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REVIEW ARTICLE

A Review on Advances in 3D Printing Technology for Personalized Drug Delivery Systems

Lakshmi Prasanna Mortha*[1], Rawoof Mohammad[2], Raju VBVSN[2]

[1] *Professor, Department of Pharmaceutics, VJ's College of Pharmacy, Diwancheruvu, Rajahmundry, Andhra Pradesh, India*
[2] *UG Scholar, Department of Pharmacy, VJ's College of Pharmacy, Diwancheruvu, Rajahmundry, Andhra Pradesh, India*

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Abstract: Three-dimensional (3D) printing is a revolutionary technology in pharmaceutical manufacturing, offering numberous possibilities for creating customized drug delivery systems. The layer-by-layer fabrication helps in precise control over drug product design, dosage forms, and release kinetics. Multiple printing technologies, including Fused Deposition Modeling (FDM), Stereolithography (SLA), Selective Laser Sintering (SLS), and various extrusion-based methods, have demonstrated success in producing pharmaceutical formulations. These methods allow the incorporation of active pharmaceutical ingredients into diverse materials such as thermoplastic polymers, photocurable resins, and biocompatible hydrogels. The ability to create complex geometries and internal structures facilitates the development of sophisticated drug delivery systems with tailored release profiles. The technology shows particular promise in to overcome the challenges in pediatric and geriatric medicine through personalized dosage forms. Additionally, bioprinting applications extend to tissue engineering and regenerative medicine, enabling the fabrication of drug-loaded scaffolds and implants. While 3D printing offers numerous advantages in pharmaceutical manufacturing, several challenges remain, including regulatory compliance, scalability limitations, and material constraints. Ongoing research focuses on expanding the range of printable pharmaceutical materials, optimizing printing parameters, and establishing quality control standards. The combination of artificial intelligence and automation in 3D printing processes may further increase the precision and efficiency of drug product manufacturing. It holds immense potential to revolutionize pharmaceutical manufacturing and advance personalized medicine as the 3D printing continues to mature.

Keywords: 3D Printing; Pharmaceutical Manufacturing; Drug Delivery Systems; Personalized Medicine; Bioprinting.

1. Introduction

The pharmaceutical industry is experiencing a significant transformation with the integration of three-dimensional (3D) printing technologies. This manufacturing approach, initially developed for industrial applications, has found remarkable applications in drug development and delivery systems [1]. The shift from traditional mass production methods to additive manufacturing represents a pivotal advancement in creating patient-specific pharmaceutical formulations [2]. 3D printing in pharmaceuticals operates through the precise deposition of materials in sequential layers, guided by computer-aided design (CAD) software. This technology enables the creation of complex three-dimensional structures with exact specifications, offering unprecedented control over drug product characteristics [3]. The ability to modify crucial parameters such as geometry, size, and internal structure allows pharmaceutical scientists to optimize drug release kinetics and bioavailability [4]. The evolution of pharmaceutical 3D printing has led to diverse applications, from simple oral dosage forms to intricate drug-device combinations. Modern printing technologies facilitate the production of multi-drug combinations, sustained-release formulations, and targeted delivery systems [5]. The technology has shown particular value in developing medications for specific patient populations, such as pediatric formulations with child-friendly shapes and sizes [6]. The journey of 3D printing in pharmaceuticals began with basic proof-of-concept studies in the early 2000s, progressing to the first FDA-approved 3D-printed medication, Spritam®, in 2015 [7]. This milestone demonstrated the commercial viability of 3D-printed pharmaceuticals and opened new avenues for drug development [8]. Current applications extend beyond oral dosage forms to include transdermal delivery systems, implants, and tissue engineering constructs [9].

3D printing offers several advantages over conventional pharmaceutical manufacturing methods. This technology enables:

1. The ability to produce small batches of customized medications addresses individual patient needs, considering factors such as age, weight, and genetic variations [10]. This flexibility extends to creating unique dosage forms with specific release profiles and drug combinations [11].

* Corresponding author: Lakshmi Prasanna Mortha

2. The technology reduces material waste and eliminates the need for expensive tooling and molds, making it particularly valuable for developing orphan drugs and clinical trial materials [12]. The rapid prototyping capability accelerates the drug development process and reduces time-to-market [13].
3. 3D printing enables the creation of intricate internal structures and geometries that are difficult or impossible to achieve through traditional manufacturing methods [14]. This capability allows for precise control over drug release patterns and enhanced therapeutic efficacy [15].
4. The usage of 3D printing in pharmaceutical manufacturing has broader implications for healthcare delivery. The technology supports the trend toward personalized medicine by enabling point-of-care manufacturing of medications [16]. This technology can potentially improve patient compliance through customized dosage forms and reduce healthcare costs by minimizing waste and optimizing drug utilization [17]

The aim of this review is to discuss about the various aspects of 3D printing in pharmaceutical manufacturing.

2. 3D Printing in Pharmaceutical Manufacturing

2.1. Powder-Based Printing

Powder-based 3D printing methodologies represent fundamental approaches in pharmaceutical manufacturing. The process involves the selective binding or sintering of powder particles to create solid drug formulations [18]. Two primary techniques dominate this category:

2.1.1. Selective Laser Sintering (SLS)

SLS utilizes a high-powered laser to selectively fuse powder particles, creating solid structures layer by layer. The process maintains precise thermal control, making it suitable for thermolabile drugs [19]. The technique allows for the creation of porous structures, beneficial for controlled release formulations. Temperature-sensitive materials require careful parameter optimization to prevent drug degradation during the sintering process [20].

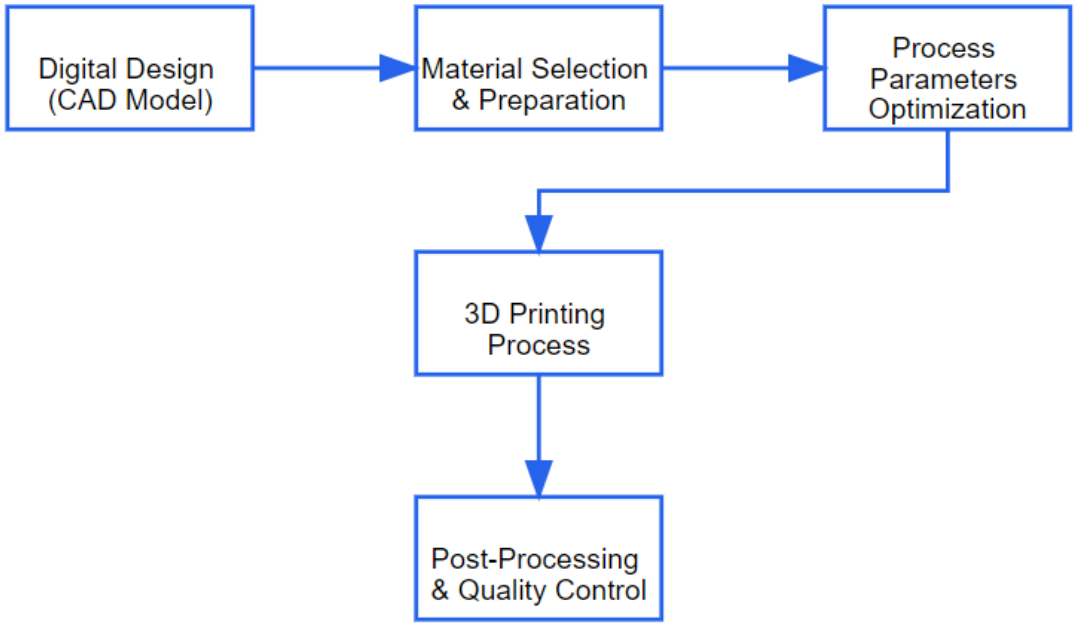

Figure 1. Overview of 3D Printing Process

2.1.2. Binder Jet Printing

This technique employs liquid binding agents selectively deposited onto powder beds. The binder can incorporate active pharmaceutical ingredients or function purely as an adhesive [21]. The process occurs at room temperature, preserving drug stability and enabling the incorporation of temperature-sensitive compounds. The resulting products often require post-processing steps to enhance mechanical strength and modify drug release characteristics [22].

2.2. Photopolymerization-Based Printing

2.2.1. Stereolithography (SLA)

SLA technology utilizes photocurable resins that solidify upon exposure to specific wavelengths of light. The process offers exceptional resolution and surface quality, crucial for certain pharmaceutical applications [23]. Drug incorporation methods include direct mixing with photopolymerizable resins or post-printing loading. The technology presents unique opportunities for creating complex internal geometries and controlled-release systems [24].

2.2.2. Digital Light Processing (DLP)

DLP shares similarities with SLA but uses digital light projection to cure entire layers simultaneously. This approach offers faster production speeds while maintaining high resolution. The technology shows promise in creating matrix-type drug delivery systems and medical devices [25].

2.3. Extrusion-Based Technologies

2.3.1. Fused Deposition Modeling (FDM)

FDM involves the extrusion of thermoplastic filaments containing active pharmaceutical ingredients. The process requires careful consideration of processing temperatures to maintain drug stability [26]. Recent advances include the development of new pharmaceutical-grade polymers and modified extrusion techniques to enhance drug loading capacity [27].

2.3.2. Pressure-Assisted Microsyringe (PAM)

PAM technology enables the precise deposition of semi-solid materials through controlled pressure systems. The technique proves particularly valuable for printing hydrogels and bioactive materials [28]. The versatility of PAM allows for the incorporation of multiple drugs and creation of complex release profiles [29].

Table 1. Common 3D Printing Technologies in Pharmaceutical Manufacturing

Technology	Advantages	Limitations	Applications
Fused Deposition Modeling (FDM)	- Low cost equipment - Wide range of polymers - Simple operation	- High processing temperature - Limited drug loading - Thermal degradation risk	- Oral tablets - Modified release systems
Stereolithography (SLA)	- High resolution - Complex geometries - Room temperature processing	- Limited material choice - Expensive equipment - Post-curing required	- Hydrogel devices - Implants
Selective Laser Sintering (SLS)	- No support structures needed - High mechanical strength - Multiple materials possible	- High equipment cost - Powder handling challenges - Complex process control	- Orally disintegrating tablets - Porous structures
Binder Jetting	- Room temperature process - Fast production - Multiple color possibility	- Low mechanical strength - Post-processing needed - Material wastage	- Immediate release tablets - Multi-drug products

3. Materials in Pharmaceutical 3D Printing

3.1. Polymeric Materials

3.1.1. Thermoplastic Polymers

The selection of thermoplastic polymers plays a crucial role in FDM-based pharmaceutical printing. Commonly used polymers include polyvinyl alcohol (PVA), polylactic acid (PLA), and polyvinylpyrrolidone (PVP) [30]. These materials offer varying degrees of drug loading capacity and release characteristics. PVA demonstrates excellent water solubility and biocompatibility, making it suitable for immediate-release formulations [31]. PLA provides sustained release properties and biodegradability, beneficial for long-term drug delivery applications [32].

Table 2. Commonly Used Polymers in Pharmaceutical 3D Printing

Polymer Type	Examples	Properties	Printing Temperature (°C)	Drug Delivery Applications
Polyesters	PLA, PCL, PLGA	Biodegradable, Sustained release	180-220	Implants, Long-acting formulations
Cellulose derivatives	HPMC, EC, HPC	Hydrophilic, Controlled release	170-200	Modified release tablets
Polyvinyl-based	PVA, PVP	Water-soluble, Immediate release	160-180	Fast-dissolving formulations
Methacrylates	Eudragit® varieties	pH-dependent release	160-190	Enteric-coated products
Natural polymers	Chitosan, Alginate	Biocompatible, Biodegradable	80-120*	Hydrogel systems

*When used in hydrogel formulations

3.1.2. Photocurable Polymers

Photopolymerizable resins used in SLA printing require specific characteristics including biocompatibility and appropriate viscosity. Common materials include polyethylene glycol diacrylate (PEGDA) and polyethylene glycol dimethacrylate (PEGDMA) [33]. These materials undergo rapid crosslinking upon light exposure, forming stable networks capable of drug encapsulation and controlled release [34].

3.2. Natural and Synthetic Hydrogels

Hydrogels serve as versatile materials in pharmaceutical 3D printing, offering unique advantages in drug delivery applications. Natural hydrogels like alginate, chitosan, and gelatin provide excellent biocompatibility and biodegradability [35]. Synthetic hydrogels, including poly(acrylic acid) derivatives and poly(N-isopropylacrylamide), offer tunable properties and stimuli-responsive behavior [36].

3.3. Pharmaceutical Excipients and Active Ingredients

3.3.1. Matrix Forming agents

Matrix forming agents serve as the structural backbone in 3D printed pharmaceutical formulations, providing essential mechanical properties and drug delivery functionality. Cellulose derivatives, such as hydroxypropyl methylcellulose (HPMC), methylcellulose, and ethylcellulose, offer versatile properties including biocompatibility and controlled release characteristics. Polyethylene oxide (PEO) demonstrates excellent thermoplastic behavior and enables fine-tuned drug release through molecular weight variation. Carbomers, cross-linked polyacrylic acid polymers, provide superior mucoadhesive properties and pH-responsive behavior [37]. The selection process for matrix formers requires careful consideration of multiple factors. Printability aspects include melt viscosity, thermal stability, and solidification behavior. Drug release kinetics can be modulated through matrix hydrophilicity, erosion rate, and swelling properties. Long-term stability considerations encompass chemical compatibility with active ingredients, moisture sensitivity, and storage conditions. The interaction between matrix formers and other formulation components significantly impacts the final product performance [38]

3.3.2. Drug Loading

Drug incorporation into 3D printed pharmaceuticals employs various methodologies, each with distinct advantages and limitations. Direct blending represents the most straightforward approach, where active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) are physically mixed with polymer matrices prior to printing. This method enables uniform drug distribution but requires consideration of thermal stability, especially in hot-melt extrusion-based printing. Process parameters such as mixing time, temperature, and shear forces must be optimized to prevent drug degradation [39]. Post-loading techniques offer alternative strategies for drug incorporation. Impregnation methods involve soaking printed structures in drug solutions, allowing API absorption into the matrix. Surface modification approaches utilize coating or chemical conjugation to attach drugs to printed scaffolds. These techniques prove particularly valuable for thermolabile drugs or when precise spatial drug distribution is desired. The selection of loading method significantly influences several critical quality attributes. Drug distribution uniformity affects dose consistency and therapeutic efficacy. Stability considerations include chemical degradation, polymorphic transformations, and environmental factors. Release characteristics can be tailored through loading method selection, with factors such as drug-polymer interactions, matrix porosity, and surface properties playing crucial roles. Integration of these considerations enables development of optimized drug delivery systems [40].

4. Applications in Drug Delivery

4.1. Oral Drug Delivery Systems

Pharmaceutical 3D printing has revolutionized the development of oral dosage forms, offering unprecedented control over tablet design and drug release characteristics. Complex tablet geometries, including internal channels, compartments, and variable density regions, enable precise manipulation of drug release profiles. These sophisticated designs facilitate targeted release in specific gastrointestinal regions and controlled release rates over extended periods [41]. Multi-layered tablets represent a significant advancement in addressing polypharmacy challenges, particularly beneficial for patients requiring multiple medications. These formulations can incorporate different active ingredients in distinct layers, each with optimized release characteristics. This approach not only simplifies medication regimens but also prevents drug-drug interactions through physical separation. The technology enables precise control over layer thickness, composition, and interface properties, resulting in predictable and programmable release sequences [42]. Orally disintegrating formulations have particularly benefited from 3D printing capabilities. The technology allows precise control over critical parameters such as porosity, surface area, and pore interconnectivity. These characteristics directly influence disintegration time, drug dissolution rate, and bioavailability. Advanced printing techniques enable the creation of complex internal structures that promote rapid water uptake and subsequent disintegration while maintaining adequate mechanical strength for handling and storage. The ability to fine-tune these parameters helps optimize the balance between rapid disintegration and structural integrity [43].

4.2. Implantable Drug Delivery Devices

3D printing technology has transformed the implantable drug delivery devices by enabling the fabrication of patient-specific implants with sophisticated drug delivery capabilities. These devices can be designed to match specific anatomical requirements while incorporating features for controlled drug release. The technology allows precise control over implant architecture, including porosity, surface texture, and internal channels, which directly influence drug release kinetics and tissue integration. Local delivery of therapeutic agents at specific anatomical sites minimizes systemic exposure and enhances therapeutic efficacy [44]. The development of biodegradable implants represents another significant advancement in this field. 3D printing enables the fabrication of devices with predetermined degradation rates synchronized with drug release profiles. This synchronization ensures optimal therapeutic outcomes while eliminating the need for implant removal. Material selection and processing parameters can be adjusted to achieve desired degradation kinetics, mechanical properties, and drug release characteristics. The technology allows for the creation of gradient structures with varying degradation rates in different regions, enabling sequential drug release and tissue regeneration [45].

4.3. Transdermal Drug Delivery Systems

Innovation in transdermal delivery systems has been accelerated by 3D printing technology, particularly in the development of microneedle arrays and patches. These advanced delivery systems offer numerous advantages, including painless administration, controlled drug release, and improved patient compliance. 3D printing enables precise control over microneedle dimensions, spacing, and tip geometry, factors crucial for effective skin penetration and drug delivery. The technology also facilitates the integration of multiple drug reservoirs and smart release mechanisms within a single patch system [46]. The ability to customize microneedle geometry and composition has significantly enhanced the efficiency of transdermal delivery while minimizing skin irritation. Parameters such as needle length, tip sharpness, and base diameter can be optimized for specific drug molecules and target tissue depths. Material selection can be tailored to achieve desired mechanical properties and dissolution rates. Advanced designs incorporate features for controlled breakage, ensuring complete drug delivery while preventing needle remnants in the skin. The technology also enables the creation of arrays with varying needle densities and geometries across the patch surface, optimizing drug distribution and minimizing local tissue trauma [47].

5. Challenges and Limitations

5.1. Technical Challenges

The integration of 3D printing technology into pharmaceutical manufacturing encounters significant technical obstacles that require careful consideration and innovative solutions. Print resolution limitations pose particular challenges for precise drug dosing, especially critical for low-dose medications where minor variations can significantly impact therapeutic efficacy. Current printing technologies struggle to achieve the microscale precision necessary for consistent production of dosage forms containing potent drugs with narrow therapeutic windows [48].

Production efficiency remains a significant concern, with printing speeds substantially lower than conventional pharmaceutical manufacturing methods. This limitation becomes particularly evident in high-volume production scenarios, where traditional tablet pressing can produce thousands of units per minute compared to the relatively slow layer-by-layer printing process. The time

required for precise deposition and solidification of materials creates a fundamental bottleneck in production throughput [49]. Material-related challenges present multiple complexities in pharmaceutical 3D printing. Many pharmaceutical ingredients exhibit poor printability characteristics, including inadequate flow properties, thermal sensitivity, or insufficient mechanical properties in the final product. Achieving consistent drug distribution within printed structures remains challenging, particularly with complex geometries or multi-material systems. Issues such as phase separation, material segregation during printing, and non-uniform drug loading can compromise product quality and therapeutic effectiveness [50]..

5.1.1. Process Parameters

The maintenance of consistent print quality demands rigorous control over numerous process parameters, creating a complex manufacturing environment. Temperature management during printing is particularly critical, as variations can significantly impact both drug stability and polymer behavior. Thermal degradation of active ingredients, unexpected polymorphic transformations, and changes in material rheology can occur due to temperature fluctuations. These thermal effects can compromise product quality and therapeutic efficacy [51]. Layer adhesion and internal structural integrity present ongoing challenges in pharmaceutical 3D printing. Insufficient adhesion between printed layers can lead to delamination, while internal defects such as voids or inconsistent density can affect mechanical properties and drug release characteristics. These issues may manifest as unpredictable dissolution profiles, compromised mechanical strength, or irregular drug release patterns. The optimization of printing parameters to achieve consistent layer fusion while maintaining drug stability requires careful balance [52].

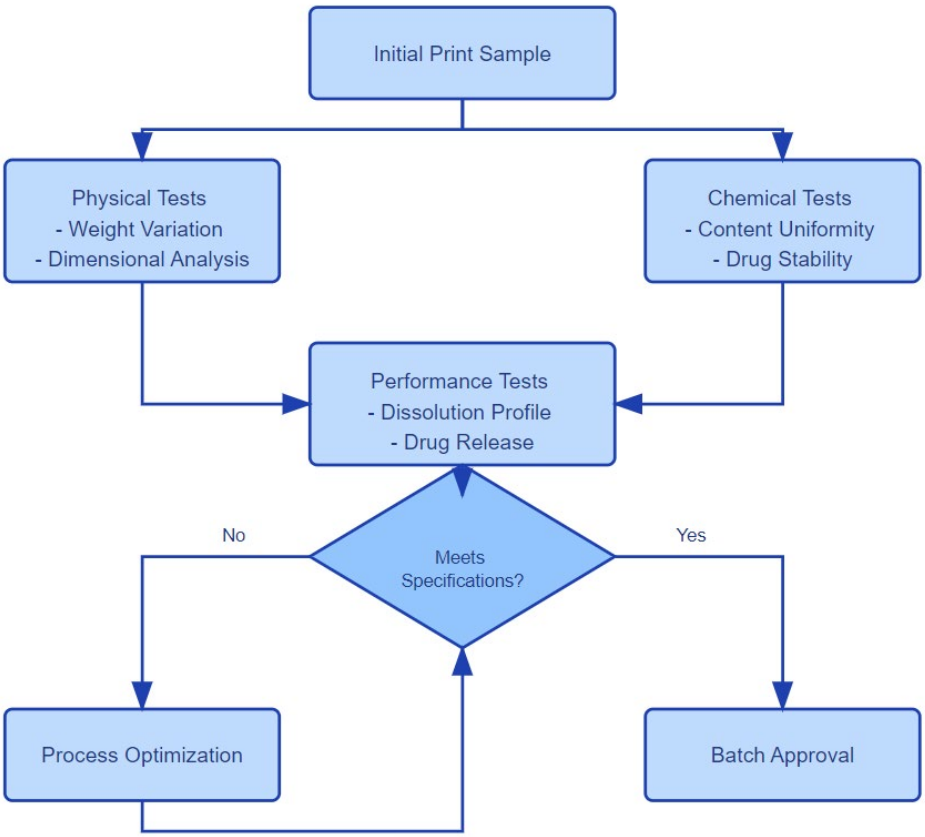

Figure 2. Quality Control Process for D Printed Pharmaceuticals

5.1.2. Scale-up Issues

The transition from laboratory-scale development to commercial manufacturing presents substantial challenges in pharmaceutical 3D printing. Current printer designs impose limitations on batch sizes and production rates, making it difficult to achieve economically viable manufacturing scales. The need for multiple printing units to meet production demands introduces additional complexity in maintaining consistent quality across different machines [53]. Post-processing requirements add significant complexity to the manufacturing process. Steps such as drying, removal of residual solvents, and surface finishing must be carefully controlled to ensure product quality. These additional processing steps can extend production time, increase complexity, and introduce potential variability in the final product. The development of efficient and validated post-processing methods that maintain product integrity while meeting regulatory requirements presents ongoing challenges [54].

5.2. Regulatory Compliance

The establishment of appropriate quality control measures for 3D printed pharmaceuticals necessitates novel analytical approaches and regulatory frameworks. Traditional pharmaceutical testing methods may prove inadequate for evaluating the unique characteristics of printed products, including internal structure, layer adhesion, and spatial drug distribution. New analytical techniques and acceptance criteria must be developed to ensure product quality and consistency [55]. Batch-to-batch consistency and stability assessment present particular challenges due to the customized nature of printed formulations. The potential for variation in printing conditions, material properties, and environmental factors requires robust quality control strategies. Long-term stability testing must account for the unique structural characteristics and material interactions present in printed pharmaceuticals [56].

Table 3. Quality Control Parameters for 3D Printed Pharmaceuticals

Parameter	Test Method	Acceptance Criteria	Critical Factors
Content Uniformity	HPLC/UV Spectroscopy	RSD ≤ 6%	- Print resolution - Material distribution - Process consistency
Weight Variation	Gravimetric analysis	±7.5% of target weight	- Printing parameters - Material flow - Environmental conditions
Mechanical Strength	Hardness testing	Product specific	- Layer adhesion - Infill density - Material properties
Dissolution Profile	USP apparatus	Meets target profile	- Geometry - Internal structure - Material selection
Dimensional Accuracy	Digital caliper/3D scanning	±5% of target dimensions	- Printer calibration - Design parameters - Material shrinkage

Current regulatory frameworks lack comprehensive guidelines specific to 3D printed pharmaceuticals. Questions regarding Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) compliance and validation requirements remain partially addressed, creating uncertainty in quality assurance processes. The need for standardized approaches to process validation, in-process controls, and finished product testing requires further regulatory development [57]. The implementation of digital design controls and documentation standards presents unique challenges in the regulatory landscape. The need to validate computer-aided design (CAD) systems, ensure data integrity, and maintain traceable documentation throughout the digital manufacturing process requires new approaches to quality management. The combination of digital workflows with traditional pharmaceutical quality systems demands careful consideration of regulatory requirements [58].

Table 4. Regulatory Challenges in 3D Printed Pharmaceuticals

Aspect	Current Status	Challenges	Potential Solutions
GMP Compliance	Limited guidelines	- Process validation - Quality assurance - Batch definition	- Development of specific guidelines - Real-time monitoring systems - Automated documentation
Product Testing	Traditional methods may not apply	- Novel dosage forms - Customized products - Batch size definition	- Development of new testing methods - In-process controls - PAT implementation
Documentation	Standard requirements unclear	- Digital design control - Process parameters - Material traceability	- Electronic batch records - Digital twin technology - Blockchain integration
Stability Testing	Limited long-term data	- Storage conditions - Material aging - Product degradation	- Accelerated testing protocols - Predictive modeling - Real-time stability assessment

5.3. Economic Limitations

The economic viability of pharmaceutical 3D printing faces several significant constraints that affect its widespread adoption. High equipment costs, including initial investment in printing systems, supporting infrastructure, and quality control equipment, represent substantial capital requirements. Ongoing maintenance expenses, specialized operator training, and regular system calibration add to the operational costs [59].

The cost of specialized pharmaceutical-grade materials suitable for 3D printing typically exceeds that of conventional excipients. These materials must meet strict quality requirements while maintaining suitable printing characteristics, leading to higher raw material expenses. Limited production volumes, combined with the slower manufacturing speed of 3D printing, may affect the cost-effectiveness compared to traditional manufacturing methods. The economic balance between the benefits of customization and the higher production costs presents ongoing challenges for commercial implementation [60].

Table 5. Economic Analysis of 3D Printing in Pharmaceutical Manufacturing

Cost Component	Traditional Manufacturing	3D Printing	Impact Factors
Equipment Investment	High ($1-10M+)	Medium ($10K-500K)	- Technology type - Production scale - Automation level
Material Costs	Low-Medium	High	- Specialized materials - Waste generation - Batch size
Labor Costs	High	Medium	- Operator training - Process complexity - Automation level
Development Costs	Very High	Medium	- Formulation development - Process optimization - Regulatory requirements
Production Scale	Large batches	Small-medium batches	- Market demand - Customization needs - Production efficiency

6. Conclusion

3D printing technology in pharmaceutical manufacturing marks a significant change in drug development. It provides control over dosage form design and drug release characteristics, supporting the movement toward personalized medicine. Various printing technologies, from powder-based methods to photopolymerization and extrusion-based approaches, offer unique advantages in pharmaceutical applications. The selection of appropriate materials, including polymers, hydrogels, and pharmaceutical excipients, plays a crucial role in determining the success of 3D printed formulations. These materials must balance printability, drug loading capacity, and therapeutic effectiveness. This technology is particularly useful in creating complex drug delivery systems, including modified-release oral formulations, implantable devices, and transdermal delivery systems. Despite significant progress, several challenges remain in the widespread adoption of pharmaceutical 3D printing. Technical limitations, regulatory uncertainties, and economic constraints require continued attention and innovation. Overcoming these challenges through collaborative efforts between academia, industry, and regulatory bodies will be essential for realizing the full potential of this technology in pharmaceutical manufacturing.

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Author's short biography

Dr. Lakshmi Prasanna Mortha:

Dr. Lakshmi Prasanna Mortha is a Professor at VJ's College of Pharmacy, Rajahmundry, with expertise in pharmaceutical sciences and drug formulation. She has extensive experience in research and academia, actively mentoring students and contributing to advancements in pharmaceutical technology

Mr. Rawoof Mohammad

Rawoof Mohammad is a third-year B. Pharmacy student at VJ's College of Pharmacy, Rajahmundry. His research interests focus on innovative pharmaceutical technologies, and he actively participates in experimental research projects exploring novel drug delivery systems

Mr. Raju V.B.V.S.N

Raju V.B.V.S.N is a third-year B. Pharmacy student at VJ's College of Pharmacy, Rajahmundry. His research interests include drug delivery systems and pharmaceutical technology, with particular emphasis on practical experimental work advancing pharmaceutical formulation techniques.