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# Polysaccharides: Structure and Solubility

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## Abstract

Understanding the solubility of polysaccharides is extremely important for their food applications as most functions of polysaccharides including stability, emulsifying property, drug delivery, membrane forming properties, etc., are all achieved in aqueous solution. This chapter aims specifically at the mechanism of solubility of polysaccharides from the molecular level. General understandings of the solubility including definition, testing methods, and the solution behaviors were provided; the relationships between polysaccharide solubility and the structural features in terms of molecular weight, degree of branching, charging properties, chain flexibility, and the special groups were all discussed. With all the information provided, the molecular modification and further applications of polysaccharides in both food and nonfood areas could be promoted.

**Keywords:** polysaccharides, structure, solubility, conformation, solution behavior

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## 1. Introduction

Polysaccharides are polymeric carbohydrate molecules composed of long chains of monosaccharide units bound together by glycosidic bonds. Natural occurring polysaccharides exhibit distinct structural features in terms of molecular weight, monosaccharide composition, glycosidic linkage patterns, configuration ( $\alpha$  or  $\beta$ ), charging properties, degree of branching, etc. These diversified structural properties determine the functional properties of polysaccharides, such as solubility and rheological properties, which in turn benefit their extensive applications in both food and nonfood areas. As most polysaccharides perform their function in aqueous solution, understanding the solubility of polysaccharides, therefore, becomes critically important [1]. This chapter specifically addressed the mechanisms of polysaccharide solubility from molecular level. The relationships between polysaccharide solubility and molecular structures were established. It also should be noted that the current chapter only focused on the polysaccharides in aqueous solution; the solubility of polysaccharides in other organic solvents was not covered.

## 2. Solubility of polysaccharides

Polysaccharides display a wide range of solubility; some are water insoluble, e.g., cellulose; some are only hot water soluble, e.g., starch; and some are readily dissolved in cold water, such as pullulan and gum arabic. The dissolution of polysaccharides is different from that of the small crystalline molecules. The dissolution of most crystalline small molecules involved the disintegration of the crystalline structure and release of the separate atoms, ions, polysaccharides dissolution is a continuous hydration process with the conversion of inter-polysaccharide binding to polysaccharide-water binding, and most of the non-starch polysaccharides are in amorphous state. The dissolution process is more or less assisted by entropy as the molecules assume lower-energy conformations.

Polysaccharides have strong affinity to water molecules due to the presence of multi-OH groups. However, this also leads to a strong interaction among polysaccharide molecules via hydrogen bonding. Therefore, the balance between molecule-molecule interaction and molecule-water interaction is the key to understand the polysaccharide solubility. For soluble polysaccharides, the interactions between polysaccharide molecules and water molecules are energetically favorable, and the solvent creates a solvating envelope around the polymer chain, which keeps the polysaccharide molecules away from each other. For polysaccharides with poor water solubility, the intramolecular interactions between polymer segments dominate, leading to aggregation and eventually precipitation or gelation when ordered molecular structure, e.g., junction zone, is formed. In between, under specific conditions, the polymer-polymer interaction can precisely compensate the polymer-water interaction, which referred as *theta* condition. Under *theta* condition, the chain conformation is defined solely by bond angles and short-range interactions given by the hindrances to rotation about bonds and polymer coil dimensions [2].

Second virial coefficient ( $A_2$ ), which describes the contribution of the pair-wise potential to the pressure of the gas, could reflect the polymer-water interaction. Good solvent, poor solvent, and *theta* condition can be indicated when the second virial coefficient is above, below, or equal to zero, respectively. In a real experiment, the second virial coefficient of the polysaccharides in aqueous solution can be determined by static light scattering using Zimm plot (**Figure 1**) based on the Eqs. (1–2) [3]:

$$Kc/R_\theta = 1/M_w + 1/3 \left( R_g^2/M_w \right) q^2 + 2A_2c \quad (1)$$

where  $K$  is an optical contrast factor,  $c$  is the polymer concentration,  $R_\theta$  is the Rayleigh ratio (normalized scattering intensity), and the scattering vector  $q$  is defined as

$$q = 4\pi n_0 \sin(\theta/2)/\lambda_0 \quad (2)$$

with  $n_0$  as the refractive index and  $\lambda_0$  as the wavelength in a vacuum.

For example,  $A_2$  of xyloglucans from flaxseed kernel cell wall was reported as 3.9, 0.9, and  $-0.54 \cdot 10^{-4} \text{ cm}^3 \text{ mol/g}^2$  in 0.5 M NaOH solution,  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ , and 0.1 M  $\text{NaNO}_3$  solution, respectively, indicating xyloglucan prone to dissolve in 0.5 M NaOH than 0.1 M  $\text{NaNO}_3$  [4]. 0.5 M NaOH

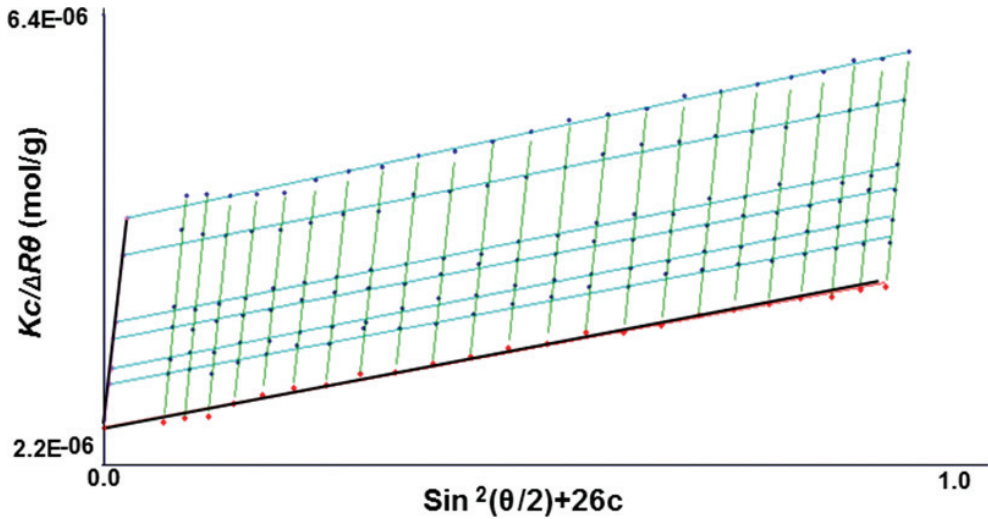


Figure 1. Zimm plot of polysaccharide from seed of *Artemisia sphaerocephala* Krasch determined by SLS (solvent, 0.5 M NaOH; temperature, 25°C). Adopted from Guo et al. [3].

has been reported as a good solvent for several different polysaccharides, such as  $\beta$ -glucan [5], arabino-glucuronoxylan isolated from seeds of *Artemisia sphaerocephala* Krasch [3], and gum ghatti [6]. This is because mild alkaline could break down the intermolecular hydrogen bonding, thus eliminating the aggregates in aqueous solution.

### 3. Structure and solubility relationships

The solubility of polysaccharides is determined by their molecular structures. Any structural feature that hinders the intermolecular association leads to higher solubility, such as branching structure, charged group (carboxylate group, sulfate, or phosphate groups); on the opposite, structural characters that promote the intermolecular association result in a poor solubility, such as linear chain, large molecular weight, and other regular structural characters.

#### 3.1. Molecular weight and molecular weight distribution

Polysaccharides are polydisperse in molecular weight. Therefore the molecular weight of polysaccharides is mostly described in a statistic way, such as number average molecular weight ( $M_n$ ), weight average molecular weight ( $M_w$ ), and zeta average molecular weight ( $M_z$ ), as shown in the below equations (Eqs. (3–5)). Here  $C_i$  refers to the concentration of molecules that having molecular weight of  $M_i$ . The molecular distribution of polysaccharides can be described by the polydispersity index (Eq. (6)). For monodispersed polymers,  $PDI = 1$ , while  $PDI$  less than 1.2 and above 2 are generally regarded as narrow disperse and wide disperse, respectively. Most natural occurring polysaccharides demonstrated high  $PDI$  value (above 2):

$$Mn = \frac{\sum C_i}{\sum C_i/M_i} \quad (3)$$

$$Mw = \frac{\sum M_i C_i}{\sum C_i} \quad (4)$$

$$Mz = \frac{\sum M_i^2 C_i}{\sum M_i C_i} \quad (5)$$

$$PDI = \frac{Mw}{Mn} \quad (6)$$

The molecular weight and molecular weight distribution play a critical role for the solubility of polysaccharides. High molecular weight molecules normally have a large excluded volume (Eq. (7)) that promotes intermolecular interaction of polysaccharide, and suppress its solubility. Almost all carbohydrate polymers with degrees of polymerization (DP) less than 20 are soluble in water [7]. Solubility decreases with the increase of molecular weight. For example, the amylose and amylopectin in starch are reluctant to dissolve in cold water due to high molecular weight, while maltodextrin (starch after chain cleavage by acid or enzyme) with the DP value less than 20 demonstrates very good solubility in cold water. The dissolution rate of polysaccharide samples is also highly affected by the molecular weight and molecular weight distribution. Higher molecular weight usually leads to lower dissolution rate, as disentanglement from the particle surface and subsequent diffusion to the bulk solution of large molecules take a longer time compared to that of small molecules. It has also been reported that samples with high polydispersity dissolved about twice as fast as monodisperse ones of the same Mn [1]:

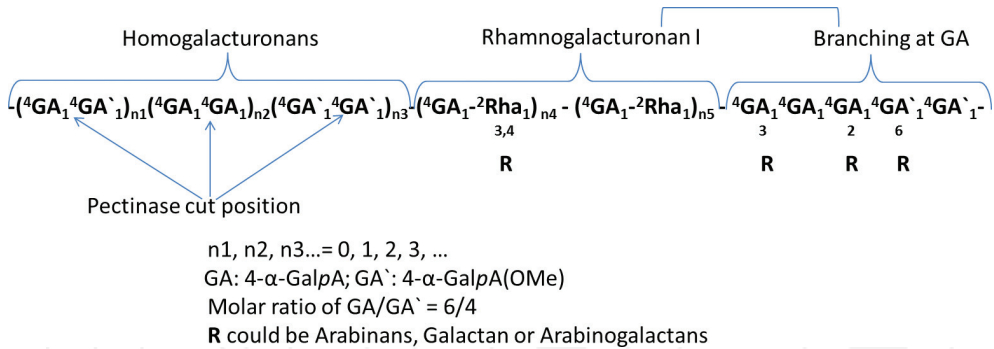
$$V_h = \frac{[\eta]M}{\gamma N_A} \quad (7)$$

where  $V_h$  is the hydrodynamic volume,  $M$  is molar mass,  $N_A$  is Avogadro's number,  $[\eta]$  is intrinsic viscosity, and  $\gamma$  is Simha's parameter related to the shape of a particle.

### 3.2. Charged polysaccharides vs. neutral polysaccharide

Charged polysaccharides are referred to polysaccharides that carry charged groups in the molecules, which include both negatively (acidic polysaccharides) and positively charged polysaccharides. The charged groups help with the solubility of polysaccharides, which is achieved by (1) increasing the molecular affinity to water and (2) preventing the intermolecular association due to the electrostatic effects posed by the charged group.

Acidic polysaccharides are polysaccharides containing carboxyl groups (e.g., pectin) and/or sulfuric ester groups (e.g., carrageenan). As shown in **Figure 2**, pectin is a polysaccharide containing the majority of  $\alpha$ -(1-4)-linked D-galacturonic acid unit in the backbone and a small percentage of branching portion (rhamnogalacturonan I and II). The acidic group may be free (or as a simple salt with sodium, potassium, calcium, or ammonium) or naturally esterified with methanol. Therefore, most of the natural occurring pectin is readily soluble in water due



**Figure 2.** Pectic polysaccharides from American ginseng. Adapted from Guo, et al. [9].

to the charged group, although high in molecular weight. It also should be noticed that adding salt or reducing pH value could shield the charged effect, which leads to gelation under some circumstances. For example, high methyl ester pectin gel at pH 3.4 (rapid set pectin) or 3.2 (slow set pectin) with the presence of sucrose. Low methyl ester pectin can react with calcium ions to form gel, even under relative high pH environment. Therefore, when dissolving the pectin into water, it is essential to avoid the gelling condition; similar to other hydrocolloids, the dissolution usually needs high shearing mixing [8].

Carrageenans are a family of linear sulfated polysaccharides that are extracted from red edible seaweeds with the repeating unit of sulfate esters of 3- $\beta$ -D-GalP and 3,6-anhydro- $\alpha$ -D-GalP. There are three types of commercial carrageenans including  $\kappa$ -carrageenan,  $\lambda$ -carrageenan, and  $\iota$ -carrageenan, which showed different structural features regarding the number and position of sulfate groups in the repeating unit as shown in **Figure 3**. The higher levels of ester sulfate in  $\lambda$  carrageenan (three sulfate groups per repeating unit) contribute to gel inhibition and result in good water solubility. With the decrease of sulfate groups in the repeating unit, carrageenan start to form soft gel ( $\iota$ -carrageenan, two sulfate groups per repeating unit) and rigid gel ( $\kappa$ -carrageenan, one sulfate group per repeating unit).

As one typical positively charged polysaccharide (**Figure 4**), chitosan is derived from the deacetylation of chitin. The positively charged groups come from protonation of its free amino groups, which is the key to its water solubility. Chitosan is insoluble in neutral and basic environments due to the lacking of a positive charge. However, in acidic environments, protonation of the amino groups increases the degree of water solubility. Following this property, chitosan has been widely used for drug delivery, e.g., the transport of insulin [11].

### 3.3. Branching polysaccharides vs. linear polysaccharides

The linear polysaccharides with highly regular conformation that can form crystalline or partial crystalline structures are mostly insoluble in water, while branching structure could increase the solubility for two reasons: (1) the branching structure could weaken the intramolecular interaction due to the steric effects, which prevent the intermolecular association, and

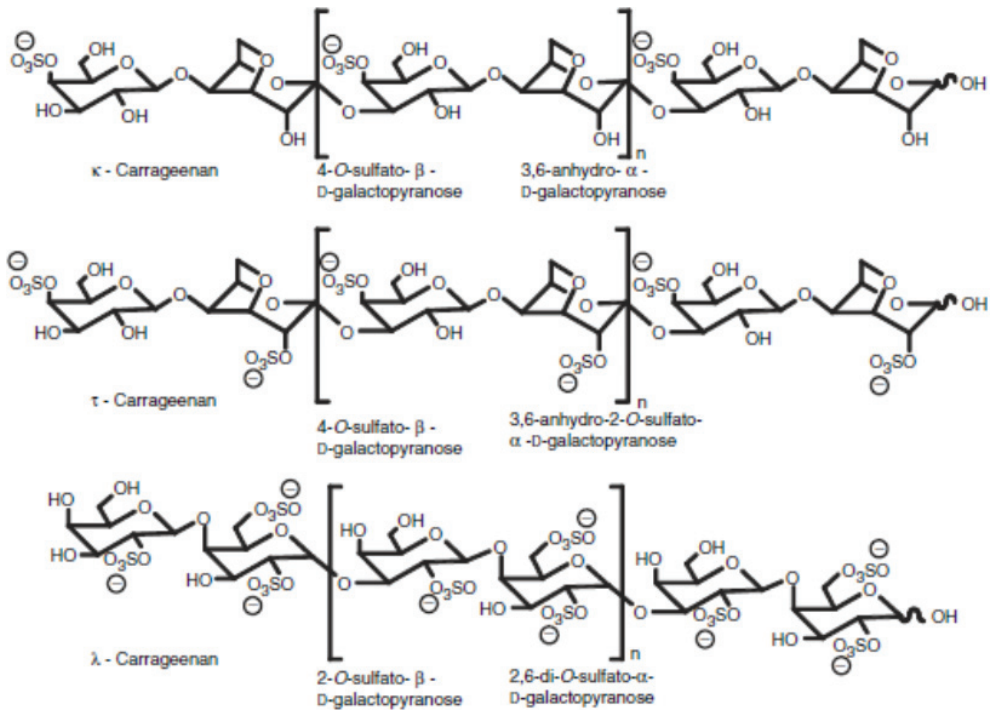


Figure 3. Comparison of structural features of  $\kappa$ -,  $\lambda$ -, and  $\tau$ -carrageenan. Adopted from Cui et al. [10].

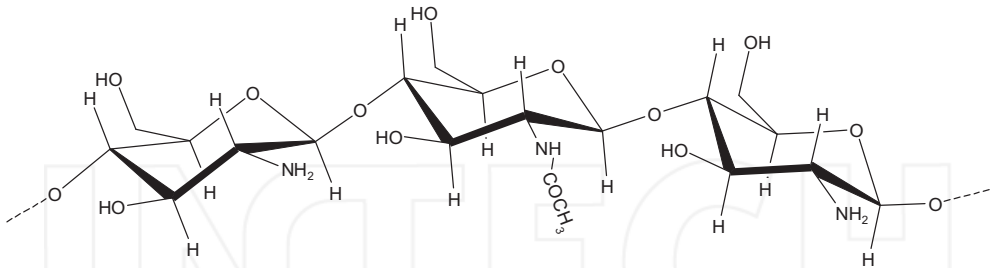


Figure 4. Structural feature of chitosan.

(2) the highly branched structure could also decrease the excluded volume when compared to polysaccharides with same molecular weight, which potentially increases the critical concentration and therefore improves the water solubility.

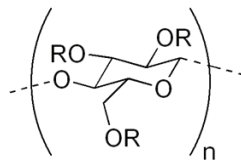
Taking cellulose as an example, cellulose with a regular (1  $\rightarrow$  4)- $\beta$ -D-glucan chain is essentially insoluble in aqueous medium. However, it can be modified by decreasing the Mw and introducing either charged (sodium carboxymethyl cellulose (CMC)) or branching groups (methyl cellulose (MC), hydroxypropyl cellulose (HPC), hydroxypropyl methyl cellulose (HPMC)) to

increase the solubility (**Figure 5**). MC, HPMC, and HPC all can dissolve in cold water and are insoluble in hot water. MC and HPMC form gel when the temperature increases (52°C for MC and 63–80°C for HPMC), while HPC cannot form gel when heating, instead, it precipitates when temperature is above 45°C. Unlike MC and HPMC, CMC is well dissolved in both cold and hot water [12].

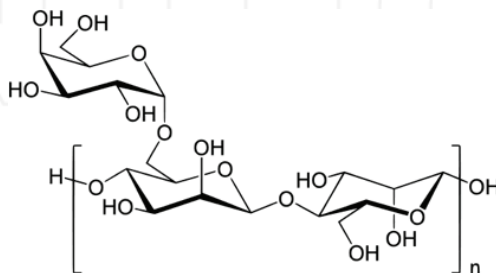
Starch contains both amylose and amylopectin. Amylopectin exhibits better solubility than amylose due to the highly branched structure, although the latter has relative low molecular weight (amylose,  $10^5$ ; amylopectin,  $10^7$ – $10^9$ ). According to the structure and solubility difference, amylose and amylopectin can be separated from each other in starch granules according to the following procedure: firstly, starch granules are completely dispersed in hot water or aqueous dimethyl sulfoxide; amylose then can be precipitated by the addition of butanol (as a crystalline complex due to the linear structure) after cooling. Afterward, amylopectin can be recovered from the supernatant by lyophilization [13].

Guar gum and locust bean gum both belong to the galactomannan family (**Figure 6**), while the degree of branching for guar gum (galactose to mannose 2:1) is higher than locust bean gum (galactose to mannose about 4:1), which could easily prevent strong cohesion of the main backbones of different neighboring molecules, so that no extensive crystalline regions of guar gum can be formed, while locust bean gum is easy to form gel due to the naked region of the molecules, which favors the formation of junction zone [14].

Xylans of all higher plants possess (1–4) linked D-xylP residues as the backbone, substituted by various degrees with sugar units including arabinose, xylose, and glucuronic acid (4-O-methyl). (1–4) linked D-xylP as a linear chain showed the least solubility as it can be regarded as cellulose



**Figure 5.** Schematic chart for cellulose derivatives. R=H or CH<sub>3</sub> for methyl cellulose; R=H or CH<sub>2</sub>COOH for CMC; R=H or CH<sub>3</sub> or CH<sub>2</sub>CH(OH)CH<sub>3</sub> for HPMC; and R=H or CH<sub>2</sub>CH(OH)CH<sub>3</sub> for HPC.

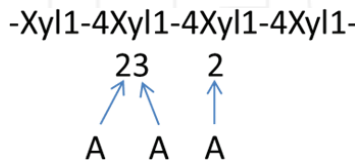


**Figure 6.** Schematic chart for galactomannan structure.

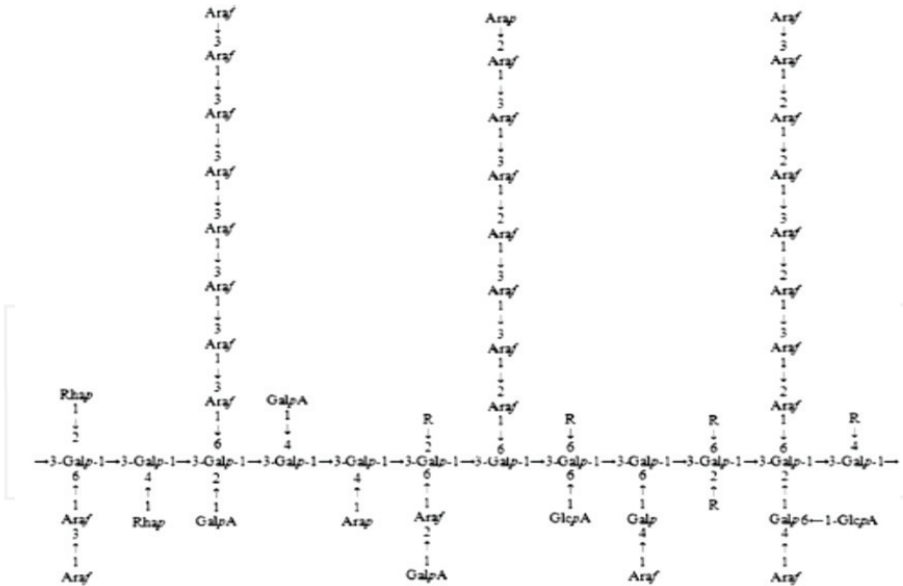


with hydroxymethyl group replaced with H. However, with the increase of degree of substitution such as arabinose (arabinoxylan) (as shown in **Figure 7**), its solubility dramatically increased [15].

Gum arabic has a highly branched structure (**Figure 8**). Although with a relatively high molecular weight, gum arabic showed excellent water solubility (up to 30% at room temperature). It has been reported that even 30% gum arabic solutions have a lower viscosity than 1% xanthan gum and sodium carboxyl methylcellulose at low shear rates. Gum arabic has been commercially used as emulsifiers due to the covalent bond with protein, in which protein functioned as hydrophobic group attached to the oil droplet and keeps the whole emulsion system stable. Similar to gum arabic, gum ghatti (**Figure 9**) also contains highly branched structure and demonstrated excellent water solubility (up to 20%). According to methylation analysis [16], the



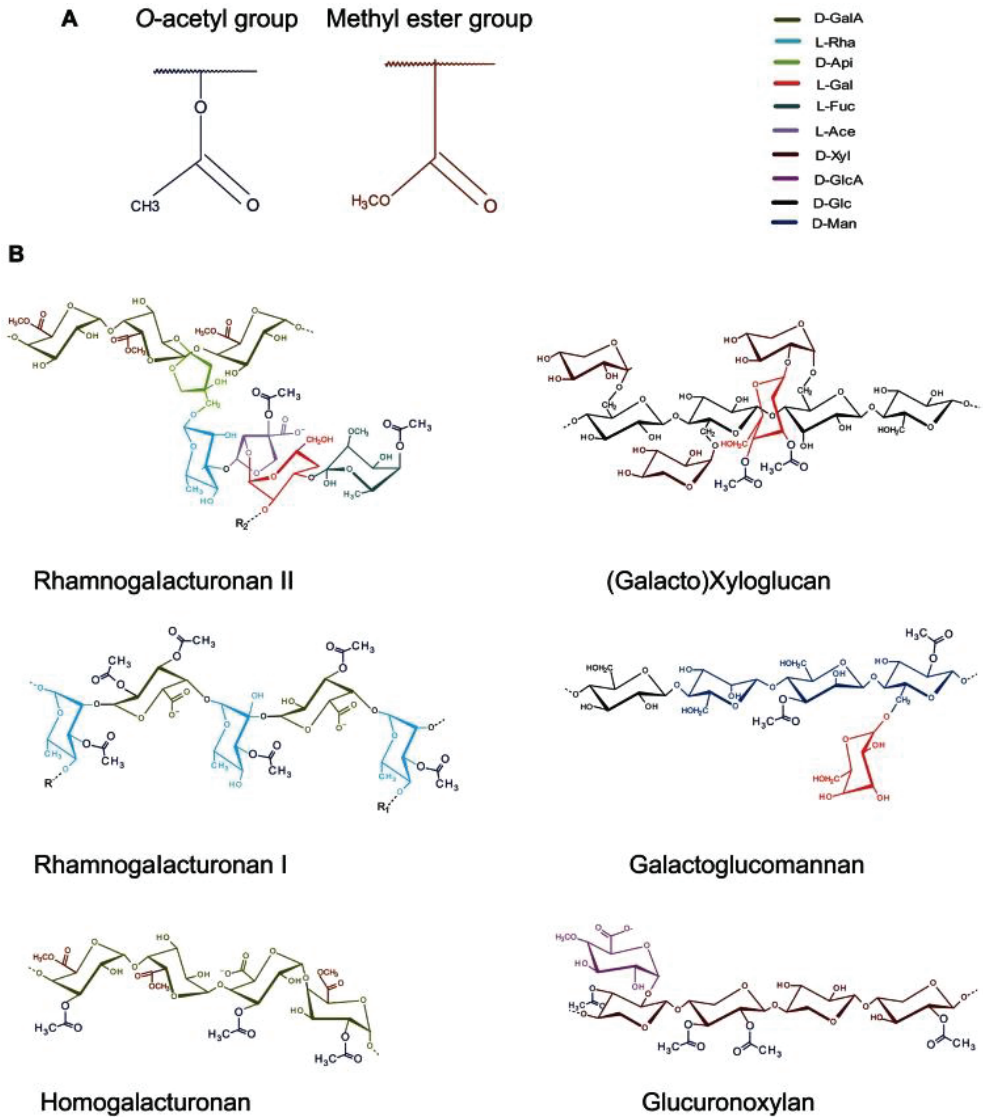
**Figure 7.** Schematic chart of arabinoxylan. A: T-AraP.



R is one of these following residues: T-Rhap1→, T-L-Araf1→, T-L-Arap1→, T-GlcA1→, T-GalpA1→, T-L-Araf1→3-L-Araf1→, T-L-Araf1→2-L-Araf1→. The galactose moieties are in -β-D form, with the galacturonic acid, arabinose and rhamnose in α-L form.

**Figure 8.** Proposed structure of gum arabic (Acacia senegal), adopted from Nie et al. [17].

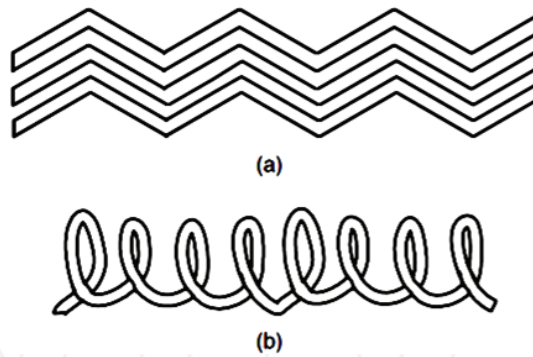




**Figure 10.** *O*-acetylation of cell wall polysaccharides. (A) Generic representation of *O*-acetyl group as found at different -OH positions in many cell wall polysaccharides. Note the structural similarity between *O*-acetyl- and methyl ester groups that decorate carboxylic acid residues in polygalacturonic acid. (B) Occurrence of *O*-acetyl groups in cell wall matrix polysaccharides. Adopted from Pawar et al. (2003) [20].

for polysaccharides can be simply divided—ordered conformation and disordered conformation—which is decided by the regularity of the molecular structure. In aqueous solution, most of non-starch polysaccharides with heterogeneous structure demonstrated disordered





**Figure 13.** Linkage patterns and conformation types of polysaccharides: (a) ribbon-like and (b) hollow helix. Adopted from Cui and Wang [23].

If the values of the torsion angles are fixed by cooperative interactions between residues, such as in solid or gel states, an ordered conformation can be adopted. Two general ordered conformations are ribbon-like and helix conformations (**Figure 13**). Polysaccharide with ribbon-like conformation is most easily aligned and closely packed through numerous hydrogen bonds and van der Waals forces. The resultant compact structures essentially prevent solvent penetration and retain insolubility in water. Polysaccharides such as cellulose, xylan, and mannan, which contained the zig-zag type linkages, all belong to this type. Another ordered conformation is hollow helix conformation, in which the bonds adopt a U-turn form, as in 3- $\beta$ -D-GlcP (curdlan) and 4- $\alpha$ -D-GlcP (amylose from starch). Compared to ribbon-like conformation, the hollow helix conformation showed a relative better solubility, but still not comparable with disordered conformation (random coil), e.g. amylose adopts the helix conformation and is only dissolvable in hot water [23] (**Figure 13**).

Polysaccharides with the same monosaccharides but different linkage patterns (solubility) also showed varied solubility. Compared to cellulose, the solubility of cereal  $\beta$ -glucan is increased with the insertion of 1  $\rightarrow$  3 linkage bond into the 1  $\rightarrow$  4 glycosidic bond. Generally speaking, any structures that contain especially flexible units such as (1  $\rightarrow$  6) linkages lead to easier solubility because of a large favorable entropy of the solution. For example, by introducing single  $\beta$ -D-GalP substituents (1  $\rightarrow$  6) linked to mannan backbone, the resulting galactomannans are fairly soluble in water [24]. Pullulan is another very typical example, which is also known as  $\alpha$ -1,4- and  $\alpha$ -1,6-glucan, and prone to dissolve in water.

#### 4. Discussions

It can be seen that polysaccharides have very complex structural features regarding monosaccharide composition, glycosidic bonds (linkage patterns), the degree of branching,

molecular weight distribution, and the presence of special groups. These structural features highly affected the solubility of polysaccharides, in either positive or negative way. All in all, any structure that hinders the intermolecular association usually leads to a higher solubility, such as branching structure, charged group (carboxylate group, sulfate, or phosphate groups); on the opposite, structural characters that promote the intermolecular association result in the poor solubility, such as linear chain, large molecular weight, and other regular structural characters. It should be noted that these structural features are not isolated but intercorrelated with each other to decide the solubility of any specific polysaccharide. For example, the excellent solubility of gum arabic is not only contributed by its highly branched character but also affected by the charged group as well as the 1–6 linkage bonds. The good solubility of amylopectin is contributed by both highly branched structure and 1 → 6 linkage bonds. Therefore, it is wise to consider the relationships of solubility with overall polysaccharide structure features. Some examples of polysaccharides with different solubility groups have been previously summarized [7], while some modification has been made (**Table 1**).

Understanding the relationships between solubility and structural features of polysaccharides could better facilitate the food and nonfood applications. The solubility of some originally insoluble or poor soluble polysaccharides such as cellulose and starch can be increased through basic structural modification. Take starch for example; starch can be physically or chemically modified to improve water solubility. The physical modification methods involve the treatment of native starch granules under different temperature/moisture combinations, pressure, shear, and irradiation, while chemical modification involved with acid treatment, cross-linking, oxidation, and substitution (esterification and etherification) to either decrease the starch molecular weight, increasing the substitution or increase the charged groups.

Solubility groups	Polysaccharide	Monomer	Special/charged group	Branching situation	Conformation
Poor solubility	Cellulose	4-β-D-GlcP	No	Linear	Ribbon
	Xylan	4-β-D-XlyP	No	Linear	Ribbon
	Mannan	4-β-D-ManP	No	Linear	Ribbon
Intermedia	Cereal β-glucan	4-β-D-GlcP,3-β-D-GlcP	No	Linear	Random coil
	Konjac glucomannan	4-β-D-GlcP,4-β-D-ManP	Acetyl group	Linear	Random coil
	Locus bean gum (galactomannan)	4-β-D-ManP,T-α-D-GalP	No	Less and short branched	Random coil
Good solubility	Gum arabic/gum ghatti	3,4,6-, 3,6- Galp,-Araf, and so on	Glucuronic acid	Highly branched	Spherical
	Pullulan	4-α-D-GlcP,6- α-D-GlcP	No	Branched	Random coil
	Amylopectin	4-α-D-GlcP,6- α-D-GlcP	No	Highly branched	Spherical

**Table 1.** Examples of polysaccharides with different solubility.

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