A Review of Sertraline Loaded Nanocarrier Systems for Enhanced Solubility

Chintan Aundhia[1], Shrikaant Kulkarni[1]
[1]Lincoln University College, 47301, Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia
Email ID: aundhia@gmail.com

Abstract: Depression is a major global health disorder that significantly affects quality of life and productivity. Sertraline hydrochloride, a widely prescribed selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor, suffers from poor aqueous solubility and pH-dependent precipitation, leading to dissolution-limited absorption and variability in therapeutic response. Conventional formulation approaches such as solid dispersions and inclusion complexes have shown partial improvement but fail to provide consistent and scalable solutions. Nanotechnology-based delivery systems have emerged as promising strategies for addressing such challenges in poorly soluble drugs. Solid lipid nanoparticles (SLNs) are an advanced lipid-based nanocarrier system that combines biocompatibility, structural stability, and controlled drug release properties. The solid lipid matrix enables efficient drug encapsulation, reduces direct drug exposure to aqueous environments, and minimizes precipitation under gastrointestinal conditions. This study proposes the development and optimization of sertraline-loaded SLNs to enhance dissolution behavior and formulation stability. The expected outcomes include improved dissolution performance, reduced precipitation tendency, and enhanced physicochemical stability.
Keywords: Sertraline hydrochloride; Solid lipid nanoparticles; Solubility enhancement; Lipid nanocarriers; Dissolution enhancement

Introduction

Depression is a complex and prevalent psychiatric disorder characterized by persistent low mood, loss of interest, impaired cognitive function, and reduced quality of life. It represents a significant global health burden, affecting more than 4% of the world's population and contributing substantially to disability and reduced productivity. The management of depression relies heavily on pharmacotherapy, with selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) being the most commonly prescribed class of antidepressants due to their favourable safety profile and clinical efficacy.[1]

Among SSRIs, sertraline hydrochloride is widely used for the treatment of major depressive disorder, anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Its mechanism of action involves selective inhibition of serotonin reuptake in the synaptic cleft, thereby enhancing serotonergic neurotransmission and improving mood regulation. Despite its therapeutic advantages, the clinical performance of sertraline is often limited by its unfavourable physicochemical properties.[2]

Sertraline hydrochloride is classified as a Biopharmaceutics Classification System (BCS) Class II drug, characterized by low aqueous solubility and high permeability. Its poor solubility leads to dissolution-limited absorption following oral administration. Furthermore, sertraline is a weakly basic drug, exhibiting pH-dependent solubility behaviour. While it is relatively soluble in acidic gastric conditions, it tends to precipitate in the higher pH environment of the intestine, resulting in reduced drug availability for

absorption. This phenomenon contributes to variability in oral bioavailability and inconsistent therapeutic outcomes.[3, 4]

Over the years, several formulation strategies have been explored to overcome these limitations, including solid dispersions, inclusion complexes, lipid-based systems, and alternative delivery routes. While these approaches have shown partial success, they often suffer from limitations such as poor physical stability, lack of scalability, and insufficient control over drug precipitation under physiological conditions. Therefore, there remains a need for an efficient and robust formulation strategy that can simultaneously enhance solubility, maintain drug stability, and control precipitation behaviour.

In recent years, nanotechnology-based drug delivery systems have gained considerable attention as promising tools for improving the performance of poorly soluble drugs. Among these, lipid-based nanocarriers have emerged as particularly attractive due to their biocompatibility, ability to solubilize lipophilic drugs, and potential to improve oral absorption. Solid lipid nanoparticles (SLNs) represent a well-established class of lipid nanocarriers composed of physiologically acceptable solid lipids stabilized by surfactants.[5, 6]

SLNs offer several advantages, including nanoscale particle size, high surface area, controlled drug release, and protection of the drug from chemical degradation. The solid lipid matrix enables efficient incorporation of lipophilic drugs and may maintain them in a molecularly dispersed or amorphous state, thereby enhancing dissolution. Additionally, SLNs can reduce direct exposure of the drug to aqueous environments, which is particularly beneficial for weakly basic drugs like sertraline that are prone to precipitation under intestinal conditions.[7]

Despite the promising potential of SLNs, their application in the formulation of sertraline hydrochloride has not been extensively investigated. Moreover, there is limited understanding of how lipid matrix composition and formulation parameters influence precipitation behaviour and dissolution performance. Systematic optimization approaches such as Design of Experiments (DoE) have also not been adequately applied in this context.

Therefore, the present study aims to develop and optimize solid lipid nanoparticles of sertraline hydrochloride to enhance its solubility and dissolution performance while minimizing pH-dependent precipitation. This approach is expected to provide a rational and scalable formulation strategy for improving the oral delivery of sertraline and other weakly basic drugs.

Literature review

Several formulation strategies have been explored to address the solubility and dissolution limitations of poorly water-soluble drugs such as sertraline hydrochloride. Cyclodextrin-based inclusion complexes are among the earliest approaches, where drug molecules are entrapped within the hydrophobic cavity of cyclodextrins, leading to enhanced aqueous solubility. Such systems have demonstrated improved dissolution and pharmacological performance; however, limitations such as low drug loading capacity and scalability restrict their practical application.

Solid dispersion systems using hydrophilic polymers have also been widely investigated to enhance drug dissolution by converting the crystalline drug into an amorphous form. Although these systems improve initial dissolution rates, their long-term stability is often compromised due to recrystallization during storage.

In recent years, lipid-based nanocarriers have emerged as promising systems for improving the solubility and bioavailability of lipophilic drugs. Among these, nanostructured lipid carriers (NLCs) have demonstrated improved drug loading capacity and controlled release behavior due to their mixed lipid matrix structure. However, the presence of liquid lipids may result in structural imperfections, affecting long-term stability and reproducibility.

Solid lipid nanoparticles (SLNs), composed entirely of solid lipids, offer improved physical stability, controlled drug release, and protection of the encapsulated drug from degradation. Their nanoscale size enhances surface area and dissolution rate, while the lipid matrix helps maintain the drug in a dispersed or amorphous state. Additionally, SLNs have shown potential in reducing precipitation of weakly basic drugs by limiting their exposure to aqueous environments and modulating drug release behavior under physiological conditions.

Recent studies have highlighted the growing importance of lipid-based nanocarriers in improving oral delivery of poorly soluble drugs. Advances in formulation strategies, including optimization using Design of Experiments (DoE), have further improved reproducibility and performance of such systems.

Despite these advancements, the application of SLNs specifically for sertraline hydrochloride remains limited. Existing studies primarily focus on general solubility enhancement techniques or alternative nanocarrier systems, with minimal emphasis on precipitation control and systematic optimization. Therefore, there is a clear need to develop and optimize SLN-based formulations to address the dissolution and precipitation challenges associated with sertraline hydrochloride.

Table 1. Comparison of Previous Studies with the Proposed Work

Study (Drug/System & Key Findings – Delivery Strategy and Limitation)	**Solubility/Dissolution Issue Addressed**	**Nanocarrier-Based Delivery**	**Lipid-Based Strategy**	**Ref**
Conventional formulations (Sertraline): Poor aqueous solubility and pH-dependent precipitation lead to dissolution-limited absorption and variable bioavailability.	Yes	No	No	[8]
Cyclodextrin complexes & solid dispersions (Sertraline, poorly soluble drugs): Improve solubility via inclusion complexation and amorphization; limitation includes low drug loading and recrystallization instability.	Yes	No	No	[9, 10]
Polymeric nanoparticles & liposomes (Paclitaxel, Doxorubicin): Enhance drug stability and encapsulation; limitation includes limited improvement in dissolution of highly lipophilic drugs and physical instability.	Yes	Yes	Partial	[11, 12]
Nanostructured lipid carriers (Curcumin, Simvastatin): Improve solubility, drug loading, and controlled release; limitation includes structural instability due to mixed lipid matrix.	Yes	Yes	Yes	[13]

Solid lipid nanoparticles (Ibuprofen, Clozapine): Provide improved stability, controlled release, and dissolution enhancement; limitation includes limited drug-specific optimization and precipitation-focused studies.	Yes	Yes	Yes	[14]
This Work – Sertraline-loaded SLNs: Proposed optimized SLN system aims to enhance dissolution, reduce pH-dependent precipitation, and provide a scalable lipid-based delivery platform.				

Problem Statement Addressed / Motivation

Sertraline hydrochloride exhibits poor aqueous solubility and pH-dependent precipitation, which results in dissolution-limited absorption and variability in therapeutic outcomes following oral administration. These limitations necessitate the development of an advanced formulation strategy to improve its biopharmaceutical performance.

Method Used / Proposed Strategy

The present study proposes the development of solid lipid nanoparticles (SLNs) as a lipid-based nanocarrier system to enhance solubility and dissolution. The approach involves incorporation of the drug into a solid lipid matrix using suitable homogenization techniques, followed by systematic optimization through Design of Experiments (DoE) to achieve desirable physicochemical characteristics.

Key Findings

The SLN-based formulation is expected to significantly improve dissolution performance by reducing particle size and enhancing surface area. Encapsulation within the lipid matrix may also minimize pH-dependent precipitation and improve drug stability. Additionally, the system offers potential for controlled drug release and improved reproducibility through optimized formulation parameter.

Limitations and Future Work

Although SLNs show promising potential for improving solubility and dissolution, further investigations are required to validate the formulation through in vivo pharmacokinetic and bioavailability studies. Future work should also focus on scale-up feasibility, long-term stability evaluation, and exploration of the platform for other weakly basic drugs.

Conclusion

This study highlights the potential of lipid-based nanocarrier systems, particularly solid lipid nanoparticles, in addressing the solubility and dissolution challenges associated with poorly water-soluble drugs such as sertraline hydrochloride. The integration of nanotechnology with systematic optimization approaches offers a rational pathway for enhancing drug performance and stability. Furthermore, such strategies provide a scalable and versatile platform for improving oral delivery of BCS Class II drugs.

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