition of divalent electrolytes and HA reduced the opportunities directly for AgNP contact and interaction with cells through formation of aggregates, complexes, and surface coatings, leading to significant toxicity reduction; however, in monovalent electrolytes, the dominating mode of action of AgNPs could be toxic effects of the released Ag^+ on microorganisms due to nanoparticle dissolution.

Keywords:

Silver nanoparticles; Antimicrobial efficacy; *Phanerochaete chrysosprium*; Monovalent and divalent electrolytes; Humic acid

1. Introduction

Silver nanoparticles (AgNPs), one of the most extensively studied nanomaterials, are increasingly used in consumer products including paints, textiles, medicals, personal care products, and food storage bins [1–4], due to their broad-spectrum antimicrobial efficacy and low mammalian cytotoxicity [5–7]. Increased AgNP production and usage imply an increase potential for their release into surface waters and subsurface, thus transforming into various silver forms (e.g., Ag^0 nanoparticle, dissolved Ag^+, and soluble AgNP/Ag^+ complexes) due to the oxidation and dissolution of nanoparticles [8–11]. The incidental or intentional release of AgNPs to the environment poses a potential risk to the ecosystem and human health [12–18]. The toxicity and antimicrobial activity of AgNPs are proven to be associated with water chemistry, which shows impacts on aggregation, dissolution, and stability of AgNPs [19–23].

For example, divalent cations (e.g., Ca^{2+} and Mg^{2+}) were more efficient in AgNP aggregation and conferred protective effects against cytotoxicity of nanoparticles via potentially limiting their adherence onto microbial biomass as compared to monovalent cations (e.g., Na^+) at similar concentrations [24,25]. Nevertheless, Pokhrel et al. [26] exhibited an enhanced toxicity of AgNPs with increasing Ca^{2+} concentrations. Besides, effects of aqueous anions on AgNP stability behaviors have also been reported [9,27]. Chloride strongly enhanced the destabilization of AgNPs through the formation of $AgCl^0$ bridging of AgNPs, respectively [1,22]. Association of these anions with released Ag^+ may form precipitates or soluble complexes [28,29].

These behaviors would further reduce AgNP/Ag^{+} bioavailability and toxicity. By contrast, AgNP stability was increased in the presence of phosphate and bicarbonate [30]. However, no specific ion effects were observed for nitrate (NO_3^-) and sulfate (SO_4^{2-}) as described by Baalousha et al. [31]. Moreover, natural organic material (NOM) could enhance AgNP stability through steric or electrostatic repulsion after being adsorbed onto nanoparticle surface, playing an important role in the environmental fate, transport, and toxicity of nanomaterials [32–35]. Enhanced aggregation was also documented in certain systems when NOM was complexed with cations and intermolecular bridging of humic acid (HA) macromolecules occurred in the presence of multivalent cations such as Ca^{2+} [36,37]. Although numerous studies show that relatively subtle changes in water chemistry have been linked to differences in reactivity, bioavailability, and potential toxicity of AgNPs in aquatic environments [32,38,39], the roles of water chemistry in the mode of antimicrobial action of AgNPs on filamentous fungi have not been addressed systematically in the literature. Therefore, studies on the antifungal efficacy of AgNPs over a wide range of environmental parameters are important to elucidate the effects of AgNPs on microorganisms in ecosystems.

The objective of the current study is to establish a correlation between water characteristics and tolerance of *Phanerochaete chrysosporium* (*P. chrysosporium*, the model species of white-rot fungi) to AgNPs that could easily predict antimicrobial properties and ecotoxicology of AgNPs. Herein, tolerance is defined as cell survival upon antimicrobial treatments. A viability-based tolerance assay was carried out to

systematically assess antimicrobial efficacy of AgNPs against *P. chrysosporium* following exposure to different electrolytes including single monovalent, single divalent, a mixture of the two ions, and HA. This study also investigated changes of AgNP size and zeta-potential, dissolved Ag^+ concentration, intracellular and extracellular Ag content, lignolytic enzyme activity, and microbial morphology. Toxicity of Ag^+ versus AgNPs was compared by conducting antibacterial assays under similar water chemistry conditions. Their differential effects on AgNP vs Ag^+ toxicity will be valuable in addressing how water characteristics may affect their relative contributions to AgNP antimicrobial activity.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Effects of environmental electrolytes on toxicity responses of *P. chrysosporium* to AgNPs and Ag^+

Influences of monovalent, divalent ions, and HA on AgNP cytotoxicity were investigated in *P. chrysosporium*. To achieve an identical cell concentration, equivalent mycelia (0.2 g) were added respectively into: (i) suspensions containing various concentrations of single electrolytes (0.5–500 mM; NaCl, $NaNO_3$, Na_2SO_4, KCl, KNO_3, K_2SO_4, $CaCl_2$, $Ca(NO_3)_2$, $CaSO_4$, $MgCl_2$, and $MgSO_4$) under 30-μM AgNP stress; (ii) suspensions comprising different AgNP doses (0, 10, 60, 100, and 170 μM) and a constant concentration of the above single electrolytes (30 mM); (iii) mixtures of electrolytes (500 mM $NaNO_3$ and 10 mM $Ca(NO_3)_2$; 500 mM $NaNO_3$ and 100 mM $Ca(NO_3)_2$) with 30 μM AgNPs, higher concentrations of monovalent cations selected were due to their more abundance in the environment and less efficiency in

106 inducing nanoparticle aggregation; and (iv) suspensions consisting of 30 mM of the
107 above single electrolytes, 30 μM AgNPs, and 0.1 g/L HA. Ag^+-elicited toxicity
108 responses were performed similarly under the same conditions except for the
109 substitution of Ag^+ (3 μM) added as $AgNO_3$ for AgNPs (30 μM). The samples were
110 incubated for 24 h at 37 ℃. The fungal mycelia were harvested by centrifugation and
111 washed three times with ultrapure water for AgNP/Ag^+ cytotoxicity assessment.
112 Dose-response effects of AgNP/Ag^+ antimicrobial viability were carried out in 2 mM
113 $NaHCO_3$ buffer solution, which was selected due to the fact that it had no influence
114 on silver bioavailability and avoided ligands that might bind with AgNPs and Ag^+ and
115 facilitate precipitation or other confounding effects [10,27].
116 *P. chrysosporium* strain was cultivated in Kirk's liquid culture medium [40].
117 AgNPs (coated with citrate), with a mean hydrodynamic diameter of 21.6 ± 0.3 nm
118 and a negative zeta-potential of –34.5 ± 1.5 mV, were synthesized by $NaBH_4$
119 reduction of $AgNO_3$, following the modified procedure as described in our previous
120 studies [41,42]. Viability of *P. chrysosporium* cells was determined by using the MTT
121 reduction assay according to Chen et al. [43]. Lignin peroxidase (LiP) and manganese
122 peroxidase (MnP) activities were also determined according to our previous report
123 [42]. Detailed descriptions on cultivation of *P. chrysosporium*, synthesis and
124 characterization of AgNPs, determination of cellular viability and total Ag content are
125 available in Supporting Information.

126 *2.2.* Statistical analyses

127 Statistical analyses were determined by one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA)

using Student's t test and differences between treatments were regarded to be significant at $p < 0.05$. All the experiments were repeated independently in triplicate. The results obtained were presented as the mean of three independent replicates and all data were analyzed with SigmaPlot 14.0 software and SPSS software.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Effects of different electrolytes on microbial tolerance to AgNPs

Environmental anions may significantly influence the physicochemical properties of AgNPs, and thereby their toxicity [9]. Survival of *P. chrysosporium* was determined in the presence of AgNPs over a series of monovalent and divalent electrolyte concentrations (Fig. 1). After addition of Na^+, *P. chrysosporium* survival in the presence of 1 mM NaCl increased by 15.4% and 11.7% compared with the control and the treatment with AgNPs alone (103.7%, shown in section 3.5, Fig. 6A), respectively, whereas a decline in cell viability was observed with an increase in NaCl concentrations from 1 to 100 mM (Fig. 1A). A further increase of Na^+ concentration to 500 mM led to a viability increase for NaCl, Na_2SO_4, and $NaNO_3$. At the same electrolyte concentrations, although *P. chrysosporium* viability in the presence of NaCl was slightly higher than those in Na_2SO_4 and $NaNO_3$, insignificant influence was observed for the three Na^+ dominant suspensions. In the presence of K^+, viability of *P. chrysosporium* in the range of 59.0%–84.6% was almost unchanged for KCl, KNO_3, and K_2SO_4, independent of K^+ concentrations, except for the case of 500 mM KNO_3 with the minimum cell viability of 28.8% (Fig. 1B). The contrasting responses in cell survival between NaCl and KCl amendments indicated the relative preferential

interaction/binding of Na^+ as low as 1 mM with carboxylates (COO^-) on AgNP surfaces, leading to relative lower bioavailability and cytotoxicity of AgNPs towards *P. chrysosporium* [44]. K^+ induced preferential enhancement in AgNP toxicity over Na^+, possibly resulting from a large amount of Ag^+ released from AgNPs upon addition of K^+ (Table 1). Furthermore, the mean hydrodynamic diameters of AgNPs were 37.7 ± 1.6, 41.9 ± 0.6, and 36.0 ± 0.9 nm in the presence of buffer and 1 mM NaCl/KCl electrolytes, respectively. Substantial toxicological studies have documented that AgNPs with relatively larger sizes are much less reactive and toxic than smaller ones, further causing lower adsorption, uptake, and cytotoxicity [45–48]. Hence, another possibility for an enhancement in cell viability in 1 mM NaCl electrolyte was the aggregation of nanoparticles.

Survival of *P. chrysosporium* in Ca^{2+} and Mg^{2+} solutions is presented in Fig. 1C and D. Similar to the toxicity profile obtained in the presence of Na^+, cell viability in divalent electrolytes was stimulated by Cl^- at low concentrations (1 mM), but was depressed by almost all of the investigated NO_3^- and SO_4^{2-} concentrations (0.5–30 mM). However, higher concentrations of $CaCl_2$ and $MgCl_2$ electrolytes (30 mM) resulted in cell death with approximately 26.7% and 22.4% of the total cells, respectively, causing certain toxic effects on *P. chrysosporium*. Besides, higher levels of dissolved Ag^+ concentrations were also observed in the presence of 30 mM Cl^- electrolytes (Table 1). Thus, our data indicated that high Cl^- concentrations might drive AgNP dissolution, further exerting the increased toxicity to cells [1].

3.2. Dose-response effects of AgNP antimicrobial viability

Toxicity of AgNPs at various doses towards *P. chrysosporium* in various electrolyte solutions was also evaluated (Fig. 2). In the absence of AgNPs/Ag^+, activity of fungal cells was inhibited by monovalent electrolytes, but promoted considerably by divalent electrolytes. As shown in Fig. 2A, remarkable stimulation in *P. chrysosporium* survival is evoked by 1 and 10 μM AgNPs in the presence of 2 mM $NaHCO_3$ buffer solution, with the increase of 53.2% and 25.7% in microbial viability with respect to the control, respectively. On the contrary, adding $NaNO_3$ increased *P. chrysosporium* survival by 8.0% and 57.8% at AgNP concentrations of 100 and 170 μM, respectively, which were toxic to *P. chrysosporium* in the absence of $NaNO_3$. By comparison, KNO_3 affected insignificantly AgNP toxicity profiles. Obviously, addition of monovalent electrolytes disrupted the stimulatory effects of low-dose AgNPs, while tolerance of *P. chrysosporium* to high-dose AgNPs was greatly improved by the presence of Na^+. These findings also suggested the preference of Na^+ over K^+ to inhibition on the toxic properties of AgNPs, in line with the results obtained in Fig. 1A.

Fig. 2B shows the toxic effects of AgNPs at various concentrations on *P. chrysosporium* survival in the presence of divalent electrolytes. Survival of *P. chrysosporium* increased by 84.1%–123.0% and 18.8%–87.7% for $CaCl_2$ and $Ca(NO_3)_2$, and 23.8%–63.3% and 30%–35.2% for $MgCl_2$ and $MgSO_4$, respectively. However, $MgSO_4$ addition caused a decrease in cell viability (23.9%–36.5%) relative to the control under AgNP doses of 60–170 μM. We found that the increases in *P. chrysosporium* viability were basically greater in Cl^- solutions than in NO_3^- and SO_4^{2-}

194 solutions in the presence of Ca^{2+}/Mg^{2+} and AgNPs, as indicated in Figs. 1 and 2. The
195 lower viability of *P. chrysosporium* was observed in SO_4^{2-} electrolytes, likely due to
196 greater efficiency of SO_4^{2-} in countering the destabilizing effects of Ca^{2+} and Mg^{2+}
197 compared to Cl^- [49]. More importantly, a noticeable higher increase in cell survival
198 was observed in Ca^{2+} electrolytes compared with Mg^{2+} electrolytes, indicating that
199 Ca^{2+} induced more effective cell protection than the same amount of Mg^{2+} did. This
200 could be explained by the fact that by comparison with Mg^{2+}, Ca^{2+} appeared to act as
201 a constituent of the structural components of microbes more frequently [50], and that
202 the propensity of Ca^{2+} to form complexes with citrate molecules on the surfaces of
203 AgNPs was higher than that of Mg^{2+}, as evident from a higher stability constant of
204 monodentate Ca^{2+}-citrate complexes relative to monodentate Mg^{2+}-citrate complexes
205 at 25 ℃ and ionic strength of 0 mM ($10^{1.4}$ versus $10^{1.0}$) [31,51]. Furthermore, higher
206 AgNP sizes and lower dissolved Ag^+ concentrations were observed in $CaCl_2$
207 electrolyte relative to $MgCl_2$ electrolyte (Fig. 3B and Table 1). These findings can also
208 indicate stronger interaction of Ca^{2+} with citrate coating than Mg^{2+} indirectly.
209 Combined with the observations in Fig. 2A and B, cell survival in Ca^{2+} and Mg^{2+}
210 electrolytes was much higher than that obtained in Na^+ and K^+ electrolytes, especially
211 at low concentrations of AgNPs, indicating that AgNP toxicity to *P. chrysosporium*
212 was reduced by Ca^{2+} and Mg^{2+} more effectively. The reduction of AgNP cytotoxicity
213 could be attributed to the fact that the presence of Ca^{2+} and Mg^{2+} partially neutralized
214 the surface charges of both negatively charged AgNPs and *P. chrysosporium* cells
215 through specific interactions with COO^- of the adsorbed citrate molecules on AgNP

surfaces and biomacromolecules on the cell surfaces (Table S1). Ca^{2+}/Mg^{2+} neutralization caused the occurrence of partial aggregation of nanoparticles as well, leading to attenuation in direct contact between AgNPs and fungal cells [27].

3.3. **Effects of different electrolytes on AgNP stability**

When monovalent or divalent electrolytes (30 mM) were added into various concentrations of AgNP suspensions for 24 h, the average hydrodynamic size of AgNPs was determined to estimate nanoparticle stability (Fig. 3). Upon exposure to higher concentrations of AgNPs (100–170 μM), $NaNO_3$ caused a 1.8–2.3-fold increase in nanoparticle average size relative to their corresponding average sizes in buffer solutions, whereas a negligible increase was measured in AgNP size under stress of 60 μM AgNPs (Fig. 3A). KNO_3 did not affect the average sizes of AgNPs, except for a decrease in the average size under 10-μM AgNP stess. Presumably, monovalent electrolytes maintained and enhanced the nanoparticle stability, especially in K^+ electrolytes. However, Ca^{2+}/Mg^{2+} electrolytes induced a significant increase of 2.9–11.5 folds in the average size of AgNPs compared to their corresponding sizes in the buffer (Fig. 3B). In comparison with Ca^{2+} electrolytes, lower AgNP sizes were evoked by $MgSO_4$. The rise in AgNP average size in the presence of divalent electrolytes suggested potential aggregation/agglomeration of AgNPs [52], which was consistent with the changes in *P. chrysosporium* viability in Figs. 1 and 2.

3.4. Effects of different electrolytes on microbial tolerance to Ag^+

Numerous studies have shown that antimicrobial properties of AgNPs primarily

237 stem from dissolved Ag^+, which can effectively inactivate a wide variety of microbes.
238 To discern the specific contribution of monovalent and divalent electrolytes to AgNP
239 toxicity, the antimicrobial assays of Ag^+ ions were carried out under the conditions of
240 the same electrolyte solutions (Fig. 4). As noted in Fig. 4A, survival of *P.*
241 *chrysosporium* exposed to 3 μM Ag^+ was enhanced upon addition of 50 mM NaCl
242 and 10 mM Na_2SO_4, increasing by 10.2% and 9.3% relative to the control,
243 respectively. However, *P. chrysosporium* survivals in 500 mM NaCl and Na_2SO_4
244 solutions were only 30.0% and 51.7%, respectively. These results indicated that
245 toxicity of Ag^+ cannot be counteracted by adding excess Cl^- and SO_4^{2-}. Another
246 possibility was that salt shock (osmotic stress) led to a decrease in cell activity at the
247 higher Na^+ concentrations. Furthermore, $NaNO_3$ amendment did not markedly affect
248 Ag^+ antimicrobial ability. Similarly, no significant alteration in antimicrobial activity
249 was observed with the addition of K^+, except for treatments with 10 mM KNO_3 and
250 500 mM KCl/KNO_3/K_2SO_4 (Fig. 4B).

251 Survival of fungal cells in the presence of Ag^+ and divalent electrolytes is
252 presented in Fig. 4C and D. The results indicated that *P. chrysosporium* viability
253 under the same ionic strengths followed the order: in SO_4^{2-} > Cl^- > NO_3^- electrolyte
254 solutions, without obvious variations over a series of Ca^{2+} and Mg^{2+} concentrations
255 investigated. Additionally, in the absence of electrolytes, a concentration of 3 μM Ag^+
256 diminished the microbial survival, causing 53.7% of the total cells being killed (seen
257 in section 3.6, Fig. 6B). By contrast, it was found that SO_4^{2-} and Cl^- exhibited a
258 stimulatory effect on microbial viability with respect to Ag^+ alone and that toxic

effects of Ag^+ to cells can be negligibly influenced by NO_3^-. It is widely accepted that Ag^+ bioavailability is hindered by forming complexation and/or precipitation with SO_4^{2-} and Cl^- in the media, e.g., relatively insoluble Ag_2SO_4 and AgCl molecules. Additionally, it is well-known that Cl^- has a relatively lower solubility product equilibrium constant than SO_4^{2-} ($K_{sp\text{-}AgCl} = 1.8 \times 10^{-10}$ and $K_{sp\text{-}Ag2SO4} = 1.2 \times 10^{-5}$) [2]. And in comparison with Ag_2SO_4, the solubility product constant of AgCl was exceeded by our tested concentrations (1.8×10^{-7}), indicating that the formation of AgCl was much more stable than Ag_2SO_4. In that case, more significant toxicity reduction should be observed by Cl^-, rather than SO_4^{2-}, which was obviously opposite to the findings in the present work. Comparison of their stability constants and potential to reduce Ag^+ toxicity suggested that for the higher Cl/Ag molar ratios, it was likely for the formation of soluble $AgCl_{(aq)}$ or $AgCl_2^-$, as well as $AgCl_3^{2-}$ and $AgCl_4^{3-}$ below the precipitation potential, because the toxicity of Ag^+ was not completely removed by the addition of Cl^- [2]. This speculation can be verified by observation in distribution of total Ag content in Fig. S1. Total extracellular Ag content was considerably suppressed to an undetectable level upon addition of $CaCl_2$/$MgCl_2$ into AgNP and Ag^+ suspensions (Fig. S1A and B). However, an increase in total intracellular Ag content was observed upon $CaCl_2$ amendment of Ag^+; by contrast, total intracellular Ag content under AgNP exposure was not detected (Fig. S1C). Unlike Cl^-, mitigation of SO_4^{2-} on toxic effects of Ag^+ probably originated from the complexation of SO_4^{2-} with Ag^+, and the aqueous and unstable complexes might lead to a fluctuation in microbial survival to a certain extent.

281 *3.5.* Dose-response effects of Ag^+ on cell viability

282 Influences of monovalent and divalent electrolytes on Ag^+ dose-response toxicity
283 against *P. chrysosporium* are presented in Fig. 5. A similar trend as for different
284 amount of AgNPs in the presence of KNO_3 was observed for dose-response curves of
285 Ag^+ in microbial viability with monovalent electrolytes (Fig. 5A). $NaNO_3$ and KNO_3
286 did not significantly affect the toxic effects of Ag^+ towards cells, except for the
287 inhibition at low Ag^+ concentrations (0–1 μM) that showing a stimulatory effect in the
288 absence of electrolytes, and their corresponding EC_{50} values were statistically
289 undistinguishable ($p > 0.05$) (EC_{50}: 1.4 vs 4.9 μM) relative to buffer exposure (EC_{50}:
290 4.6 μM). In contrast to $NaNO_3$/KNO_3 electrolytes, the presence of $CaCl_2$ (EC_{50}: 8.2
291 μM), $MgCl_2$ (EC_{50}: 12.4 μM), and $MgSO_4$ (EC_{50}: 7.8 μM) alleviated the toxic action
292 of Ag^+ at concentrations of 0–3 μM to some extent (Fig. 5B). Nevertheless, *P.*
293 *chrysosporium* survival upon $Ca(NO_3)_2$ amendment was still depressed, similar to that
294 upon amendments of $NaNO_3$ and KNO_3. These results demonstrated that
295 antimicrobial toxicity of Ag^+ to *P. chrysosporium* was evidently enhanced by NO_3^-
296 under low doses of Ag^+, regardless of monovalent or divalent cations, but was
297 inhibited upon addition of Cl^- and SO_4^{2-} electrolytes. Upon further increases in Ag^+
298 concentrations, the microbiocidal effects of Ag^+ on *P. chrysosporium* were not easily
299 subjected to the influence of all the monovalent and divalent electrolytes, probably
300 due to the bioavailability and cytotoxicity of the formation of soluble and/or unstable
301 silver species. Moreover, on the basis of EC_{50} values, Ag^+ ions were about 28 × more
302 toxic to *P. chrysosporium* than AgNPs in the buffer solutions (Figs. 2A and 5A) (EC_{50}:

4.6 vs 126.9 μM).

Besides, the toxicity of AgNPs and Ag^+ to *P. chrysosporium* presented a time-dependent decrease, and in contrast with divalent electrolytes, monovalent electrolytes elicited a more significant decrease in cell survival (Fig. S2). Meanwhile, under AgNP stress, there was no significant difference in LiP activities between the samples in $NaNO_3$/KNO_3/$MgSO_4$ and buffer solutions; however, LiP activity was significantly stimulated upon addition of $Ca(NO_3)_2$, $CaCl_2$, and $MgCl_2$ (Fig. S3A). A significant stimulation in LiP activity was also induced after addition of $CaCl_2$/$MgCl_2$/$MgSO_4$ into Ag^+ solutions. NO_3^- electrolytes insignificantly influenced LiP activity upon exposure to Ag^+, relative to those in the control and buffer. The alterations of MnP activity under stresses of AgNPs and Ag^+ with various electrolytes were similar to those of LiP (Fig. S3B). Coupled with the analyses of influences of different electrolytes on microbial tolerance to AgNPs/Ag^+ and dose-response effects of AgNP/Ag^+ on cell viability, predictably, it was also observed that higher viabilities under AgNP exposure were induced by divalent electrolytes with the preference of Ca^{2+} over Mg^{2+}, compared to monovalent electrolytes. And viability of *P. chrysosporium* treated with low-dose Ag^+ was indeed inhibited by NO_3^- electrolytes, but was enhanced by Cl^- and SO_4^{2-} electrolytes.

3.6. AgNP/Ag^+ toxicity in the presence of mixture of mono and divalent electrolytes

Tolerance of *P. chrysosporium* to AgNPs and Ag^+ showed an apparent disparity in the presence of single and combined electrolytes of $NaNO_3$ and $Ca(NO_3)_2$ (Fig. 6). As shown in Fig. 6A, the antimicrobial effectiveness of AgNPs can be enhanced by

325 500 mM $NaNO_3$ alone, 10 mM $Ca(NO_3)_2$ alone, and the combination of the two;
326 however, introduction of 100 mM $Ca(NO_3)_2$ into 500 mM $NaNO_3$ solutions mitigated
327 the toxicity of AgNPs to *P. chrysosporium*. Thus, the dominance of $Ca(NO_3)_2$ at high
328 concentrations in controlling AgNP behaviors (e.g. aggregation) in this mixture can be
329 concluded. In marked contrast to the observations made under AgNP stress, negligible
330 impacts of $NaNO_3$ and $Ca(NO_3)_2$, separately and in combination, on Ag^+
331 antimicrobial effects were observed in Fig. 6B.
332 Besides, in order to visualize the influence of $Ca(NO_3)_2$ on AgNP/Ag^+
333 antimicrobial efficacy in the presence of mixture of mono and divalent electrolytes,
334 membrane damage of *P. chrysosoporium* cells was determined after uniform dyeing
335 with propidium iodide. In the presence of 500 mM $NaNO_3$, weaker red fluorescence
336 under AgNP stress was shown when *P. chrysosporium* was exposed to 100 mM
337 $Ca(NO_3)_2$ in comparison to10 mM $Ca(NO_3)_2$ (Fig. S4A and B). This implied that
338 addition of high-concentration $Ca(NO_3)_2$ triggered less loss of plasma membrane and
339 improved viability of *P. chrysosporium* exposed to AgNPs. However, an opposite
340 phenomenon was observed under stress of Ag^+ (Fig. S4C and D). Meanwhile, it was
341 also found that *P. chrysosporium* cells showed stronger red fluorescence after addition
342 of 100 mM $Ca(NO_3)_2$ into the Ag^+ solution as well as 500 mM $NaNO_3$ than that
343 challenged with 10 mM $Ca(NO_3)_2$. Apparently, addition of high-level $Ca(NO_3)_2$ in the
344 presence of $NaNO_3$ lowered AgNP cytotoxicity, leading to unobvious damage of
345 plasma damage, in agreement with the observations of Fig. 6.
346 The results from Figs. 6 and S4 manifested that environmental electrolytes

modulated the toxicity of AgNPs and Ag^+ via specific chemical interactions differentially, thus affecting their relative contributions to antimicrobial activity. Furthermore, it was found that higher dissolved Ag^+ concentrations were obtained in the electrolytes of 500 mM $NaNO_3$ and/or 10 mM $Ca(NO_3)_2$, and that there was a larger hydrodanamic size in the mixture of 500 mM $NaNO_3$ and100 mM $Ca(NO_3)_2$ relative to those in the buffer (Table S2). Predictably, lower survival of *P. chrysosporium* possibly arose from a large amount of Ag^+ released from AgNPs in the presence of monovalent cations and/or low concentrations of divalent cations. However, AgNP aggregation might be predominantly induced under higher concentrations of divalent cations, thereby showing higher *P. chrysosporium* survival.

3.7. Effects of electrolytes and HA coexistence on AgNP/Ag^+ toxicity

NOM may exist together with various cations and anions in natural or engineered aquatic and soil systems. Here, the comprehensive effects on antimicrobial efficacy of AgNPs and Ag^+ caused by combination of HA and electrolytes were investigated (Fig. 7). The microbial viabilities of samples in the HA alone and AgNP alone systems were slightly higher than that in the control (Fig. 7A). The decreased viability of *P. chrysosporium* in electrolyte solutions (except $MgSO_4$) without HA was observed under AgNP stress relative to the control. But the mixture of HA and NaCl, Na_2SO_4, $Ca(NO_3)_2$, $CaCl_2$, or $MgCl_2$ electrolytes greatly improved the viability. The observations suggested that HA addition could weaken the enhanced antimicrobial efficacy of AgNPs in these electrolyte solutions. Huang et al. [5] found that HA might mitigate the anti-algae efficacy of AgNPs to *Microcystis aeruginosa* through changing

physicochemical properties and dissolution behavior of nanoparticles. Mitigation of AgNP toxicity by HA was possibly because the adsorption of HA onto the surfaces of AgNPs and *P. chrysosporium* hindered their direct interaction and/or uptake of AgNPs by fungal cells [53–55]. Considering negatively charged functional groups present on HA macromolecules, HA coating on AgNPs and cells also increased the electrostatic and steric repulsive forces between them due to the more negative surface charges. Meanwhile, the adsorbed HA could inhibit Ag^{+} release on account of blockage of active sites, oxidant competition, reduction reactions, or complexation [5]. In addition, Ca^{2+} and Mg^{2+} have also been found to promote HA adsorption onto AgNP surface [49]. Complexation of Ca^{2+}/Mg^{2+} with COO^{-} on HA and AgNP surfaces could probably neutralize their negative charged, leading to weaker repulsion between AgNPs and fungal cells and making AgNP contact with and bind to fungal cells easier. However, the coating of HA might play a greater role in decreasing the probabilities of direct contact and interaction between nanoparticles and cells, thus alleviating the antimicrobial toxicity of AgNPs [5,49]. Remarkably, the enhancement of AgNP toxicity to *P. chrysosporium* was observed in $NaNO_3$ and KNO_3 electrolytes without HA; however, the coexistence of HA and $NaNO_3$/KNO_3 aggravated the toxicity of AgNPs more significantly, which could be interpreted by the formation of relatively smaller and more stable particles after addition of HA [56,57]. The results also indicated that the antimicrobial toxicity of AgNPs towards *P. chrysosporium* in the presence of a mixture of HA and $NaNO_3$/KNO_3 might be additive.

For better understanding of the effects of Ca^{2+}/Mg^{2+} and HA addition on AgNPs/Ag^{+} stimulation for microbial growth, SEM measurements on the surfaces of control, fungi after treatment with AgNPs alone and combined treatment with AgNPs, Ca^{2+}/Mg^{2+} and HA were conducted (Fig. 8). All the SEM images exhibited network surface structures with smooth mycelia and void spaces between the hyphae. Analysis of AgNP treatment exhibited widened hyphae loaded with some crystal particles compared to the control (Fig. 8A and B). After addition of Ca^{2+}/Mg^{2+} and HA, more vigorous and compact mycelia attached with fewer crystals were observed in the presence of AgNPs in Fig. 8C and D. It reflected that Ca^{2+}/Mg^{2+} and HA addition contributed to stimulation of AgNPs for microbial growth possibly because of the reduction in direct contact, interaction, and uptake of AgNPs/Ag^{+} with cell components.

Besides, in Ag^{+} solutions, the survival of *P. chrysosporium* in $Ca(NO_3)_2$ and $MgCl_2$ solutions with HA was increased by 52.3% and 114.3% over those without HA, respectively (Fig. 7B). The difference in *P. chrysosporium* survival in $Ca(NO_3)_2$ and $MgCl_2$ was presumably due to complexation of Cl^{-} with Ag^{+}. However, apart from the two electrolytes, there was no dramatic change in *P. chrysosporium* viability under Ag^{+} stress in all the electrolytes with and without HA addition. Furthermore, adding HA prominently improved the survival of *P. chrysosporium* in $MgCl_2$ solution, but resulted in a slight inhibitory effect on microbial activity in $CaCl_2$ solution. Therefore, the effects of Cl^{-} present in solutions on Ag^{+} toxicity may not be the dominant factor. Meanwhile, the comparison of cell survival in $CaCl_2$ and $MgCl_2$ solutions showed that

412 Mg^{2+} possibly induced a stronger complexation with HA than Ca^{2+} in Ag^{+} solution,
413 which was contrary to the previous findings of a lower affinity of Mg^{2+} to COO^{-} of
414 NOM compared to Ca^{2+} [49,58]. Further studies must be conducted to further explore
415 direct evidence involved. By contrast, for AgNPs, no evidence of a stronger affinity of
416 Mg^{2+} for HA was observed. It was implied that the impacts of divalent electrolytes
417 and NOM might be strongly dependent on the metal species present and that AgNPs
418 could bind to NOM more strongly than Ag^{+}.

419 In a word, the toxicity of AgNPs and Ag^{+} has been affected differentially by
420 common electrolytes and HA in aquatic systems, further altering their relative
421 contribution to antimicrobial capacities. Previous studies have reported that the
422 interactions of nanoparticles with plasma membranes may lead to particle aggregation,
423 dissolution, and restructuring at the nanomaterial surfaces and play a key role in the
424 antimicrobial effects [59–62]. In this study, combined with SEM observations in Fig.
425 8, the enhanced AgNP stimulation for microbial growth upon addition of Ca^{2+}/Mg^{2+}
426 and in the presence of HA could be attributed to reduction in direct contact,
427 interaction, and uptake of AgNPs/Ag^{+} with cell components due to the formation of
428 new surface coatings and particle aggregation. However, antimicrobial performance
429 of AgNPs was enhanced in the presence of monovalent electrolytes, particularly K^{+},
430 which might be associated with AgNP dissolution. The action would further aggravate
431 a large amount of Ag^{+} release and direct contact/interaction between AgNPs and *P.*
432 *chrysosporium* cells.

433 **4. Conclusions**

In the present study, monovalent electrolytes, especially K^+, enhanced the antimicrobial efficacy of AgNPs, while an obvious promotion in AgNP stimulation of microbial activity was observed in divalent electrolytes. Ca^{2+} induced more effective tolerance of *P. chrysosporium* to AgNPs than the same concentrations of Mg^{2+} did. For combination of monovalent and divalent electrolytes, the dominating factor for AgNP antimicrobial capability was divalent cations. Collectively, it was hypothesized that the major factors responsible for AgNP cytotoxicity towards *P. chrysosporium* were direct contact/interaction and specific reactions between nanoparticles and cells. The enhanced AgNP toxicity in monovalent electrolytes mainly arose from the aggravated nanoparticle-microbe interplay, resulting in Ag^+ dissociation. However, the reduced direct contact and interaction of AgNPs/Ag^+ with cell components due to aggregation, complexation, and HA surface coating greatly mitigated the antimicrobial activity of AgNPs in the presence of divalent electrolytes and HA. The observations here have great implications for better understanding in ecotoxicity of nanomaterials in natural water systems.

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