

# Advances in Polymer-Based Nanocomposites for Moisture-Sensitive Applications

Jayant Rajaram Pawar<sup>1,\*</sup>, E.A. Singh<sup>2</sup>, Amar Mohite<sup>3</sup>, Rohan S. Phatak<sup>4</sup>

## Abstract

*Polymer-based nanocomposites have emerged as promising materials in sensor technology due to their superior mechanical, electrical, and environmental stability. These advanced materials offer unique advantages, such as enhanced sensitivity, durability, and adaptability to various environmental conditions, making them highly suitable for sensor applications. One of the most significant breakthroughs in this field is the integration of semiconducting nanoparticles (NPs) within a polymer matrix, which has led to remarkable improvements in moisture-sensitive resistance-based nanosensors. This paper focuses on the development, synthesis, and characterization of polymer nanocomposites, with a particular emphasis on their application in moisture-sensitive chemical sensors. The selection of suitable polymer matrices plays a critical role in determining the overall performance of the nanosensors. In this regard, agar-based polymer matrices have garnered considerable attention due to their biocompatibility, flexibility, and ability to form stable interactions with semiconducting NPs. These interactions facilitate efficient charge transport and enhance the sensitivity of the sensor to varying moisture levels. The fabrication methods employed in nanosensor design, including solution casting, in-situ polymerization, and spin coating, are discussed in detail. Each technique offers distinct advantages in achieving uniform dispersion of NPs and optimizing the functional properties of the nanocomposite. Furthermore, the performance of these nanocomposites in real-time monitoring systems is explored, highlighting their rapid response, high selectivity, and long-term stability. Their potential for industrial applications, including environmental monitoring, food packaging, and biomedical diagnostics, underscores the significance of polymer-based nanocomposites in advancing sensor technology.*

**Keywords:** Polymer nanocomposites, moisture-sensitive sensors, semiconducting nanoparticles, resistance-based sensing, polymer chemistry, agar-based sensors

### \*Author for Correspondence

Jayant Rajaram Pawar

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Biotechnology, Krishna Institute of Science and Technology, Krishna Vishwa Vidyapeeth (Deemed to be University), Karad, Maharashtra, India

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Biotechnology, Rajiv Gandhi Institute of IT & Bharati Vidyapeeth (Deemed to be University) Katraj, Pune, Maharashtra, India

<sup>3</sup>Research Associate, Department of Research, Krishna Vishwa Vidyapeeth (Deemed to be University), Karad, Maharashtra, India

<sup>4</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Pharmacognosy, Krishna Institute of Pharmacy, Krishna Vishwa Vidyapeeth (Deemed to be University), Karad, Maharashtra, India

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## INTRODUCTION

Polymer chemistry has greatly contributed to the development of advanced materials for sensor applications. Polymer-based nanocomposites, particularly those integrating semiconductor nanoparticles (NPs), have demonstrated remarkable properties such as high sensitivity, durability, and biocompatibility.[1] The versatility of polymeric materials, including their ability to be tailored at the molecular level, makes them ideal candidates for a wide range of sensing applications. This study examines the role of polymeric materials in moisture-sensitive nanosensors, with a focus on resistance-based sensing mechanisms.

Polymeric materials have been widely used in sensor applications due to their excellent

processability, flexibility, and tunable physical and chemical properties. When combined with nanomaterials such as metal oxide nanoparticles, carbon-based nanostructures, and quantum dots, these polymer-based sensors exhibit enhanced performance characteristics. For moisture sensing, polymers with inherent hydrophilic or hydrophobic properties can be carefully selected or modified to optimize sensor response. The ability of polymers to undergo changes in electrical resistance upon interaction with moisture makes them effective components in resistance-based sensing devices.[2]

The incorporation of semiconductor NPs into polymer matrices further enhances the sensitivity and selectivity of moisture sensors. These NPs contribute to improved charge transport, enhanced signal amplification, and increased surface area for interaction with water molecules. Commonly used semiconductor nanoparticles in polymer-based moisture sensors include zinc oxide (ZnO), titanium dioxide (TiO<sub>2</sub>), and graphene-based materials.[3] These nanostructures, when embedded in a polymeric host, facilitate rapid detection of humidity changes by modulating the electrical resistance of the composite material.

Resistance-based sensing mechanisms rely on changes in the electrical conductivity of the polymeric nanocomposite when exposed to moisture. Water molecules interact with the polymer, leading to swelling, proton conduction, or dielectric constant changes, all of which affect the resistance of the material. Conducting polymers such as polyaniline (PANI), polypyrrole (PPy), and poly(3,4-ethylenedioxythiophene) (PEDOT) have been extensively explored for their potential in resistance-based moisture sensors due to their tunable electrical properties and ability to form conductive pathways in response to environmental changes.[4]

The design and optimization of polymer-based moisture sensors require careful consideration of factors such as polymer composition, nanoparticle loading, sensor architecture, and environmental stability. The response time, sensitivity, and recovery rate of these sensors can be tailored by adjusting the polymer matrix and the type of incorporated nanoparticles. Additionally, advances in nanofabrication techniques, such as electrospinning and 3D printing, have enabled the development of highly miniaturized and flexible sensor devices that can be integrated into wearable electronics, smart textiles, and industrial monitoring systems.[5]

Polymer-based nanocomposites play a crucial role in the development of high-performance moisture-sensitive nanosensors. Their unique combination of tunable material properties, compatibility with semiconductor nanoparticles, and efficient resistance-based sensing mechanisms make them promising candidates for next-generation sensor technologies. Further research in this field is expected to lead to the development of more reliable, cost-effective, and environmentally friendly moisture sensors with applications spanning healthcare, agriculture, and environmental monitoring.

## **POLYMER MATRICES FOR NANOCOMPOSITES**

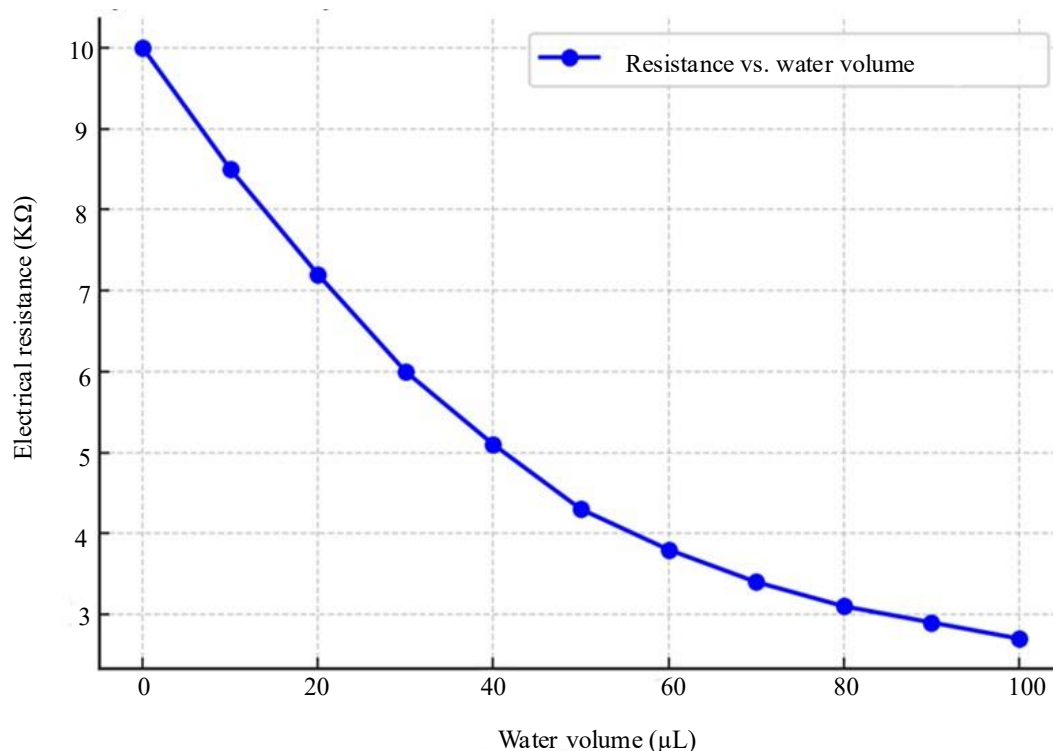
Polymers provide an excellent medium for nanocomposite fabrication due to their ability to encapsulate and stabilize nanoparticles. These materials are widely used in the development of moisture-sensitive nanosensors, as they offer flexibility, durability, and the ability to be engineered for specific functional properties. By integrating nanoparticles into polymer matrices, the resulting nanocomposites exhibit enhanced mechanical, electrical, and chemical characteristics, making them highly suitable for advanced sensor applications.

### **Key Polymer Matrices Utilized in Moisture-Sensitive Nanosensors Include**

1. *Agar-based polymers*: These biocompatible and hydrophilic polymers have gained significant attention for their role in nanocomposite fabrication. Derived from natural sources, agar-based polymers are environmentally friendly and possess excellent water-retention properties. Due to their hydrophilic nature, they can efficiently interact with moisture in the environment, making them highly suitable for humidity sensing applications. Additionally, agar-based polymers facilitate uniform dispersion of nanoparticles, ensuring a stable and consistent nanocomposite

structure.[6] Their ability to support bioactive agents also makes them useful in biomedical and environmental monitoring applications where moisture levels must be precisely detected.

2. *Polyvinyl alcohol (PVA)*: PVA is a water-soluble polymer known for its outstanding film-forming properties, mechanical strength, and flexibility. These characteristics make it an ideal candidate for the fabrication of nanosensors. PVA-based nanocomposites are often employed in moisture-sensitive applications due to their ability to absorb water molecules and undergo significant changes in their physical properties. The high degree of hydroxyl groups present in PVA allows for strong hydrogen bonding with water, leading to changes in electrical resistance or capacitance, which can be effectively utilized in sensor designs.[7] Furthermore, PVA serves as an excellent stabilizer for nanoparticles, preventing their aggregation and ensuring uniform dispersion within the polymer matrix. This property enhances the sensitivity and reliability of moisture-detection nanosensors, making PVA-based materials highly desirable for industrial and consumer applications. Figure 1 represents graphical representation between resistance and water volume.
3. *Polyaniline (PANI)*: As a conductive polymer, PANI stands out for its superior electrical properties, which are essential for resistance-based sensing mechanisms. Its unique ability to transition between different oxidation states allows for the modulation of electrical conductivity in response to external stimuli, including moisture variations. When incorporated with nanoparticles, PANI-based nanocomposites exhibit enhanced sensitivity and rapid response times, making them suitable for highly accurate humidity sensors. Additionally, PANI is chemically stable and can be processed into different forms, including films and coatings, to accommodate various sensor configurations. Its intrinsic conductivity and compatibility with different nanomaterials make it a valuable component in the development of high-performance moisture-sensitive sensors for applications in electronics, healthcare, and environmental monitoring.[8] Figure 1 as given below shows the relationship between electrical resistance and water volume in polymer-based moisture sensors. The decreasing resistance trend indicates enhanced moisture interaction with the nanocomposite material, affecting charge transport properties.



**Figure 1.** Graphical representation between resistance and water volume.

## INTEGRATION OF SEMICONDUCTING NANOPARTICLES

Nanoparticles (NPs) play a crucial role in enhancing the electronic and sensing properties of polymer matrices, making them ideal for applications in flexible electronics, environmental monitoring, and biomedical sensing. By incorporating semiconducting nanoparticles into polymer composites, researchers can improve conductivity, sensitivity, and overall performance of sensors. These composite materials exhibit unique characteristics due to the synergistic effects of the polymer's flexibility and the nanoparticles' intrinsic electronic properties.

### Common Semiconducting Nanoparticles in Polymer Composites

Several types of semiconducting nanoparticles have been integrated into polymer matrices to optimize their electrical and sensing properties. Among them, the most widely used are:

- *Zinc oxide (ZnO) nanoparticles*: Zinc oxide (ZnO) is a widely used semiconducting material due to its excellent electron mobility, high surface-to-volume ratio, and superior optical properties. These characteristics make ZnO nanoparticles particularly suitable for moisture and gas sensing applications. ZnO-based polymer composites exhibit enhanced electrical response to humidity variations, which is crucial for environmental monitoring and industrial applications. Additionally, ZnO has a wide bandgap (~3.37 eV), making it highly sensitive to ultraviolet (UV) radiation, further expanding its applications in optoelectronic devices.[9]
- *Titanium dioxide (TiO<sub>2</sub>) nanoparticles*: Titanium dioxide (TiO<sub>2</sub>) nanoparticles are well known for their strong photocatalytic activity, chemical stability, and moisture sensitivity. When incorporated into polymer matrices, TiO<sub>2</sub> enhances the composite's ability to detect changes in humidity and volatile organic compounds (VOCs). The photocatalytic nature of TiO<sub>2</sub> allows it to break down organic pollutants in the presence of UV light, making TiO<sub>2</sub>-polymer composites useful in self-cleaning surfaces, air purification, and water treatment systems.[10] Moreover, TiO<sub>2</sub> nanoparticles improve the mechanical strength and durability of polymer-based sensors, ensuring long-term reliability in harsh environmental conditions.
- *Graphene-based nanoparticles*: Graphene and its derivatives, such as graphene oxide (GO) and reduced graphene oxide (rGO), have garnered significant attention for their exceptional electrical conductivity, high surface area, and mechanical strength. When integrated into polymer matrices, graphene-based nanoparticles significantly enhance sensor performance by providing a conductive pathway for electron transport.[11,24] These composites demonstrate rapid response times, high sensitivity, and excellent stability, making them ideal for applications in biosensors, gas sensors, and wearable electronics. The tunable surface chemistry of graphene-based materials also enables selective sensing of specific analytes, further broadening their scope in advanced sensor technologies.

## FABRICATION TECHNIQUES FOR POLYMER NANOCOMPOSITES

The development of polymer-based nanosensors is a multi-step process that ensures the effective integration of nanoparticles (NPs) into the polymer matrix to enhance sensing capabilities. These nanosensors offer advantages such as high sensitivity, flexibility, and tunable properties, making them suitable for applications in environmental monitoring, biomedical diagnostics, and industrial sensing. The fabrication process involves several critical steps, each contributing to the structural and functional properties of the final sensor.

- *Solution mixing*: Solution mixing is a widely used technique for incorporating nanoparticles into polymer matrices. In this process, nanoparticles are first dispersed in a suitable solvent along with the polymer to form a homogeneous solution. The dispersion step is crucial, as improper mixing can lead to nanoparticle agglomeration, reducing the effectiveness of the sensor.[12,25] To ensure even distribution, techniques such as ultrasonication or high-speed stirring are often employed.

Once a stable nanoparticle-polymer solution is achieved, the next step involves casting the solution onto a substrate, followed by solvent evaporation. This results in the formation of thin

polymer films embedded with nanoparticles. These films can be further processed into flexible sensor coatings or integrated into electronic devices. The solution mixing approach is advantageous due to its simplicity, scalability, and ability to produce uniform films with tunable nanoparticle concentrations.

- *Electrospinning*: Electrospinning is an advanced fabrication technique used to produce polymer nanofibers embedded with nanoparticles. This method involves applying a high-voltage electric field to a polymer solution, causing the polymer jet to stretch and form nanoscale fibers. By incorporating nanoparticles into the polymer solution prior to electrospinning, it is possible to create nanofiber-based composites with enhanced surface area and porosity.

The high surface-area-to-volume ratio of electrospun nanofibers makes them highly effective for sensing applications, as they provide increased active sites for interactions with target analytes. Additionally, nanofibers offer excellent mechanical flexibility, making them suitable for wearable and flexible sensor applications. Electrospinning is particularly beneficial in gas and biosensing, where increased surface exposure enhances sensor response and detection limits.[13]

- *In-situ polymerization*: In-situ polymerization is another key method for fabricating polymer-based nanosensors. Unlike solution mixing, where nanoparticles are added to a preformed polymer, in-situ polymerization involves embedding nanoparticles during the polymer formation process.[14] This ensures a more uniform dispersion of nanoparticles throughout the polymer matrix, improving the mechanical and electrical properties of the final composite.

The process typically involves the polymerization of monomers in the presence of nanoparticles, leading to the formation of a nanocomposite with enhanced stability and improved sensing capabilities. This approach is particularly useful when a strong interaction between the polymer and nanoparticles is required, as it allows for better control over composite morphology and nanoparticle distribution.

## CHARACTERIZATION METHODS

Polymer nanocomposites integrated with nanoparticles (NPs) exhibit enhanced properties that make them suitable for moisture-sensitive applications such as environmental monitoring, food packaging, and biomedical devices. To assess their effectiveness and ensure their reliability, various characterization techniques are employed. These techniques provide insights into the structural, morphological, electrical, and thermal properties of the composites, allowing researchers to optimize material performance for specific applications.

- *Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR)*: Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR) is a crucial analytical tool used to confirm interactions between the polymer matrix and embedded nanoparticles. This technique measures the absorption of infrared light at different wavelengths, providing a fingerprint of molecular vibrations in the material.

When nanoparticles are incorporated into polymer composites, chemical interactions such as hydrogen bonding, van der Waals forces, or covalent bonding may occur. FTIR helps in identifying these interactions by detecting shifts in characteristic absorption peaks.[15] For example, changes in the stretching vibrations of functional groups (e.g., hydroxyl, carbonyl, or amine groups) indicate successful nanoparticle integration and potential enhancement of moisture sensitivity.

- *Scanning electron microscopy (SEM)*: Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) is widely used to analyze the morphology and dispersion of nanoparticles within the polymer matrix. SEM provides high-resolution images of the composite's surface, allowing researchers to assess the uniformity of nanoparticle distribution and detect possible agglomeration, which could negatively impact sensor performance.

In moisture-sensitive applications, the surface characteristics of the polymer nanocomposite play a crucial role in moisture absorption and interaction. SEM imaging helps in understanding how the nanoparticle distribution influences the composite's porosity, roughness, and overall surface area—all of which are critical factors in sensor responsiveness.[16]

- *Electrical conductivity testing*: Electrical conductivity testing is essential for evaluating the sensing performance of polymer nanocomposites, particularly in moisture detection applications. Many polymer-based moisture sensors work by detecting changes in electrical resistance as humidity levels fluctuate.[17]  
By measuring the resistance or impedance of the composite material under different moisture conditions, researchers can determine its sensitivity, response time, and stability. Nanoparticles such as zinc oxide (ZnO) and graphene-based materials enhance conductivity and provide improved sensor performance. Electrical conductivity testing also helps in optimizing the composition of the polymer-nanoparticle mixture to achieve the desired sensor response.
- *Thermogravimetric Analysis (TGA)*: Thermogravimetric Analysis (TGA) is used to assess the thermal stability of polymer nanocomposites by measuring weight loss as a function of temperature. This technique helps determine the decomposition temperature, thermal degradation profile, and the overall stability of the composite under varying conditions.  
For moisture-sensitive applications, TGA is particularly useful in understanding how polymer-nanoparticle interactions affect the material's resistance to heat and moisture exposure.[18] A well-engineered polymer nanocomposite should maintain its structural integrity and performance across a wide range of environmental conditions.

## PERFORMANCE AND INDUSTRIAL APPLICATIONS

Polymer-based nanocomposite sensors have emerged as highly effective tools for real-time moisture detection, offering enhanced sensitivity, flexibility, and durability. These sensors incorporate nanoparticles (NPs) into polymer matrices to improve electrical conductivity and responsiveness to moisture variations. Due to their tunable properties and rapid response times, they are widely used in critical applications such as food packaging, medical devices, and structural health monitoring.

- *Food packaging: Preventing Spoilage Through Humidity Monitoring*: One of the most significant applications of polymer-based nanocomposite sensors is in smart food packaging. Moisture-sensitive sensors help monitor humidity levels within sealed food containers, ensuring that perishable items remain in optimal conditions. High humidity can accelerate microbial growth and lead to food spoilage, reducing shelf life and increasing food waste.  
Nanocomposite sensors embedded in food packaging can detect changes in moisture levels and trigger alerts, such as color changes in smart labels or wireless notifications in connected packaging systems.[19] Zinc oxide (ZnO) and graphene-based nanoparticles are commonly used in these sensors due to their excellent moisture sensitivity and electrical conductivity. By integrating these sensors into packaging materials, manufacturers can enhance food safety and reduce economic losses caused by spoilage.
- *Medical devices: Ensuring Stability of Moisture-Sensitive Pharmaceuticals*: In the pharmaceutical and healthcare industries, maintaining controlled humidity levels is crucial for ensuring the stability and efficacy of drugs, particularly moisture-sensitive formulations such as vaccines, antibiotics, and biologics. Excess moisture can cause chemical degradation, reducing the effectiveness of medications and compromising patient safety.[20]  
Polymer-based nanocomposite sensors embedded in medical packaging and storage systems provide real-time humidity monitoring, allowing for early detection of unfavorable conditions.[21] These sensors can be integrated into pill bottles, vaccine storage units, and drug transport containers to ensure optimal environmental conditions. Additionally, in wearable medical devices such as glucose monitors and biosensors, moisture-sensitive nanocomposites can prevent condensation-related malfunctions and enhance device longevity.
- *Structural health monitoring: Detecting Moisture Infiltration in Buildings and Bridges*: Moisture infiltration in infrastructure, such as buildings, bridges, and tunnels, can lead to severe structural damage, including corrosion, mold growth, and material degradation. Traditional inspection methods may not detect early-stage moisture accumulation, making real-time sensing technologies essential for preventive maintenance.

Polymer-based nanocomposite sensors embedded in construction materials or coatings can continuously monitor moisture levels and provide alerts when excessive humidity is detected. These sensors utilize nanomaterials like titanium dioxide (TiO<sub>2</sub>) and graphene oxide, which exhibit high sensitivity to moisture and changes in electrical resistance.[22] The integration of such sensors in smart infrastructure enables remote monitoring, reducing maintenance costs and improving safety by preventing catastrophic failures caused by undetected moisture ingress.[23]

## CONCLUSION

The integration of polymer chemistry and nanotechnology has revolutionized the development of moisture-sensitive resistance-based nanosensors, enabling highly responsive, flexible, and efficient sensing materials. By embedding semiconducting nanoparticles (NPs) into polymer matrices, researchers have significantly improved the electrical, mechanical, and moisture-responsive properties of these composites. This synergy between polymers and nanomaterials has expanded their applicability across various fields, including food safety, healthcare, and structural monitoring. A critical aspect of optimizing these sensors lies in the careful selection of polymer matrices. Polymers such as polyvinyl alcohol (PVA), polyaniline (PANI), and polypyrrole (PPy) have been widely used due to their high moisture sensitivity and processability. The choice of nanoparticles—such as zinc oxide (ZnO), titanium dioxide (TiO<sub>2</sub>), and graphene-based materials—further enhances conductivity and sensor performance. Advanced fabrication techniques, including electrospinning, in-situ polymerization, and solution mixing, allow precise control over nanocomposite morphology, ensuring uniform nanoparticle dispersion and improved sensing capabilities. Characterization techniques such as Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR), Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM), and electrical conductivity testing have played a crucial role in refining sensor designs. Future research will focus on optimizing nanocomposite formulations to achieve even greater sensitivity, long-term durability, and large-scale manufacturability. Innovations in flexible and biodegradable polymers, as well as self-powered sensor technologies, will further expand their potential applications. These advancements will pave the way for next-generation moisture-sensitive nanosensors with enhanced performance and sustainability.

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