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REVIEW ARTICLE

Galactose-Functionalized Solid Lipid Nanoparticles for Site-Specific Hepatic Targeting via the Asialoglycoprotein Receptor

Shilpa Khambete*[1], Hemant Khambete[2], Sanjay Jain[3]

[1] *Associate Professor, Department of Pharmaceutics, Chameli Devi Institute of Pharmacy, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India*
[2] *Professor, Department of Pharmaceutics, Faculty of Pharmacy, Medicaps University, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India*
[3] *Dean, Department of Pharmacognosy, Faculty of Pharmacy, Medicaps University, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India*

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Abstract: Hepatic diseases, ranging from viral hepatitis and liver fibrosis to hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), constitute a formidable global health challenge that requires the development of advanced therapeutic interventions. Conventional pharmacotherapies are frequently impeded by non-specific biodistribution, resulting in suboptimal drug concentrations at the target site and debilitating systemic toxicity. In response to these clinical deficits, nanomedicine has emerged as a pivotal frontier, with Solid Lipid Nanoparticles (SLNs) gaining prominence due to their superior biocompatibility, physical stability, and controlled release profiles. A promising strategy to augment the therapeutic index of anti-hepatotoxic agents involves the surface engineering of SLNs with galactose moieties to strategically exploit the Asialoglycoprotein Receptor (ASGPR). This receptor, abundantly and exclusively expressed on the sinusoidal surface of mammalian hepatocytes, serves as a high-affinity portal for receptor-mediated endocytosis. Galactose-modified SLNs facilitate the active internalization of therapeutic payloads directly into the hepatic parenchyma by mimicking natural desialylated glycoproteins, thereby bypassing non-target organs. This review focusses on the mechanistic rationale behind ASGPR targeting, elucidating the structural advantages of lipid-based nanocarriers in preserving drug stability and enhancing cellular uptake. The review also highlights the potential of this "lock-and-key" approach to revolutionize the management of chronic liver diseases by enabling precise dosage reduction and minimizing off-target adverse effects. The combination of ligand-anchored lipid nanotechnology signifies a paradigm shift towards precision medicine, offering a robust platform for the delivery of both small molecules and complex nucleic acid therapeutics.

Keywords: Asialoglycoprotein Receptor (ASGPR); Galactose-ligand targeting; Solid Lipid Nanoparticles; Hepatic pharmacokinetics; Receptor-mediated endocytosis.

1. Introduction

The escalating prevalence of liver-associated morbidities constitutes a critical priority within the global healthcare framework. Epidemiological data indicates that hepatic diseases account for approximately two million mortalities annually, representing nearly 4% of total deaths worldwide. Conditions such as liver cirrhosis, viral hepatitis, and primary hepatic malignancies have propelled liver dysfunction to the fifth leading cause of mortality, with projections suggesting a continued upward trajectory [1, 2]. In nations with high disease burdens, such as India, the clinical management of these conditions is frequently complicated by late-stage diagnosis and the limited efficacy of conventional systemic chemotherapies [3]. The rising incidence of lifestyle-associated conditions, such as non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD), further exacerbates this burden, creating an urgent demand for novel therapeutic modalities.

A significant impediment in current hepatology is the inability of standard therapeutic agents to distinguish between diseased hepatic tissue and healthy parenchyma. When administered systemically, chemotherapeutic agents distribute throughout the body, affecting healthy tissues and leading to severe systemic toxicity. This lack of selectivity often necessitates dose reduction or treatment cessation, resulting in insufficient drug accumulation at the pathological site and therapeutic failure. Consequently, pharmaceutical research has pivoted towards precision medicine, specifically the development of nanocarrier systems capable of active targeting [4]. Nanotechnology offers a transformative way to overcome biological barriers. The strategic exploitation of cell-surface receptors overexpressed on hepatocytes offers a viable pathway to enhance therapeutic efficacy. Among these, the Asialoglycoprotein Receptor (ASGPR) is of paramount importance due to its high density on the sinusoidal plasma membrane and its specificity for galactose/N-acetylgalactosamine-terminated ligands [5].

* Corresponding author: Shilpa Khambete

Table 1. Biological Barriers to Hepatic Drug Delivery and Nanotechnological Solutions

Biological Barrier	Physiological Challenge	Advantages with Gal-SLNs
Reticuloendothelial System (RES)	Rapid clearance of foreign particles by Kupffer cells in the liver and macrophages in the spleen.	Surface modification with hydrophilic polymers (e.g., PEG) to prolong circulation time ("Stealth" effect).
Non-specific Distribution	Systemic spread leads to accumulation in healthy organs (heart, kidneys), causing toxicity.	Active targeting using Galactose ligands directs cargo specifically to ASGPR+ hepatocytes.
Enzymatic Degradation	Rapid metabolism of drugs (especially nucleic acids) by serum nucleases and proteases.	Encapsulation within the solid lipid matrix protects the payload from enzymatic hydrolysis.
Cellular Membrane Impermeability	Large or hydrophilic molecules cannot easily cross the lipophilic hepatocyte membrane.	Receptor-mediated endocytosis facilitates active transport into the cell interior.
Endosomal Entrapment	Therapeutics may get degraded in lysosomes after uptake.	Lipid components facilitate endosomal escape, releasing the drug into the cytoplasm.

This review explains the potential of Solid Lipid Nanoparticles (SLNs) surface-modified with galactose residues as a sophisticated drug delivery vehicle. These nanocarriers facilitate the selective internalization of therapeutic agents by utilizing the specific binding affinity between galactose and ASGPR, bridging the gap between systemic administration and localized cellular action [6, 7].

2. The Asialoglycoprotein Receptor (ASGPR)

2.1. Structural and Functional Characteristics

The ASGPR is a C-type lectin receptor predominantly expressed on the sinusoidal surface of mammalian hepatocytes. It functions primarily as a scavenger receptor responsible for the clearance of desialylated glycoproteins proteins that have lost their terminal sialic acid residues from the systemic circulation [8].

2.1.1. Subunit Composition and Distribution

Structurally, the ASGPR is a hetero-oligomer composed of two homologous polypeptides, H1 and H2. These subunits assemble to form a functional receptor complex that requires calcium ions for ligand binding. The density of ASGPR on the hepatocyte surface is remarkably high, estimated at approximately 500,000 receptors per cell [6]. This high expression density provides an extensive surface area for the interaction and capture of circulating ligands, making it an ideal target for nanocarrier-mediated delivery [9].

2.1.2. Carbohydrate Recognition Domain Specificity

The receptor exhibits a profound affinity for ligands containing terminal galactose or N-acetylgalactosamine (GalNAc) residues. The Carbohydrate Recognition Domain (CRD) is highly specific; it recognizes the axial hydroxyl group at the C4 position of the galactose ring. This specificity ensures that galactose-decorated nanoparticles are preferentially recognized by hepatocytes over other cell types, serving as the biological basis for liver-specific targeting [10].

2.2. Mechanism of Receptor-Mediated Endocytosis

2.2.1. Ligand Binding and Internalization

The cellular uptake of galactose-functionalized nanocarriers is governed by a highly coordinated biological process known as receptor-mediated endocytosis. The interaction begins with the binding of the galactose moiety on the nanoparticle surface to the CRD of the ASGPR in the presence of calcium ions [11]. This binding event triggers the invagination of the plasma membrane, forming clathrin-coated pits that encapsulate the ligand-receptor complex.

2.2.2. Endosomal Sorting and Receptor Recycling

Upon internalization, the vesicle sheds its clathrin coat and fuses with early endosomes. The acidic environment of the endosome (pH ~5.0-6.0) induces a conformational change in the receptor and the release of calcium, causing the dissociation of the ligand (nanoparticle) from the ASGPR [12]. The receptor is subsequently recycled back to the cell surface to participate in further endocytic cycles, while the nanoparticle is directed towards lysosomes or other intracellular compartments for payload release [13]. This

recycling capability makes ASGPR a highly efficient, high-capacity target for continuous drug delivery, ensuring a sustained therapeutic effect within the hepatocyte cytoplasm [14].

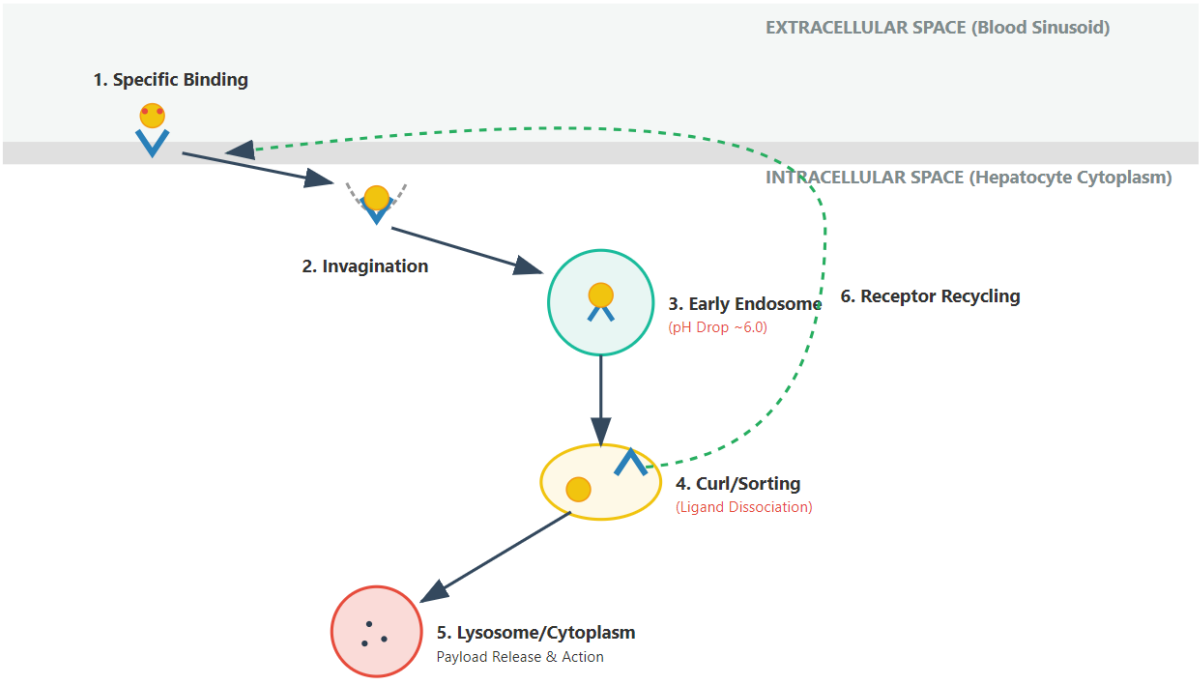

Figure 1. Mechanism of ASGPR-Mediated Endocytosis

The receptor-mediated endocytosis of Galactose-functionalized Solid Lipid Nanoparticles (Gal-SLNs). The process initiates with the calcium-dependent binding of galactose ligands to the Asialoglycoprotein Receptor (ASGPR) on the hepatocyte surface (1). The membrane invaginates to form clathrin-coated pits (2), evolving into early endosomes (3). Acidification within the endosome induces a conformational change, leading to the dissociation of the SLN from the receptor (4). The receptor is recycled back to the plasma membrane (6), while the SLN is trafficked to lysosomes or the cytoplasm for therapeutic payload release (5).

3. Solid Lipid Nanoparticles (SLNs): The Carrier of Choice

3.1. Composition and Physicochemical Properties

3.1.1. Lipid Matrix Components

Solid Lipid Nanoparticles (SLNs) are colloidal carrier systems composed of physiological lipids such as fatty acids (e.g., stearic acid), triglycerides (e.g., tristearin), and waxes that remain solid at both room and body temperature [15]. Unlike liquid-state liposomes, the solid matrix of SLNs offers enhanced physical stability, restricting the mobility of encapsulated drugs and thereby preventing leakage. This solid state also provides protection for chemically labile drugs against hydrolysis and enzymatic degradation in the harsh biological environment.

3.1.2. Surfactant Stabilization

The lipid core is stabilized in an aqueous dispersion by a layer of surfactants or emulsifiers, such as poloxamers or lecithins. These surfactants reduce interfacial tension and prevent particle aggregation. Importantly, the choice of surfactant can influence the surface charge and in vivo fate of the nanoparticles. The modification of this surface layer with targeting ligands, such as galactose, is crucial for directing the SLNs to specific tissues [9].

3.2. Biocompatibility and Metabolic Fate

3.2.1. Enzymatic Degradation Pathways

The clinical translation of nanomedicines is frequently hindered by toxicity concerns associated with synthetic polymers and metallic nanoparticles. SLNs address these challenges by utilizing lipids that are generally recognized as safe (GRAS). The metabolic fate of SLNs involves enzymatic degradation by lipases, resulting in the formation of endogenous lipid metabolites like fatty acids and

glycerol. These byproducts are easily eliminated or utilized by the body via physiological metabolic pathways, such as beta-oxidation [16].

Table 2. Comparison of Nanocarriers for Hepatic Drug Delivery

Nanocarrier System	Composition	Advantages	Disadvantages
Solid Lipid Nanoparticles (SLNs)	Solid lipids (waxes, triglycerides), Surfactants	Biocompatible (GRAS), controlled release, high physical stability, scalable production.	Limited drug loading capacity for some hydrophilic drugs, potential drug expulsion during storage.
Liposomes	Phospholipid bilayers, Cholesterol	High biocompatibility, can carry both hydrophilic and hydrophobic drugs.	Low physical stability (leaky), rapid oxidation of phospholipids, difficult scale-up.
Polymeric Nanoparticles	Synthetic (PLGA) or Natural polymers (Chitosan)	High stability, tunable degradation rates.	Risk of polymer toxicity, acidic degradation products can cause inflammation, slower clearance.
Metallic Nanoparticles	Gold, Silver, Iron Oxide	Unique optical/magnetic properties (theranostics), easy surface functionalization.	Non-biodegradable, potential for long-term accumulation and heavy metal toxicity.

3.2.2. Reduced Cytotoxicity Compared to Polymers

This inherent biodegradability significantly reduces the risk of chronic accumulation and associated cytotoxicity, a common drawback of non-degradable polymeric systems [15]. Consequently, SLNs represent a superior platform for hepatic delivery, maintaining hepatocyte viability even during prolonged treatment regimens. Studies have consistently demonstrated that lipid-based carriers exhibit a more favorable safety profile compared to cationic polymers or inorganic nanoparticles [16].

4. The Galactose Targeting Technique

4.1. Rationale for Surface Modification

4.1.1. Passive vs. Active Targeting Mechanisms

While SLNs naturally accumulate in the liver to some extent due to the reticuloendothelial system (RES), this "passive targeting" is often non-specific and largely involves uptake by Kupffer cells (liver macrophages) rather than hepatocytes. To shift the biodistribution towards the parenchymal cells (hepatocytes) which are often the site of viral replication and metabolic disorders, "active targeting" is required. Surface modification with galactose allows the nanoparticles to bypass macrophage clearance and specifically bind to hepatocytes [17, 13].

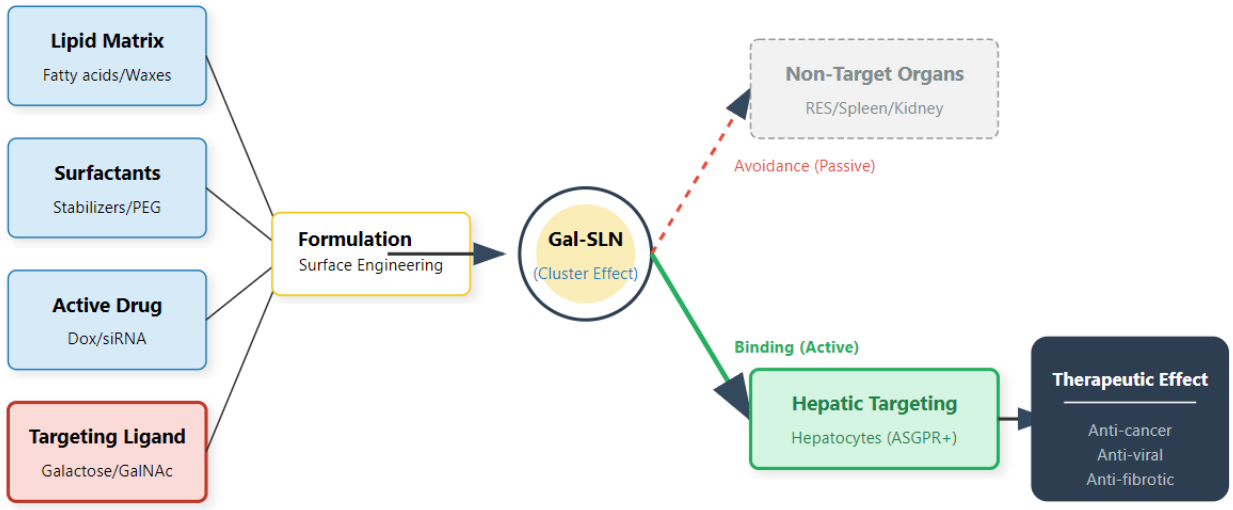

Figure 2. Engineering and Targeting Strategy of Gal-SLNs

4.1.2. Overcoming RES Clearance

One of the primary challenges in drug delivery is the rapid clearance of foreign particles by the immune system. By functionalizing the surface with hydrophilic linkers and galactose ligands, the SLNs can evade rapid recognition by the RES to a certain degree, extending their circulation time until they encounter the hepatic ASGPR. This specific interaction facilitates the "lock-and-key" mechanism, ensuring that the therapeutic payload is delivered exclusively to the cells expressing the receptor [18].

Table 3. Distinction Between Passive and Active Targeting Strategies

Feature	Passive Targeting	Active Targeting (ASGPR-Mediated)
Primary Mechanism	Enhanced Permeability and Retention (EPR) effect; Physicochemical properties (size/charge).	Specific Ligand-Receptor interaction ("Lock-and-Key").
Target Cell	Non-specific; often Kupffer cells (macrophages) or tumor interstitium.	Specifically Hepatocytes (Parenchymal cells).
Uptake Efficiency	Low to Moderate; limited by blood flow and vessel permeability.	High; driven by receptor affinity and rapid endocytosis.
Off-Target Effects	Higher risk of accumulation in spleen and lungs.	Significantly reduced; focused accumulation in liver tissue.

4.2. Engineering Galactosylated SLNs

4.2.1. Conjugation Strategies

Surface engineering involves the conjugation of galactose residues to the lipid matrix. This can be achieved through various chemical strategies, such as coupling galactose to a lipid anchor (e.g., distearoyl-phosphatidylethanolamine or DSPE) via a polyethylene glycol (PEG) spacer. The PEG spacer provides flexibility, allowing the galactose ligand to extend beyond the nanoparticle corona and interact effectively with the receptor binding pocket [17].

Table 4. Strategies for Anchoring Galactose Ligands to SLNs

Conjugation Strategy	Description	Advantages
Galactosylated Lipids (Pre-formulation)	Galactose is chemically linked to a lipid (e.g., Gal-stearic acid) *before* SLN preparation.	Ensures uniform distribution of ligand within the lipid matrix; high stability.
PEG-Spacer Linkage (e.g., Gal-PEG-DSPE)	Galactose is attached to the distal end of a PEG chain anchored to a phospholipid.	PEG spacer reduces steric hindrance, allowing the ligand to extend freely for receptor binding.
Electrostatic Coating	Coating the SLN surface with a cationic polymer bearing galactose (e.g., Gal-Chitosan).	Simple preparation method; provides surface charge modification.
Post-Insertion Technique	Gal-lipid micelles are incubated with pre-formed SLNs to transfer the ligand to the surface.	Allows for precise control of ligand density without disrupting SLN formation.

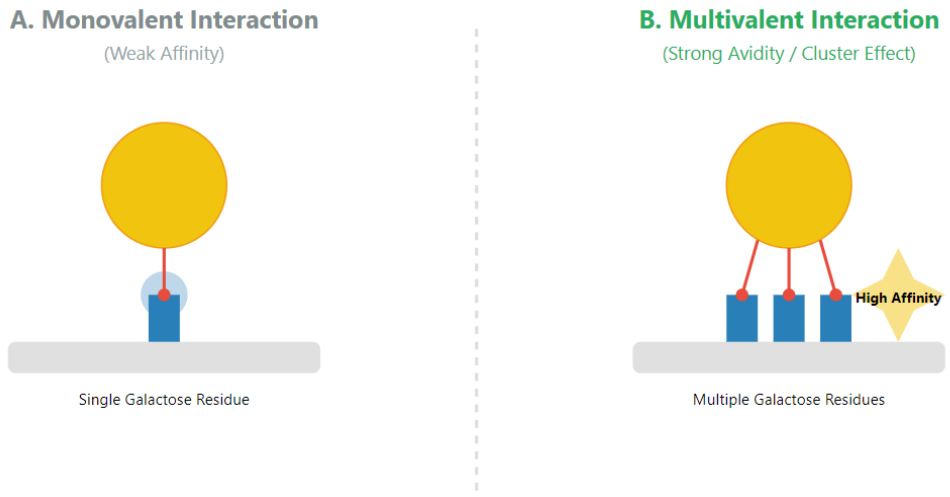

Figure 3. The "Cluster Glycoside Effect" and Multivalency

4.2.2. The Cluster Glycoside Effect

Recent advancements have focused on the "cluster glycoside effect," which posits that multivalent interactions (multiple ligands on the nanoparticle binding to multiple receptor subunits) significantly enhance binding affinity compared to monovalent interactions. By optimizing the density of galactose on the SLN surface, researchers can achieve super-selective targeting, dramatically increasing the uptake efficiency by hepatocytes compared to non-modified counterparts [14].

5. Therapeutic Applications in Hepatic Pathologies

5.1. Precision Oncology in Hepatocellular Carcinoma (HCC)

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is characterized by aggressive tumor growth and high mortality rates, largely due to the poor specificity of conventional chemotherapeutic agents like doxorubicin. The overexpression of ASGPR on HCC cells provides a unique therapeutic window for targeted intervention.

5.1.1. Improving Cytotoxicity and Reducing Systemic Side Effects

Galactose-functionalized SLNs act as "Trojan horses," delivering high concentrations of cytotoxic payloads directly into the cytoplasm of malignant hepatocytes. Studies have demonstrated that this receptor-mediated entry pathway significantly enhances the intracellular accumulation of drugs compared to free drug administration. This targeted approach minimizes exposure to non-target organs such as the heart and kidneys, thereby reducing dose-limiting toxicities like cardiotoxicity and nephrotoxicity [17].

5.1.2. Overcoming Multidrug Resistance (MDR)

A critical barrier in HCC treatment is the development of Multidrug Resistance (MDR), often mediated by P-glycoprotein efflux pumps that eject drugs from cancer cells. ASGPR-mediated endocytosis bypasses these transmembrane pumps by internalizing the drug-loaded nanoparticles into endosomes, releasing the drug deep within the cytoplasm. This mechanism effectively circumvents the efflux machinery, restoring the sensitivity of resistant tumor cells to chemotherapy [4].

Table 5. Therapeutic Applications of Galactose-Modified SLNs

Disease Indication	Therapeutic Agent	Targeting Outcome	Clinical Benefit
Hepatocellular Carcinoma (HCC)	Doxorubicin, Sorafenib, Paclitaxel	Increased accumulation in tumor cells; evasion of P-gp efflux pumps.	Higher cytotoxicity to cancer cells; reduced cardiotoxicity and systemic side effects.
Viral Hepatitis (B & C)	Acyclovir, Ribavirin, Lamivudine	Specific delivery to infected hepatocytes (viral reservoir).	Enhanced viral suppression; reduced frequency of administration.
Liver Fibrosis	Silymarin, Curcumin, Retinoic Acid	Targeted delivery to injured hepatocytes and proximity to Stellate cells.	Reduced collagen deposition; anti-inflammatory effects; hepatoprotection.
Gene Therapy	siRNA, miRNA, Plasmid DNA	Protection from nuclease degradation; facilitated intracellular entry.	Effective gene silencing (e.g., surviving knockdown); correction of genetic defects.

5.2. Antiviral Therapy for Chronic Hepatitis

Chronic viral infections, specifically Hepatitis B (HBV) and Hepatitis C (HCV), require prolonged antiviral therapy to suppress viral replication and prevent progression to cirrhosis. Systemic administration of antivirals often leads to erratic distribution and severe adverse effects.

5.2.1. Inhibiting Viral Replication

Galactose-targeted SLNs offer a platform for the exclusive delivery of antiviral nucleoside analogs to infected hepatocytes, the primary reservoir of viral replication. By achieving high intra-hepatic drug concentrations, these nanocarriers can more effectively inhibit viral polymerase activity. Furthermore, the sustained release profile of SLNs maintains therapeutic drug levels over extended periods, potentially improving patient compliance by reducing dosing frequency [19].

5.2.2. Reversal of Hepatic Fibrosis

Hepatic fibrosis is characterized by the excessive accumulation of extracellular matrix proteins, primarily driven by Activated Hepatic Stellate Cells (aHSCs). While ASGPR is primarily on hepatocytes, crosstalk between hepatocytes and HSCs is vital.

5.3. Indirect and Direct Targeting Strategies

Therapeutic strategies utilizing ASGPR-targeted SLNs can deliver antifibrotic agents (e.g., silymarin or specific corticosteroids) to hepatocytes to reduce inflammation, a key trigger for HSC activation. Additionally, under pathological conditions, specific receptor expression patterns may shift, and engineered SLNs can be tailored to target the fibrotic microenvironment. This targeted delivery aids in halting collagen deposition and promoting matrix degradation, offering a potential avenue for reversing fibrotic damage [13].

5.4. Gene Therapy and Nucleic Acid Delivery

The advent of gene therapy offers curative potential for genetic liver disorders and acquired diseases, yet the delivery of naked nucleic acids is hampered by rapid enzymatic degradation and poor cellular uptake.

5.4.1. siRNA and miRNA Therapeutics

Galactose-modified SLNs serve as robust vectors for the delivery of small interfering RNA (siRNA) and microRNA (miRNA). The cationic lipid components within the SLN matrix can complex with anionic nucleic acids, protecting them from serum nucleases. Upon ASGPR-mediated internalization, these carriers facilitate endosomal escape, allowing the siRNA to enter the cytoplasm and silence pathological genes such as those driving tumor proliferation or viral replication with high specificity [8, 20].

6. Conclusion

The utilization of galactose-modified Solid Lipid Nanoparticles into the therapeutic arsenal for liver diseases represents a significant leap forward in precision medicine. This strategy transforms the nanocarrier into a guided delivery vehicle capable of pinpoint accuracy by capitalizing on the high-affinity interaction between galactose and the ASGPR. The approach successfully amalgamates the biocompatibility of solid lipid matrices with the specificity of ligand-receptor interactions, addressing the critical bottlenecks of systemic toxicity and poor bioavailability. The clinical optimization of these targeted systems is poised to redefine the treatment, offering a highly efficient, patient-friendly alternative for combating chronic liver pathologies at their cellular source

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