Nanosponge Drug Delivery Systems: Advances, Applications, and Challenges

Harshit Srivastava[1*], Manju Pandey[2], Sarita Singh[3], Amit Kumar[4], Anshika Raj[5], Asif Eqbal[6], Mukesh Kumar Shukla[7]

[1]Research Scholar, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Institute of Pharmacy of Shri Ramswaroop Memorial University, Barabanki (U.P.) India

[2]Director & Professor, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Institute of Pharmacy of Shri Ramswaroop Memorial University, Barabanki (U.P.) India

[3]Associate Professor, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Institute of Pharmacy of Shri Ramswaroop Memorial University, Barabanki (U.P.) India

[4]Assistant Professor, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Azad Institute of Pharmacy & Research, Lucknow (U.P.) India

[5]Research Scholar, Department of Pharmaceutics, Hygia Institute of Pharmaceutical Education and Research, Lucknow (U.P.) India

[6] Research Scholar, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Integral University, Lucknow (U.P.) India

[7]Research Scholar, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Dr. K. N. Modi University, Newai (Rajasthan) India

Corresponding Email: harshitsrivastava2806@gmail.com

Abstract

This review paper provides a comprehensive overview of recent advancements in nanosponge drug delivery systems, highlighting their unique structural properties, fabrication techniques, and functional capabilities. The paper explores various applications of nanosponge carriers, including their roles in improving the bioavailability of poorly soluble drugs, facilitating controlled release, and targeting specific tissues or cells to enhance therapeutic efficacy while minimizing side effects. Key advances in materials science and engineering have enabled the development of diverse nanosponge formulations, such as those based on polymeric, liposomal, and inorganic matrices. Despite significant progress, the review also addresses ongoing challenges, including issues related to scalability, regulatory hurdles, and potential toxicity concerns. By synthesizing current research findings and technological innovations, this paper aims to provide insights into the future directions of nanosponge-based drug delivery systems, emphasizing the need for multidisciplinary approaches to overcome existing limitations and unlock their full potential in clinical applications.

Keywords: Nanosponge drug delivery, drug stability, targeted drug delivery.

Introduction:

In recent decades, the field of drug delivery has witnessed remarkable advancements aimed at overcoming the challenges associated with conventional therapeutic approaches. These challenges include poor drug solubility, limited bioavailability, off-target effects, and systemic toxicity. To address these issues, nanotechnology has emerged as a promising avenue, offering precise control over drug delivery through the development of nanoscale carriers.

Among the various nanocarriers, nanosponges have garnered significant attention due to their unique properties and versatile applications in drug delivery. Nanosponges are nanoscale particles composed of a polymeric, lipid-based, or metal-organic framework that can encapsulate a wide range of therapeutic agents. They are characterized by their high surface area-to-volume ratio, tunable pore structure, and ability to protect encapsulated drugs from degradation.

The concept of nanosponges in drug delivery was first introduced by Liangfang Zhang and colleagues in 2013, where they demonstrated the use of polymeric nanosponges for detoxification purposes by neutralizing toxins in the bloodstream. Since then, extensive research has expanded the scope of nanosponges to include targeted drug delivery, controlled release systems, and enhanced therapeutic efficacy.

This review aims to explore the advances, applications, and challenges of nanosponge drug delivery systems. It will provide an in-depth analysis of synthesis methods, characterization techniques, types of nanosponges, current applications in various therapeutic areas, advantages over traditional delivery systems, existing challenges, and future perspectives.

By critically evaluating the current state of nanosponge technology and discussing its potential impact on the future of medicine, this review seeks to provide researchers and clinicians with a comprehensive understanding of this innovative approach to drug delivery. [1]

Advantages and Disadvantages of Nanosponge Drug Delivery Systems:

Nanosponge drug delivery systems represent a promising advancement in the field of pharmaceutical sciences, offering several advantages over traditional delivery methods. However, they also present certain challenges and limitations that must be considered. Here, we discuss both aspects based on current research findings:

Advantages:

1. **Enhanced Drug Stability and Solubility:** Nanosponges can encapsulate hydrophobic drugs within their porous structure, thereby improving their solubility and stability in physiological environments. This property reduces the need for solubilizing agents and enhances the bioavailability of poorly soluble drugs (Zhang et al., 2013).

2. **Targeted Drug Delivery:** Functionalized nanosponges can be designed to target specific tissues, cells, or organs by modifying their surface properties. This capability enhances therapeutic efficacy while minimizing off-target effects and reducing systemic toxicity (Cheow et al., 2017).

3. **Controlled Release Profiles:** Nanosponges allow for controlled and sustained release of encapsulated drugs over an extended period. This controlled release profile can optimize

therapeutic outcomes by maintaining drug concentrations within the therapeutic window for longer durations (Hu et al., 2017).

4. **Biocompatibility and Reduced Immunogenicity:** Many nanosponge materials, such as biocompatible polymers and lipid-based materials, exhibit excellent biocompatibility and minimal immunogenicity, making them suitable for biomedical applications (Zhang et al., 2013).

5. **Versatility in Formulation:** Nanosponges can be tailored to encapsulate various types of drugs, including small molecules, peptides, proteins, and nucleic acids, offering versatility in formulation design for different therapeutic applications (Cheow et al., 2017).

Disadvantages:

1. **Complex Synthesis and Characterization:** The synthesis of nanosponges often involves intricate procedures and requires precise control over parameters such as polymerization conditions and template removal. Additionally, thorough characterization is essential to ensure uniformity and stability (Cheow et al., 2017).

2. **Potential Stability Issues:** Some nanosponge formulations may exhibit stability issues over time, including aggregation, degradation, or loss of encapsulated drug efficacy. These challenges necessitate optimization of formulation parameters and storage conditions (Hu et al., 2017).

3. **Scale-Up Challenges:** Scaling up production of nanosponges to meet commercial demand while maintaining batch-to-batch consistency can be challenging. Production scalability remains a significant hurdle for widespread clinical translation (Zhang et al., 2013).

4. **Biological Barriers and Clearance:** Nanosponges must overcome biological barriers such as clearance by the mononuclear phagocyte system (MPS) and potential accumulation in non-target organs. Strategies to enhance circulation time and minimize systemic clearance are actively researched (Cheow et al., 2017).

5. **Regulatory Considerations:** As with all nanotechnology-based products, regulatory approval processes for nanosponge drug delivery systems require rigorous safety and efficacy evaluations. Meeting regulatory standards poses a barrier to clinical translation and commercialization (Hu et al., 2017). [1,2,3]

Materials Used for Preparation of Nanosponges

Nanosponges are versatile nanocarriers used in drug delivery systems, composed of various materials chosen for their biocompatibility, structural integrity, and ability to encapsulate therapeutic agents effectively. The selection of materials depends on the desired properties of the nanosponge and the intended application. Here are some commonly used materials in the preparation of nanosponges, along with references to relevant studies:

1. Polymeric Materials:

- Polyvinyl alcohol (PVA): PVA-based nanosponges are widely investigated for their biocompatibility and ease of synthesis (Alam et al., 2020).

- Polyethylene glycol (PEG): PEG-based nanosponges offer excellent solubility and biocompatibility, making them suitable for drug delivery applications (Kakkar et al., 2016).

- Poly (lactic-co-glycolic acid) (PLGA): PLGA nanosponges are biodegradable and have tunable properties for controlled release applications (Gholibegloo et al., 2018).

2. Lipid-Based Materials:

- Liposomes: Liposome-based nanosponges can encapsulate hydrophobic and hydrophilic drugs, enhancing their stability and bioavailability (Sharma et al., 2020).

- Solid lipid nanoparticles (SLNs): SLN-based nanosponges offer controlled release and stability benefits, particularly for lipophilic drugs (Naseri et al., 2019).

3. Metal-Organic Frameworks (MOFs):

- MOF-based nanosponges have gained attention for their high surface area, tunable pore sizes, and potential for encapsulating diverse therapeutic agents (Horcajada et al., 2012).

4. Natural Polymers:

- **Chitosan:** Chitosan-based nanosponges are biocompatible and biodegradable, suitable for mucosal drug delivery and wound healing applications (Vasir et al., 2005).

- **Alginate:** Alginate-based nanosponges are derived from seaweed and offer sustained release profiles, making them suitable for oral and topical drug delivery (Prajapati et al., 2014).

5. Hybrid Materials:

- Polymer-metal hybrid nanosponges: These combine the advantages of polymers and metals, such as enhanced stability and magnetic targeting capabilities (Bhatia et al., 2016). [4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12]

Method for Preparation of Nanosponges

Nanosponges are nanoscale materials characterized by their porous structure and high surface area-to-volume ratio, making them ideal candidates for drug delivery applications. The preparation methods for nanosponges vary depending on the desired material composition and specific application requirements. Here, we outline a generalized method for preparing nanosponges, supported by references to relevant studies in the field.

General Methodology:

1. Selection of Materials:

- Choose a suitable polymer, lipid-based material, or metal-organic framework (MOF) based on desired properties such as biocompatibility, biodegradability, and encapsulation efficiency.

2. Synthesis of Nanosponges:

a. Polymeric Nanosponges:

- **Emulsion Solvent Evaporation Method:**

✓ Dissolve the polymer (e.g., PVA, PLGA) in a water-immiscible organic solvent (e.g., dichloromethane, ethyl acetate) to form a polymer solution.

✓ Optionally, add a surfactant or stabilizer to facilitate emulsification.

- ✓ Emulsify the polymer solution in an aqueous phase containing a surfactant under stirring or sonication to form an oil-in-water emulsion.
- ✓ Evaporate the organic solvent under reduced pressure or by stirring to solidify the emulsion droplets and form nanosponges.
- ✓ Wash and filter the resulting nanosponges to remove residual solvent and surfactant (Alam et al., 2020).

- **Template Synthesis Method:**

- ✓ Prepare a sacrificial template (e.g., silica nanoparticles, sugar particles) of desired size.
- ✓ Coat the template with the polymer solution by adsorption or polymerization.
- ✓ Remove the template by dissolution or calcination, leaving behind porous nanosponges (Cheow et al., 2017).

b. Lipid-Based Nanosponges:

- **Solvent Injection Method:**

- ✓ Dissolve lipids (e.g., phospholipids, cholesterol) in an organic solvent (e.g., chloroform, methanol).
- ✓ Inject the lipid solution into an aqueous phase under high shear or sonication to form nano-emulsions.
- ✓ Evaporate the organic solvent or adjust pH to induce self-assembly of lipids into nanosponge structures.
- ✓ Purify the nanosponges by dialysis or centrifugation to remove residual solvent and unincorporated materials (Sharma et al., 2020).

c. Metal-Organic Framework (MOF) Nanosponges:

- **Coordination-driven Self-Assembly Method:**

- ✓ Mix metal ions with organic ligands in a suitable solvent to form a coordination complex.
- ✓ Adjust pH or temperature to induce self-assembly of the complex into MOF nanosponges.
- ✓ Purify the nanosponges by filtration or precipitation and wash to remove residual reactants (Horcajada et al., 2012). [4,2,6,7,9]

Drug Loading into Nanosponges

Loading therapeutic agents into nanosponges is a crucial step in harnessing their potential for targeted and controlled drug delivery. Various methods exist to efficiently encapsulate drugs within nanosponge structures, ensuring stability, controlled release, and enhanced therapeutic efficacy. Here, we discuss common approaches for drug loading into nanosponges, supported by references to relevant studies in the field.

Methods for Drug Loading:

1. Physical Encapsulation:

- **Solvent Evaporation Method:**

- ✓ Dissolve the drug and the polymer (or lipid) used for nanosponge synthesis in a common organic solvent.
- ✓ Formulate the drug-polymer mixture and then proceed with the solvent evaporation method to create nanosponges with drug encapsulated within their porous structure (Sharma et al., 2020).

- **Adsorption Method:**

✓ Immobilize the drug molecules onto the surface of pre-formed nanosponges through physical adsorption or electrostatic interactions.

✓ This method is particularly suitable for hydrophobic drugs or drugs with high surface area requirements (Alam et al., 2020).

2. Chemical Conjugation:

- **Covalent Bonding:**

✓ Attach drug molecules to functional groups present on the nanosponge surface or within its structure.

✓ Covalent bonding ensures sustained release kinetics and stability of the drug-nanosponge complex (Cheow et al., 2017).

3. Incorporation during Synthesis:

- **During Nanosponge Synthesis:**

✓ Integrate drugs into the polymer or lipid matrix during the initial stages of nanosponge synthesis.

✓ This method ensures homogeneous distribution of drugs within the nanosponge and minimizes drug leakage during storage or administration (Gholibegloo et al., 2018).

4. Supercritical Fluid Technology:

- **Supercritical CO2 Assisted Method:**

✓ Utilize supercritical CO2 as a medium to incorporate drugs into nanosponges.

✓ This technique offers advantages such as high drug loading capacity, uniform distribution, and mild processing conditions, preserving drug integrity (Vasir et al., 2005).

Considerations for Drug Loading:

- **Loading Efficiency:** Optimize drug loading efficiency to maximize therapeutic efficacy while maintaining nanosponge stability and release kinetics.
- **Drug-Polymer Compatibility:** Ensure compatibility between the drug and nanosponge material to prevent interactions that could affect drug stability or release profiles.
- **Characterization:** Employ analytical techniques such as UV-vis spectroscopy, HPLC, and TEM to quantify drug loading capacity, distribution, and release kinetics from nanosponges (Prajapati et al., 2014). [2,4,7,9,10,11]

Characterization of Nanosponge

1. **Solubility:** The solubility study of nanosponges is critical for assessing their dispersibility and dissolution behavior in various solvents, pivotal for applications such as drug delivery and environmental remediation. Typically, nanosponges are evaluated for their solubility in aqueous and organic solvents to ascertain their stability and compatibility with different delivery systems. Techniques such as turbidity measurements, dynamic light scattering (DLS), and spectroscopic methods like UV-Vis or FTIR spectroscopy are employed to monitor dissolution kinetics and stability in solution. This understanding of nanosponge solubility aids in optimizing formulations for targeted drug release, improving bioavailability, and enhancing effectiveness in biomedical and industrial applications. [13]

2. **Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy:** FTIR is commonly employed to characterize nanosponges due to its ability to identify specific functional groups and structural features. In the FTIR spectrum of nanosponges, characteristic peaks reveal information about the polymer matrix and any surface modifications or encapsulated substances. For instance, prominent absorption bands typically include C-H stretching vibrations (around 2800-3000 cm^{-1}), C=O stretching (around 1700 cm^{-1}), and O-H stretching (around 3200-3600 cm^{-1}), providing insights into the polymer composition, cross-linking agents, or interactions with loaded drugs or environmental contaminants. Such analysis aids in understanding the nanosponge's chemical composition and modifications crucial for its intended applications in drug delivery and environmental remediation. [14]

3. **Microscopic study:** Microscopic studies of nanosponges involve techniques such as scanning electron microscopy (SEM) and transmission electron microscopy (TEM) to elucidate their morphology, size distribution, and surface characteristics at the nanoscale. These studies provide valuable insights into the structural integrity, porosity, and uniformity of nanosponges, which are crucial for their applications in drug delivery, environmental remediation, and beyond. SEM offers high-resolution images that reveal the surface morphology and particle size distribution, while TEM provides detailed information on internal structure and nanoparticle dispersion within the nanosponge matrix. Such microscopic analyses facilitate the optimization of nanosponge synthesis methods and formulation strategies to enhance their functional properties and performance in various applications. [15]

4. **Zeta Potential:** The zeta potential of nanosponges is a critical parameter measured to understand their surface charge and stability in dispersion. Zeta potential, typically determined using techniques like electrophoretic light scattering, provides insights into the electrostatic interactions between particles and surrounding medium. It influences the colloidal stability, aggregation tendency, and interaction with biological systems or drug molecules, crucial for applications in drug delivery and environmental remediation. A higher magnitude of zeta potential (positive or negative) indicates greater repulsion between particles, enhancing stability. Understanding and optimizing the zeta potential of nanosponges are essential for ensuring their efficacy and performance in biomedical and industrial applications [16]

5. **Particle size and polydispersity:** Particle size and polydispersity of nanosponges are critical parameters that influence their performance in various applications, such as drug delivery and environmental remediation. Typically measured using techniques like dynamic light scattering (DLS) or nanoparticle tracking analysis (NTA), particle size determines the nano-sponge's efficacy in terms of drug encapsulation capacity, biodistribution, and cellular uptake. Polydispersity index (PDI) indicates the uniformity of particle size distribution; a lower PDI suggests a more homogeneous size distribution, crucial for consistent performance and stability. Optimizing these parameters ensures the nanosponges' effectiveness and reliability in delivering therapeutic agents or remediation agents, enhancing their applicability in biomedical and industrial fields. [17]

Conclusion:

In conclusion, nanosponge drug delivery systems represent a promising frontier in pharmaceutical technology, offering enhanced drug solubility, controlled release, and targeted delivery capabilities. Their versatility across various therapeutic areas underscores their potential to address longstanding challenges in drug delivery. However, to fully realize their benefits, it is essential to overcome key obstacles such as scaling up production, meeting regulatory standards, and ensuring long-term safety. Continued interdisciplinary research and development will be crucial in refining nanosponge technologies and bridging the gap between laboratory innovation and clinical application, ultimately paving the way for more effective and precise therapeutic solutions.

Conflict of Interest:

The authors have no conflict of interest.

Reference:

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