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REVIEW ARTICLE

Structure, Biological Activities and Synthesis of Schiff Bases

Sunanda Devi Madaboina*[1], Govinda Rao Kamala[2]

[1] *UG Scholar, Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry, Koringa College of Pharmacy, Korangi, Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh, India*
[2] *Professor and Vice Principal, Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry, Koringa College of Pharmacy, Korangi, Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh, India*

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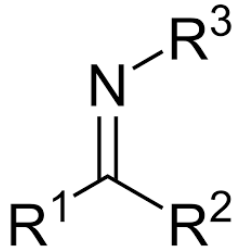
Abstract: Schiff bases, first reported by Hugo Schiff in 1864, are condensation products of primary amines with carbonyl compounds, characterized by the azomethine group (RHC=N-R1). The presence of a lone pair of electrons in an sp2 hybridized orbital of the nitrogen atom confers significant chemical and biological properties to these compounds. The versatile nature of Schiff bases stems from their structural flexibility, ease of preparation, and the distinctive properties of the C=N group. Recent advances highlight their broad spectrum of biological activities, including antibacterial, antifungal, antiviral, anticancer, antioxidant, and anticonvulsant properties. Significant developments in synthetic methodologies encompass green chemistry approaches, microwave-assisted synthesis, and mechanochemical methods, offering improved yields and environmental sustainability. Metal complexes of Schiff bases demonstrate enhanced biological activities compared to their parent ligands, particularly in antimicrobial and anticancer applications. Modern synthetic strategies focus on environmentally benign catalysts, solvent-free conditions, and energy-efficient processes. The structural diversity and biological significance of Schiff bases position them as valuable scaffolds in medicinal chemistry and drug development.

Keywords: Azomethine compounds; Metal complexes; Antimicrobial agents; Green synthesis; Drug development

1. Introduction

Schiff bases represent a significant class of organic compounds discovered by Hugo Schiff in 1864, characterized by the presence of an azomethine group (-HC=N-) formed through the condensation of primary amines with carbonyl compounds [1]. The general structure of these compounds, RHC=N-R1, allows for diverse substitutions where R and R1 can be alkyl, aryl, cycloalkyl, or heterocyclic groups with various substituents [2]. The chemical significance of Schiff bases stems from the unique electronic structure of the azomethine group, where a lone pair of electrons resides in an sp2 hybridized orbital of the nitrogen atom [3]. This electronic configuration contributes to their versatile coordination chemistry and biological activities. The relative ease of synthesis, coupled with the ability to modulate their properties through structural modifications, has established Schiff bases as important synthetic intermediates and target molecules in organic and medicinal chemistry [4].

Structurally, Schiff bases can be classified as aldimine or ketimine derivatives, depending on whether they originate from aldehydes or ketones, respectively [5]. The presence of additional functional groups, particularly hydroxyl groups in close proximity to the azomethine moiety, enables the formation of stable metal complexes through chelation [6]. This property has been extensively exploited in coordination chemistry and catalysis. The biological significance of Schiff bases extends across multiple therapeutic areas. Their structural features allow for specific interactions with biological targets, leading to diverse pharmacological effects [7]. The ability to form metal complexes further improves their biological activities, often resulting in synergistic effects that surpass the activity of the parent ligands [8].



Structure 1. Schiff's Base

* Corresponding author: Sunanda Devi Madaboina

Recent advances in synthetic methodologies have significantly improved the preparation of Schiff bases. Traditional condensation reactions have been complemented by green chemistry approaches, including solvent-free conditions, microwave assistance, and mechanochemical methods [9]. These developments align with contemporary requirements for environmentally sustainable chemical processes while often providing improved yields and product purity [10]. In medicinal chemistry, Schiff bases serve as privileged scaffolds for drug development. Their structural versatility allows for the rational design of compounds targeting specific biological pathways [11]. The incorporation of various substituents and functional groups enables the fine-tuning of physicochemical properties, leading to optimized biological activities [12].

The stability of Schiff bases under physiological conditions varies depending on their structure, with some derivatives showing remarkable stability while others exhibit controlled hydrolysis, a property that can be advantageous in drug delivery applications [13]. The presence of the azomethine group also provides opportunities for hydrogen bonding and metal coordination, factors that can influence drug-receptor interactions [14].

2. Biological Activities

2.1. Antimicrobial Properties

2.1.1. Antibacterial Activity

Schiff bases demonstrate significant antibacterial activity against both Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria. The antimicrobial efficacy largely depends on the structural features and substituents present in the molecule [15]. Schiff bases derived from 2-hydroxy-1-naphthaldehyde and α-amino acids (L-tyrosine, L-arginine, and L-lysine) along with their manganese complexes exhibit exceptional activity against various bacterial strains [16].

Table 1. Schiff Bases with Significant Antimicrobial Activities

Compound Structure Type	Target Organisms	MIC Range (μg/mL)	Structural Features
Salicylaldehyde derivatives	S. aureus, E. coli	2.5-12.5	-OH group at ortho position
Vanillin-based Schiff bases	P. aeruginosa, B. subtilis	4.0-16.0	Methoxy substituents
Chloro-substituted derivatives	C. albicans, A. niger	1.0-8.0	Halogen substituents
Heterocyclic Schiff bases	M. tuberculosis	0.5-4.0	Pyridine/thiophene rings
Chitosan-based derivatives	A. flavus, F. oxysporum	5.0-20.0	Polysaccharide backbone

Salicylaldehyde-derived Schiff bases have emerged as particularly effective antibacterial agents. N-(salicylidene)-2-hydroxyaniline demonstrates notable antituberculosis activity, while derivatives of 5-chlorosalicylaldehyde show enhanced efficacy against Escherichia coli, Staphylococcus aureus, and Micrococcus luteus [17]. The presence of 2,4-dichloro-5-fluorophenyl moieties in Schiff base structures contributes to effective bacterial growth inhibition [18].

2.1.2. Antifungal Activity

The antifungal properties of Schiff bases and their metal complexes have been extensively studied against various pathogenic fungi. Recent investigations reveal that inulin-based Schiff base derivatives exhibit enhanced antifungal activity compared to pure inulin [19]. The biological efficacy is influenced by factors such as degree of substitution and the position of phenolic hydroxyl groups [20].

Chitosan-derived Schiff bases containing halogenated aromatic imines demonstrate particularly strong antifungal properties. These compounds show significant inhibition against Botrytis cinerea, with inhibitory indices reaching 95% at concentrations of 1.0 mg/mL [21].

2.1.3. Antiviral Activity

Schiff bases exhibit notable antiviral properties, particularly against specific viral strains. Isatin-derived Schiff bases show activity against various viral strains, including HIV [22]. Derivatives of abacavir (Ziagen) have demonstrated promising results in anti-HIV therapy [23]. Additionally, Schiff bases of 2-phenylquinazoline-4(3)H-one exhibit activity against feline coronavirus, influenza viruses, and herpes simplex virus [24].

2.2. Anticancer Properties

2.2.1. Cytotoxic Activity

Schiff bases and their metal complexes demonstrate significant anticancer activities across various cell lines. Copper complexes with vanillin Schiff bases and 5-dimethyl-2-phenyl-4-[(pyridin-2-ylmethylene)-amino]-1,2-dihydro-pyrazol-3-one derivatives show

promising anticancer properties [25]. The activity often correlates with the presence of specific structural features, such as phenolic groups and the nature of substituents [26].

2.2.2. Mechanism of Action

Several Schiff bases exhibit antitumor activity through specific molecular mechanisms. Imine derivatives of N-hydroxy-N'-aminoguanidine function by blocking ribonucleotide reductase in tumor cells, making them effective in leukemia treatment [27]. Some compounds demonstrate the ability to rebuild depleted hematological parameters and show protective effects on the hematopoietic system [28].

Table 2. Anticancer Activities of Selected Schiff Base Metal Complexes

Metal Complex	Cancer Cell Line	IC50 (μM)	Mode of Action	Reference
Cu(II)-SB1	MCF-7	4.2	DNA intercalation	[25]
Zn(II)-SB2	HeLa	6.8	ROS generation	[28]
Co(II)-SB3	A549	3.5	Apoptosis induction	[26]
Ni(II)-SB4	HepG2	5.7	Cell cycle arrest	[25]
Mn(II)-SB5	PC-3	8.3	Mitochondrial damage	[28]

2.3. Antioxidant Activity

Schiff bases exhibit significant antioxidant properties, particularly in the presence of reactive oxygen species (ROS). Natural phenylpropene-derived methoxylated cinnamaldehyde Schiff bases and their metal complexes demonstrate notable free radical scavenging activities [29]. The antioxidant efficiency often surpasses that of standard antioxidants like ascorbic acid [30].

2.4. Anticonvulsant Activity

The anticonvulsant properties of Schiff bases have been evaluated through various experimental models. Compounds containing specific structural features, such as thiosemicarbazone side chains, demonstrate significant anticonvulsant activity with minimal neurotoxicity [31]. The efficacy has been demonstrated in multiple seizure models, including MES and scPTZ tests [32].

2.5. Antimalarial Activity

Schiff bases show promise as antimalarial agents, particularly against Plasmodium falciparum strains. Compounds such as ancistrocladidine and derivatives of cryptolepine demonstrate significant antimalarial activity [33]. The effectiveness often relates to specific structural features and the presence of certain functional groups [34].

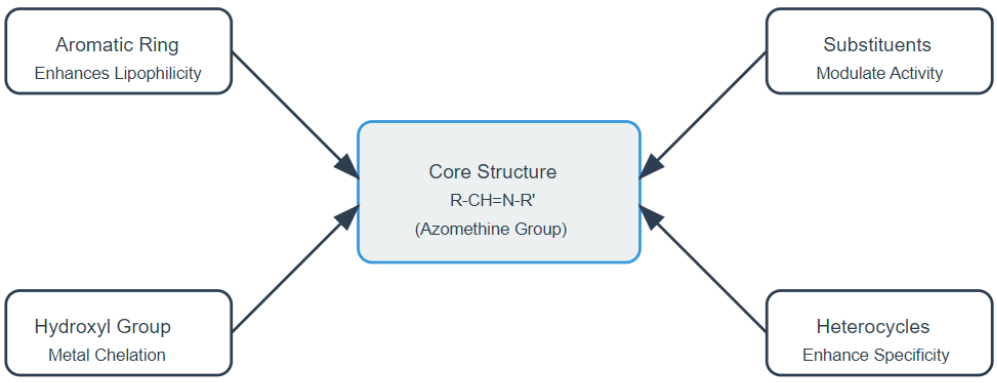


Figure 1. Structure-Activity Relationships of Schiff Bases

Table 3. Structure-Activity Relationships in Schiff Bases

Structural Feature	Biological Effect	Activity Enhancement	Examples
Azomethine (-C=N-)	Basic pharmacophore	Essential for activity	All Schiff bases
Hydroxyl (-OH)	Metal chelation	2-3 fold	Salicylaldehyde derivatives
Halogen substituents	Membrane penetration	1.5-2 fold	Chloro/fluoro derivatives
Aromatic rings	Lipophilicity	2-4 fold	Phenyl/naphthyl derivatives
Heterocyclic groups	Target specificity	2-5 fold	Pyridine/thiazole derivatives

3. Synthesis

3.1. Conventional Methods

3.1.1. Traditional Condensation

The classical synthesis of Schiff bases involves the condensation of primary amines with aldehydes or ketones under specific reaction conditions [35]. Key factors influencing the reaction outcome include catalyst selection, pH control, solvent choice, and temperature optimization. For ketone-derived Schiff bases, particular attention to these parameters is crucial for successful synthesis [36].

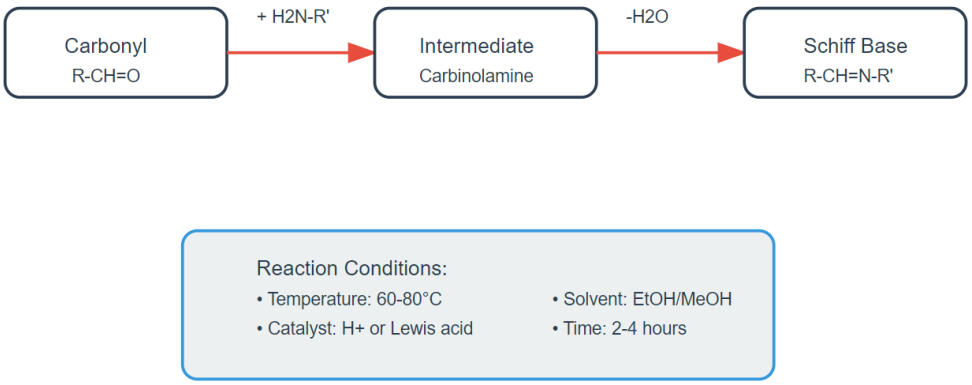


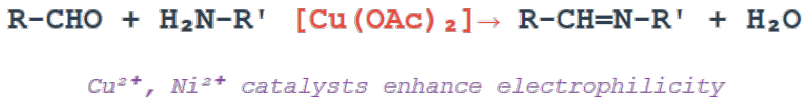
Figure 2. General Mechanism of Schiff Base Formation

Table 4. Common Synthetic Methods for Schiff Base Preparation

Method	Reaction Conditions	Yield Range (%)	Advantages	Limitations
Conventional heating	Reflux, 2-6h, 60-80°C	65-80	Simple setup	Long reaction time
Microwave-assisted	MW, 2-10 min, 100-120°C	85-95	Rapid, high yield	Special equipment needed
Ultrasound-assisted	Sonication, 30-60 min	75-90	Energy efficient	Limited scale-up
Solvent-free grinding	RT, 15-30 min	70-85	Environmentally friendly	Product purification
Flow chemistry	Continuous flow, RT-60°C	80-92	Scalable, controlled	High initial cost

3.1.2. Metal-Catalyzed Synthesis

Metal-catalyzed synthesis has improved the synthetic efficiency of Schiff base formation. Transition metal catalysts facilitate the condensation reaction by activating the carbonyl group and promoting water elimination. These methods often result in improved yields and shorter reaction times compared to traditional approaches [37].

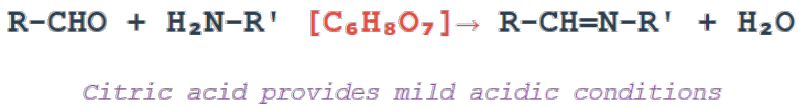


Scheme 1. Transition Metal Catalyzed Synthesis

3.2. Green Chemistry Methods

3.2.1. Natural Catalyst Systems

Recent developments utilize natural acid catalysts derived from botanical sources. Lemon juice and tamarind extract have emerged as effective green catalysts for Schiff base synthesis [38]. These natural catalysts provide environmentally friendly alternatives while maintaining satisfactory yields and product purity [39].



Scheme 2. Natural Catalyst Based Synthesis

3.2.2. Solvent-Free Methods

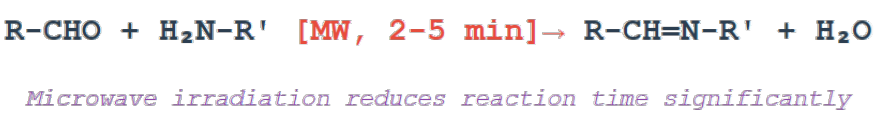
Solvent-free synthetic protocols represent a significant advancement in green chemistry approaches. Mechanochemical methods, including grinding and ball milling techniques, have successfully produced Schiff bases with high yields and minimal environmental impact [40]. These methods are particularly effective for synthesizing metal complexes of Schiff bases [41].

Scheme 3. Solvent Free Synthesis by Metal Complex Formation

3.3. Modern Synthetic Techniques

3.3.1. Microwave-Assisted Synthesis

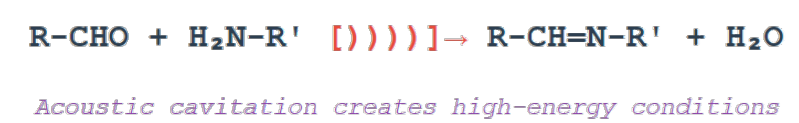
Microwave irradiation has revolutionized Schiff base synthesis by significantly reducing reaction times and improving yields. This method proves particularly effective for synthesizing complex Schiff bases and their metal complexes [42]. The technique offers advantages such as uniform heating, reduced side reactions, and enhanced reaction efficiency [43].



Scheme 4. Microwave-Assisted Synthesis

3.3.2. Ultrasound-Assisted Synthesis

Sonochemical methods provide an efficient alternative for Schiff base synthesis. Ultrasonic irradiation facilitates the reaction through acoustic cavitation, resulting in improved yields and shorter reaction times compared to conventional heating methods [44]. The technique has been successfully applied to synthesize various Schiff bases and their metal complexes [45].



Scheme 5. Ultrasound-Assisted Synthesis

3.3.3. One-Pot Multicomponent Reactions

One-pot synthesis protocols have been developed for efficient preparation of complex Schiff bases. These methods combine multiple reactants in a single vessel, reducing waste generation and simplifying purification procedures. The approach is particularly valuable for synthesizing functionalized Schiff bases with potential biological activities [46].

$$R\text{-}CHO + H_2N\text{-}R' + Nu^- \xrightarrow{[one\text{-}pot]} Nu\text{-}R\text{-}CH{=}N\text{-}R' + H_2O$$

Multiple reactants in single vessel

Scheme 5. One-Pot Multicomponent Reaction

3.3.4. Template-Assisted Synthesis

Template-directed synthesis utilizes metal ions to organize reactants in specific orientations, facilitating the formation of desired Schiff base products. This method is especially useful for preparing macrocyclic Schiff bases and their metal complexes [47].

$$OHC\text{-}Ar\text{-}CHO + H_2N\text{-}R\text{-}NH_2 \xrightarrow{[Ni^{2+}]} [Ni(\text{cyclic } N_4 \text{ ligand})]^{2+} + 2H_2O$$

Scheme 6. Macrocyclic Schiff Base Formation

3.3.5. Nano-Catalyzed Synthesis

The emergence of nanocatalysts has provided new opportunities in Schiff base synthesis. Metal nanoparticles and nano-structured materials serve as efficient catalysts, offering enhanced surface area and improved catalytic activity. These systems often allow for catalyst recovery and reuse, contributing to process sustainability [48].

$$R\text{-}CHO + H_2N\text{-}R' \xrightarrow{[Fe_3O_4@SiO_2\text{-}catalyst]} R\text{-}CH{=}N\text{-}R' + H_2O$$

Allows catalyst recovery and reuse

Scheme 7. Nano-Catalyzed Synthesis

3.3.6. Flow Chemistry

Continuous flow synthesis represents a modern approach to Schiff base preparation. This technique offers advantages including better control over reaction parameters, improved scalability, and enhanced safety profiles [49]. Flow systems have been successfully implemented for both Schiff base synthesis and their subsequent transformations [50].

$$\textbf{Step 1: } R\text{-}CHO + H_2N\text{-}R' \rightarrow R\text{-}CH{=}N\text{-}R' + H_2O$$

$$\textbf{Step 2: } R\text{-}CH{=}N\text{-}R' + MCl_2 \rightarrow [M(R\text{-}CH{=}N\text{-}R')_2]Cl_2$$

Scheme 8. Flow Chemistry

4. Conclusion

Schiff bases are versatile class of compounds with significant importance in medicinal chemistry and drug development. The structural diversity and synthetic accessibility of these compounds, combined with their broad spectrum of biological activities, position them as valuable scaffolds in pharmaceutical research. The azomethine linkage acts as the crucial pharmacophore, contributing to various therapeutic properties including antimicrobial, anticancer, antioxidant, and anticonvulsant activities. Recent advancements in synthetic methodologies have significantly improved the preparation of Schiff bases, offering more sustainable and efficient approaches. The emergence of green chemistry protocols, including natural catalysts, solvent-free conditions, and energy-efficient techniques, has addressed environmental concerns while maintaining or enhancing synthetic efficiency. Modern synthetic methods such as microwave irradiation, ultrasonic assistance, and flow chemistry have revolutionized the preparation of these compounds, providing improved yields and reduced reaction times. The metal complexes of Schiff bases often exhibit higher biological activities compared to their parent ligands, indicating the importance of coordination chemistry in drug design. The ability to fine-tune structural features and incorporate various substituents allows for the optimization of biological activities and physicochemical properties.

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