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Biomechanics of Bone: Structural–Functional Interactions and Mechanical Adaptation in Skeletal Tissue

Daniel K. Whitmore*

Division of Orthopaedic Research University of Melbourne Melbourne, Australia

Hypothesis

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***For Correspondence**

Daniel K. Whitmore, Division of
Orthopaedic Research University of
Melbourne Melbourne, Australia

E-mail: d.whitmore@unimelb-research.edu

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ABSTRACT

Bone is a highly dynamic biological material that exhibits remarkable mechanical competence due to its hierarchical structure and continuous remodeling process. The biomechanics of bone integrates principles of mechanical engineering and biological adaptation, explaining how bone resists loads, dissipates energy, and adapts to mechanical stimuli. This article hypothesizes that the mechanical behavior of bone is primarily governed by its composite nature (collagen–mineral matrix), multiscale architecture, and mechanobiological feedback mechanisms involving osteocytes. The interplay between structure and function enables bone to achieve both strength and toughness, properties rarely combined in synthetic materials. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for advancing orthopedic biomaterials, fracture prevention strategies, and regenerative therapies.

Keywords

Bone biomechanics, cortical bone, trabecular bone, mechanotransduction, collagen matrix, hydroxyapatite, bone remodeling, osteocytes, viscoelasticity, skeletal mechanics

INTRODUCTION

Bone is not merely a rigid structural element but a living, adaptive tissue that responds to mechanical demands throughout life. It serves three primary functions: mechanical support, protection of vital organs, and mineral homeostasis. From a biomechanical perspective, bone behaves as a composite material with properties influenced by both its composition and loading environment.

Studies show that bone exhibits anisotropy, meaning its mechanical strength varies with direction of loading, particularly in cortical bone where alignment of osteons follows habitual stress patterns . Additionally, bone demonstrates viscoelastic behavior, allowing it to absorb and dissipate energy under dynamic loading conditions.

This article proposes that bone biomechanics arises from a tightly regulated feedback loop between mechanical stress and biological remodeling.

Hypothesis Statement

The central hypothesis of this review is:

Bone mechanical properties are emergent outcomes of a hierarchical collagen–mineral composite structure regulated by mechanosensitive cellular remodeling, enabling adaptive optimization of strength, toughness, and stiffness under varying mechanical loads.

Composition of Bone and Its Mechanical Significance

1. Organic Phase (Collagen Matrix)

Type I collagen forms a flexible fibrous network that provides tensile strength and resistance to crack propagation. It acts as the “ductile phase” of bone.

2. Inorganic Phase (Hydroxyapatite)

Hydroxyapatite crystals contribute compressive strength and stiffness. They are the “rigid phase” responsible for load-bearing capacity.

The combination of these two phases creates a natural composite material that balances stiffness and toughness, unlike most engineered materials.

Hierarchical Structure of Bone

Bone structure is organized across multiple length scales:

- Nanoscale: collagen fibrils + mineral crystals
- Microscale: lamellae and osteons
- Macroscale: cortical and trabecular architecture

This hierarchical arrangement allows efficient stress distribution and crack deflection mechanisms, preventing catastrophic failure under load.

The mechanical strength of bone is therefore not only composition-dependent but also structure-dependent, where architecture strongly governs performance .

Types of Bone and Their Biomechanics

1. Cortical Bone

- Dense and compact
- High stiffness and strength
- Primary load-bearing tissue
- Exhibits anisotropic mechanical behavior

2. Trabecular Bone

- Porous and spongy
- Lower density but high surface area
- Absorbs energy and redistributes stress
- Highly responsive to metabolic and mechanical changes

Trabecular bone is particularly sensitive to aging and disease due to its structural variability and dependence on density and architecture .

Mechanical Properties of Bone

1. Strength

Bone resists compressive forces more effectively than tensile forces, especially in cortical regions.

2. Elasticity

Bone exhibits elastic deformation under physiological loads but returns to original shape when stress is removed.

3. Viscoelasticity

Time-dependent deformation occurs due to fluid content and microstructural rearrangement.

4. Anisotropy

Mechanical properties vary depending on direction of loading due to aligned microstructures.

These properties collectively ensure mechanical efficiency and durability during daily activities.

Mechanobiology and Bone Adaptation

Bone is continuously remodeled by osteoblasts and osteoclasts under the regulation of mechanical stimuli.

1. Mechanotransduction

Osteocytes act as mechanosensors that convert mechanical strain into biochemical signals, influencing bone formation or resorption.

2. Types of Mechanical Stimuli

Compression

Tension

Fluid shear stress

Fluid shear stress is especially important in activating signaling pathways that regulate bone formation.

3. Bone Remodeling Hypothesis

Bone adapts its structure according to the “mechanostat theory,” where mechanical loading determines whether bone is formed or resorbed.

Biomechanical Modeling of Bone

Modern biomechanical analysis uses:

- Finite element modeling
- Imaging-based mechanical prediction (CT, MRI)
- Nanoindentation testing

These approaches allow multiscale understanding of bone mechanics and help simulate fracture risk and implant behavior.

Clinical Implications

Understanding bone biomechanics is crucial for:

- Osteoporosis management
- Fracture prediction and prevention
- Orthopedic implant design
- Tissue engineering scaffolds
- Rehabilitation biomechanics

Mechanical failure of bone is often linked to altered microarchitecture rather than simple loss of density.

DISCUSSION

The biomechanical efficiency of bone arises from its ability to self-optimize through remodeling. However, aging, disease, and disuse disrupt this balance, leading to reduced strength and increased fracture risk.

A key insight is that bone is not static but dynamically adaptive. Its mechanical properties are continuously recalibrated based on environmental loading conditions.

CONCLUSION

Bone biomechanics is governed by a complex interaction between structure, composition, and biological adaptation. The collagen–mineral composite system, combined with hierarchical architecture and mechanosensitive remodeling, enables bone to achieve exceptional mechanical performance. Future research should focus on replicating these properties in biomimetic materials for improved clinical applications.

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