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REVIEW ARTICLE

Formulation Methods and Applications of Liposomes in Drug Delivery

Jyothsna Kasani*[1], Charan Ambujalapu [2]

[1] *Assistant Professor, Department of Pharmaceutics, Koringa College of Pharmacy, Korangi, Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh, India*
[2] *UG Scholar, Department of Pharmaceutics, Koringa College of Pharmacy, Korangi, Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh, India*

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Abstract: Liposomes are novel drug delivery systems that can act as carriers for both hydrophilic and lipophilic therapeutic agents. These phospholipid-based vesicular systems closely mimic biological membranes, providing enhanced drug bioavailability and reduced toxicity. The structural composition of liposomes, primarily consisting of phosphatidylcholine and cholesterol, enables efficient drug encapsulation and controlled release characteristics. Various preparation methods, including thin-film hydration, reverse-phase evaporation, and micro-emulsification, yield liposomes with distinct physicochemical properties suitable for specific therapeutic applications. Surface modification strategies, such as PEGylation and ligand conjugation, have led to the development of targeted delivery systems with improved circulation times and enhanced therapeutic efficacy. Current clinical applications span across cancer therapy, vaccine delivery, and gene therapy, with several FDA-approved formulations demonstrating successful therapeutic outcomes. Despite challenges in stability, scale-up manufacturing, and regulatory compliance, ongoing technological advancements continue to expand the potential of liposomal drug delivery systems. Current trends like stimuli-responsive liposomes and novel surface modification techniques have opened new possibilities for accurate drug targeting and controlled release, particularly in cancer treatment and genetic disorders.

Keywords: Drug delivery systems; Phospholipid vesicles; Controlled release; Surface modification; Therapeutic targeting

1. Introduction

Liposomes are novel drug delivery systems and proved transformative since their discovery by Alec Bangham in 1964. These spherical vesicles, composed of one or more phospholipid bilayers, exhibit remarkable structural similarity to biological cell membranes, making them excellent candidates for drug delivery applications [1]. The amphipathic nature of phospholipids enables the formation of closed bilayer structures in aqueous environments, creating distinct hydrophilic and hydrophobic compartments within a single vesicular system [2].

The structure of liposomes allows encapsulation of therapeutic agents with varying physicochemical properties. Hydrophilic drugs are entrapped within the aqueous core, while lipophilic compounds integrate into the phospholipid bilayer. This dual encapsulation capability, combined with their biocompatibility and biodegradability, positions liposomes as superior drug carriers compared to conventional delivery systems [3]. The fundamental building blocks of liposomes primarily consist of phospholipids, with phosphatidylcholine being the most predominantly used lipid. These phospholipids self-assemble into bilayer structures due to their amphipathic nature, where the hydrophilic head groups orient towards the aqueous phase while the hydrophobic fatty acid chains form the internal matrix of the bilayer [4]. The incorporation of cholesterol into the phospholipid bilayer serves multiple crucial functions:

Cholesterol molecules position themselves between phospholipid molecules, reducing membrane fluidity and increasing mechanical stability. The hydroxyl group of cholesterol forms hydrogen bonds with the polar head groups of phospholipids, while its steroid nucleus interacts with the hydrocarbon chains, resulting in a more ordered and less permeable membrane structure [5]. The presence of cholesterol significantly affects the gel-to-liquid crystalline phase transition of phospholipid membranes. At concentrations above 30 mol%, cholesterol essentially eliminates the phase transition, maintaining an intermediate fluid state that combines the mechanical stability of the gel phase with the permeability properties of the liquid crystalline phase [6]. The size of liposomes typically ranges from 30 nanometers to several micrometers, with the bilayer thickness consistently measuring 4-5 nanometers. This size distribution plays a crucial role in determining their biological fate and therapeutic efficacy [7]. The surface charge of liposomes, quantified as zeta potential, significantly influences their stability, cellular interactions, and biodistribution. Positive surface charge generally enhances cellular uptake but may lead to increased clearance by the reticuloendothelial system (RES) [8].

* Corresponding author: Jyothsna Kasani

Table 1. Classification of Liposomes Based on Size and Lamellarity

Type	Size Range (nm)	Number of Bilayers	Preparation Method	Applications
Small Unilamellar Vesicles (SUVs)	20-100	Single	Sonication, Microfluidics	Drug delivery, Gene therapy
Large Unilamellar Vesicles (LUVs)	100-1000	Single	Extrusion, REV method	Vaccine delivery, Cancer therapy
Giant Unilamellar Vesicles (GUVs)	>1000	Single	Electroformation, Gentle hydration	Model membranes, Cell studies
Multilamellar Vesicles (MLVs)	500-5000	Multiple	Thin-film hydration	Sustained release, Imaging

2. Targeted Liposomes

Recent developments in liposomal technology have focused on enhancing their therapeutic potential through various modifications:

2.1. Surface Modification

The incorporation of polyethylene glycol (PEG) creates a hydrophilic barrier that reduces opsonization and subsequent RES clearance, resulting in prolonged circulation times. This "stealth" technology has revolutionized liposomal drug delivery, particularly in cancer therapy [9].

2.2. Targeting Mechanisms

Active targeting strategies involve the conjugation of specific ligands (antibodies, peptides, or small molecules) to the liposome surface, enabling selective binding to target cells. Passive targeting utilizes the enhanced permeability and retention (EPR) effect, particularly effective in tumor targeting [10].

3. Preparation Methods

3.1. Thin-Film Hydration Method

The Bangham method represents the foundational approach for liposome preparation. The process involves dissolving phospholipids and cholesterol in organic solvents (typically chloroform:methanol in 2:1 ratio) followed by solvent evaporation under reduced pressure. The resulting thin lipid film undergoes hydration with an aqueous buffer at a temperature above the lipid phase transition temperature. This process yields multilamellar vesicles (MLVs) with sizes ranging from 400-3500 nm [11]. The encapsulation efficiency varies significantly depending on the physicochemical properties of the drug, typically achieving 5-15% for hydrophilic compounds and up to 80% for lipophilic drugs [12].

Table 2. Comparison of Liposome Preparation Methods

Method	Advantages	Limitations	Scale-up Potential
Thin-film Hydration	Simple process, Wide lipid compatibility, Well-established	Low encapsulation efficiency, Size heterogeneity	Limited
Reverse-Phase Evaporation	High encapsulation efficiency, Large internal volume	Organic solvent residues, Process complexity	Moderate
Microfluidic Preparation	Precise size control, High reproducibility, Continuous production	Equipment cost, Technical expertise required	Excellent
Supercritical Fluid Method	Organic solvent-free, Single-step process, Environmental friendly	High pressure requirements, Initial setup cost	Good

3.2. Reverse-Phase Evaporation Method

This technique produces large unilamellar vesicles (LUVs) with significantly higher encapsulation efficiencies for hydrophilic compounds (up to 65%). The process involves forming a water-in-oil emulsion between the aqueous phase containing the drug and the organic phase containing phospholipids. Subsequent removal of organic solvent under reduced pressure leads to the collapse of lipid-stabilized water droplets into vesicles. The resulting LUVs typically range from 200-500 nm in diameter [13].

3.3. Microfluidic Methods

Microfluidic platforms enable precise control over liposome formation through manipulation of fluid dynamics at the microscale. The technique employs controlled mixing of lipids in organic phase with an aqueous phase through specialized microchannels. Key parameters affecting vesicle characteristics include:

- Flow rate ratio (FRR) between aqueous and organic phases
- Total flow rate (TFR)
- Channel geometry
- Lipid concentration

These systems consistently produce small unilamellar vesicles (SUVs) with narrow size distributions (50-150 nm) and high batch-to-batch reproducibility [14].

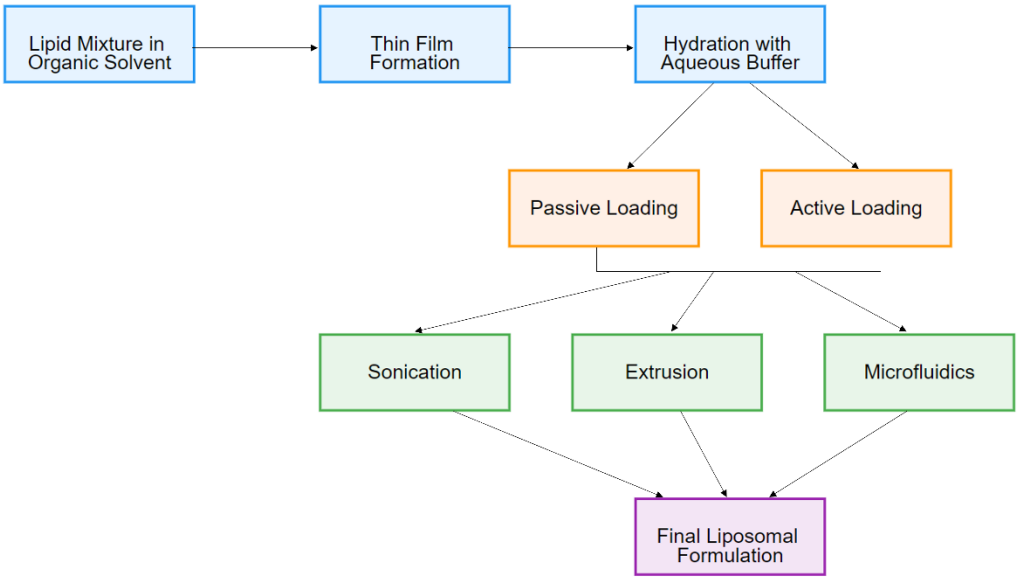

Figure 1. Liposome Formation and Drug Loading

3.4. Supercritical Fluid Technology

This environmentally friendly approach utilizes supercritical carbon dioxide (scCO2) as an alternative to organic solvents. The method involves rapid depressurization of a supercritical mixture containing lipids and aqueous phase through a nozzle, resulting in immediate vesicle formation. The technique offers advantages such as:

- Elimination of organic solvent residues
- Single-step processing
- Scalability potential
- Enhanced stability of thermolabile compounds [15]

3.5. Size Reduction and Homogenization

3.5.1. Sonication

Ultrasonic energy can be applied through probe or bath sonicators to reduce vesicle size and lamellarity. Probe sonication typically achieves smaller vesicles (20-50 nm) compared to bath sonication (40-100 nm). However, probe sonication may introduce metal contamination from the titanium tip and generate local heat spots that could degrade phospholipids [16].

3.5.2. Extrusion

Mechanical extrusion through polycarbonate membranes with defined pore sizes produces uniform vesicle populations. Multiple passes through successively smaller pore sizes (typically starting at 400 nm and ending at 100 nm) yield homogeneous populations

of LUVs. The process operates at temperatures above the lipid phase transition temperature to maintain membrane flexibility during extrusion [17].

4. Characterization of Liposomes

4.1. Physical Characterization

4.1.1. Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS):

- Measures particle size distribution and polydispersity index
- Monitors stability over time
- Provides zeta potential measurements through electrophoretic mobility [18]

4.1.2. Electron Microscopy:

- Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM) reveals morphology and lamellarity
- Cryo-TEM enables visualization in native hydrated state
- Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) provides surface topography information [19]

4.1.3. Chemical Characterization

Analytical methods for composition and drug loading assessment include:

Chromatographic Techniques:

- High-Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC) for drug quantification
- Thin-Layer Chromatography (TLC) for lipid composition analysis
- Gas Chromatography (GC) for fatty acid profile determination [20]

Spectroscopic Methods:

- Nuclear Magnetic Resonance (NMR) for membrane fluidity studies
- Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR) for molecular organization
- UV-Visible spectrophotometry for drug content determination [21]

5. Pharmaceutical Applications

5.1. Cancer Therapy

Liposomal formulations have revolutionized cancer treatment through enhanced drug delivery and reduced systemic toxicity. Doxorubicin-loaded PEGylated liposomes (Doxil®) represent a milestone achievement, demonstrating superior efficacy in treating various malignancies including ovarian cancer and multiple myeloma. The PEGylated surface significantly extends circulation time from hours to days, while the enhanced permeability and retention (EPR) effect facilitates passive accumulation in tumor tissues. Clinical studies have shown a marked reduction in cardiotoxicity compared to free doxorubicin, while maintaining or improving therapeutic efficacy [22].

Table 3. FDA-Approved Liposomal Formulations in Cancer Treatment

Product Name	Active Drug	Indication	Key Features	Launch Year
Doxil®	Doxorubicin	Ovarian cancer, Multiple myeloma	PEGylated, Long-circulating	1995
Myocet®	Doxorubicin	Breast cancer	Non-PEGylated, Reduced toxicity	2000
DaunoXome®	Daunorubicin	Kaposi's sarcoma	Conventional liposome	1996
Marqibo®	Vincristine	Acute lymphoid leukemia	Sphingomyelin-based	2012
Onivyde®	Irinotecan	Pancreatic cancer	PEGylated, Targeting	2015

Advanced targeting strategies incorporate specific ligands such as transferrin, folate receptors, or HER2-specific antibodies to enhance tumor-specific drug delivery. These actively targeted systems demonstrate increased cellular uptake and improved therapeutic outcomes in resistant tumors. Recent developments include pH-sensitive liposomes that selectively release their cargo in the acidic tumor microenvironment, thereby minimizing off-target effects [23].

5.2. Gene Therapy and Nucleic Acid Delivery

Cationic liposomes serve as efficient vectors for delivering genetic material, including plasmid DNA, siRNA, and mRNA. The positive surface charge facilitates interaction with negatively charged nucleic acids and enhances cellular uptake through electrostatic interactions with cell membranes. Lipid composition plays a crucial role in transfection efficiency, with helper lipids like DOPE (dioleoylphosphatidylethanolamine) promoting endosomal escape through membrane fusion mechanisms [24].

The success of mRNA-based COVID-19 vaccines has highlighted the potential of lipid nanoparticles in nucleic acid delivery. These systems employ ionizable lipids that become cationic at endosomal pH, enabling efficient cytoplasmic delivery while maintaining stability during circulation. Optimization of lipid composition and particle size has achieved transfection efficiencies comparable to viral vectors while offering superior safety profiles [25].

5.3. Antimicrobial Drug Delivery

Liposomal antibiotics demonstrate enhanced efficacy against intracellular pathogens and biofilm-associated infections. AmBisome®, a liposomal formulation of amphotericin B, exhibits reduced nephrotoxicity while maintaining antifungal activity. The phospholipid bilayer protects the drug from degradation and facilitates penetration into infected tissues. Studies have shown improved therapeutic indices for various antibiotics, including aminoglycosides and fluoroquinolones, when encapsulated in liposomes [26].

5.4. Vaccines

Liposomes function as both delivery vehicles and adjuvants in vaccine formulations. The bilayer structure allows incorporation of various immunostimulatory molecules, including lipid A derivatives and viral proteins. Cationic liposomes particularly enhance antigen presentation to antigen-presenting cells through improved cellular uptake and sustained release characteristics. The success of liposomal adjuvants is evidenced by approved vaccines like Inflexal® V and Epaxal® [27].

5.5. Diagnosis

Theranostic liposomes combine therapeutic and diagnostic capabilities through the incorporation of imaging agents alongside therapeutic compounds. Gadolinium-loaded liposomes enable magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) visualization while delivering therapeutic payloads. Recent advances include multimodal imaging capabilities through the incorporation of radionuclides, fluorescent dyes, or quantum dots within the same liposomal system [28].

5.6. Topical and Transdermal Delivery

Liposomes enhance skin penetration and deposition of various therapeutic agents. Their similarity to skin lipids facilitates interaction with the stratum corneum, while flexible and deformable variants (transfersomes) enable improved tissue penetration. Applications range from cosmeceuticals to therapeutic agents for skin conditions. The incorporation of penetration enhancers and optimization of lipid composition has achieved targeted delivery to specific skin layers [29]

6. Stability and Quality Control

6.1. Physical Stability

Physical stability of liposomal formulations consists of multiple interconnected factors affecting their shelf-life and therapeutic efficacy. Particle aggregation represents a primary stability concern, driven by van der Waals attractive forces and electrostatic interactions between vesicles. The incorporation of surface charge through charged phospholipids or the addition of charged molecules creates electrostatic repulsion, preventing vesicle aggregation. However, excessive surface charge can lead to increased interactions with serum proteins, potentially compromising in vivo stability [30].

6.2. Membrane Phase Behavior

The phase transition temperature (Tm) of phospholipids significantly influences membrane permeability and drug retention. Saturated phospholipids with higher Tm values provide greater stability but may limit drug release at physiological temperatures. The incorporation of cholesterol at concentrations between 30-45 mol% reduces membrane permeability by increasing lipid packing density and eliminating gel-to-liquid crystalline phase transitions [31].

6.3. Oxidative Stability

Unsaturated phospholipids are susceptible to oxidative degradation, leading to the formation of lysolipids and fatty acid oxidation products. These degradation products can compromise membrane integrity and accelerate drug leakage. Antioxidants such as α-tocopherol or butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT) are frequently incorporated to prevent oxidative degradation. Storage under nitrogen atmosphere and protection from light further enhance oxidative stability [32].

6.4. Chemical Stability

6.4.1. Hydrolysis

Phospholipids undergo hydrolysis at the ester bonds, producing lysophospholipids and free fatty acids. This degradation process accelerates at extreme pH values and elevated temperatures. Buffer selection plays a crucial role, with optimal stability typically observed at pH 6.5-7.0. The presence of divalent cations can catalyze hydrolysis, necessitating careful consideration of buffer composition [33].

Table 4. Chemical Stability Parameters

Parameter	Acceptable Range	Testing Method	Impact on Quality
Particle Size	±10% from initial value	Dynamic Light Scattering	Drug release, Biodistribution
pH	6.5-7.5	pH meter	Chemical stability, Drug retention
Zeta Potential	±30 mV	Electrophoretic mobility	Physical stability, Aggregation
Encapsulation Efficiency	>90% of initial drug content	HPLC/UV spectroscopy	Therapeutic efficacy
Lipid Oxidation	<2% oxidation products	HPLC, TLC	Membrane integrity, Drug leakage
Storage Temperature	2-8°C (liquid), 25°C (lyophilized)	Stability chambers	Shelf-life, Product viability

6.4.2. Drug-Lipid Interactions

The chemical compatibility between encapsulated drugs and lipid components significantly impacts formulation stability. Drug-induced changes in membrane fluidity, charge distribution, or phase behavior can compromise vesicle integrity. Advanced analytical techniques, including differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) and solid-state NMR, enable detailed characterization of these interactions during formulation development [34].

6.5. Stabilization Methods

6.5.1. Lyophilization

Freeze-drying represents an effective approach for improving long-term stability of liposomal formulations. The process requires careful optimization of:

The inclusion of appropriate cryoprotectants (typically disaccharides) prevents fusion during freezing and maintains vesicle integrity upon reconstitution. Trehalose has emerged as a superior cryoprotectant due to its high glass transition temperature and ability to replace water molecules around polar head groups. The freezing rate and primary drying temperature significantly influence the quality of the lyophilized product [35].

6.5.2. Surface Modification

Surface modification with hydrophilic polymers, particularly PEG, provides steric stabilization against aggregation and protein adsorption. The optimal PEG molecular weight (typically 2000-5000 Da) and surface density must be carefully balanced to achieve desired stability without compromising drug release characteristics. Novel polymer alternatives, including zwitterionic polymers and polysaccharides, offer potential advantages in specific applications [36].

6.6. Quality Control

6.6.1. Critical Quality Attributes

Comprehensive quality control protocols encompass multiple parameters essential for consistent product performance:

- Particle Size Distribution: Regular monitoring using validated DLS methods, with acceptance criteria typically allowing coefficient of variation ≤ 10%.
- Encapsulation Efficiency: Quantification through validated separation and analytical methods, maintaining batch-to-batch consistency within ±5%.
- Surface Charge: Zeta potential measurements under standardized conditions, typically maintaining values between ±30 mV for stable formulations.
- Lipid Content: Quantitative analysis of individual lipid components using chromatographic methods, ensuring composition within ±10% of target values [37].

6.6.2. Stability Testing

Accelerated and long-term stability studies follow ICH guidelines, with specific considerations for liposomal formulations:

- Temperature cycling studies to evaluate physical stability and drug retention.
- Photostability assessment under defined light exposure conditions.
- In-use stability following reconstitution of lyophilized products.
- Container closure system compatibility evaluation, particularly for plastic containers and rubber stoppers [38].

7. Conclusion

Liposomal drug delivery systems have evolved significantly since their discovery, establishing themselves as versatile platforms for therapeutic applications. The success of commercially available liposomal formulations in cancer therapy, antimicrobial treatments, and vaccine delivery demonstrates their clinical significance and market potential. The combination of advanced preparation methods, including microfluidic techniques and supercritical fluid technology, has addressed many traditional manufacturing challenges, offering improved control over particle characteristics and scalability. Surface modification techniques, particularly PEGylation and targeted ligand conjugation, have substantially enhanced the biological performance of liposomal formulations, enabling prolonged circulation times and specific tissue targeting. Despite these achievements, several challenges persist in liposomal drug development. Physical and chemical stability issues continue to influence product shelf-life and commercial viability. The complexity of manufacturing processes and regulatory requirements often presents hurdles in translating laboratory success to clinical applications.

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