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Standard Test Method for Determining Molecular Weight Distribution and Molecular Weight Averages of Polyolefins by High Temperature Gel Permeation Chromatography¹

This standard is issued under the fixed designation D6474; the number immediately following the designation indicates the year of original adoption or, in the case of revision, the year of last revision. A number in parentheses indicates the year of last reapproval. A superscript epsilon (ϵ) indicates an editorial change since the last revision or reapproval.

1. Scope*

1.1 This test method covers the determination of molecular weight distributions and molecular weight averages of linear polyolefins by high temperature gel permeation chromatography (GPC). This test method uses commercially available polystyrene standards and equipment and is applicable to polyethylenes (excluding high pressure low density polyethylene—LDPE) and polypropylenes soluble in 1,2,4-trichlorobenzene (TCB) at 140°C. This test method is not absolute and requires calibration.

NOTE 1—Size exclusion chromatography (SEC) often is used as an alternative name for gel permeation chromatography (GPC).

NOTE 2—Specific methods and capabilities of users may vary with differences in columns, instrumentation, applications software, and practices between laboratories.

NOTE 3—One general method is outlined herein; alternative analytical practices can be followed and are attached in notes where appropriate.

NOTE 4—There is no known ISO equivalent to this standard.

1.2 The values stated in SI units, based on [IEEE/ASTM S1-10](#), are to be regarded as the standard.

1.3 *This standard does not purport to address all of the safety concerns, if any, associated with its use. It is the responsibility of the user of this standard to establish appropriate safety, health, and environmental practices and determine the applicability of regulatory limitations prior to use.*

1.4 *This international standard was developed in accordance with internationally recognized principles on standardization established in the Decision on Principles for the Development of International Standards, Guides and Recommendations issued by the World Trade Organization Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Committee.*

¹ This test method is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee [D20](#) on Plastics and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee [D20.70](#) on Analytical Methods.

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2. Referenced Documents

2.1 *ASTM Standards*:²

[D883 Terminology Relating to Plastics](#)

[D3016 Practice for Use of Liquid Exclusion Chromatography Terms and Relationships](#)

[D5296 Test Method for Molecular Weight Averages and Molecular Weight Distribution of Polystyrene by High Performance Size-Exclusion Chromatography](#)

[E685 Practice for Testing Fixed-Wavelength Photometric Detectors Used in Liquid Chromatography](#)

[E691 Practice for Conducting an Interlaboratory Study to Determine the Precision of a Test Method](#)

[IEEE/ASTM S1-10 Standard for Use of the International System of Units \(SI\): The Modern System \(replaces ASTM E 380 and ANSI/IEEE Standard 268-1992\)](#)

3. Terminology

3.1 *Definitions*—Definitions of terms applying to plastics appear in Terminology [D883](#).

3.2 *Definitions of Terms Specific to This Standard:*

3.2.1 *polyolefin, n*—used in this context, refers to PE (except LDPE) and PP thermoplastics.

4. Summary of Test Method

4.1 In this test method, a polyolefin sample is dissolved in a solvent and injected onto a chromatographic column(s) packed with a substrate, which separates the molecules according to their size in solution. The separated molecules are detected and recorded as they elute from the column according to size by a concentration sensitive detector. Through calibration, retention times are converted to molecular weights. Molecular weight averages and molecular weight distributions are determined from the calibration curve and detector response.

² For referenced ASTM standards, visit the ASTM website, www.astm.org, or contact ASTM Customer Service at service@astm.org. For *Annual Book of ASTM Standards* volume information, refer to the standard's Document Summary page on the ASTM website.

*A Summary of Changes section appears at the end of this standard

5. Significance and Use

5.1 This test method measures the molecular weight distribution and molecular weight averages of polyethylene (except LDPE) and polypropylene resins. Differences in molecular weight and molecular weight distribution significantly affect physical properties, such as morphology, strength, melt flow etc., and as a result, the final properties of products made from these resins.

6. Interferences

6.1 A major interference is the presence of insoluble, highly entangled, high molecular weight material that may be linear or cross-linked. A successful outcome of the test requires that the sample be dissolved completely prior to the chromatographic separation. The presence of the above-described material often precludes the necessary dissolution step.

6.2 A mismatch in the antioxidant level in the dissolved sample and that of the TCB eluent (see 8.1).

6.3 The accuracy of the molecular weight results decreases, that is, they become increasingly underestimated, as the α -olefin comonomer content increases in linear low density polyethylene (LLDPE). For example, the results for an octene copolymer containing 30 branches per 1000 carbon atoms will be about 6 % low.

7. Apparatus

7.1 *Essential Components*—The essential components of the instrumentation are a solvent reservoir, a pump, a solvent degasser, a sample injection system, packed columns, and a concentration sensitive detector.

NOTE 5—Complete high temperature GPC units with a maximum operating temperature of 210°C are commercially available.

7.2 *Solvent Reservoir*—The solvent reservoir shall hold sufficient TCB to ensure consistency of composition for a number of runs. The TCB is protected from exposure to water in the air and the reservoir material shall be inert to the solvent.

7.3 *Pump*—The principal requirement of the pump is production of a relatively constant flow, with minimum pulsations, of solvent through the columns. In general, the rate is adjustable between 0.1 and 5.0 cm³/min and back pressures are not to exceed limits specified by the column manufacturer. Flow rate precision shall be at least ± 0.3 % as measured under the conditions and time interval for a typical analysis.

7.4 *Sample Injection System*—The purpose of the injection system is to introduce the solution containing the sample into the flow stream as a sharply defined zone. Either a six-port valve with an attached sample loop or a variable volume injector can be used for this purpose in conjunction with an autosampler. Requirements include minimal contribution to band spreading, injector ability to operate at the back pressure generated by the columns, repeatability of injection volume, and no carryover.

7.5 *Columns*—Stainless steel columns with uniform and highly polished inside walls are recommended for high temperature GPC. Columns with lengths ranging from 20 to 50 cm with fittings, frits, and connectors designed to minimize dead

volume and mixing are recommended. Generally, the packing materials, typically styrene divinylbenzene copolymers, have narrow particle size distributions in the 3 to 20 μm range. Packing materials are available in a variety of shapes and pore sizes. Columns are packed with particles of relatively uniform pore size or with a “mixed bed” of particles to produce a broad range of pore sizes. If a set of columns with uniform pore size is used, it is recommended that the columns be connected in order of increasing pore size towards the low pressure detector side.

NOTE 6—Packed high temperature GPC columns are available from a number of manufacturers.

7.6 *Detector*—The detector provides a continuous measure of the concentration of solute eluting from the column(s). The detector shall be sufficiently sensitive and respond linearly to the solute concentration, independently of molecular weight, and shall be of low internal volume so as not to distort the concentration gradient during elution. For this test method, the detector cell volume should be 30 μL or less. The most commonly used concentration detectors for high temperature GPC are refractive index or infrared. The former has moderate sensitivity and general utility. When testing detector performance, follow the recommendations of the instrument manufacturer.

NOTE 7—For polyolefins, the refractive index (dn/dc) increment is essentially constant above molecular weights of 5 000 g/mol. The response of the components below 5 000 g/mol should be corrected prior to the molecular weight calculations using a pre-established dn/dc molecular weight calibration. The principal disadvantage of the differential refractometer is that the temperature within the detector cell shall be controlled to within 0.0001°C.

7.7 *Tubing and Fittings*—All tubing between the sample injector and the detector must be no greater than 0.25 mm (0.01 in.) internal diameter and rated for pressures up to 42 MPa. Connecting column tubing must be kept as short as possible and all fittings and connectors shall have low dead volumes to prevent mixing.

7.8 *Data Acquisition/Handling System*—Means shall be provided for determining chromatographic peak heights or integrated area segments at prescribed time intervals and for handling and reporting data. This is best accomplished using a computer with appropriate software.

NOTE 8—Data acquisition and handling systems for high temperature GPC have not been standardized. However, a number of different manufacturers provide GPC specific computer software.

8. Reagents and Materials

8.1 *Solvent*—1,2,4-trichlorobenzene (TCB) is recommended as the solvent for this test method. With a refractive index detector, the solvent shall have a refractive index different than that of the polyolefins analyzed. Solvent purity and consistency shall be considered when choosing a solvent. For example, unless freshly distilled, and subsequently, kept in a glass container under an inert gas, TCB will react with water to form hydrochloric acid that will attack tubing walls and degrade column packing. The TCB reservoir must be protected against exposure to moisture, or be replaced frequently with fresh

solvent, or both. An antioxidant, such as 2,6-di-tert-butyl-4-methylphenol (BHT) must be added to the solvent reservoir at the same concentration, that is, about 250 mg/L, as in the solvent used to dissolve the polymer to minimize any interference due to an antioxidant mismatch peak.

NOTE 9—Several laboratories are successfully recycling TCB using partial vacuum distillation.

NOTE 10—Any solvent that has a boiling point higher than the operating temperature, is considered a good solvent for polyolefins, and is compatible with the GPC components, can be used

8.2 *Polymer Standards*—Narrow MWD ($M_w/M_n < 1.1$) polystyrene standards of known molecular weight (available from several suppliers) are used for calibration.

8.3 *Other Chemicals*—Low MW compounds, such as toluene or hexadecane, that are used for determining plate count, shall be of high purity.

9. Hazards

9.1 Solvents used in this test method are toxic, or highly flammable, or both. The user is advised to consult literature and follow recommended procedures pertaining to the safe handling of solvents.

10. Sampling

10.1 Whenever possible, grinding is used to ensure a representative sample is analyzed.

11. Preparation of Apparatus

11.1 *Flow Rate*—A flow rate of $1 \pm 0.1 \text{ cm}^3/\text{min}$ is suggested. It is recommended that the retention time of the air peak or that of an added low molecular weight flow rate marker, such as toluene, be used to ascertain a flow rate constant to within 0.3 %.

11.2 *Detector*—Detector performance must be checked regularly for any deterioration in signal-to-noise ratio. The calibration mixtures can be used for this purpose.

12. Preparation of Solutions

12.1 *Polymer Samples:*

12.1.1 Weigh the polymer samples directly into GPC autosampler vials or into larger heat resistant vials having a cap lined with solvent resistant material.

12.1.2 Add antioxidant containing, that is, about 250 mg/L solvent, preferably siphoned from the solvent reservoir, to give a polymer concentration of between 0.05 and 0.2 weight % (see 12.3).

12.1.3 Cap the vials and heat the solutions to about 150°C for 3 to 6 h to completely dissolve the samples.

NOTE 11—For polypropylene and some high MW polyethylenes, the samples may have to be heated to between 160 and 180°C for complete dissolution.

NOTE 12—Magnetic stirring, frequent manual agitation, or a slow rotational arrangement inside an oven is recommended to aid dissolution. Excessive temperatures, prolonged dissolution times, and ultrasonic devices may cause the polymer to degrade.

NOTE 13—Filtration of hot polymer solutions to remove or identify the presence of nonvisible gels or other undissolved material is not recommended due to the difficulty involved in filtering at 150°C. Unless performed very carefully, sample losses may occur due to a drop in

temperature during the filtration. Also, most commercial instruments are or can easily be outfitted with an inline pre-column filter.

12.2 *Polymer Standards*—Prepare 3 to 5 “cocktails”, that is, mixtures containing 3 to 4 baseline resolved standards, containing a total of at least 12 narrow MWD polystyrene standards, as well as some hydrocarbon and polyolefin standards, if available, to give individual concentrations of 0.01 to 0.03 weight % (the high molecular weight standards being the more dilute. The standards must be dissolved at room temperature (up to three days dissolution time) or at 150°C, as described in 12.1, for a few hours. Analyze the standards within a month of their preparation. Stabilized polystyrene solutions have been shown to be stable at room temperature for several months.

12.3 *Test for Sample Solution Suitability*—The mass of the polymer injected is typically between 0.05 and 0.5 mg depending on the expected breadth of the molecular weight distribution. Smaller samples are used when the molecular weight distribution is narrower, or the molecular weight is higher, or both. This test method assumes that the mass of the injected polymer is low enough for the hydrodynamic volume of the polymer and the chromatographic separation not to be mass dependent. If the injected sample mass is too high, the peak elution volume and the shape of the chromatogram may be affected and lead to erroneous MW values. If in doubt, it is advisable to rerun an unknown sample or standard at one half its original concentration to ensure that its elution profile is repeatable. When a change is observed, the analysis must be repeated with a lower sample concentration.

13. Performance Requirements

13.1 *Plate Count Number*—The plate count number (N) is a dimensionless quantity related to column efficiency and provides an indication of the extent of band broadening. Follow recommendations of the column manufacturer when initially evaluating columns. The plate count number is determined under the same conditions as those used in this test method. For example:

Solvent:	TCB
Temperature:	140°C
Flow rate:	1 cm ³ /min
Test solute:	Hexadecane
Concentration:	~0.01 % w/v
Injection volume:	300 μL

For an approximately Gaussian-shaped solute peak, the following expression is used to calculate the number of plates (N)/ m :

$$N/L = 16 \times (1/L) \times (V_r/W)^2 \quad (1)$$

where:

L = total column length, m,

V_r = peak elution volume, mL, or time, min, and

W = peak width in units of volume (mL) or time (min) as determined by measuring the distance between the baseline intercepts of lines drawn tangent to the peak inflection points.