
**Plastics — Determination of the
molecular mass and molecular mass
distribution of polymer species by
matrix-assisted laser
desorption/ionization time-of-flight mass
spectrometry (MALDI-TOF-MS)**

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*Plastiques — Détermination de la masse moléculaire et de la
distribution des masses moléculaires des polymères par spectrométrie
de masse, à temps de vol, après désorption/ionisation laser assistée
par matrice (SM-MALDI-TOF)*

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Contents

Page

Foreword	iv
Introduction.....	v
1 Scope	1
2 Normative references	1
3 Terms and definitions	1
4 Principle	2
5 Reagents	3
5.1 Matrices	3
5.2 Solvents	3
5.3 Salts	3
5.4 Molecular mass standards	3
6 Apparatus	3
6.1 General	3
6.2 Sample introduction chamber/target.....	3
6.3 Laser source	4
6.4 Flight tube	4
6.5 Detector	5
6.6 Data recording	5
6.7 Data handling.....	5
7 Procedure	5
7.1 General	5
7.2 Sample preparation	5
7.3 Instrument settings	6
7.4 Recording spectra	7
8 Data acquisition and processing.....	8
8.1 General	8
8.2 Calibration.....	8
8.3 Generation of calibration curve	9
8.4 Signal intensity axis calibration.....	9
9 Expression of results	9
9.1 Calculation of molecular mass distribution.....	9
9.2 Calculation of the average molecular masses	9
10 Precision	9
11 Test report.....	10
Annex A (normative) Calibrants	11
Annex B (informative) Precision data	12
Bibliography.....	13

Foreword

ISO (the International Organization for Standardization) is a worldwide federation of national standards bodies (ISO member bodies). The work of preparing International Standards is normally carried out through ISO technical committees. Each member body interested in a subject for which a technical committee has been established has the right to be represented on that committee. International organizations, governmental and non-governmental, in liaison with ISO, also take part in the work. ISO collaborates closely with the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) on all matters of electrotechnical standardization.

International Standards are drafted in accordance with the rules given in the ISO/IEC Directives, Part 2.

The main task of technical committees is to prepare International Standards. Draft International Standards adopted by the technical committees are circulated to the member bodies for voting. Publication as an International Standard requires approval by at least 75 % of the member bodies casting a vote.

Attention is drawn to the possibility that some of the elements of this document may be the subject of patent rights. ISO shall not be held responsible for identifying any or all such patent rights.

ISO 10927 was prepared by Technical Committee ISO/TC 61, *Plastics*, Subcommittee SC 5, *Physical-chemical properties*.

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Introduction

The molecular mass and molecular mass distribution of a synthetic polymer are fundamental characteristics that result from the polymerization process. They may be used for a wide variety of correlations for fundamental studies and for processing and product applications. Determination of the molecular mass and molecular mass distribution is used for quality control of polymers and for specification purposes in the commerce of polymers. The comparability of MALDI-TOF-MS results obtained in different laboratories can be ensured by using standardized conditions of measurement, identical samples and identical matrix preparation methods. The classification of MALDI-TOF-MS as an equitable (standardized) method compared with other established methods of polymer characterization could result in a significant increase in the use of MALDI-TOF-MS.

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Plastics — Determination of the molecular mass and molecular mass distribution of polymer species by matrix-assisted laser desorption/ionization time-of-flight mass spectrometry (MALDI-TOF-MS)

1 Scope

This International Standard specifies a general method for determining the average molecular mass and molecular mass distribution of polymers (see Reference [1]) from 2 000 g·mol⁻¹ to 20 000 g·mol⁻¹ by matrix-assisted laser desorption/ionization time-of-flight mass spectrometry (MALDI-TOF-MS).

The average molecular masses and molecular mass distributions are calculated from a calibration curve constructed using synthetic-polymer and/or biopolymer standards. This method is therefore classified as a relative method.

The method is not applicable to polyolefins or to polymers with a polydispersity >1,2.

2 Normative references

The following referenced documents are indispensable for the application of this document. For dated references, only the edition cited applies. For undated references, the latest edition of the referenced document (including any amendments) applies.

ISO 472, *Plastics — Vocabulary*

3 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this document, the terms and definitions given in ISO 472 and the following apply.

3.1

matrix-assisted laser desorption/ionization time-of-flight-mass spectrometry MALDI-TOF-MS

a mass-spectrometric technique in which the separation is based on different flight times in a field free flight tube depending on the mass of formed polymer ions after ionization by a laser, desorption and acceleration by high voltage

3.2

molecular mass

M

sum of the masses of the atoms making up a molecule

NOTE Molecular weight is also used for molecular mass.

**3.3
average molecular mass**

Three possible types of average molecular mass are defined by the following equations, where

N_i is the number of molecules of species i of molecular mass M_i ;

m_i is the mass of the i th species (i.e. $m_i = N_i M_i$);

$z_i = m_i M_i / \sum m_i$.

**3.3.1
number-average molecular mass**

M_n

$$M_n = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} (N_i \times M_i)}{\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} N_i} \tag{1}$$

**3.3.2
mass-average molecular mass**

M_w

$$M_w = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} (N_i \times M_i^2)}{\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} (N_i \times M_i)} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} m_i \times M_i}{\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} m_i} \tag{2}$$

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**3.3.3
z-average molecular mass**

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M_z

$$M_z = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} (N_i \times M_i^3)}{\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} (N_i \times M_i^2)} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} (m_i \times M_i^2)}{\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} m_i \times M_i} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} z_i \times M_i}{\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} z_i} \tag{3}$$

4 Principle

The MALDI process involves the desorption and the ionization of an analyte dispersed in an organic small-molecule matrix. The matrix must be able to absorb the laser energy. A metal salt may be added to cationize the analyte. A polymer is co-crystallized or co-mixed with the matrix molecule and deposited on the target. A short-duration UV laser pulse is used to desorb the matrix and the analyte. The laser energy is transferred to the matrix molecules, causing them to vaporize. Analyte and matrix molecules leave the target surface in a plume. Due to the very short desorption time, polymer molecules do not degrade. The polymer in the desorption plume gains a cation and is accelerated by a high voltage, drifts down the field-free flight tube and is detected at the end of the flight tube. The time of flight of the species is a measure of its mass. From the distribution of arrival times and the calibration of the arrival times with known mass standards, the mass distribution of the polymer is determined.

5 Reagents

5.1 Matrices

2,5-dihydroxybenzoic acid (gentisic acid, DHB) and 1,8,9-trihydroxyanthracene (dithranol) are the recommended matrices for this method. All of these materials shall be at least 97 % pure. They shall be stored in a freezer and warmed to room temperature immediately before use.

5.2 Solvents

The recommended solvent is tetrahydrofuran (THF). THF with an antioxidant, such as 2,6-di-*tert*-butyl-4-methylphenol (dibutylated hydroxytoluene, BHT) at a concentration of 0,025 % to 0,1 % (*m/V*), shall be stored in an amber container. If THF without an antioxidant is used, it shall be stored in an amber container under an inert gas. Otherwise, it will react with oxygen to form peroxides which are hazardous on evaporative concentration.

Depending on the solubility of the polymer being investigated, toluene, methanol and acetone may also be used.

High-purity solvents are recommended.

5.3 Salts

Lithium, sodium, potassium and silver trifluoroacetate are recommended since they are soluble in THF and toluene. AgNO₃ with ethanol as solvent may be used with the polymer and matrix in THF.

The salts shall be soluble in the solvent chosen for the polymer and the matrix. When silver nitrate is used, relevant safety aspects should be borne in mind.

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5.4 Molecular mass standards

The calibration of the mass spectrometer shall be carried out using biopolymers and/or synthetic polymers with known repeating units and end groups. The molecular masses of the standards shall lie within the range of the molecular mass of the polymer being investigated. The software of the mass spectrometer shall be used for calibration. A list of recommended biopolymers and their molecular masses is given in Annex A.

6 Apparatus

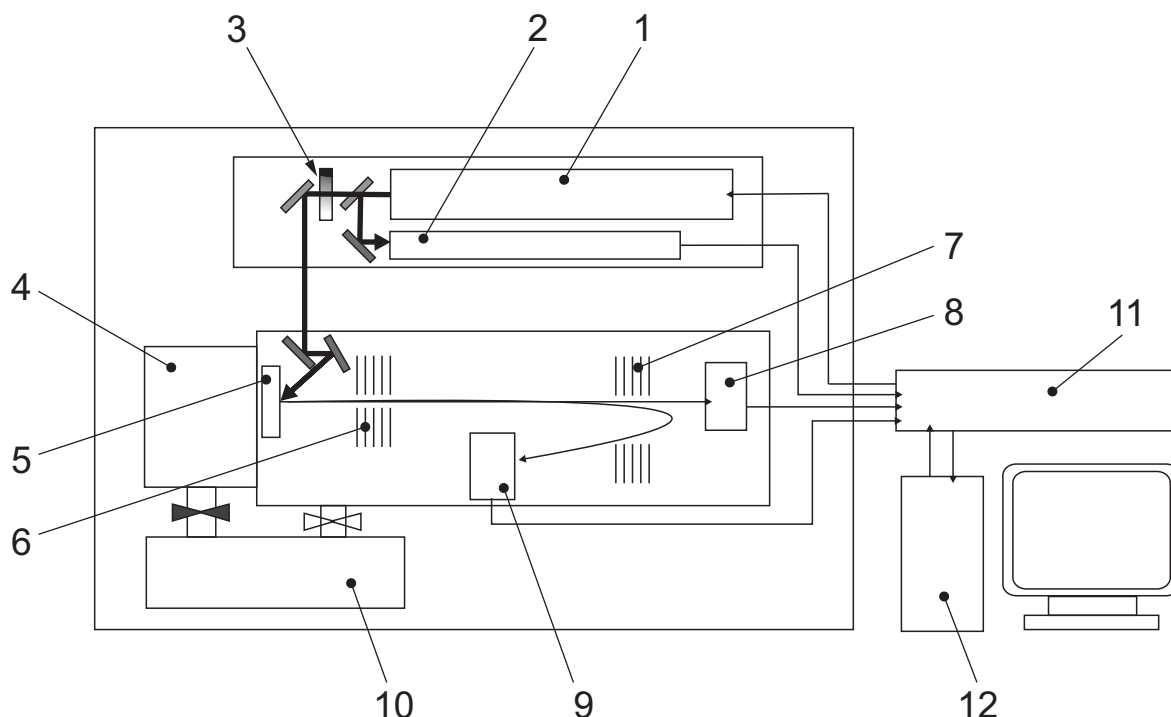
6.1 General

A schematic diagram of a MALDI-TOF mass spectrometer is shown in Figure 1. The main components are a sample introduction chamber, a laser source, an ion source, a flight tube with an acceleration region and an ion detector. The instruments may have additionally an ion deflector and a reflector detector.

Both commercially available TOF mass spectrometers and systems assembled in the laboratory may be used for this method, provided they meet the required levels of performance.

6.2 Sample introduction chamber/target

A MALDI test sample consists of a film, containing the analyte, the matrix and a salt mixture, deposited as so-called "spots" on a metal plate. The entire plate, with the sample spots, is often referred to as the MALDI target. The MALDI target is introduced into the spectrometer vacuum chamber by either a manual or an automatic operation. The target is moveable, so that all the sample spots on the target are accessible to the laser beam.



Key

- 1 laser source
- 2 counter
- 3 optical system with beam splitter and attenuator
- 4 test sample introduction chamber
- 5 target
- 6 ion acceleration optics
- 7 reflector
- 8 linear detector
- 9 reflector detector
- 10 vacuum pump system
- 11 data recording
- 12 computer

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Figure 1 — Schematic diagram of a MALDI-TOF mass spectrometer

6.3 Laser source

The laser system is comprised of a pulsed laser, an attenuator which allows the adjustment of the laser power, beam splitters to direct a fraction of the laser light to a photodiode to start the timing for the TOF measurement, and a lens and mirror system to direct the laser beam onto the MALDI target.

The wavelength of the laser shall be in the absorption range of the matrix. Typically, UV-lasers are used.

6.4 Flight tube

The target is at a high voltage of several kilovolts and situated just behind the acceleration optics. The analyte/matrix/salt mixture is deposited on this target and exposed to the pulsed laser beam. Thereby, gaseous analyte ions are formed which are accelerated by the electric field, exit the source and pass through into the flight tube. The flight tube is a field-free drift region.

6.5 Detector

Ion detection in a TOF mass analyser is based on the fast measurement of the electrode voltage after an ion impact. This is done in a detector in which the signal is proportional to the number of ions hitting the detector.

6.6 Data recording

A multichannel recorder based on the principle of “analogue-to-digital” conversion shall be used.

6.7 Data handling

For data analysis, a computer which is able to read, store and analyse the data is needed. The software shall be able to determine the baseline, convert the data from time to mass by means of a calibration curve and calculate the average molecular masses.

7 Procedure

7.1 General

The procedure includes setting up the MALDI-TOF mass spectrometer, preparation of the test sample and calibration of the data acquisition and processing system.

Typically with a TOF-MS, the vacuum system, the high-voltage power supply and the computer and other parts of the data collection system are left on at all times.

7.2 Sample preparation

7.2.1 General

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Prepare targets as described in 7.2.2 and 7.2.3. If possible, prepare, from each polymer/matrix/salt solution, three different sample spots and record one spectrum from each spot. If only one spot can be made, record three spectra from different areas of the spot. Record a minimum of 100 shots for each spectrum.

Each set of three sample spots shall be prepared from the same solution of polymer, matrix and salt. In addition, the parameters of the mass spectrometer (laser, acceleration voltage, etc.) shall not be changed during the acquisition of the three spectra. Additional spots on the sample target may, however, be made to allow instrument adjustments to be made in order to obtain the optimum spectrometer settings. The adjustment of the laser attenuation is described in 7.3.

7.2.2 Preparation of polymer/matrix/salt solutions

Solutions with the following composition have been found to work successfully in many instruments for various polymers:

- 5 mg/ml of polymer dissolved in a suitable solvent (see 5.2);
- 10 mg/ml of matrix (see 5.1) dissolved in the same solvent;
- 0,1 mol/l of salt (see 5.3) dissolved in the same solvent.

Mix these solutions in the ratios, by volume, of 10:10:1, 10:50:2 and 10:100:2 to give three polymer/matrix/salt solutions containing different ratios of polymer, matrix and salt. Each of these polymer/matrix/salt solutions is used to prepare a set of three spots, i.e. nine spots in all. The solutions shall be used within 24 h. For sample preparation, one of the methods described in 7.2.3 may be used.