International Science And Technology Scholars Federation

Nano-Bio Convergence Letters
https://journals.cypedia.net/nbcl

Article

Dual-Enzyme-Mimicking MOF-Derived Carbon Nanoparticles Loaded with Antimicrobial Peptides for Smart Photothermal-Assisted Bacterial Wound Infection Therapy

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Received: 18 July 2025; Revised: 23 July 2025; Accepted: 30 July 2025; Published: 3 August 2025

ABSTRACT

Bacterial wound infections, particularly those caused by drug-resistant strains (e.g., methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, MRSA), pose a severe threat to public health due to limited treatment options and high mortality rates. Conventional antibiotics often fail to eliminate biofilms and induce drug resistance, while single-modal antimicrobial strategies lack efficiency in complex infection microenvironments. Herein, we report a smart nanotherapeutic platform based on metal-organic framework (MOF)-derived carbon nanoparticles (MDC NPs) with dual enzyme-mimetic activities (peroxidase-like and catalase-like) and photothermal properties, loaded with antimicrobial peptides (AMPs) for synergistic bacterial wound infection therapy. The MDC NPs were synthesized by pyrolyzing zeolitic imidazolate framework-8 (ZIF-8) at 800°C, followed by surface modification with polyethylene glycol (PEG) to enhance biocompatibility. The dual enzyme-mimetic activities of MDC NPs enable them to catalytically generate reactive oxygen species (ROS) via peroxidase-like activity in the presence of H_2O_2 (abundant in infected wounds) and decompose excess H_2O_2 into O_2 via catalase-like activity to relieve oxidative stress in normal tissues. Under near-infrared (NIR) laser irradiation (808 nm), MDC NPs exhibit excellent photothermal conversion efficiency (42.3%), which not only directly ablates bacteria but also promotes AMP release from the nanoparticle surface. In vitro studies show that the MDC-AMP nanosystem achieves 99.8% and 99.2% antibacterial efficiency against E. coli (Gram-negative) and MRSA (Gram-positive), respectively, and effectively disrupts MRSA biofilms (biofilm degradation rate: 87.6%). In a MRSA-infected mouse full-thickness skin wound model, MDC-AMP + NIR treatment accelerates wound closure (wound healing rate: 92.3% at day 7 vs. 45.6% for saline control), reduces inflammatory cell infiltration, and promotes collagen deposition. This work demonstrates a versatile nanotherapeutic strategy that integrates enzyme catalysis, photothermal therapy, and AMP-based antimicrobial action, providing a promising solution for drug-resistant bacterial wound infections and advancing the convergence of nanomaterial science and clinical microbiology.

Keywords: MOF-Derived Carbon Nanoparticles; Nanozymes; Antimicrobial Peptides; Photothermal Therapy; Bacterial Wound Infection; MRSA; Reactive Oxygen Species; Wound Healing

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Bacterial wound infections affect over 100 million people worldwide annually, with drug-resistant strains such as methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) and extended-spectrum β-lactamase (ESBL)-producing *E. coli* accounting for 30–50% of cases. These infections delay wound healing, increase the risk of sepsis, and lead to approximately 700,000 deaths each year. Conventional antibiotic therapy faces two major challenges: (1) the formation of bacterial biofilms—extracellular polymeric substance (EPS) matrices that shield bacteria from antibiotics and the host immune system; (2) the rapid evolution of drug resistance, with over 2.8 million antibiotic-resistant infections reported annually in the United States alone.

Alternative antimicrobial strategies, such as antimicrobial peptides (AMPs), photothermal therapy (PTT), and reactive oxygen species (ROS)-based therapy, have gained attention in recent years. AMPs are short cationic peptides that disrupt bacterial membranes without inducing resistance, but their clinical application is limited by poor stability, high cytotoxicity, and rapid degradation in vivo. PTT uses nanomaterials with NIR light absorption to generate local heat (45–55°C) for bacterial ablation, but it may damage surrounding normal tissues and fail to eliminate bacteria in deep wound layers. ROS-based therapy relies on the production of highly toxic ROS (e.g., ·OH, O_2^-) to kill bacteria, but excessive ROS can cause oxidative stress and delay wound healing.

1.2 Research Gaps

Existing nanotherapeutic platforms for bacterial wound infections often rely on single-modal action, leading to suboptimal efficacy in complex infection microenvironments. For example, AMP-loaded nanoparticles improve peptide stability but lack the ability to disrupt mature biofilms. Photothermal nanomaterials can ablate bacteria but require high laser power, increasing tissue damage risk. Nanozymes—nanomaterials with enzyme-mimetic activities—have been used for ROS generation, but most single-enzyme-mimetic nanozymes cannot balance ROS production and oxidative stress relief. Additionally, few platforms integrate multiple therapeutic modalities (e.g., enzyme catalysis, PTT, AMPs) into a single nanosystem for synergistic antimicrobial action, and even fewer are validated in clinically relevant wound infection models.

1.3 Research Objectives and Contributions

The primary objective of this study is to develop a multi-modal nanotherapeutic platform based on MOF-derived carbon nanoparticles (MDC NPs) for smart, synergistic treatment of drug-resistant bacterial wound infections. Specific objectives include:

(1) Synthesize and characterize MDC NPs with dual enzyme-mimetic activities (peroxidase-like and catalase-like) and photothermal properties.

(2) Load AMPs onto MDC NPs and evaluate AMP loading efficiency, NIR-triggered release behavior, and biocompatibility.

(3) Assess the in vitro antibacterial efficacy of MDC-AMP against planktonic bacteria (Gram-positive MRSA and Gram-negative *E. coli*) and MRSA biofilms.

(4) Validate the in vivo therapeutic efficacy of MDC-AMP + NIR in a MRSA-infected mouse full-thickness skin wound model, focusing on wound healing rate, inflammation reduction, and tissue regeneration.

The key contributions of this research are:

•**Nanomaterial Engineering Contribution**: The MDC NPs exhibit dual enzyme-mimetic activities and high photothermal conversion efficiency, enabling simultaneous ROS generation, oxidative stress relief, and photothermal ablation—addressing the limitations of single-modal nanozymes or photothermal agents.

•**Therapeutic Synergy Contribution**: The integration of enzyme catalysis, PTT, and AMPs creates a synergistic antimicrobial effect that enhances antibacterial efficacy against planktonic bacteria and biofilms while reducing AMP dosage and minimizing tissue damage.

•**Clinical Translation Contribution**: The MDC-AMP nanosystem accelerates wound healing in a clinically relevant mouse model, providing a translatable strategy for treating drug-resistant bacterial wound infections.

2. Literature Review

2.1 MOF-Derived Carbon Nanoparticles in Biomedical Applications

Metal-organic frameworks (MOFs) are porous crystalline materials composed of metal ions/clusters and organic ligands, with high surface area, tunable pore size, and excellent biocompatibility. MOF-derived carbon nanoparticles (MDC NPs), synthesized by pyrolyzing MOFs at high temperatures, inherit the porous structure of MOFs and exhibit unique properties such as high electrical conductivity, photothermal activity, and enzyme-mimetic behavior. ZIF-8, a widely used MOF composed of Zn^{2+} ions and 2-methylimidazole ligands, is an ideal precursor for MDC NPs due to its high thermal stability and low toxicity (Zn^{2+} is biodegradable and essential for human metabolism).

Recent studies have demonstrated the potential of MDC NPs in biomedical applications. For example, ZIF-8-derived carbon NPs have been used for drug delivery, with a loading capacity of up to 400 μg drug/mg NPs due to their large surface area. MDC NPs also exhibit photothermal properties, with photothermal conversion efficiencies ranging from 35–50% under NIR irradiation, making them suitable for PTT. Additionally, MDC NPs can mimic the activity of natural enzymes (e.g., peroxidase, catalase) by virtue of their surface defects and metal dopants, enabling ROS-based therapy. However, few studies have explored MDC NPs with dual enzyme-mimetic activities for bacterial infection therapy, and even fewer have integrated them with AMPs for synergistic action.

2.2 Nanozymes for Bacterial Infection Therapy

Nanozymes offer several advantages over natural enzymes for antimicrobial therapy: (1) high stability under harsh conditions (e.g., acidic wound microenvironment, high temperature); (2) low cost and easy large-scale synthesis; (3) tunable enzyme-mimetic activity via surface modification. Peroxidase-like nanozymes catalyze the decomposition of H_2O_2 into highly toxic ·OH, which disrupts bacterial membranes and DNA. Catalase-like nanozymes decompose H_2O_2 into O_2 and H_2O, relieving oxidative stress in normal tissues.

Single-enzyme-mimetic nanozymes have limitations: peroxidase-like nanozymes require exogenous H_2O_2 (often not present in sufficient quantities in wounds), while catalase-like nanozymes cannot generate ROS for antibacterial action. Dual-enzyme-mimetic nanozymes that combine peroxidase and catalase activities can overcome these limitations: in the presence of low H_2O_2 concentrations (e.g., infected wounds, where H_2O_2 is produced by immune cells), they act as peroxidases to generate ROS; in high H_2O_2 concentrations, they switch to catalase activity to prevent excessive ROS-induced tissue damage. However,

current dual-enzyme-mimetic nanozymes often have low catalytic efficiency and poor targeting ability, limiting their antimicrobial efficacy.

2.3 Antimicrobial Peptides (AMPs) in Wound Therapy

Antimicrobial peptides are short (10–50 amino acids) cationic, amphipathic peptides that kill bacteria by disrupting their membranes or interfering with intracellular processes. Unlike antibiotics, AMPs do not induce resistance because they target conserved membrane structures, making them ideal for treating drug-resistant infections. However, AMPs have poor stability in vivo (degraded by proteases), high cytotoxicity at high concentrations, and low bioavailability—challenges that can be addressed by loading them onto nanocarriers.

Nanoparticle-based AMP delivery systems, such as liposomes, polymersomes, and mesoporous silica NPs, improve AMP stability and reduce cytotoxicity by controlling release. For example, AMP-loaded liposomes show a 5–10-fold increase in half-life compared to free AMPs. However, most AMP delivery systems rely on passive release, leading to premature release in normal tissues and reduced efficacy at infection sites. Stimuli-responsive release (e.g., NIR light, acidic pH, bacterial enzymes) can address this issue by triggering AMP release only at the infection site. Few studies have combined stimuli-responsive AMP delivery with nanozyme and photothermal activities for synergistic antimicrobial therapy.

3. Methodology

3.1 Synthesis and Characterization of MDC-AMP Nanoparticles

3.1.1 Synthesis of ZIF-8 MOFs

ZIF-8 MOFs were synthesized using a solvothermal method. Briefly, 0.61 g of zinc nitrate hexahydrate ($Zn(NO_3)_2 \cdot 6H_2O$) was dissolved in 20 mL of methanol, and 1.64 g of 2-methylimidazole was dissolved in 20 mL of methanol. The two solutions were mixed under vigorous stirring at room temperature, and the mixture was incubated for 24 h. The resulting white ZIF-8 precipitate was collected by centrifugation (8,000 rpm, 15 min), washed with methanol three times, and dried at 60°C overnight.

3.1.2 Synthesis of MDC NPs

MDC NPs were prepared by pyrolyzing ZIF-8 at high temperature. ZIF-8 powder (1.0 g) was placed in a quartz tube and heated to 800°C at a rate of 5°C/min under a nitrogen atmosphere. The pyrolysis was maintained for 2 h, then cooled to room temperature. The resulting black MDC NPs were ground into a fine powder and dispersed in deionized water (DI) for further modification.

3.1.3 Surface Modification with PEG

To enhance biocompatibility and reduce aggregation, MDC NPs were modified with polyethylene glycol (PEG). MDC NPs (100 mg) were dispersed in 10 mL of DI water, and 50 mg of NH_2-PEG-COOH (molecular weight: 5 kDa) was added. The mixture was stirred at room temperature for 4 h, and the PEG-modified MDC NPs (MDC-PEG) were collected by centrifugation (10,000 rpm, 20 min), washed with DI water three times, and resuspended in DI water.

3.1.4 Loading of Antimicrobial Peptides (AMPs)

The antimicrobial peptide LL-37 (sequence: LLGDFFRKSKEKIGKEFKRIVQRIKDFLRNLVPRTES) was purchased from ChinaPeptides Co., Ltd. (Shanghai, China). AMPs were loaded onto MDC-PEG via electrostatic interaction. MDC-PEG (50 mg) was dispersed in 5 mL of 0.1 M PBS (pH 7.4), and different

concentrations of LL-37 (0.1–1.0 mg/mL) were added. The mixture was incubated at 4°C for 12 h, and the MDC-AMP nanoparticles were collected by centrifugation (10,000 rpm, 20 min). The loading efficiency and capacity were determined by measuring the absorbance of free LL-37 in the supernatant at 280 nm using a UV-Vis spectrophotometer (Shimadzu UV-2600, Kyoto, Japan).

3.1.5 Characterization of Nanoparticles

The morphology of ZIF-8, MDC NPs, MDC-PEG, and MDC-AMP was observed using transmission electron microscopy (TEM, JEOL JEM-2100, Tokyo, Japan) and scanning electron microscopy (SEM, FEI Quanta 250, Hillsboro, OR, USA). The crystal structure was analyzed by X-ray diffraction (XRD, Bruker D8 Advance, Karlsruhe, Germany) with Cu Kα radiation (λ = 1.5418 Å). The specific surface area and pore size distribution were measured by Brunauer-Emmett-Teller (BET) analysis (Micromeritics ASAP 2020, Norcross, GA, USA). The surface functional groups were characterized by Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR, Thermo Scientific Nicolet iS50, Waltham, MA, USA) and X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS, Thermo Scientific K-Alpha, Waltham, MA, USA). The zeta potential and particle size were measured using dynamic light scattering (DLS, Malvern Zetasizer Nano-ZS, Worcestershire, UK).

3.2 Enzyme-Mimetic Activity Assays

3.2.1 Peroxidase-Like Activity

Peroxidase-like activity was evaluated using 3,3',5,5'-tetramethylbenzidine (TMB) as a chromogenic substrate. Different concentrations of MDC-PEG (0–200 μg/mL) were mixed with 0.1 mM TMB and 100 μM H_2O_2 in 0.1 M acetate buffer (pH 4.0). The mixture was incubated at 37°C for 30 min, and the absorbance was measured at 652 nm. The catalytic rate was calculated based on the change in absorbance over time.

3.2.2 Catalase-Like Activity

Catalase-like activity was evaluated by measuring the volume of O_2 generated from H_2O_2 decomposition. MDC-PEG (100 μg/mL) was added to 10 mL of 10 mM H_2O_2 in 0.1 M PBS (pH 7.4) at 37°C. The volume of O_2 released was measured using a gas burette, and the catalytic efficiency was calculated as moles of O_2 generated per minute per gram of MDC-PEG.

3.3 Photothermal Properties and NIR-Triggered AMP Release

3.3.1 Photothermal Conversion Efficiency

The photothermal properties of MDC-PEG were evaluated under NIR laser irradiation (808 nm, 1.0 W/cm^2). MDC-PEG solutions (0–200 μg/mL) were irradiated for 10 min, and the temperature change was recorded every 30 seconds using a thermal imaging camera (FLIR E60, Wilsonville, OR, USA). The photothermal conversion efficiency (η) was calculated using the following formula:

$\eta = (hS\Delta T\_max - Q_0) / I(1 - 10\text{^}(-A_{808}))$

where hS is the heat transfer coefficient, ΔT_max is the maximum temperature change, Q_0 is the heat generated by the solvent, I is the laser power density, and A_{808} is the absorbance of MDC-PEG at 808 nm.

3.3.2 NIR-Triggered AMP Release

To evaluate the NIR-triggered AMP release behavior, MDC-AMP (100 μg/mL) was dispersed in 0.1 M PBS (pH 7.4) and irradiated with an 808 nm NIR laser (1.0 W/cm^2) for 0, 5, 10, 15, and 20 min. At each time point, the solution was centrifuged (10,000 rpm, 20 min), and the concentration of released LL-37 in the supernatant was measured at 280 nm. The cumulative release percentage was calculated as (Released AMP amount / Total loaded AMP amount) × 100%. For comparison, the release behavior of MDC-AMP without

NIR irradiation was also measured over 24 h.

3.4 In Vitro Antibacterial Experiments

3.4.1 Bacterial Strains and Culture Conditions

Gram-positive methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA, ATCC 43300) and Gram-negative *Escherichia coli* (E. coli, ATCC 25922) were used in this study. Bacteria were cultured in Luria-Bertani (LB) broth at 37°C with shaking (180 rpm) for 12 h to reach the logarithmic growth phase. The bacterial concentration was adjusted to 1×10^6 colony-forming units (CFU)/mL using LB broth for subsequent experiments.

3.4.2 Antibacterial Efficacy Against Planktonic Bacteria

The antibacterial efficacy of different formulations was evaluated using the colony counting method. Bacterial suspensions (1×10^6 CFU/mL) were treated with: (1) saline; (2) free LL-37 (20 μg/mL); (3) MDC-PEG (100 μg/mL); (4) MDC-PEG + NIR (100 μg/mL, 808 nm, 1.0 W/cm^2, 10 min); (5) MDC-AMP (100 μg/mL MDC-PEG, 20 μg/mL LL-37); (6) MDC-AMP + NIR (100 μg/mL MDC-PEG, 20 μg/mL LL-37, 808 nm, 1.0 W/cm^2, 10 min). After incubation at 37°C for 4 h, the treated bacterial suspensions were serially diluted (10^0–10^6) with sterile PBS, and 100 μL of each dilution was spread on LB agar plates. The plates were incubated at 37°C for 24 h, and the number of colonies was counted. The antibacterial efficiency was calculated as:

Antibacterial efficiency = [(CFU of control group - CFU of treated group) / CFU of control group] × 100%

Additionally, the bacterial viability was visualized using LIVE/DEAD BacLight Bacterial Viability Kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA). Bacteria were stained with SYTO 9 (green, live bacteria) and propidium iodide (PI, red, dead bacteria) for 15 min in the dark, then observed under a confocal laser scanning microscope (CLSM, Zeiss LSM 880, Oberkochen, Germany).

3.4.3 MRSA Biofilm Disruption Assay

MRSA biofilms were formed in 24-well plates. Briefly, 1 mL of MRSA suspension (1×10^6 CFU/mL) was added to each well and incubated at 37°C for 48 h. The medium was refreshed every 12 h to promote biofilm formation. After 48 h, the supernatant was removed, and the biofilms were gently washed with PBS to remove planktonic bacteria. The biofilms were then treated with the same formulations as in the planktonic antibacterial assay for 6 h (MDC-AMP + NIR group was irradiated for 10 min at the start of incubation).

After treatment, the biofilm biomass was measured using the crystal violet (CV) staining method. The biofilms were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde for 15 min, stained with 0.1% CV for 30 min, and washed with PBS to remove excess dye. The bound CV was dissolved in 33% acetic acid, and the absorbance was measured at 570 nm. The biofilm degradation rate was calculated as:

Biofilm degradation rate = [(Absorbance of control group - Absorbance of treated group) / Absorbance of control group] × 100%

The viability of bacteria within the biofilm was evaluated using the LIVE/DEAD staining kit, followed by CLSM observation. The biofilm structure was also observed using scanning electron microscopy (SEM). After treatment, the biofilms were fixed with 2.5% glutaraldehyde for 24 h, dehydrated with a gradient ethanol series (30%, 50%, 70%, 90%, 100%), and sputter-coated with gold. SEM images were acquired using a FEI Quanta 250 SEM.

3.5 Biocompatibility Evaluation

3.5.1 Hemolysis Assay

The hemocompatibility of MDC-PEG and MDC-AMP was evaluated using a hemolysis assay. Fresh mouse blood was collected from BALB/c mice (4–6 weeks old) and centrifuged at 3,000 rpm for 10 min to separate red blood cells (RBCs). The RBCs were washed three times with PBS and resuspended in PBS to a concentration of 2% (v/v). Different concentrations of MDC-PEG or MDC-AMP (0–400 μg/mL) were mixed with 0.5 mL of 2% RBC suspension and incubated at 37°C for 1 h. Distilled water was used as a positive control (100% hemolysis), and PBS was used as a negative control (0% hemolysis). After incubation, the mixtures were centrifuged at 3,000 rpm for 10 min, and the absorbance of the supernatant was measured at 540 nm. The hemolysis rate was calculated as:

Hemolysis rate = [(Absorbance of sample - Absorbance of negative control) / (Absorbance of positive control - Absorbance of negative control)] × 100%

3.5.2 Cytotoxicity Assay

The cytotoxicity of MDC-PEG and MDC-AMP against mouse embryonic fibroblasts (NIH/3T3 cells) was evaluated using the MTT assay. NIH/3T3 cells were seeded in 96-well plates at a density of 5×10^3 cells/well and incubated overnight at 37°C with 5% CO_2. The cells were then treated with different concentrations of MDC-PEG or MDC-AMP (0–400 μg/mL) for 24 h. For the NIR groups, the cells were irradiated with an 808 nm laser (1.0 W/cm^2) for 10 min after adding the nanoparticles. After incubation, 20 μL of MTT solution (5 mg/mL) was added to each well, and the plates were incubated for 4 h. The supernatant was removed, and 150 μL of DMSO was added to dissolve the formazan crystals. The absorbance was measured at 570 nm using a microplate reader (Bio-Rad, Hercules, CA, USA). The cell viability was calculated as:

Cell viability = (Absorbance of treated group / Absorbance of control group) × 100%

3.5.3 In Vivo Biocompatibility

To evaluate in vivo biocompatibility, MDC-PEG or MDC-AMP (200 μL, 100 μg/mL) was subcutaneously injected into BALB/c mice (n=3 per group). Saline was injected as a control. At 1, 3, and 7 days post-injection, the mice were euthanized, and the injection site tissues were harvested. The tissues were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde, embedded in paraffin, sectioned, and stained with hematoxylin and eosin (H&E). The sections were observed under a light microscope (Olympus BX53, Tokyo, Japan) to evaluate inflammatory cell infiltration and tissue damage.

3.6 In Vivo MRSA-Infected Wound Healing Model

3.6.1 Wound Model Establishment

Female BALB/c nude mice (4–6 weeks old, 18–22 g) were used to establish the MRSA-infected full-thickness skin wound model. All animal experiments were approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) of the University of Michigan (Protocol Number: PRO00010256). The mice were anesthetized with isoflurane, and the dorsal hair was removed using a depilatory cream. A 10 mm diameter full-thickness skin wound was created on the dorsal side using a sterile biopsy punch. The wound was inoculated with 100 μL of MRSA suspension (1×10^8 CFU/mL) to induce infection.

3.6.2 Treatment Protocol

Twenty-four hours after infection, the mice were randomly divided into six groups (n=6 per group): (1) Saline; (2) Free LL-37; (3) MDC-PEG; (4) MDC-PEG + NIR; (5) MDC-AMP; (6) MDC-AMP + NIR. For each

treatment:

Saline group: 100 μL of saline was applied topically to the wound.

Free LL-37 group: 100 μL of free LL-37 (20 μg/mL) was applied topically.

MDC-PEG group: 100 μL of MDC-PEG (100 μg/mL) was applied topically.

MDC-PEG + NIR group: 100 μL of MDC-PEG (100 μg/mL) was applied, followed by 808 nm NIR irradiation (1.0 W/cm^2) for 10 min.

MDC-AMP group: 100 μL of MDC-AMP (100 μg/mL MDC-PEG, 20 μg/mL LL-37) was applied topically.

MDC-AMP + NIR group: 100 μL of MDC-AMP was applied, followed by 808 nm NIR irradiation (1.0 W/cm^2) for 10 min.

Treatments were administered once every 2 days for a total of 7 days.

3.6.3 Wound Healing Evaluation

The wound images were captured every 2 days using a digital camera. The wound area was measured using ImageJ software (National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, USA), and the wound healing rate was calculated as:

Wound healing rate = [(Initial wound area - Wound area at day n) / Initial wound area] × 100%

At 7 days post-treatment, the mice were euthanized, and the wound tissues were harvested for further analysis.

3.6.4 Bacterial Load Determination

The bacterial load in the wound tissues was measured using the colony counting method. The wound tissues were homogenized in 1 mL of sterile PBS, and the homogenates were serially diluted. 100 μL of each dilution was spread on LB agar plates containing methicillin (10 μg/mL) to select MRSA. The plates were incubated at 37°C for 24 h, and the number of colonies was counted to determine the CFU per gram of tissue.

3.6.5 Histopathological and Immunohistochemical Analysis

The wound tissues were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde, embedded in paraffin, and sectioned into 5 μm slices. The sections were stained with H&E to evaluate tissue regeneration (e.g., re-epithelialization, granulation tissue formation) and inflammatory cell infiltration. Masson's trichrome staining was used to assess collagen deposition.

Immunohistochemical staining was performed to detect the expression of inflammatory markers (tumor necrosis factor-α, TNF-α; interleukin-6, IL-6) and angiogenesis markers (cluster of differentiation 31, CD31). The sections were incubated with primary antibodies against TNF-α (1:200, Abcam, Cambridge, UK), IL-6 (1:200, Abcam), and CD31 (1:200, Abcam) overnight at 4°C, followed by incubation with HRP-conjugated secondary antibodies (1:500, Abcam) for 1 h at room temperature. The staining was visualized using 3,3'-diaminobenzidine (DAB), and the sections were counterstained with hematoxylin. The positive staining area was quantified using ImageJ software.

3.7 Statistical Analysis

All experiments were performed in triplicate, and the data were expressed as mean ± standard deviation (SD). Statistical analysis was conducted using GraphPad Prism 9 software (GraphPad Software, San Diego, CA, USA). Differences between groups were analyzed using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) followed by Tukey's post-hoc test. A p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

4. Results

4.1 Synthesis and Characterization of MDC-AMP Nanoparticles

4.1.1 Morphology and Structure

TEM images showed that ZIF-8 had a typical rhombic dodecahedral morphology with a uniform size of ~100 nm (Figure 1A). After pyrolysis at 800°C, ZIF-8 was converted into MDC NPs with a porous carbon structure, retaining partial rhombic dodecahedral shape but with a reduced size of ~80 nm (Figure 1B). Surface modification with PEG and loading of AMPs did not significantly change the morphology of MDC NPs, as observed in TEM images of MDC-PEG (Figure 1C) and MDC-AMP (Figure 1D). SEM images further confirmed the porous structure of MDC NPs and the uniform distribution of MDC-AMP (Figure 1E,F).

XRD patterns (Figure 2A) showed that ZIF-8 exhibited characteristic diffraction peaks at 7.3°, 10.3°, 12.7°, 14.7°, 16.4°, 18.0°, 22.1°, and 24.5°, which matched the standard pattern of ZIF-8 (JCPDS No. 00-062-1030). After pyrolysis, the diffraction peaks of ZIF-8 disappeared, and a broad peak at ~23° was observed for MDC NPs, corresponding to the (002) plane of amorphous carbon, indicating successful conversion of ZIF-8 to carbon-based NPs. No significant changes in XRD patterns were observed for MDC-PEG and MDC-AMP, confirming that PEG modification and AMP loading did not affect the crystal structure of MDC NPs.

4.1.2 BET Surface Area and Pore Size

BET analysis (Figure 2B,C) showed that MDC NPs had a high specific surface area of 867 ± 32 m^2/g and a pore volume of 1.25 ± 0.08 cm^3/g, with an average pore size of 5.8 ± 0.4 nm. This porous structure is beneficial for AMP loading and enzyme-mimetic activity. After PEG modification, the specific surface area and pore volume of MDC-PEG decreased to 654 ± 28 m^2/g and 0.92 ± 0.06 cm^3/g, respectively, due to the partial filling of pores by PEG. Loading of AMPs further reduced the specific surface area and pore volume to 589 ± 25 m^2/g and 0.78 ± 0.05 cm^3/g, confirming successful AMP loading into the pores of MDC-PEG.

4.1.3 Surface Chemistry and Zeta Potential

FTIR spectra (Figure 2D) showed that ZIF-8 had characteristic peaks at 420 cm^{-1} (Zn-N stretching), 750 cm^{-1} (C-H bending of imidazole), 1140 cm^{-1} (C-N stretching), and 1580 cm^{-1} (C=C stretching of imidazole). After pyrolysis, these peaks disappeared, and new peaks at 1620 cm^{-1} (C=C stretching of carbon) and 3400 cm^{-1} (O-H stretching) were observed for MDC NPs, indicating the formation of carbon structures with surface hydroxyl groups. MDC-PEG exhibited additional peaks at 2880 cm^{-1} (C-H stretching of PEG) and 1080 cm^{-1} (C-O-C stretching of PEG), confirming successful PEG modification. MDC-AMP showed a peak at 1650 cm^{-1} (amide I band of AMPs), verifying AMP loading.

XPS analysis (Figure 2E,F) revealed that MDC NPs contained C (82.3%), O (12.5%), and N (5.2%) elements. The high-resolution C 1s spectrum of MDC NPs showed peaks at 284.8 eV (C=C), 285.6 eV (C-N/C-O), and 288.2 eV (C=O), confirming the presence of various carbon-containing functional groups. After AMP loading, the N content increased to 7.8%, and a new peak at 400.2 eV (N-H of amide groups in AMPs) was observed in the high-resolution N 1s spectrum of MDC-AMP, further confirming successful AMP conjugation.

The zeta potential of ZIF-8 was +25.6 ± 2.3 mV due to the protonation of imidazole ligands. After pyrolysis, MDC NPs exhibited a negative zeta potential of -32.4 ± 3.1 mV, attributed to surface hydroxyl and carboxyl groups. PEG modification (with negatively charged carboxyl groups) slightly decreased the zeta potential to -38.7 ± 3.5 mV. Loading of positively charged AMPs (LL-37, isoelectric point ~9.5) reversed the zeta potential to +18.9 ± 2.7 mV, confirming electrostatic interaction between MDC-PEG and AMPs (Figure

2G).

4.1.4 AMP Loading and NIR-Triggered Release

The AMP loading efficiency and capacity of MDC-PEG were evaluated at different LL-37 concentrations. At an LL-37 concentration of 0.5 mg/mL, the loading efficiency reached 91.2 ± 4.3%, with a loading capacity of 45.6 ± 2.1 μg AMP/mg MDC-PEG. Higher LL-37 concentrations (□0.5 mg/mL) did not significantly increase the loading efficiency, indicating saturation of the MDC-PEG pores (Figure 3A).

The NIR-triggered AMP release behavior of MDC-AMP is shown in Figure 3B. Without NIR irradiation, only 12.5 ± 2.3% of AMPs were released after 24 h, indicating good stability of the complex under physiological conditions. Under 808 nm NIR irradiation (1.0 W/cm^2), the cumulative AMP release increased with irradiation time: 35.2 ± 3.1% after 5 min, 68.7 ± 4.5% after 10 min, 82.3 ± 5.2% after 15 min, and 90.1 ± 5.7% after 20 min. This rapid NIR-triggered release was attributed to heat-induced weakening of electrostatic interactions between MDC-PEG and AMPs, as well as pore expansion of MDC NPs under thermal stimulation.

4.2 Enzyme-Mimetic Activities

4.2.1 Peroxidase-Like Activity

The peroxidase-like activity of MDC-PEG was evaluated using TMB as a substrate. MDC-PEG catalyzed the oxidation of TMB by H_2O_2, resulting in a blue color change (absorbance at 652 nm) in a concentration-dependent manner (Figure 4A). The catalytic rate of MDC-PEG (100 μg/mL) was 0.87 ± 0.06 μM/min, which was 3.2-fold higher than that of bare carbon NPs (0.27 ± 0.03 μM/min) and comparable to that of natural horseradish peroxidase (HRP, 1.02 ± 0.08 μM/min). The peroxidase-like activity was pH-dependent, with maximum activity at pH 4.0 (simulating the acidic wound microenvironment) and minimal activity at pH 7.4 (normal tissue pH) (Figure 4B). This pH responsiveness ensures selective ROS generation at infection sites, reducing off-target oxidative damage.

4.2.2 Catalase-Like Activity

MDC-PEG exhibited efficient catalase-like activity, decomposing H_2O_2 into O_2 and H_2O. The volume of O_2 generated increased linearly with MDC-PEG concentration, with a catalytic efficiency of 12.5 ± 0.8 mmol $O_2 \cdot min^{-1} \cdot g^{-1}$ for MDC-PEG (100 μg/mL) (Figure 4C). In the presence of high H_2O_2 concentrations (□500 μM), the catalase-like activity of MDC-PEG was enhanced, while the peroxidase-like activity was inhibited (Figure 4D). This dual-enzyme switching behavior allows MDC-PEG to scavenge excess H_2O_2 in normal tissues (preventing oxidative stress) and generate ROS in infected wounds (for antibacterial action), addressing the limitations of single-enzyme nanozymes.

4.3 Photothermal Properties

MDC-PEG exhibited excellent photothermal performance under 808 nm NIR irradiation. The temperature of MDC-PEG solutions increased in a concentration- and power-dependent manner. At a concentration of 200 μg/mL and power density of 1.0 W/cm^2, the temperature increased from 25.6°C to 58.7°C within 10 min (Figure 5A,B). The photothermal conversion efficiency (η) of MDC-PEG was calculated as 42.3 ± 2.1%, which is higher than that of other carbon-based nanomaterials (e.g., graphene oxide, η ≈ 30%; carbon nanotubes, η ≈ 35%) (Figure 5C). MDC-PEG also showed good photothermal stability, with no significant decrease in temperature after 5 cycles of NIR irradiation (Figure 5D), ensuring repeated use for PTT.

4.4 In Vitro Antibacterial Efficacy

4.4.1 Antibacterial Activity Against Planktonic Bacteria

Colony counting results showed that MDC-AMP + NIR exhibited the highest antibacterial efficiency against both E. coli and MRSA (Figure 6A,B). For E. coli, the antibacterial efficiency of MDC-AMP + NIR was 99.8 ± 0.2%, compared to 65.3 ± 4.1% for free LL-37, 32.5 ± 3.6% for MDC-PEG, and 58.7 ± 4.8% for MDC-AMP ($p < 0.001$). For MRSA, MDC-AMP + NIR achieved an antibacterial efficiency of 99.2 ± 0.5%, significantly higher than other groups (free LL-37: 61.2 ± 3.8%; MDC-PEG: 28.9 ± 3.2%; MDC-AMP: 54.3 ± 4.5%, $p < 0.001$).

LIVE/DEAD staining further confirmed these results. For E. coli (Figure 6C) and MRSA (Figure 6D), the MDC-AMP + NIR group showed intense red fluorescence (dead bacteria) and minimal green fluorescence (live bacteria), while the saline group showed mostly green fluorescence. The synergistic effect of enzyme-catalyzed ROS generation, photothermal ablation, and NIR-triggered AMP release contributed to the superior antibacterial efficacy.

4.4.2 MRSA Biofilm Disruption

MRSA biofilms are highly resistant to conventional antibiotics, but MDC-AMP + NIR effectively disrupted biofilms. CV staining showed that MDC-AMP + NIR reduced biofilm biomass by 87.6 ± 5.3%, compared to 32.1 ± 3.7% for free LL-37, 21.5 ± 2.9% for MDC-PEG, and 48.9 ± 4.2% for MDC-AMP ($p < 0.001$) (Figure 7A).

CLSM images of LIVE/DEAD-stained biofilms showed that MDC-AMP + NIR significantly reduced the number of live bacteria (green) within the biofilm, with extensive red fluorescence (dead bacteria) throughout the biofilm structure (Figure 7B). SEM images revealed that the compact biofilm structure in the saline group was disrupted by MDC-AMP + NIR, with visible bacterial lysis and EPS degradation (Figure 7C). The photothermal effect of MDC-PEG likely melted the EPS matrix, while ROS and AMPs killed the exposed bacteria, achieving efficient biofilm eradication.

4.5 Biocompatibility Evaluation

4.5.1 Hemolysis Assay

MDC-PEG and MDC-AMP showed excellent hemocompatibility. At concentrations up to 400 μg/mL, the hemolysis rate of MDC-PEG was 2.3 ± 0.5%, and that of MDC-AMP was 3.1 ± 0.7%, both well below the 5% threshold for biocompatible materials (Figure 8A). This low hemolysis rate is attributed to the PEG coating, which reduces nonspecific interaction with RBCs.

4.5.2 Cytotoxicity Assay

MDC-PEG and MDC-AMP exhibited low cytotoxicity against NIH/3T3 cells. At a concentration of 400 μg/mL, the cell viability of MDC-PEG-treated cells was 89.2 ± 4.5%, and that of MDC-AMP-treated cells was 85.7 ± 5.1% (Figure 8B). Even with NIR irradiation, the cell viability remained above 80% (MDC-PEG + NIR: 82.3 ± 4.8%; MDC-AMP + NIR: 79.6 ± 5.3%), indicating that the photothermal effect of MDC-PEG at 1.0 W/cm^2 does not cause significant damage to normal cells.

4.5.3 In Vivo Biocompatibility

Subcutaneous injection of MDC-PEG or MDC-AMP did not induce significant inflammatory responses or tissue damage. H&E staining of injection site tissues showed minimal inflammatory cell infiltration at 1, 3, and 7 days post-injection, similar to the saline group (Figure 8C). No necrosis, edema, or fibrosis was

observed, confirming the in vivo biocompatibility of MDC-AMP.

4.6 In Vivo MRSA-Infected Wound Healing

4.6.1 Wound Healing Rate

The MDC-AMP + NIR group showed the fastest wound healing rate. At day 7, the wound healing rate of MDC-AMP + NIR was 92.3 ± 4.7%, compared to 45.6 ± 5.2% for saline, 58.7 ± 4.9% for free LL-37, 62.1 ± 5.3% for MDC-PEG, and 75.8 ± 5.6% for MDC-AMP ($p < 0.001$) (Figure 9A,B). The wounds in the MDC-AMP + NIR group were almost completely closed by day 7, with new epithelial tissue covering the wound bed, while the saline group still had large, inflamed wounds.

4.6.2 Bacterial Load in Wound Tissues

MDC-AMP + NIR significantly reduced the bacterial load in wound tissues. The bacterial count in the MDC-AMP + NIR group was $2.3 \times 10^3 \pm 0.5 \times 10^3$ CFU/g tissue, which was 4–5 orders of magnitude lower than that in the saline group ($8.7 \times 10^7 \pm 1.2 \times 10^7$ CFU/g tissue) (Figure 9C). This result confirms that the synergistic antimicrobial effect of MDC-AMP + NIR effectively eliminates MRSA in vivo.

4.6.3 Histopathological Analysis

H&E staining of wound tissues (Figure 10A) showed that the MDC-AMP + NIR group had complete re-epithelialization, dense granulation tissue, and minimal inflammatory cell infiltration. In contrast, the saline group had incomplete epithelial coverage, loose granulation tissue, and extensive inflammatory cell infiltration (e.g., neutrophils, macrophages). Masson's trichrome staining (Figure 10B) revealed that the MDC-AMP + NIR group had significantly higher collagen deposition (blue staining) than other groups, with well-organized collagen fibers, indicating enhanced tissue regeneration.

4.6.4 Immunohistochemical Analysis

Immunohistochemical staining showed that MDC-AMP + NIR reduced the expression of inflammatory markers (TNF-α, IL-6) and increased the expression of the angiogenesis marker (CD31) (Figure 11A–C). The positive staining area for TNF-α in the MDC-AMP + NIR group was 3.2 ± 0.8%, compared to 18.5 ± 2.3% in the saline group ($p < 0.001$). Similarly, the IL-6 positive area was reduced from 16.8 ± 2.1% (saline) to 4.5 ± 1.1% (MDC-AMP + NIR, $p < 0.001$). The CD31 positive area (a measure of blood vessel density) was 12.3 ± 1.5% in the MDC-AMP + NIR group, 2.8-fold higher than that in the saline group (4.4 ± 0.7%, $p < 0.001$). These results indicate that MDC-AMP + NIR not only eliminates bacteria but also reduces inflammation and promotes angiogenesis, creating a favorable microenvironment for wound healing.

5. Discussion

5.1 Key Findings and Mechanisms of Synergistic Therapy

This study developed a multi-modal MDC-AMP nanosystem that integrates dual enzyme-mimetic activities, photothermal therapy, and AMP-based antimicrobial action for effective treatment of MRSA-infected wounds. The key findings and underlying mechanisms are:

5.1.1 Dual Enzyme-Mimetic Activity for Smart ROS Regulation

MDC-PEG exhibits pH-responsive peroxidase-like activity (maximal at pH 4.0, infected wounds) to generate ·OH from endogenous H_2O_2, killing bacteria without exogenous H_2O_2 addition. In normal tissues (pH 7.4), it switches to catalase-like activity to decompose excess H_2O_2 into O_2, relieving oxidative stress. This "on-demand" ROS generation avoids off-target tissue damage and addresses the limitations of single-

enzyme nanozymes.

5.1.2 NIR-Triggered AMP Release and Photothermal Synergy

The high photothermal conversion efficiency (42.3%) of MDC-PEG enables two critical functions: (a) direct photothermal ablation of bacteria (temperature reaches 58.7°C, above the bactericidal threshold of 45°C); (b) triggered release of AMPs (90.1% release after 20 min irradiation). The heat-induced disruption of biofilm EPS further enhances AMP penetration and ROS diffusion, achieving synergistic eradication of planktonic bacteria and biofilms.

5.1.3 Enhanced Wound Healing via Anti-Inflammation and Angiogenesis

Beyond antibacterial action, MDC-AMP + NIR reduces the expression of pro-inflammatory cytokines (TNF-α, IL-6) by eliminating bacteria and scavenging ROS. The increased angiogenesis (higher CD31 expression) promotes nutrient and oxygen delivery to the wound bed, while enhanced collagen deposition accelerates tissue regeneration. This multi-faceted effect addresses the "infection-healing cycle" (bacterial infection delays healing, and delayed healing exacerbates infection) that plagues chronic wound treatment.

5.2 Comparison with Existing Wound Therapeutics

The MDC-AMP nanosystem offers significant advantages over conventional and nanomaterial-based wound therapeutics:

5.2.1 Superior Antibacterial Efficacy Against Drug-Resistant Strains

Unlike antibiotics that induce MRSA resistance, the MDC-AMP nanosystem kills bacteria via multiple mechanisms (ROS, heat, membrane disruption by AMPs), making it difficult for bacteria to develop resistance. The 99.8% and 99.2% antibacterial efficiency against E. coli and MRSA, respectively, outperforms most single-modal nanotherapeutics (e.g., AMP-loaded liposomes: ~85% MRSA killing; photothermal carbon NPs: ~90% MRSA killing).

5.2.2 Minimal Toxicity and High Biocompatibility

The PEG coating of MDC-PEG reduces nonspecific interactions with normal cells, resulting in low hemolysis (<5%) and cytotoxicity (>80% cell viability at 400 μg/mL). In vivo studies show no tissue damage or inflammation, addressing the safety concerns of metal-based nanozymes (e.g., Fe_3O_4 NPs, which accumulate in the liver and cause oxidative stress).

5.2.3 Integration of Antibacterial and Wound Healing Promotion

Most existing wound therapeutics focus solely on antibacterial action, while the MDC-AMP nanosystem simultaneously eliminates bacteria, reduces inflammation, and promotes angiogenesis/collagen deposition. This holistic approach accelerates wound healing (92.3% healing rate at day 7) compared to antibiotic treatments (typically <60% healing rate at day 7 for MRSA-infected wounds).

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its promising results, this study has several limitations:

5.3.1 In Vivo Model Limitations

The study used a murine full-thickness wound model, which has a faster healing rate than human wounds and does not fully recapitulate the chronic wound microenvironment (e.g., diabetes, ischemia). Future studies should use diabetic mouse models or porcine wound models (with skin physiology similar to humans) to evaluate the nanosystem's efficacy in chronic infected wounds.

5.3.2 Long-Term Biodistribution and Clearance

The long-term fate of MDC NPs in the body (e.g., accumulation in organs, excretion pathway) remains unknown. Although MDC NPs are carbon-based and likely biodegradable, future studies should investigate their biodistribution over 1–3 months and evaluate potential long-term toxicity.

5.3.3 Clinical Translation Challenges

Scaling up MDC-AMP synthesis with consistent properties (e.g., particle size, enzyme activity) is critical for clinical translation. Additionally, the NIR laser's penetration depth (~2 cm) limits the nanosystem's application in deep tissue infections; future work could explore second-window NIR lasers (1000–1700 nm) with deeper penetration or develop injectable MDC-AMP formulations for deep tissue applications.

5.3.4 AMP Stability in Complex Wound Environments

While NIR-triggered release improves AMP stability, the complex wound microenvironment (e.g., proteases, high salt concentrations) may still degrade AMPs. Future work could modify AMPs with protease-resistant groups (e.g., D-amino acids, polyethylene glycolylation) or encapsulate AMPs in pH-sensitive microgels within MDC NPs to further enhance stability.

6. Conclusion

In this study, we successfully developed a multi-modal nanotherapeutic platform based on MOF-derived carbon nanoparticles (MDC NPs) loaded with antimicrobial peptides (AMPs) for synergistic treatment of MRSA-infected wounds. The MDC NPs exhibited dual enzyme-mimetic activities (peroxidase-like and catalase-like) and high photothermal conversion efficiency (42.3%), enabling smart ROS regulation, photothermal ablation, and NIR-triggered AMP release.

Systematic characterization confirmed that MDC-AMP NPs had a porous structure (specific surface area: 589 ± 25 m^2/g), high AMP loading efficiency (91.2 ± 4.3%), and pH-responsive enzyme activity—maximizing ROS generation at infected wounds (pH 4.0) while scavenging excess H_2O_2 in normal tissues (pH 7.4). In vitro studies showed that MDC-AMP + NIR achieved 99.8% and 99.2% antibacterial efficiency against E. coli and MRSA, respectively, and disrupted 87.6% of MRSA biofilms. Importantly, MDC-AMP exhibited excellent biocompatibility, with low hemolysis (<5%) and high cell viability (>80%) at 400 μg/mL.

In a MRSA-infected mouse full-thickness wound model, MDC-AMP + NIR accelerated wound healing (92.3% closure at day 7), reduced bacterial load by 4–5 orders of magnitude, and promoted tissue regeneration via anti-inflammatory (reduced TNF-α/IL-6 expression) and pro-angiogenic (increased CD31 expression) effects. This work demonstrates the power of integrating nanomaterial engineering (MOF-derived carbon NPs) with biological principles (enzyme catalysis, AMPs) to address the unmet clinical need for drug-resistant bacterial wound infection therapy.

The MDC-AMP nanosystem not only provides a versatile strategy for treating MRSA-infected wounds but also serves as a blueprint for developing multi-modal nanotherapeutics for other infectious diseases, advancing the convergence of nanoscience and clinical microbiology.

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