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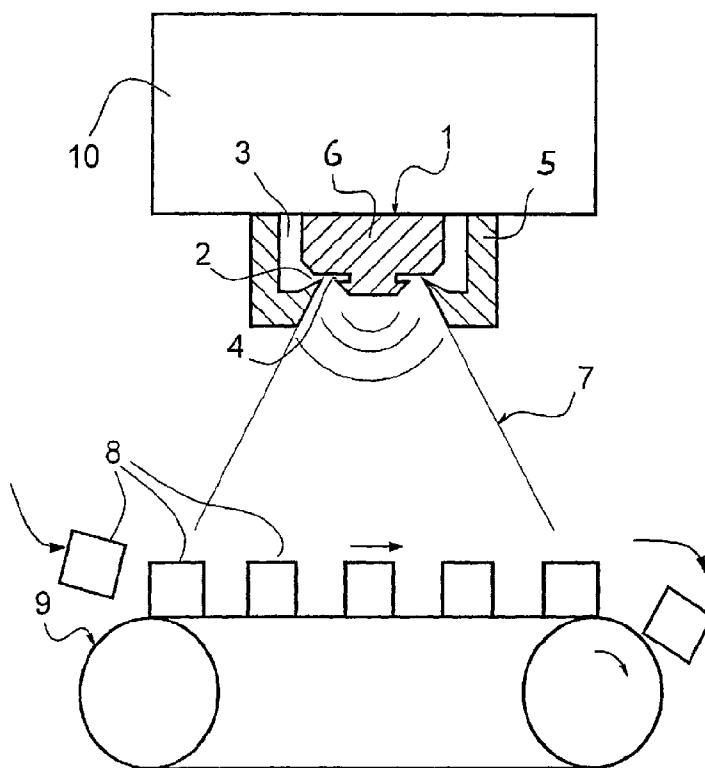
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(54) Title: METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR DISINFECTING A PRODUCT BY SURFACE TREATMENT THEREOF



(57) Abstract: A method and an apparatus in form of a disinfecting apparatus comprising a steam device for combatting germs on the surface of products, in particular of food products. The apparatus employs a combination of steam and ultrasound to kill germs on the surface of a product which is conveyed past the steam device. Pressurized steam is fed through a steam passage to an opening conveying the steam to a cavity, in which the steam is made to oscillate at an ultrasonic frequency. The oscillations in the steam prevent the steam from heating the products excessively, while germs presents on the surface of the products are heated and killed.

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Declaration under Rule 4.17:

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Title: Method and apparatus for disinfecting a product by surface treatment thereof.

Technical Field

- 5 The invention relates to a method for disinfecting a product by surface treatment thereof, steam of a liquid, preferably aqueous steam, and sound, preferably ultrasound, being discharged to the surface of the product.

When processing and subsequent packing food products it is desirable to kill germs,
10 such as spores, micro-organisms and the like present on the surface of the food products and on other firm surfaces. It is known to heat-treat food to kill germs. However such a heat treatment usually causes unwanted changes in the flavour and texture of the treated food and may at worst spoil the food. It is also known to remove impurities from the surface of a product by ultrasonic treatment thereof.

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Background Art

Japanese published specification No JP-0714 3999A discloses a sterilization apparatus, in which the instruments to be sterilized first are exposed to ultrasound and
20 then autoclaved by means of high-pressure steam, and finally irradiated with ultraviolet light. This principle is, however, not suitable for the treatment of food *inter alia* due to the high temperatures used during the autoclave process.

Furthermore EP 0711566A1 discloses a method and an apparatus for degerminating
25 dental instruments. The apparatus employs various principles for combatting germs, eg. treatment with jets of steam, hot air, ultrasound bath, electromagnetic radiation, etc. This apparatus is, however, not suitable for the treatment of food, as too high heat volumes are absorbed by the treated products in many of the proposed methods.

30 It is moreover known to heat the surface of for instances food products by means of steam to kill germs. However, in order to obtain the desired kill effect the outermost

layers of the treated food are damaged as a result of excessive exposure.

It is further known from Russian Patent No. 2000058 to
5 sterilise fluid food products by means of a combination of
steam and ultrasound. The food is fed to a container and a
layer of the fluid food is formed by centrifugal force.
Steam is supplied to the food from the inner surface of the
container. The steam is injected through a plurality of
10 nozzles, whereby ultrasonic oscillations are generated in
the fluid food. During condensation of the steam a
cavitation is formed. The use of this treatment method is
limited for a number of reasons: -it is only suitable for
fluid food products, -a centrifuge is required, and -water
15 is supplied to the food due to the condensation of aqueous
steam. This type of condensation is preferably avoided.

Description of the Invention

The object of the invention is to provide a method for the
20 disinfection of a product and which is suitable for
effectively killing germs on the surface of the product
without inducing too much heat to the product.

The invention provides a method for disinfecting a product
25 by surface treatment thereof, comprising discharging steam
to the surface of the product and simultaneously generating
ultrasound in the steam without inducing cavitation so the
steam is discharged and made to oscillate at a frequency in
the ultrasonic range at such a high acoustic pressure that
30 the migration of the individual molecules exceeds the
dimensions of the bacteria or germs to be killed.

The ultrasound in the steam thus generates such high
particle oscillations and particle velocities that the water
35 molecules are alternately pumped to and fro the surfaces of
the products. As a result:

1. Power is supplied in form of steam;
2. The steam zone around the product is continuously

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removed to prevent condensation and insulation;

3. The natural microstructures in the surface do not prevent steam from reaching all germs.

5 This entails that:

1. The surface of the product is heated to the temperature of the steam considerably faster than if the heat is conducted through the air zone surrounding the product.
- 10 2. Germs hidden in natural pockets and spores are heated without hardly affecting the food per se.

During treatment the temperature inside the product decreases as a function of the depth. This also applies
15 to germs on the surface. In biological products the germs are typically several times smaller than the cell size of the product. This means that the germs reach a core temperature exceeding 70°C at a time, at which the thermal gradient has only penetrated a few micrometers into the
20 surface cells of the product.

When the treatment is subsequently completed, the amount of energy absorbed by the cells of the product distributes itself and results in a general heating of the product.
25 Since the volume of the cells of the product exceeds the volume of germs, the total amount of heat induced during processing is very small and thus harmless to the products. The processing time is comparatively short, preferably only a few seconds i.e., preferably upto 2
30 seconds.

The ultrasound-generating device may for instance be formed of a jet stream and a cavity.

35 Preferably, the ultrasound generating device is in the form of a whistle for generating steam and ultrasound.

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The invention further relates to a disinfection apparatus
for carrying out the method comprising a steam device for
combatting germs on the surface of a solid product,
especially of a solid food product, said steam device
5 having at least one steam passage and an opening.

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The disinfection apparatus is characterised in that a cavity is provided adjacent the opening, which in use is adapted to be supplied with a jet of aqueous steam under a comparatively high pressure through the steam passage, whereby the aqueous steam diffused from the opening is made to oscillate at a frequency determined by the cavity. As a result a particularly advantageous disinfection apparatus is obtained.

The invention also provides a method for heating a product by surface treatment thereof, comprising discharging steam to the surface of the product and simultaneously generating ultrasound in the steam without inducing cavitation so the steam is discharged and made to oscillate at a frequency in the ultrasonic range at such a high acoustic pressure that the migration of the individual molecules exceeds the dimensions of the bacteria or germs to be killed.

The invention still further provides a heating apparatus for carrying out the above method.

Brief Description of the Drawings

The invention is described in greater detail below with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Fig. 1 shows the diffusion of a steam jet from a steam device of a disinfection apparatus according to the invention,

Fig. 2 shows an embodiment of a steam device in form of a disc-shaped disc jet,

Fig. 3 is a sectional view along the diameter of the steam device in Fig. 2,

Fig. 4 shows a steam device shaped as an elongated body,

Fig. 5 shows a steam device of the same type as in Fig. 4 shaped as a closed curve, and

Fig. 6 shows a steam device of the same type as in Fig. 4 shaped as an open curve.

Best Modes for Carrying out the Invention

The disinfection apparatus shown in Fig. 1 for carrying out the method according to the invention comprises a steam device 1 shaped as a disc-shaped so-called disc jet comprising an outer part 5 and an inner part 6, which is displayed in a sectional view in the figure. Pressurized water is passed from a steam chamber 10 through a steam passage 3 defined by the outer part 5 and the inner part 6 to an opening 2, from which the steam is discharged in a jet towards a cavity 4 provided in the inner part 6. The steam may be made from distilled or demineralized water. If the steam pressure is sufficient high oscillations are generated in the steam fed to the cavity 4 at a frequency defined by the dimensions of the cavity 4. By adapting the dimensions of the cavity 4 for instance such that its acoustic natural frequency ranges between 20 kHz and 25 kHz, the steam device 1 generates acoustic oscillations from the opening 2 provided the steam pressure is sufficiently high. A further increase of the steam pressure does not change the frequency significantly, but the acoustic pressure delivered by the steam device 1 is heavily increased. A steam device of the type shown in Fig. 1 is able to generate ultrasonic acoustic pressures of up to 160 dB_{SPL} at a steam pressure of about 4 atmospheres. The steam device 1 may be made from brass, aluminium or stainless steel in a suitable stainless material or in any other sufficiently hard material. The material merely has to withstand the acoustic pressure and temperature to which the steam device is subjected during use. The method of operation is also shown in Fig. 1, in which the diffused steam 7 is made to oscillate by the cavity 4. The diffused oscillating steam is directed towards a subjacent conveyor 9, whereon the products 8, eg. the food products, to be disinfected, are arranged. The products 8 are conveyed at a predetermined velocity corresponding to the desired disinfection degree. The emitted oscillating steam may optionally be used to disinfect seeds.

An optional embodiment of a steam device according to the invention, ie. a so-called disc jet, is shown in Fig. 2. The steam device 1 comprises an annular outer part 5 and a cylindrical inner part 6, in which an annular cavity 4 is recessed. Through an annular steam passage 3 steam may be diffused to the annular opening 2 from which it may be conveyed to the cavity 4. The outer part 5 may be adjustable in relation to the inner

part 6, eg. by providing a thread or another adjusting device (not shown) in the bottom of the outer part 5, which further may comprise fastening means (not shown) for locking the outer part 5 in relation to the inner part 6, when the desired interval therebetween has been obtained. Advantageous dimensions of the steam device shown in Fig. 2 may be an external diameter of the outer part 5 of for instance 80 mm, an internal diameter of the rim of the opening 2 of about 22 mm, a diameter of the tip of the inner part 6, in which the cavity 4 is provided, of about 15 mm, and a cavity 4 having an internal diameter of about 10 mm and a width ranging from 1.5 to 2 mm. Such a steam device generates a frequency of about 19 kHz at a steam pressure of 4 atmospheres. The molecules of the steam are thus able to migrate up to 36 μm about 19,000 times per second at a maximum velocity of 4.5 m/s. These values are merely included to give an idea of the size and proportions of the steam device and by no means limit of the shown embodiment.

Fig. 3 is a sectional view of the steam device 1 in Fig. 2 so as to render the shape of the opening 2, the steam passage 3 and the cavity 4 more clearly. It is further apparent that the opening 2 is annular. The steam passage 3 and the opening 2 are defined by the substantially annular outer part 5 and the cylindrical inner part 6 arranged therein. The steam jet discharged from the opening 2 hits the substantially circumferential cavity 4 formed in the inner part 6, and then exits the steam device 1. As previously mentioned the outer part 5 defines the exterior of the steam passage 3 and is further bevelled at an angle of about 30° along the outer surface of its inner circumference forming the opening of the steam device, wherefrom the steam jet may expand when diffused. Jointly with a corresponding bevelling of about 60° on the inner surface of the inner circumference, the above bevelling forms an acute-angled circumferential edge defining the opening 2 externally. The inner part 6 has a bevelling of about 45° in its outer circumference facing the opening and internally defining the opening 2. The outer part 5 may be adjusted in relation to the inner part 6, whereby the pressure of the steam jet hitting the cavity 4 may be adjusted. The top of the inner part 6, in which the cavity 4 is recessed, is also bevelled at an angle of about 45° to allow the oscillating steam jet to expand at the opening of the steam device.

As an optional embodiment of the steam device of the disinfection apparatus an elongated, rail-shaped body 1 is shown in Fig. 4, said body being functionally equivalent with the embodiments shown in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, respectively. In this embodiment the outer part comprises two separate rail-shaped portions 5a and 5b, which jointly with the rail-shaped inner part 6 form a steam device 1. Two steam passages 3a and 3b are provided between the two portions 5a and 5b of the outer part 5 and the inner part 6. Each of said steam passages has an opening 2a, 2b, respectively, conveying emitted steam from the steam passages 3a and 3b to two cavities 4a, 4b provided in the inner part 6. One advantage of this embodiment is that a rail-shaped body is able to coat a far larger surface area than a circular body. Another advantage of this embodiment is that the steam device may be made of extruded aluminium, whereby the cost of materials is reduced.

The embodiment of the steam device shown in Fig. 4 does not have to be rectilinear. Fig. 5 shows a rail-shaped body 1 shaped as three circular, separate rings. The outer ring defines an outermost outer part 5a, the middle ring defines the inner part 6 and the inner ring defines an innermost outer part 5b. The three parts of the steam device jointly form a cross section as shown in the embodiment in Fig. 4, wherein two cavities 4a and 4b are provided in the inner part, and wherein the space between the outermost outer part 5a and the inner part 6 defines an outer steam passage 3a and an outer opening 2a, respectively, and the space between the inner part 6 and the innermost outer part 5b defines an inner steam passage 4b and an inner opening 2b, respectively. This embodiment of a steam device is able to coat a very large area at a time and thus treat the surface of large products such as food products, eg. whole cheeses, large vegetables or halved carcasses.

As shown in Fig. 6, it is also possible to form a steam device of this type as an open curve. In this embodiment the functional parts correspond to those shown in Fig. 4 and further details appear from this portion of the description for which reason reference is made thereto. A steam device shaped as an open curve is applicable where germs are to be eliminated from the surfaces of unusually shaped products. A

system is envisaged, in which a plurality of steam devices shaped as different open curves are arranged in a disinfection apparatus according to the invention and used in a wide range of different applications.

- 5 In general the disinfection apparatus may be used in connection with steam of a liquid, not necessarily aqueous steam. The disinfection apparatus may for instance be used in connection with alcohol. In the latter case various additives, optionally gaseous additives, may be added to the liquid.
- 10 Even though the disinfection apparatus according to the invention is described above with reference to the disinfection of the surface of food products, the invention is not restricted to this use. Examples of other possible applications of the invention include disinfection of surfaces of issue samples, disinfection of surgical instruments, surface activation of products in connection with chemical process
- 15 technology and pharmaceutical industry or cleaning of food packagings prior to use thereof.

The invention may further be used in abattoirs, in food production in general, in operating theatres, in clean rooms, in biotechnological laboratories and livestock

20 buildings, etc.

The apparatus is not necessarily stationary, but may also be a mobile unit.

In the claims which follow and in the preceding description of the invention, except where the context requires otherwise due to express language or necessary implication, the word "comprise", or variations such as "comprises" or "comprising", is used in an inclusive sense, ie. to specify the presence of the stated features but not to preclude the presence or addition of further features in various embodiments of the invention.

It is to be understood that the prior art publications referred to herein, do not constitute an admission that that the publication forms a part of the common general knowledge in the art, in Australia or in any other country.

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THE CLAIMS DEFINING THE INVENTION ARE AS FOLLOWS:

1. A method for disinfecting a solid product by surface treatment thereof, comprising discharging steam to the surface of the product, characterized in that ultrasound is generated at the same time as the steam is discharged and the steam is made to oscillate at a frequency in the ultrasonic range at such a high acoustic pressure that the migration of the individual molecules exceeds the dimensions of the bacteria or germs to be killed, and that the steam is directed towards and brought into contact with the solid product.
2. The method according to claim 1, characterized in that ultrasound is generated without inducing cavitation.
3. The method according to claim 1, characterised in that the simultaneous ultrasonic generation is provided by conveying steam through an ultrasound generating device causing the steam to oscillate at a frequency in the ultrasonic range.
4. The method according to claim 3, characterised in that the ultrasound generating device is formed of a jet stream and a cavity.
5. The method according to claim 3, characterised in that the ultrasound generating device is formed of a whistle for generating steam and ultrasound.
6. The method according to any one of the preceding claims, characterised by a processing time of up to 2 seconds.
7. The method according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the steam is an aqueous steam.

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8. A disinfection apparatus when used to carry out the method according to any one of claims 1 to 7, comprising a steam device for combatting germs on the surface of a solid product, said steam device having at least one steam passage and an opening, characterised in that a cavity is provided adjacent the opening and in use adapted to be supplied with a jet of aqueous steam under a comparatively high pressure through the steam passage, whereby the aqueous steam discharged from the opening is made to oscillate at an ultrasonic frequency, determined by the cavity, and in that the steam device comprises an outer part, whose inner wall defines the outer wall of the steam passage, and an inner part substantially defining the outer wall of the steam passage and also defining the opening, the cavity being provided adjacent said opening.

9. The disinfection apparatus according to claim 8, characterised in that the cavity is adjustably interspaced from the opening of the steam device.

10. The disinfection apparatus according to claim 8, characterised in that the cavity is arranged adjacent the opening.

11. The disinfection apparatus according to any one of claims 8 to 10, characterised in that the outer part and the inner part are secured in relation to each other and that steam supplied through the steam passage is conveyed towards the cavity substantially in such a manner that the steam is made to oscillate at an ultrasonic frequency determined by the cavity.

12. The disinfection apparatus according to any one of claims 8 to 11, characterised in that in connection with the cavity the steam device is a Hartmann generator, a steam jet or a disc jet.

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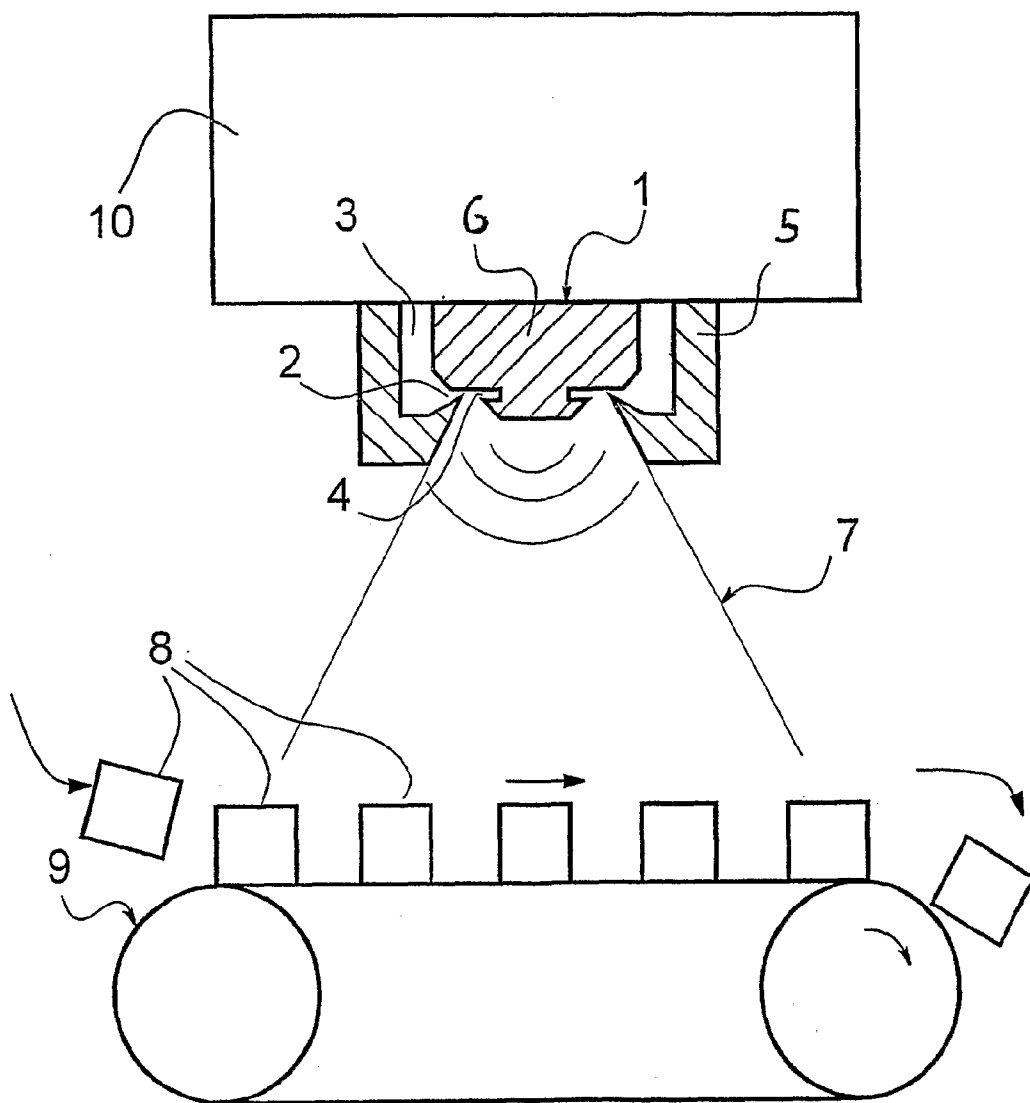
13. The disinfection apparatus according to any one of claims 8 to 12, characterised in that the steam device is shaped as a disc-shaped body.
- 5 14. The disinfection apparatus according to any one of claims 8 to 13, characterised in that the steam device is shaped as a rail-shaped body.
- 10 15. The method for disinfecting a solid product according to any one of claims 1 to 7 and substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to the accompanying figures.
- 15 16. A disinfection apparatus when used to carry out the method according to any one of claims 1 to 7, and substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to the accompanying figures.
- 20 17. A method of disinfecting a product by surface treatments thereof, characterized in that said method uses an apparatus according to any one of claims 8 to 14.

Dated this 12th day of December 2005

FORCE TECHNOLOGY

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*Fig. 1*

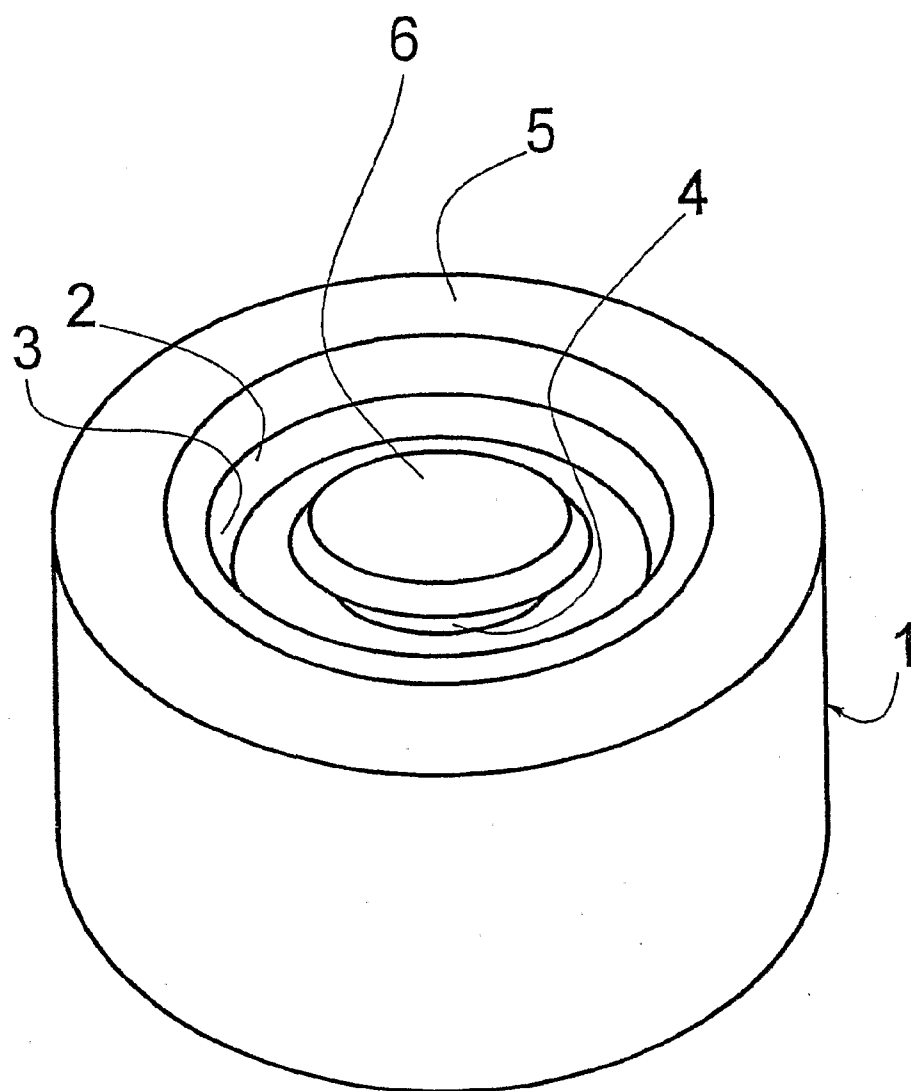


Fig. 2

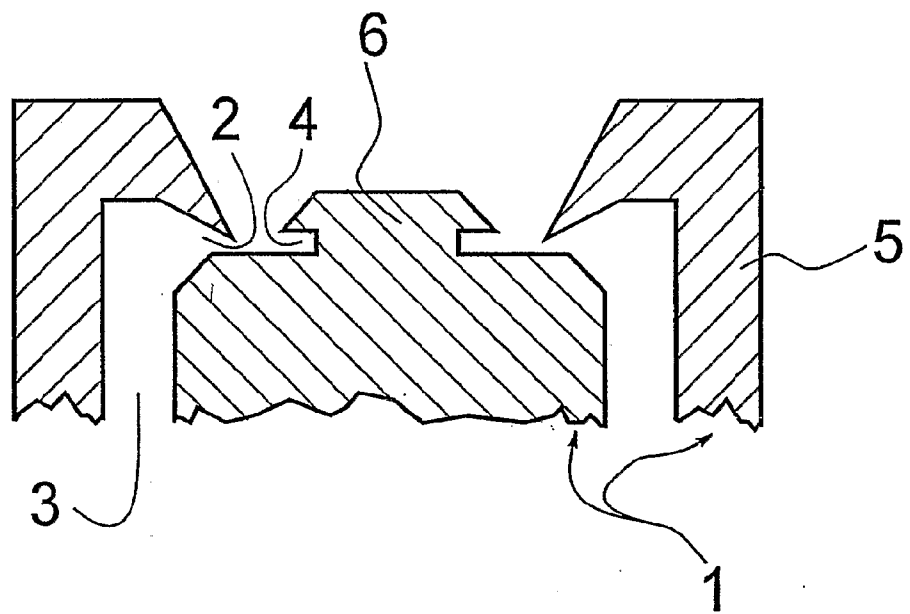


Fig. 3

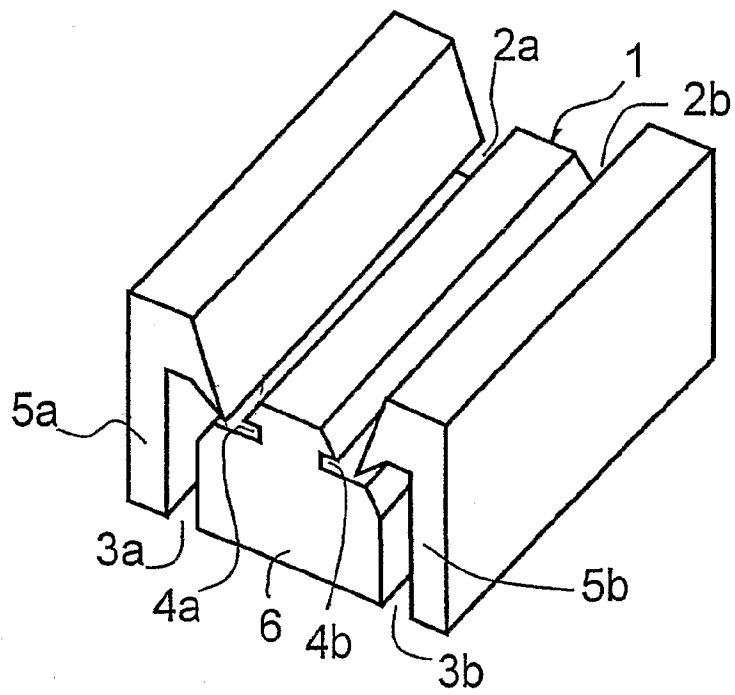


Fig. 4

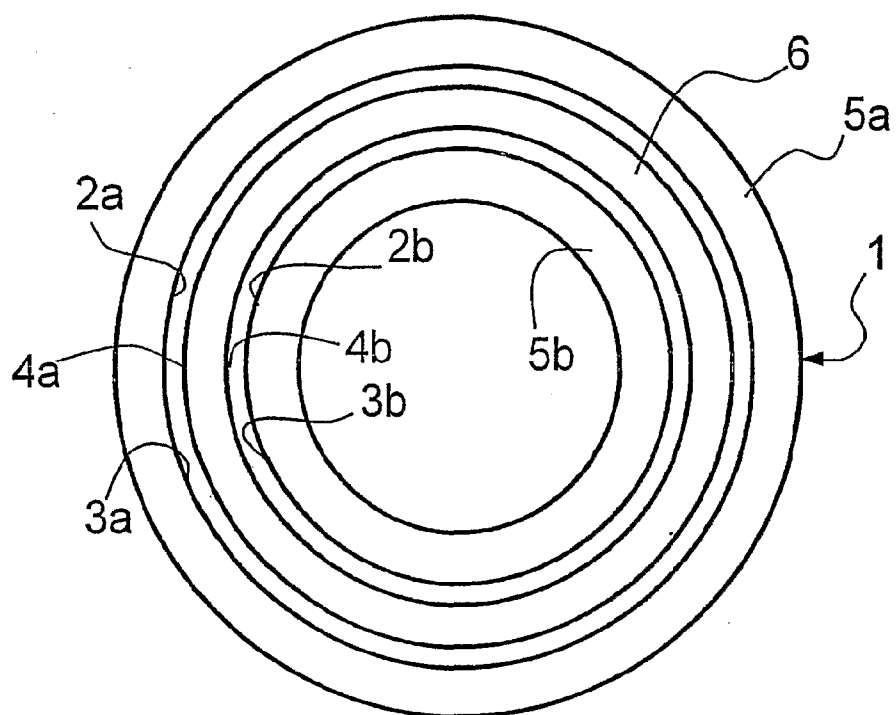


Fig. 5

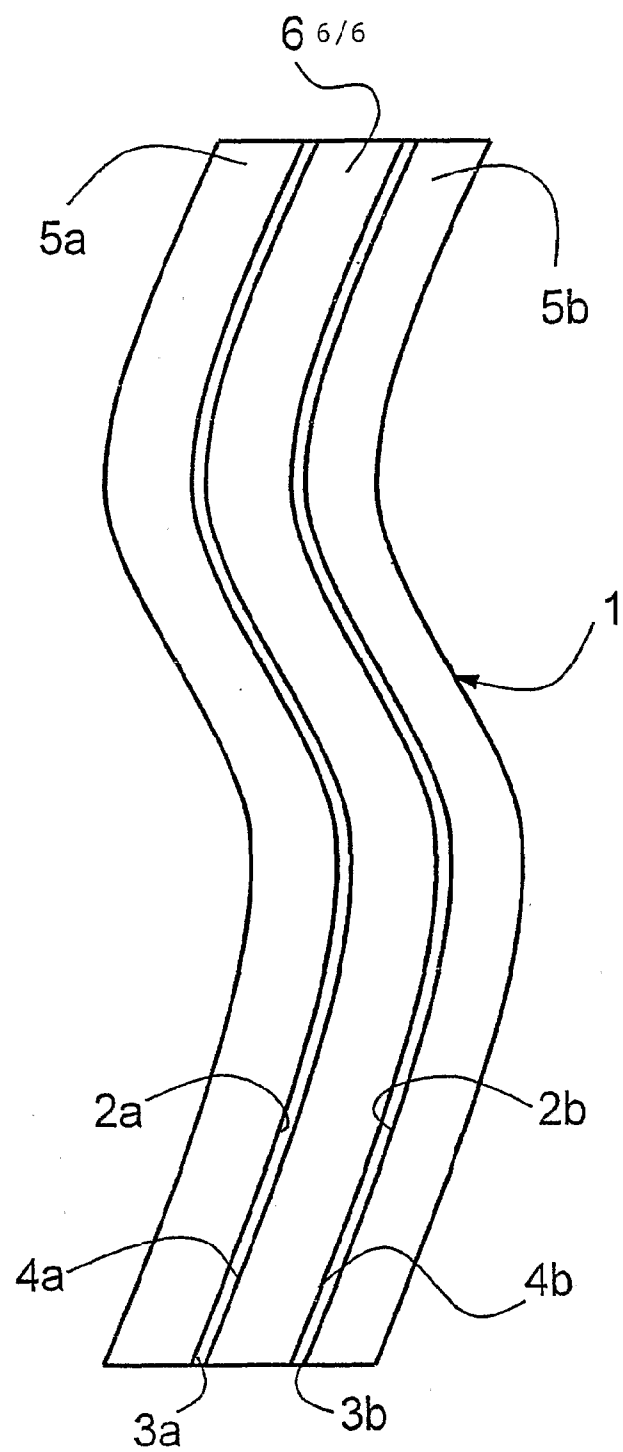


Fig. 6