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Beyond The Surface: Emerging Antimicrobial Coatings And Self-Disinfecting Materials In Clinical Settings

Manal Fayez Al-johani[1],Adhwaa Eid Olayan Alruwaili[2],Faisal Mohammed Ahmed Mudhawwi[3],Faisal Mutlaq Ghassab Alkahtani[4],Abdullah Salman Dubayyan Almutairi [5], Maram Magdab Hanter Almaredy[6], Ghazwa Atallah Alshammari[7], Munira Khaled Aldosari[8], Ahmed Mohammed Bin Abdullah Alshehri[9],Ohood Ali saeed Alshehri[10], Khawlah Waleed Ibrahim Aljawf [11], Fahd Hezam Fahad Alrwais[12],Bader Hezam Fahad Alrowais[13], Afrah Khalid ALZhrani[14], Zyanah Ibrahim Al-Dossari[15]

[1]Dental Assistant, Bani Salamah Primary Health Care Center, Madinah Health Cluster, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
[2]Specialist Nursing, king Abdulaziz Specialist Hospital, Aljouf Health Cluster, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
[3]Health Administration and Community Health, Damad General Hospital, Jazan Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
[4]Epidemiology Monitor, Al-Fawaz Health Center, First Health Cluster, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
[5]Clinical Nutrition, Afif General Hospital, Third Health Cluster, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
[6]Specialist Nursing, Prince Mutaib bin Abdulaziz Hospital, Aljouf Health Cluster, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
[7]Nursing Specialist, Kkh-Psc In Al-kharj, First Health Cluster, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
[8]Nursing, Branch of Ministry of Health in Riyadh Region- Infection Control Department, Saudi Arabia.
[9]General Dentistry ،Al-Bada General Hospital, Tabuk cluster, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
[10]Medical Laboratory Techolongy, Al-Bada General Hospital, Tabuk cluster, Saudi Arabia.
[11]Nursing Specialist, Ad Diriyah General Hospital, Third Health Cluster, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
[12]Laboratory Specialist, Third Health Cluster, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
[13]Dental Assistant, Third Health Cluster, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
[14]Radiology technologist, East Jeddah General Hospital, First cluster, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
[15]Nursing, King Khalid Hospital in Al-Kharj, First Health Cluster, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Abstract

Background
Healthcare-associated infections (HAIs) pose a major global challenge, with 136 million annual cases of antibiotic-resistant HAIs, particularly in middle-income countries, leading to millions of deaths, extended hospital stays, and costs up to $45 billion in the US. High-touch surfaces facilitate pathogen transmission via fomites and biofilms of multidrug-resistant organisms like MRSA and C. difficile, exposing limitations of conventional cleaning methods.

Methods
This narrative review synthesizes peer-reviewed literature on emerging antimicrobial coatings and self-disinfecting materials, covering historical development (pre-2000 metals to post-2016 bio-mimetics), mechanisms (anti-adhesive, contact-active, release-based, hybrid), material categories (inorganic nanoparticles, polymers, nanomaterials), fabrication techniques (PVD, sol-gel, electrospinning), clinical applications, challenges, and future directions.

Results
Advanced coatings achieve >99% bacterial reductions on implants, stents, and high-touch surfaces, with hybrids like Ag-Cu nanoparticles and stimuli-responsive systems outperforming single mechanisms against biofilms. Clinical trials show sustained efficacy in orthopedics, ICUs, and PPE, though biocompatibility, durability, and regulatory hurdles persist.

Conclusions
Self-disinfecting materials offer promising HAI prevention through multifunctional, AI-optimized designs, warranting scaled implementation in resource-limited settings to combat antimicrobial resistance.

Keywords:Antimicrobial coatings, Self-disinfecting surfaces, Healthcare-associated infections, Biofilm prevention, Nanoparticle antimicrobials.

Introduction

Healthcare-associated infections (HAIs) represent one of the most pressing challenges in modern clinical practice, imposing an immense global burden through elevated morbidity, mortality, and economic strain that underscores the urgent need for innovative surface-based interventions like antimicrobial coatings and self-disinfecting materials. Recent epidemiological data reveal staggering figures, with estimates indicating approximately 136 million cases of antibiotic-resistant HAIs occurring annually worldwide, predominantly in middle-income countries such as China (52 million cases), India (9 million), and Pakistan (10 million), where resource limitations exacerbate prevalence rates reaching up to 15% in acute-care settings compared to 7% in high-income nations. In intensive care units, infection rates can soar to 30% or higher, contributing to roughly 1 in 4 global sepsis cases being healthcare-associated, while the World Health Organization's 2024 report on infection prevention and control highlights that HAIs lead to millions of extra hospital days and economic costs ranging from €13-24 billion in Europe to $28-45 billion in the United States, with individual infections incurring $20,000-$40,000 in direct expenses plus indirect losses from prolonged stays (averaging 5.9-9.6 extra days per case) and productivity declines. Mortality remains devastating, with over 5 million deaths linked to antimicrobial resistance in HAIs as of 2019, some studies estimating up to 9.5 million annual HAI-attributable deaths globally (64% among women and children), resulting in 302 million healthy life years lost, particularly burdensome in low- and middle-income countries where HAIs rank as a top cause of premature death and disability, doubling or tripling fatality risks for resistant strains like those in procedure- and device-related infections. These figures, drawn from point prevalence surveys across 195 countries and national databases, not only strain health systems but also amplify the vicious cycle of antimicrobial resistance, with HAIs responsible for 63.5% of resistant bacterial infections, necessitating a paradigm shift beyond traditional controls toward proactive surface technologies (Gidey et al., 2023).

Surface transmission via high-touch fomites plays a pivotal role in HAI propagation, as these frequently contacted objects harbor resilient pathogens that persist despite routine cleaning, facilitating indirect transfer through healthcare worker hands and patient interactions. Mathematical models demonstrate that 75-79% of Clostridioides difficile colonizations stem from high-touch fomites, with low-touch surfaces (e.g., curtains, furniture) contributing 21-25%, a dynamic worsened by spores' months-long survival and transfer efficiencies of 0-20% between gloves and surfaces, influenced by material hydrophobicity and body fluids. Biofilm persistence amplifies this risk, as multidrug-resistant organisms like methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), vancomycin-resistant enterococci (VRE), C. difficile, and multidrug-resistant Acinetobacter baumannii form protective matrices on surfaces, evading eradication and enabling cross-transmission; for instance, hospital rooms show persistent contamination post-discharge, with 1.25% of patients co-colonized by MRSA and C. difficile, and environmental screening linking clonal outbreaks to these reservoirs. High-touch surfaces near patients act as microbial bridges, with pathogens like Gram-positive (Staphylococcus aureus, Streptococcus) and Gram-negative (Escherichia coli, Pseudomonas aeruginosa, Klebsiella) bacteria, alongside yeasts (Candida albicans) and spores, surviving hours to months, transferred via hand contact in a chain where contaminated fomites seed new infections, particularly in outbreak scenarios where even near-perfect cleaning fails to halt incidence due to rapid recontamination. This fomite-mediated pathway, evidenced by studies on over 20,000 samples showing 50-89% pathogen reductions only with enhanced methods, highlights why conventional hygiene alone cannot interrupt transmission of biofilm-embedded threats like MRSA and C. difficile, which dominate HAIs through environmental persistence (Stephens et al., 2019).

Conventional cleaning and disinfection methods reveal critical gaps in HAI prevention, characterized by inefficiencies in microbial eradication, rapid recontamination, and unintended promotion of antimicrobial resistance, rendering them insufficient against persistent biofilms and multidrug-resistant organisms in clinical environments. Routine soap-based, disinfectant, or even probiotic cleaning shows no superiority in non-ICU wards for reducing HAIs, with surfaces quickly recolonized post-

intervention, as chemical agents like sodium hypochlorite provide only time-limited effects against entrenched pathogens such as C. difficile spores and MRSA, which survive despite frequent high-touch cleaning. Disinfectant resistance emerges in 12 of 13 reviewed studies on highly resistant strains, while conventional protocols fail to address biofilm-protected reservoirs, leading to persistent contamination on textiles, equipment, and floors that fuels exogenous transmission pathways beyond person-to-person contact. These shortcomings result in unabated HAI rates, with enhanced cleaning reducing bacteria but not reliably curbing outbreaks unless paired with multifaceted strategies like UV-C or stewardship, exposing the need for self-sustaining antimicrobial surfaces to bridge these persistent vulnerabilities (Paladini et al., 2025).

Historical Development

The evolution of antimicrobial coatings and self-disinfecting materials in clinical settings traces back to ancient civilizations that recognized the oligodynamic effects of metals like silver and copper for preserving water and treating wounds, with systematic applications emerging in the early 20th century amid rising concerns over hospital-acquired infections. Pre-2000 innovations primarily leveraged intrinsic antimicrobial metals such as silver (Ag) and copper (Cu), alongside quaternary ammonium compounds (QACs), which were first synthesized in the 1910s and gained prominence after benzalkonium chloride's discovery in 1935 for broad-spectrum disinfection in medical devices and surfaces. Silver's efficacy stemmed from ion release disrupting bacterial membranes and enzymes, while copper exhibited rapid contact-killing through oxidative stress and lipid peroxidation, often applied as metallic coatings on catheters and wound dressings; QACs, cationic surfactants, worked via electrostatic binding to negatively charged microbial cells, causing leakage and lysis, with early formulations like hexamethylenetetramine derivatives showing bactericidal promise against pathogens like Staphylococcus aureus. These materials marked foundational shifts from empirical antiseptics to engineered surfaces, reducing biofilm formation on indwelling devices, though challenges like leaching and short-term activity spurred further research (Mitra et al., 2020).

Before 2000, clinical applications focused on simple impregnation or alloying of Ag and Cu into polymers and metals for devices like urinary catheters and surgical tools, capitalizing on their historical use copper alloys sanitized water in ancient Egypt, while silver nitrate treated ophthalmia neonatorum in the 19th century. QACs revolutionized disinfection in the 1930s-1990s, with compounds like cetyltrimethylammonium bromide (CTAB) integrated into coatings for vascular grafts and contact lenses, achieving >99% kill rates against gram-positive and gram-negative bacteria via membrane disruption without sporicidal limitations addressed until later. Copper's resurgence in the late 20th century involved EPA-registered surfaces killing 99.9% of pathogens within hours, outperforming silver in speed under ambient conditions, while QAC-polymers like poly (diallyldimethylammonium chloride) provided stable, non-leaching barriers on endotracheal tubes, mitigating ventilator-associated pneumonia. These pre-nanotech approaches emphasized biocompatibility, with studies confirming low cytotoxicity to mammalian cells at effective doses, laying groundwork for infection control amid emerging antibiotic resistance (Jiao et al., 2017).

The 2000-2015 period ushered in the nanoparticle revolution, with silver nanoparticles (AgNPs) dominating due to enhanced surface area amplifying ion release and ROS generation, shifting from bulk metals to nanoscale embeddings in hydrogels and titanium implants for superior biofilm inhibition. ZnO nanoparticles emerged as a cost-effective alternative around 2010, leveraging photocatalysis and direct membrane puncture for broad-spectrum activity against E. coli and S. aureus, often combined with Ag for synergy studies showed Ag/ZnO composites outperforming individual NPs by 2-5 fold in MIC values. This era saw sol-gel and layer-by-layer techniques deposit AgNPs into silica matrices for catheters, reducing device-related infections by >90%, while ZnO's stability in physiological conditions addressed Ag's cytotoxicity concerns, with orthodontic wires and wound dressings demonstrating prolonged efficacy. Regulatory approvals like FDA-cleared AgNP catheters highlighted clinical translation, though debates on environmental leaching prompted hybrid designs (Shaalan et al., 2017).

Post-2016 innovations emphasize bio-mimetics and stimuli-responsive materials, drawing from shark skin denticles and lotus effects for omniphobic, anti-adhesive coatings that repel bacteria via micro-nanotopography, integrated with Ag/Cu NPs for dual contact-killing. Responsive systems activate via

pH, light, or quorum-sensing, releasing antimicrobials only on pathogen detection e.g., NO-QAC hybrids or photoactive ZnO polymers trigger ROS bursts, achieving >99.99% kill rates against MRSA biofilms on implants. Clinical trials validate these for high-touch surfaces and prosthetics, with Cu-based composites like Copper Armour™ reducing hospital bioburden by >99.9% over 24 hours, and biomimetic peptides mimicking AMPs minimizing resistance. Multifunctional designs now incorporate self-healing polymers and machine-learning optimized topologies for long-term durability in ICUs and dental settings (Fu & Gray, 2021).

Mechanisms of Action

Anti-adhesive antimicrobial coatings, particularly superhydrophobic and zwitterionic surfaces, prevent microbial colonization by minimizing initial bacterial attachment through physical and chemical repulsion mechanisms. Superhydrophobic surfaces achieve water contact angles exceeding 150° via hierarchical micro-nanostructures that trap air pockets at the solid-liquid interface, following the Cassie-Baxter model, which reduces the contact area between bacteria and the surface, effectively repelling cells and contaminants in a self-cleaning manner akin to the lotus effect. Zwitterionic coatings, such as those based on poly (sulfobetaine methacrylate) or poly (carboxybetaine methacrylate), form a strongly hydrated layer through electrostatic interactions between oppositely charged groups and water molecules, creating a steric barrier that resists protein adsorption and bacterial adhesion across Gram-positive and Gram-negative strains in clinical environments like catheters and implants. These mechanisms not only inhibit the initial adhesion phase of biofilm formation but also maintain long-term efficacy under dynamic fluid flows and mechanical stresses typical in medical devices, with studies demonstrating over 99% reduction in bacterial colonization compared to unmodified surfaces (Liu et al., 2020).

Contact-active coatings exert direct bactericidal effects upon physical contact without requiring agent release, primarily through quaternary ammonium compounds (QACs) and antimicrobial peptides (AMPs) that disrupt microbial membranes. QACs, featuring positively charged quaternary nitrogen heads tethered to hydrophobic alkyl chains (typically 10-12 carbons long), bind electrostatically to negatively charged bacterial phospholipids, followed by hydrophobic insertion that destabilizes membrane integrity, causes ion leakage, and leads to lysis, effective against both planktonic cells and biofilms with minimal resistance development due to multi-site membrane targeting. AMPs like LL-37 or PMAP-23 similarly employ cationic amphiphilicity to permeabilize membranes via models such as barrel-stave, carpet, or toroidal pore formation, saturating bacterial surfaces at concentrations of 10^6-10^7 peptides per cell to induce rapid killing, while also offering broad-spectrum activity against multidrug-resistant pathogens. These coatings maintain activity through covalent surface immobilization, preventing leaching and ensuring sustained contact-killing on high-touch clinical surfaces, with reductions exceeding 4 log cycles in viable bacteria even after prolonged exposure (Waller et al., 2019).

Release-based systems deliver antimicrobial agents in a controlled manner from matrices like hydrogels and liposomes, providing high local concentrations to eradicate adhered or nearby pathogens while minimizing systemic exposure. Hydrogels, often composed of natural polymers like alginate or synthetic polyethylene glycol networks, swell in aqueous environments to enable diffusion-controlled release of antibiotics or antiseptics, sustaining therapeutic levels at infection sites for days to weeks, with pH-responsive variants accelerating release in acidic biofilm microenvironments to enhance penetration and efficacy against chronic wounds or implant infections. Liposomes, stabilized by nanoparticles to prevent premature fusion, encapsulate both hydrophilic and hydrophobic drugs, fusing selectively with bacterial membranes in a pH-dependent manner at infection sites, as demonstrated with vancomycin-loaded lysostaphin-targeted liposomes that disrupt Staphylococcus aureus cell walls and release payloads intracellularly, outperforming free drugs against resistant strains. These platforms excel in clinical settings by combining biocompatibility, tunable degradation, and targeted delivery, reducing minimum inhibitory concentrations and biofilm biomass significantly in topical and implantable applications (Gao et al., 2014).

Hybrid and smart coatings integrate multiple mechanisms with stimuli-responsive elements like photodynamic therapy (PDT) or multi-modal activation for adaptive, on-demand antimicrobial action

in complex clinical scenarios. Photodynamic hybrids incorporate photosensitizers (e.g., chlorin e6 or porphyrins) into polymeric matrices that generate reactive oxygen species (ROS) like singlet oxygen upon visible light exposure, oxidizing bacterial membranes, proteins, and DNA without resistance induction, while superhydrophobic bases prevent initial fouling and hydrogels sustain ROS production for prolonged efficacy on catheters or surgical tools. Multi-modal smart surfaces respond to triggers such as pH, temperature, or enzymes by switching wettability, releasing agents, or activating PDT, as in zwitterionic microgel-reinforced coatings that combine hydration barriers with nitric oxide or silver release for dual anti-thrombotic and anti-infective effects, achieving over 99.99% bacterial reduction and stability under shear stress. These advanced systems address polymicrobial resistance in healthcare-associated infections by synergizing passive repellency with active killing, offering durable performance in real-world settings like public transport or indwelling devices (Uroz et al., 2022).

Material Categories

Inorganic antimicrobial materials, primarily leveraging silver (Ag) and copper (Cu) nanoparticles alongside titanium dioxide (TiO2), represent a cornerstone of emerging self-disinfecting technologies due to their broad-spectrum photocatalytic and ion-release mechanisms that disrupt microbial cell walls and generate reactive oxygen species (ROS) for potent bactericidal effects against pathogens like Escherichia coli, Staphylococcus aureus, and Pseudomonas aeruginosa in clinical environments. These materials excel in applications such as catheters, orthopedic implants, and surgical fixtures, where TiO2 nanocomposites provide sustained antibacterial activity under UV or visible light activation, while Ag/Cu bimetallic nanoparticles enhance efficacy through synergistic ion release that outperforms single-metal variants, achieving minimum inhibitory concentrations (MICs) as low as those needed for multidrug-resistant strains without immediate loss of functionality. However, challenges persist, including potential cytotoxicity from prolonged nanoparticle leaching into surrounding tissues, which can elevate ROS levels in mammalian cells, and the need for controlled doping strategies to balance antimicrobial potency with biocompatibility, as evidenced in studies on TiO2-Ag hybrids for external fixator pins that demonstrate up to 99% bacterial reduction but require optimization to mitigate eukaryotic toxicity (Serov et al., 2024).

Polymeric antimicrobial coatings, exemplified by chitosan and polyhexamethylene biguanide (PHMB), offer tunable biocompatibility and adhesion properties ideal for high-touch textiles, wound dressings, and hospital surfaces, operating via electrostatic interactions with negatively charged bacterial membranes in acidic environments or through biguanide-induced chromosomal condensation that selectively targets prokaryotes while sparing human cells. Chitosan's natural polycationic structure enables pH-dependent antimicrobial action, enhanced when crosslinked with glutaraldehyde or benzaldehyde for durable films on cotton fabrics that inhibit Bacillus cereus, Candida lipolytica, and Pseudomonas aeruginosa with inhibition zones exceeding 15 mm, while PHMB at concentrations above 1% demonstrates robust activity against Gram-positive and Gram-negative strains in nanocomposite nanofibers, synergizing with chitosan for anti-adhesive surfaces that prevent surgical site infections. Key limitations include humidity sensitivity, which reduces chitosan's protonation and efficacy in moist clinical settings, and PHMB's potential keratocyte toxicity at higher doses, necessitating hybrid formulations with polymers for extended durability and reduced environmental dependence, as seen in core/shell nylon-chitosan-PHMB systems that repel biofilm formation on medical textiles (Keirouz et al., 2020).

Nanomaterials such as graphene derivatives and silicon nanoparticles (SiNPs) harness ROS generation and sharp-edge membrane laceration for superior antimicrobial performance in personal protective equipment (PPE), air filters, and respiratory masks, where graphene oxide (GO) nanocomposites exhibit photothermal self-sterilization under sunlight, reaching temperatures up to 80°C to inactivate SARS-CoV-2 and bacterial contaminants while maintaining superhydrophobicity to repel droplets. These materials disrupt viral envelopes and bacterial integrity through oxidative stress and physical trapping, with reduced graphene oxide (RGO)-nanoparticle hybrids embedded in fabrics showing up to 5-fold improved photothermal effects and broad antiviral/antibacterial activity against E. coli and S. aureus, positioning them as reusable coatings for pandemic-era healthcare. Aggregation remains a primary challenge, compromising uniformity and long-term efficacy in dynamic clinical flows, alongside

scalability issues for large-area PPE production, though laser-induced graphene modifications address this by enhancing self-cleaning without toxicity (Ayub et al., 2021).

Bio-inspired antimicrobial coatings mimic natural anti-fouling structures like the lotus leaf's superhydrophobicity or ciliary motility to minimize microbial adhesion on tools, prosthetics, and silicone rubber devices, employing peptide-functionalized lipids or liquid-infused surfaces (LIS) that reduce biofilm formation by P. aeruginosa and S. aureus through slippery barriers that prevent "beachhead" colonies within lubricant layers. These designs integrate human cathelicidin LL-37 with glycerol monooleate self-assemblies for contact-killing and stimuli-responsive release, achieving significant log reductions in clinically relevant strains while promoting biocompatibility for dental and orthopedic implants via GL13K peptide coatings that inhibit biofilm without impeding osteoblast proliferation. Scalability challenges arise from complex fabrication like synchrotron-characterized nanostructures, limiting translation from lab to clinical prosthetics, yet their fouling resistance offers promise for infection-prone high-wear areas (Ozkan et al., 2022).

Self-healing antimicrobial materials utilize capsule-embedded agents like nanoparticle-stabilized phytochemicals (e.g., peppermint oil and cinnamaldehyde) that rupture upon mechanical damage in high-wear clinical zones such as wound dressings and implant surfaces, autonomously repairing coatings while delivering payloads that eradicate pathogenic biofilms via ROS and membrane disruption in co-culture models with fibroblasts. These multicomponent capsules enhance therapeutic selectivity, promoting mammalian cell proliferation post-biofilm clearance against clinical isolates, with Ag-doped variants extending repair cycles through in situ interfacial reactions. Trigger limitations, including single-use healing per capsule and dependency on precise rupture mechanics, hinder repeated exposure resilience, though integration with polymers addresses this for multifunctional composites in trauma care (Duncan et al., 2015).

Fabrication Methods

Physical vapor deposition (PVD), chemical vapor deposition (CVD), and plasma-based techniques represent foundational physical approaches for creating antimicrobial coatings in clinical settings, enabling precise deposition of thin films with antimicrobial agents like silver or titanium nitride onto medical implants and surfaces. PVD involves vaporizing source materials in a vacuum chamber through processes such as thermal evaporation or sputtering, where atoms or molecules condense onto substrates to form uniform, adherent layers typically 50 nm to several micrometers thick, ideal for orthopedic brackets, titanium implants, and surgical tools due to enhanced hardness, corrosion resistance, and bactericidal properties from ions like Ag^+ disrupting bacterial membranes. Studies demonstrate PVD silver coatings on orthodontic brackets reduce Streptococcus mutans and Lactobacillus acidophilus colony-forming units by over 60% at baseline and maintain efficacy after four months, while TiN PVD coatings on Ti-6Al-4V alloys improve osseointegration and lower wear by up to 800% in cyclic loading tests mimicking joint arthroplasty. CVD employs gaseous precursors decomposed by heat or plasma to deposit conformal coatings, such as Cu-SiO_2 films via flame-assisted CVD, which exhibit sustained Cu^{2+} release inhibiting biofilm formation without exceeding minimum inhibitory concentrations systemically. Plasma techniques, including plasma-enhanced CVD (PECVD) and initiated CVD (iCVD), activate surfaces at low temperatures (under 50°C) for solvent-free polymerization of antimicrobial polymers on heat-sensitive substrates like nylon fabrics or catheters, achieving up to 4-log bacterial reductions in under 5 minutes against hospital pathogens. These methods excel in producing dense, defect-free films with controlled stoichiometry, but line-of-sight limitations in PVD necessitate rotating substrates for complex geometries like porous titanium implants (Saad et al., 2024).

Chemical fabrication methods, including sol-gel, layer-by-layer (LbL) assembly, and electrophoretic deposition (EPD), offer versatile, solution-based routes for antimicrobial coatings, particularly suited for flexible or irregular clinical surfaces like vascular grafts, hernia meshes, and dental appliances. Sol-gel processes involve hydrolysis and condensation of metal alkoxides to form oxide networks doped with antimicrobials, yielding transparent, crack-free films with tunable porosity for controlled release; for instance, ZnO sol-gel coatings on titanium achieve >99.98% water disinfection in dark conditions via reactive oxygen species generation. LbL assembly alternates oppositely charged polyelectrolytes (e.g., PAH/PSS with silver nanoparticles) to build multilayers 10-100 nm thick, enabling antibiotic

loading like vancomycin for 28-day release on polyester meshes, reducing S. aureus adhesion by 90% while preserving biocompatibility. EPD applies electric fields to suspend charged particles (e.g., Bioglass/chitosan/Ag nanoparticles) for rapid, uniform deposition on conductive substrates like TiAlV alloys, producing clindamycin-loaded coatings with broad-spectrum activity against staphylococci and pneumococci; anti-gravity perfusion EPD on porous titanium further incorporates Ag-Cu-mesoporous silica for photothermal synergy, enhancing vascularization and inhibiting E. coli biofilms. These techniques accommodate bioactive glass, hydroxyapatite, or peptide incorporation for dual antimicrobial-osteogenic effects, with LbL excelling in anti-adhesive properties via steric repulsion and EPD in scalability for 3D scaffolds. Challenges include pH-sensitive stability in EPD suspensions and multilayer delamination in LbL under shear, addressed by crosslinking or nanosphere integration for prolonged drug elution up to 50 days (Escobar et al., 2020).

Emerging fabrication methods like electrospinning and 3D printing revolutionize antimicrobial material design by producing nanostructured, patient-specific constructs for self-disinfecting wound dressings, implants, and catheters, bridging nanoscale efficacy with macroscale functionality. Electrospinning extrudes polymer solutions (e.g., PCL with amoxicillin or clindamycin) under high voltage to form nanofibers 100-500 nm in diameter with high surface area for burst or sustained release, achieving >4-log reductions against S. aureus and E. coli; needle-free variants like Nanospider enable scalable production of alginate-CMC meshes for hip prostheses, promoting angiogenesis while preventing device-related infections. 3D printing, often hybridized with electrospinning, fabricates bicomponent scaffolds (e.g., PCL-AMX outer layer over SA-gelatin hydrogel) via melt electrowriting or extrusion, yielding hierarchical structures with controlled porosity (160 mm electrode distance, 60 kV) for full-thickness skin regeneration, exhibiting immunomodulatory and proangiogenic effects in vivo. These methods integrate stimuli-responsive elements like photoactive gold nanoparticles or pH-sensitive mesoporous silica for on-demand disinfection, with electrospinning-PEO nanofibers loading tetracycline for broad-spectrum activity and 3D-printed PCL meshes eluting gentamicin sulfate against all strains except MRSA. Advantages include biocompatibility (no cytotoxicity to gingival fibroblasts), customizable degradation (matching implant timelines), and multifunctionality (anti-inflammatory alongside bactericidal), though fiber alignment and nozzle clogging require optimization via flow rates (3.8 rpm) and humidity control (33%). Future integrations with AI-driven design promise personalized coatings for infection-prone clinical niches like neurosurgery or orthopedics (Cojocaru et al., 2023).

Clinical Applications

Emerging antimicrobial coatings and self-disinfecting materials have transformed clinical applications by significantly reducing device-related infections across orthopedics, cardiovascular stents, and dental implants, where biofilm formation remains a persistent challenge. In orthopedic implants, such as hip and knee prostheses, coatings incorporating zinc oxide nanorods, polymer brushes like PEGMA-Phosmet, and mechano-bactericidal nanopillars demonstrate over 99% reduction in bacterial adhesion for pathogens like Staphylococcus aureus and Pseudomonas aeruginosa, enhancing osseointegration while preventing premature failure through reactive oxygen species generation and physical penetration mechanisms. Cardiovascular stents benefit from antibiotic-eluting designs, including ciprofloxacin sinus stents and polydopamine-silver nanoparticle coatings on polycaprolactone/poly(L-lactide-co-caprolactone) scaffolds, which provide sustained ion release over weeks, halving encrustation and achieving >99% antibacterial efficacy against encrustation-associated biofilms in ureteral models adaptable to vascular use. Dental implants and abutments coated with antibacterial peptides, TiO2 nanocomposites, silver nanoparticles, and silane-TiO2 layers exhibit marked reductions in peri-implantitis risks, with peptide coatings showing prolonged biofilm control over extended incubation periods due to their biocompatibility and potency against Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria, while metal coatings like Zn, Mg, and Cu further diminish inflammation in vivo (Chen et al., 2023).

Antimicrobial strategies for orthopedic implants emphasize multilayered approaches combining bactericidal nanoparticles, antibiotic elution, and topography modifications to combat implant-associated infections that affect up to 2-5% of procedures, with costs exceeding $100,000 per case; ZnO nanorod patterns on titanium substrates kill adhered S. aureus via mechano-penetration and ROS, while smart coatings with nanopillars maintain efficacy on curved surfaces and enable strain mapping for

early failure detection in vivo rabbit models. Stents in cardiovascular and urological applications leverage hydrogel-based PPAZ/PU coatings and AgNP-Col I layers on 3D-printed biodegradable scaffolds, reducing friction coefficients by 2.62-fold, enhancing hydrophilicity, and providing continuous silver ion release for long-term protection against planktonic bacteria and biofilms, as evidenced in simulated encrustation experiments and animal implants showing halved surface encrustation. Dental implants integrate synthetic antimicrobials, metallic nanoparticles, and peptide coatings, with systematic reviews confirming peptides as most effective for durable bacterial colonization control, TiO2 nanocomposites preventing adhesion on abutments, and hybrid surfaces preserving sterilization versatility while blocking bacterial migration at tissue-implant interfaces (Rodrigues et al., 2021).

Self-disinfecting surfaces and personal protective equipment (PPE) like furniture, masks, and gowns incorporate copper-infused fabrics, TiO2 nanocomposites, and quaternary ammonium polymers to autonomously reduce microbial burdens by 90-99% on high-touch areas, addressing the fact that <50% of hospital surfaces are adequately cleaned post-disinfection and biofilms persist in 70% of ICU spots despite protocols. Furniture and environmental surfaces in emergency departments coated with antimicrobial foils show significantly lower aerobic bacteria (0.61 vs 1.01 CFU/cm² at 24 hours) in randomized trials, complementing manual cleaning by preventing cross-contamination from hands/gloves to patients, while guidelines emphasize rubber gloves, aprons, and masks during disinfection to curb SARS-CoV-2-like transmissions. Masks and gowns impregnated with antimicrobials or modified for rapid donning/doffing reduce HCAI risks, with fabrics like those in health services demonstrating feasibility in controlling microbial spread, though challenges include training gaps and non-standardized agents leading to pathogen survival on bedpans, switches, and doorknobs (Querido et al., 2019a).

Intensive care units (ICUs), operating rooms (ORs), and paramedic gear demand robust antimicrobial interventions due to high pathogen loads and procedural intensities, where coatings on stretchers, rails, and equipment cut contamination by 40% median difference in CFU/cm², as piloted in double-blind ED trials showing sustained effects up to 7 days. OR surfaces and furniture benefit from proactive AMC innovations addressing non-compliance in cleaning (e.g., <30% for handholds), with self-disinfecting technologies like those from EU COST Action AMiCI networks preventing outbreaks via permanent disinfection complementing PPE barriers. Paramedic gear, including transport stretchers and PPE, integrates hydrophilic coatings and metal modifications for field durability, reducing biofilm in prehospital settings akin to ICU findings, with hydrogel advances targeting orthopedic-like infections in trauma scenarios (Cheng et al., 2024).

Challenges

Emerging antimicrobial coatings and self-disinfecting materials face significant biocompatibility hurdles in clinical settings, primarily governed by ISO 10993 standards, which mandate comprehensive biological evaluation plans encompassing cytotoxicity (ISO 10993-5), sensitization, irritation, acute systemic toxicity, genotoxicity, implantation testing (ISO 10993-6), and hemocompatibility assessments tailored to the device's contact duration and tissue type. These coatings, often incorporating nanoparticles, quaternary ammonium compounds, or metal ions like silver and copper, must demonstrate no adverse local or systemic effects while maintaining antimicrobial efficacy, yet challenges arise from potential leaching of active agents that can induce cytotoxicity, inflammation, or foreign body responses, particularly in long-term implants where degradation products accumulate and provoke chronic immune activation or fibrosis. Balancing potent bacterial killing with tissue compatibility proves difficult, as highly effective antimicrobials may compromise cell viability or trigger hypersensitivity, necessitating iterative material optimizations and extensive in vitro/in vivo testing to meet ISO 10993-1 risk management frameworks without compromising therapeutic utility (Beltrán-Novelo et al., 2025).

Durability of these coatings intersects critically with antimicrobial resistance (AMR) concerns, as mechanical wear from repeated sterilization, cleaning protocols, or physiological stresses erodes surface topography and depletes active agents, leading to patchy protection and selective pressure favoring resistant strains like MRSA or multidrug-resistant Gram-negatives prevalent in healthcare-associated

infections. Contact-killing mechanisms, such as cationic polymers or nanostructured topographies, suffer from biofouling where dead microbes accumulate, masking active sites and diminishing long-term efficacy, while leaching-based systems exhaust reservoirs prematurely, exacerbating AMR through sub-lethal exposures that promote horizontal gene transfer or efflux pump upregulation in biofilms. Clinical translation demands coatings resilient to abrasion (e.g., ASTM standards), chemical degradation from disinfectants, and enzymatic attack, yet real-world studies reveal rapid performance decay, underscoring the need for hybrid designs integrating self-healing polymers or covalent tethering to sustain bactericidal activity over months without fostering resistance evolution (Pietsch et al., 2020).

Regulatory pathways for antimicrobial coatings under FDA and EU Medical Device Regulation (MDR) impose stringent premarket requirements, classifying many as Class II/III devices due to novel materials triggering full biocompatibility re-evaluations, clinical data mandates, and post-market surveillance for infection reduction claims, often delaying approvals amid scrutiny over antimicrobial claims lacking standardized efficacy endpoints like log reductions over clinically relevant periods. FDA's 510(k) or PMA routes demand bench performance, animal models, and human factors validation, while EU MDR's Annex XIV elevates scrutiny via Notified Body reviews emphasizing clinical evaluation reports, unique device identification, and economic operators' responsibilities, compounded by biocidal product regulations (BPR) for leachable actives requiring REACH compliance and environmental risk assessments. Harmonization gaps between jurisdictions, coupled with evolving guidance on nanomaterials and AMR mitigation, burden manufacturers with iterative submissions, substantial testing costs, and extended timelines, hindering market entry despite promising lab data (Fu & Gray, 2021).

Environmental risks associated with self-disinfecting materials stem from unintended release of biocides like silver nanoparticles, quaternary ammonium salts, or organic antimicrobials into wastewater, posing ecotoxicological threats via bioaccumulation in aquatic organisms, disruption of microbial communities, and promotion of environmental AMR reservoirs distinct from clinical strains. Lifecycle analyses reveal that non-biodegradable components contribute to microplastic pollution and persistent toxicity, while manufacturing byproducts and end-of-life disposal amplify impacts, as seen with copper or zinc coatings leaching ions that inhibit non-target species like algae or beneficial bacteria, contravening sustainability goals in green healthcare directives. Proactive mitigation through degradable matrices or triggerable release systems remains underdeveloped, with regulatory frameworks like EU REACH demanding exposure modeling and safe-by-design principles to avert broader ecological fallout from widespread clinical adoption (Querido et al., 2019a).

Future Directions

The future of antimicrobial coatings and self-disinfecting materials in clinical settings promises transformative advancements through responsive and AI-designed technologies that adapt dynamically to microbial threats, while multifunctional formulations expand protection against diverse pathogens, and strategic implementation in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) addresses global healthcare disparities. Responsive coatings, engineered to detect and react to bacterial stimuli such as pH shifts, temperature changes, or enzyme presence, represent a paradigm shift from static surfaces to intelligent, self-defensive systems that activate antimicrobial responses only when colonization occurs, thereby preserving efficacy over time, minimizing ecological disruption, and reducing the risk of resistance development. These bioinspired designs, drawing from natural defense mechanisms, enable controlled release of agents or surface reconfiguration, offering prolonged durability on high-touch medical devices and surfaces in hospitals, with potential integration of photosensitizers for light-activated disinfection that maintains activity for months under real-world conditions. Artificial intelligence is revolutionizing coating design by leveraging machine learning and deep learning to predict and optimize antimicrobial peptide (AMP) sequences, nanoparticle interactions, and hydrogel matrices, accelerating discovery from vast datasets to generate novel, high-efficacy formulations like AI-AMP-hydrogels that achieve over 99.99% bactericidal rates against drug-resistant strains such as MRSA and E. coli while promoting wound healing through piezoelectric enhancements. Generative AI models facilitate multimodal optimization, combining discriminative screening with de novo design to overcome traditional trial-and-error limitations, enabling precise tailoring of coatings for

biocompatibility, stability, and broad-spectrum activity against biofilms on implants and equipment. This AI-driven approach not only compresses development timelines but also integrates multi-objective constraints for clinical translation, positioning responsive coatings as proactive barriers in infection-prone environments (Cassa et al., 2024).

Multifunctional coatings that simultaneously combat bacterial, fungal, and viral pathogens mark a critical evolution, synergistically combining agents like quaternary ammonium compounds, metal nanoparticles, and polymers within matrices to deliver 5-log reductions in colony-forming units and 4-log drops in viral infectivity, applicable via simple spray or brush methods on diverse substrates in healthcare facilities. These broad-spectrum innovations, tested against influenza, SARS-CoV-2 pseudoviruses, and resistant bacteria, incorporate contact-killing, anti-adhesive, and controlled-release mechanisms to disrupt biofilms at multiple stages while maintaining mechanical integrity and biocompatibility for long-term use on catheters, prosthetics, and hospital furniture. Emerging strategies further enhance multifunctionality by embedding enzymes, quorum-sensing disruptors, and antiviral perhydrolases into polydopamine matrices, yielding reusable surfaces that inactivate enveloped viruses and superbugs without inducing resistance, thus addressing the polymicrobial nature of healthcare-associated infections (HAIs) comprehensively (Duque-Sanchez et al., 2024).

Implementation in LMICs demands context-specific adaptations to overcome infrastructure gaps, regulatory weaknesses, and resource constraints, with scalable, low-cost coating technologies like dip-coating or electrophoretic deposition of metal-oxide nanoparticles offering durable anti-infective surfaces on affordable implants and high-touch areas without relying on advanced diagnostics or stewardship programs. Pilot integrations via networks like Global-PPS highlight the feasibility of embedding self-disinfecting paints and nanoparticle-doped filters in under-resourced hospitals, reducing HAIs through simple application methods that withstand harsh conditions, socioeconomic barriers, and limited surveillance, while AI-optimized formulations minimize material costs for mass production. Future rollout strategies emphasize training local workforces for on-site deployment, leveraging public-private partnerships for technology transfer, and prioritizing coatings with natural antimicrobials like colophony to bypass import dependencies, ultimately bridging the equity gap in global AMR combat by enhancing occupational safety and patient outcomes in resource-limited clinical settings (Rony et al., 2023).

The role of dental assistant

A dental assistant plays a pivotal role in implementing and sustaining antimicrobial coatings and self-disinfecting strategies within the dental operatory, acting as the frontline link between advanced materials and daily infection-prevention practice. Dental assistants help ensure coated high-touch surfaces (such as chair controls, light handles, suction lines, and instrument trays) are correctly identified, maintained, and integrated with conventional cleaning protocols, preventing inappropriate use of harsh agents that could damage coatings and compromise long-term antimicrobial performance. In addition, they are central to chairside asepsis by coordinating the use of coated barriers, managing pre- and post-procedure decontamination workflows, and promptly reporting visible wear, loss of hydrophobicity, or surface damage so that self-disinfecting materials can be inspected or replaced according to manufacturer and institutional guidelines. Through ongoing education and adherence to evidence-based protocols, dental assistants support surveillance of environmental cleanliness, contribute to data collection in quality-improvement or pilot implementation projects, and help translate emerging coating technologies into tangible reductions in biofilm burden and procedure-associated infections in dental settings (Upendran et al., 2023).

The role of nursing

Nurses play a pivotal role in integrating emerging antimicrobial coatings and self-disinfecting materials into clinical infection control practices, enhancing HAI prevention through frontline implementation, monitoring, and stewardship as the most consistent patient caregivers. They verify sustained efficacy of high-touch surfaces coated with copper alloys or silver nanoparticles post-cleaning, report durability issues to bridge gaps in conventional disinfection where only 50% of surfaces may be adequately cleaned, and participate in multidisciplinary antimicrobial stewardship programs by advocating for

timely de-escalation of therapies, educating staff during ward rounds, and facilitating adoption in ICUs and PPE. This involvement reduces microbial burdens by up to 94% on self-disinfecting beds, minimizes resistance risks, and supports broader deployment in resource-limited settings (Querido et al., 2019b).

The role of health administration and community health

Health administration and community health play pivotal roles in integrating antimicrobial coatings and self-disinfecting materials into broader infection prevention strategies, overseeing policy implementation, resource allocation, and public education to curb healthcare-associated infections (HAIs). Health administrators lead the adoption of these technologies by conducting cost-benefit analyses, securing regulatory approvals, and integrating them into hospital environmental services protocols, such as prioritizing high-touch surfaces in ICUs and emergency departments, where studies show up to 36% HAI reductions following coating applications. They collaborate with multidisciplinary teams to monitor compliance through audits and training, addressing gaps in cleaning efficacy and fostering antimicrobial stewardship programs that align with ISO 10993 biocompatibility standards and national action plans on antimicrobial resistance (AMR). In community health contexts, professionals extend these efforts beyond hospitals by promoting scalable implementations in outpatient clinics, long-term care facilities, and public spaces, leveraging community health workers (CHWs) for education on surface hygiene, early detection of infections like pneumonia, and reducing inappropriate antibiotic use in resource-limited settings. This dual approach enhances surveillance, builds infrastructure for data transparency, and drives equitable access in low- and middle-income countries, ultimately mitigating AMR through population-based strategies that complement clinical innovations (Castro-Sánchez et al., 2025).

The role of epidemiology monitor

Epidemiology monitors play a pivotal role in integrating antimicrobial coatings and self-disinfecting materials into comprehensive infection prevention strategies within clinical settings by conducting active surveillance of healthcare-associated infections (HAIs), analyzing trends in pathogen incidence, environmental bioburden, and outbreak patterns to evaluate the real-world efficacy of surface technologies like silver nanoparticle coatings or copper-infused high-touch areas, which have demonstrated up to 36-47% reductions in HAIs through longitudinal data tracking. These professionals pinpoint lapses in infection control, such as persistent fomite contamination despite cleaning, to guide targeted deployment of self-disinfecting surfaces in high-risk zones like ICUs and orthopedics, benchmark performance against national databases like the CDC's National Healthcare Safety Network, and recommend protocol enhancements that sustain long-term reductions in multidrug-resistant organisms. Their data-driven insights also inform regulatory compliance, resource allocation in resource-limited settings, and future research on hybrid coating durability, ensuring these innovations complement multifaceted HAI prevention efforts (Goetz, 2024).

The role of clinical nutrition

Clinical nutrition plays a vital complementary role in preventing healthcare-associated infections (HAIs) by addressing malnutrition, which impairs immune function and heightens susceptibility to pathogens like MRSA and C. difficile prevalent on high-touch surfaces. Malnourished patients exhibit reduced T-cell activation, skewed Th2 cytokine profiles, gut dysbiosis, and diminished mucosal barriers, creating a vicious cycle where infections exacerbate nutritional deficits and prolong recovery in clinical settings. Interventions such as whey protein supplementation, vitamin D correction, zinc gluconate, and nutrient-dense meal plans have demonstrated significant reductions in infection risk—e.g., 20g/day whey protein lowered any-infection incidence—while enhancing lymphocyte counts, positioning clinical nutrition as an essential adjunct to antimicrobial coatings for comprehensive HAI mitigation. Integrating routine nutritional screening and targeted refeeding protocols in ICUs and high-risk wards could synergize with self-disinfecting surfaces to optimize patient outcomes and curb antimicrobial resistance (Psihogios et al., 2022).

The role of medical laboratory technician

Medical Laboratory Technicians (MLTs) play a pivotal role in leveraging antimicrobial coatings and self-disinfecting materials within laboratory environments to mitigate healthcare-associated infections (HAIs). These professionals conduct routine surveillance of high-touch lab surfaces, such as benchtops, pipettes, and incubators, where antimicrobial surfaces like copper-infused or nanoparticle-coated materials reduce microbial contamination risks by over 90%, preventing cross-contamination during sample processing and pathogen identification. MLTs also perform microbiological testing to validate the efficacy of these coatings against multidrug-resistant organisms (e.g., MRSA, C. difficile), providing rapid strain typing and susceptibility data that informs infection control teams and supports early outbreak detection in clinical settings. By integrating self-disinfecting technologies into lab workflows, MLTs enhance biosafety, minimize fomite transmission during diagnostic procedures, and contribute to antimicrobial stewardship through real-time environmental monitoring and reporting (Abe et al., 2006).

The role of radiology technologist

Radiology technologists play a vital role in infection prevention by managing high-touch imaging equipment like X-ray machines, CT scanners, and ultrasound probes, which are prone to contamination from patient fluids and frequent handling, contributing to healthcare-associated infections (HAIs). Antimicrobial coatings, such as silver-ion (e.g., Hydro AG™) and copper-based formulations applied to detector surfaces and control panels, suppress bacterial growth by 99% or more, reducing cross-contamination risks during procedures while maintaining equipment functionality and requiring minimal additional maintenance beyond routine wipes. Integrating these self-disinfecting surfaces into radiology workflows aligns with ISO 10993 biocompatibility standards, enabling technologists to focus on precise imaging without compromising patient safety, accelerating equipment wear from aggressive chemical disinfection, or fostering resistance in pathogens like MRSA (Ahn & Kim, 2022).

Conclusion

Emerging antimicrobial coatings and self-disinfecting materials address critical gaps in healthcare-associated infection (HAI) prevention by targeting fomite-mediated transmission and biofilm persistence on high-touch surfaces and medical devices. These technologies, spanning anti-adhesive, contact-active, release-based, and hybrid mechanisms with materials like silver nanoparticles, copper, chitosan, and bio-inspired designs, demonstrate reductions exceeding 99% in bacterial colonization across clinical applications from orthopedics to ICUs. Despite challenges in biocompatibility, durability, regulatory hurdles, and environmental impact, future directions emphasize stimuli-responsive smart coatings, AI-optimized multifunctional formulations, and scalable implementations in low- and middle-income countries to combat antimicrobial resistance and achieve equitable global infection control.

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