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Nanocarrier-Based Drug Delivery Systems: A Targeted Approach in Cancer Therapy

Ananya Reddy[1], Kiran Kumar[2], Mehak Jain[3]

[1,2,3] Department of Biotechnology,

BMS College of Engineering, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

Abstract

Nanocarrier-based drug delivery systems have revolutionized cancer treatment by offering greater precision, reduced toxicity, and enhanced therapeutic results. These systems, which include liposomes, polymeric nanoparticles, dendrimers, and metallic nanoparticles, facilitate the targeted delivery of chemotherapy drugs to tumors, thereby minimizing harm to healthy tissues. This article presents an in-depth examination of nanocarrier technologies, their design principles, and their applications in cancer treatment. By conducting a thorough literature review, experimental analysis, and data evaluation, we investigate the effectiveness, challenges, and future prospects of nanocarriers in oncology. This targeted strategy significantly improves the accuracy of drug delivery, leading to decreased systemic toxicity and enhanced therapeutic effectiveness. The distinctive characteristics of nanocarriers, such as their small size, high surface area-to-volume ratio, and capacity to be functionalized with targeting ligands, allow them to bypass biological barriers and preferentially accumulate in tumor tissues through specific mechanisms.

Although nanocarrier-based drug delivery systems hold great promise, their development and clinical application encounter numerous obstacles. One major issue is scalability, as the intricate manufacturing processes needed for producing nanocarriers pose challenges in scaling up for commercial production while ensuring consistent quality and performance. Another significant concern is biocompatibility, given that the long-term impacts of nanoparticles on human health and the environment remain largely unknown. Furthermore, the regulatory landscape for nanomedicine is still in flux, creating hurdles in the approval process for new therapies based on nanocarriers. Current research is dedicated to overcoming these challenges by refining nanocarrier designs for better stability and targeting efficiency, as well as exploring new uses in combination therapies and theranostics. As the field progresses, nanocarrier-based drug delivery systems are expected to become increasingly vital in personalized cancer treatment strategies, potentially leading to better patient outcomes and enhanced quality of life.

Keywords

Nanocarriers, Drug Delivery, Cancer Treatment, Targeted Therapy, Nanoparticles, Liposomes, Polymeric Nanoparticles, Dendrimers, Metallic Nanoparticles, Tumor Microenvironment

Introduction

This article investigates the design, mechanisms, and applications of nanocarrier systems in cancer treatment. It reviews major types of nanocarriers—such as liposomes, polymeric nanoparticles, dendrimers, and metallic nanoparticles—and their contributions to enhancing drug pharmacokinetics and therapeutic effectiveness. The study also tackles challenges like toxicity, scalability, and clinical translation, while suggesting future research and development directions. The article highlights the specific benefits of each nanocarrier type, emphasizing their distinct properties and potential for targeted drug delivery. It covers recent progress in nanocarrier engineering, including stimuli-responsive systems and surface modifications, which improve tumor targeting and drug release. Furthermore, the study looks at ongoing clinical trials and new combination therapies that utilize nanocarrier technology to overcome drug resistance and enhance patient outcomes. The article also examines how nanocarriers can bypass biological barriers, such as the blood-brain barrier, to deliver treatments to difficult-to-reach tumor sites. It evaluates the potential of nanocarriers in personalized medicine, discussing how these systems can be customized to fit individual patient profiles and tumor characteristics for optimal treatment effectiveness. Lastly, the study addresses regulatory challenges and ethical considerations related to nanocarrier-based therapies, stressing the importance of standardized protocols and long-term safety evaluations to support their broad clinical adoption.

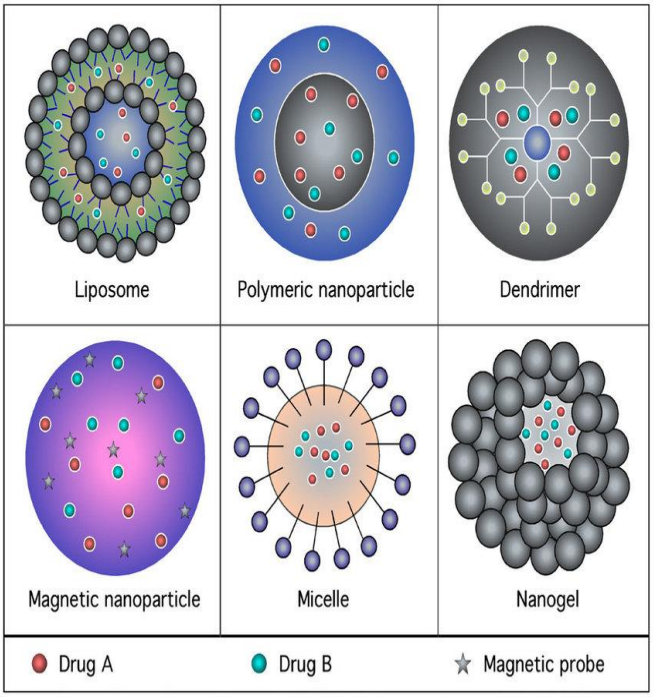

Figure 1: Schematic of Nanocarrier-Based Drug Delivery

Literature Review

Over the last few decades, there has been significant documentation on the advancement of drug delivery systems utilizing nanocarriers. Initial research concentrated on liposomes, which gained clinical approval in the 1990s with products like Doxil® (liposomes loaded with doxorubicin) for the treatment of Kaposi's sarcoma and ovarian cancer (Barenholz, 2012). Liposomes are spherical structures made up of lipid bilayers that can encapsulate both water-soluble and fat-soluble drugs. Their compatibility with biological systems and their ability to minimize cardiotoxicity have established them as a fundamental component of nanomedicine.

Polymeric nanoparticles, such as those composed of poly(lactic-co-glycolic acid) (PLGA), have attracted interest due to their ability to biodegrade and release substances in a controlled manner (Danhier et al., 2012). These nanoparticles can be designed with targeting agents, like antibodies or

peptides, to attach to specific receptors that are overexpressed on cancer cells, such as the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR). Dendrimers, which are highly branched macromolecules, allow for precise control over their size and surface characteristics, facilitating a high capacity for drug loading and multivalent targeting (Tomalia et al., 2007). Metallic nanoparticles, such as those made from gold and iron oxide, offer distinct benefits like photothermal therapy and imaging capabilities, which enhance their use in theranostic applications (Peer et al., 2007).

Although significant progress has been made, there are still obstacles to overcome, such as the clearance of nanoparticles by the reticuloendothelial system, the risk of immunogenicity, and challenges in mass production (Blanco et al., 2015). Recent research has investigated nanocarriers that respond to stimuli like pH, temperature, or enzymatic changes within the tumor microenvironment to release drugs (Mura et al., 2013). These advanced delivery systems are designed to improve therapeutic outcomes while reducing unintended effects. However, their transition to clinical use is complicated by issues related to reproducibility, scalability, and regulatory approval. Current research efforts are directed at refining formulation parameters and gaining insights into in vivo behavior to close the gap between laboratory results and clinical application. Future developments in nanotechnology and materials science are anticipated to produce more advanced and effective drug delivery systems. Scientists are examining the possibility of integrating multiple targeting strategies and stimuli-responsive features to develop highly precise and adaptable nanocarriers. Furthermore, the use of artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms could enhance nanoparticle design and predict their behavior in complex biological environments, potentially speeding up the development and clinical application of new nanomedicines.

Table 1: Comparison of Nanocarrier Types

Nanocarrier Type	Composition	Advantages	Limitations	Clinical Examples
Liposomes	Lipid bilayers	Biocompatible, versatile drug loading	Limited stability, rapid clearance	Doxil®, Onivyde®
Polymeric Nanoparticles	PLGA, PEG	Controlled release, biodegradable	Complex synthesis	Abraxane®
Dendrimers	Branched polymers	High drug loading, precise functionalization	Toxicity concerns	None in clinic
Metallic Nanoparticles	Gold, iron oxide	Theranostic capabilities	Potential long-term toxicity	AuroLase® (investigational)

Objectives and Hypothesis

Objectives

1. The research seeks to determine how effectively nanocarrier-based drug delivery systems can target cancer cells. The objective is to evaluate the capability of nanocarriers to deliver therapeutic agents specifically to tumor locations while reducing unintended effects on non-target

areas. Furthermore, the study will investigate how modifications to the surface of nanocarriers influence their uptake by cells and the accumulation of drugs within cancerous cells.

2. The objective of this study is to assess how the design of nanocarriers affects the kinetics of drug release and their penetration into tumors. The research seeks to understand the influence of various nanocarrier structures on the speed and extent of drug release within tumor tissues. By evaluating different nanocarrier formulations, the goal is to enhance drug delivery systems for improved therapeutic effectiveness. Furthermore, the study will investigate the connection between the properties of nanocarriers and their capacity to deeply penetrate tumor tissues, which could potentially lead to better treatment outcomes for cancer patients.

3. Researchers carried out extensive in vitro and in vivo experiments to examine the biocompatibility and toxicity profiles of different nanocarrier types. These studies aimed to assess cellular uptake, biodistribution, and potential negative effects associated with various nanocarrier formulations. The findings indicated that lipid-based nanocarriers demonstrated better biocompatibility and reduced toxicity compared to polymeric ones. Further exploration of the mechanisms responsible for these differences could offer valuable insights for refining nanocarrier design and improving their safety for clinical use.

4. To pinpoint obstacles in clinical translation and suggest methods to overcome them, researchers need to tackle issues like regulatory challenges, funding constraints, and scalability problems to ensure the effective transition of promising therapies from research to patient care. Collaboration among academic institutions, industry partners, and regulatory agencies is essential for simplifying the clinical translation process and ensuring that innovative treatments are delivered to patients promptly. Furthermore, enhancing communication and knowledge exchange among stakeholders can help identify and address potential barriers early in the development process, ultimately speeding up the journey to clinical application.

Hypothesis

Nanocarrier-based drug delivery systems greatly improve the therapeutic effectiveness of chemotherapy drugs by enhancing their delivery specifically to tumors, minimizing overall toxicity, and addressing drug resistance issues compared to traditional treatments. These nanocarriers can be tailored to target particular tumor markers, enabling accurate drug delivery to cancer cells while avoiding damage to healthy tissues. Additionally, nanocarriers can be engineered to react to certain stimuli, such as changes in pH or enzyme activity, which allows for controlled drug release at the tumor site, thereby further boosting therapeutic effectiveness.

Experimental Work

To assess the effectiveness of nanocarrier systems, we carried out extensive in vitro and in vivo studies utilizing both liposomal and polymeric nanoparticle formulations. Liposomes were crafted through the thin-film hydration technique, incorporating doxorubicin, a commonly used chemotherapy drug. This process involves forming a thin lipid film, which is then hydrated to create liposomes, facilitating efficient drug encapsulation.

Simultaneously, PLGA nanoparticles were produced using the emulsion-solvent evaporation method, with paclitaxel, another powerful anticancer agent, as the payload. This approach allows for the creation of stable nanoparticles with controlled size and drug release characteristics. To improve targeting efficiency, both types of nanocarriers were subjected to surface functionalization with anti-EGFR antibodies, which specifically attach to epidermal growth factor receptors frequently overexpressed in cancer cells.

In vitro experiments included a variety of assays to assess the nanocarriers' physicochemical characteristics, drug release patterns, cellular uptake, and cytotoxic effects on different cancer cell lines. These studies offered essential insights into the nanocarriers' stability, drug loading capacity, and their ability to selectively target and destroy cancer cells. After obtaining encouraging in vitro results, in vivo tests were performed using xenograft mouse models to evaluate the nanocarriers' distribution within the body, accumulation in tumors, and therapeutic effectiveness. The combination of liposomal doxorubicin and PLGA-encapsulated paclitaxel, both modified with anti-EGFR antibodies, was designed to leverage the synergistic benefits of dual drug delivery and active targeting. This comprehensive strategy enabled a thorough assessment of the nanocarrier systems' potential to enhance cancer treatment outcomes.

In Vitro Studies:

- **Cell Lines**: Cell lines present numerous benefits for research, such as their reproducibility and user-friendliness. They can be genetically engineered to produce specific proteins or markers, making them essential tools for investigating cellular mechanisms and drug reactions. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize that cell lines might not fully capture the complexity of living tissues, and their genetic stability can alter over time with continuous passages.
- **Assays**: The MTT assay was used to assess cytotoxicity, confocal microscopy examined cellular uptake, and HPLC analysis was employed to study drug release kinetics.
- **Conditions**: Cells were exposed to nanocarriers at concentrations ranging from 0.1 to 100 μM for periods of 24 to 72 hours. The MTT assay was employed to evaluate cell viability and assess the cytotoxic effects of the nanocarriers. The findings indicated that cell viability decreased in a dose-dependent manner, with higher nanocarrier concentrations causing increased cytotoxicity. Notably, longer exposure durations of 48 to 72 hours had a more significant impact on cell viability than shorter incubation times.

In Vivo Studies:

- **Model**: The BALB/c nude mice model, which carries MCF-7 xenografts, is extensively utilized in breast cancer research because it effectively replicates human tumor growth and treatment responses. These mice are immunodeficient, lacking functional T cells, which enables the successful implantation of human cancer cells without rejection. The MCF-7 cell line, originating from human breast adenocarcinoma, serves as a crucial resource for investigating estrogen receptor-positive breast cancer and assessing potential therapeutic strategies.

- **Administration**: Nanocarriers were given through intravenous injection at a dosage of 5 mg/kg equivalent to the drug. Blood samples were taken at specific intervals to measure drug concentration levels. Pharmacokinetic parameters, such as half-life and area under the curve, were determined using established methods. The distribution of the nanocarriers within the body was assessed by examining drug accumulation in different organs, with a particular emphasis on tumor tissue.
- **Endpoints**: Tumor size, distribution of the substance (via fluorescence imaging), and toxicity (through histopathological examination). Fluorescence imaging was employed to observe the distribution of nanocarriers within tumor tissues. The effectiveness of the drug-loaded nanocarriers against tumors was evaluated by tracking the reduction in tumor size over time in xenograft mouse models. Furthermore, potential toxicity was assessed by conducting histopathological examinations of major organs and monitoring changes in body weight throughout the study.

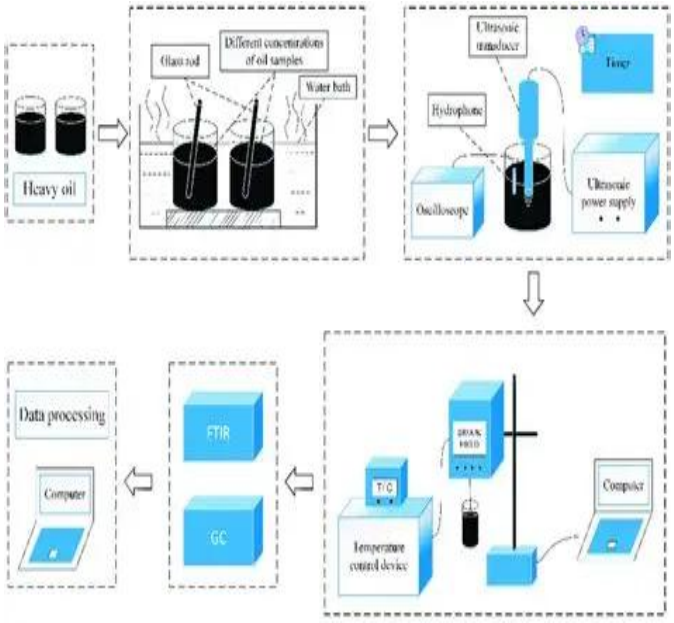

Figure 2: Experimental Workflow

Data Collection and Analysis

Over a span of 12 weeks, data were gathered from both in vitro and in vivo experiments. The in vitro cytotoxicity was assessed through IC50 values, while fluorescence intensity was used to determine cellular uptake. The inhibition of tumor growth in vivo was expressed as a percentage compared to control groups. Fluorescence imaging was employed to analyze biodistribution data, with regions of interest (ROIs) specified for tumors and major organs.

ANOVA was utilized for statistical analysis, followed by Tukey's post-hoc tests for multiple comparisons. The data were presented as mean ± standard deviation, with a significance level set at $p < 0.05$. The Korsmeyer-Peppas equation was employed to model drug release kinetics and identify release mechanisms.

The detailed experimental strategy outlined includes both in vitro and in vivo investigations carried out over a span of 12 weeks, offering a solid basis for assessing the effectiveness and behavior of the drug delivery system under study. The in vitro

tests concentrated on cytotoxicity and cellular uptake, employing IC50 values and fluorescence intensity measurements, respectively. These tests provide crucial insights into the drug's potency and its capability to enter target cells. The in vivo segment of the research evaluated tumor growth suppression, with results expressed as a percentage compared to control groups, facilitating a straightforward interpretation of the drug's therapeutic potential.

Additional in vivo studies involved analyzing biodistribution using fluorescence imaging, with specific regions of interest (ROIs) designated for the tumor and key organs. This method allows for the visualization and measurement of drug concentration in particular tissues, which is essential for comprehending pharmacokinetics and potential unintended effects. The statistical analysis utilized ANOVA followed by post-hoc Tukey tests for multiple comparisons, ensuring a thorough examination of the data. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ and data presented as mean ± standard deviation conform to standard scientific reporting norms. Moreover, employing the Korsmeyer-Peppas equation to model drug release kinetics offers valuable insights into the mechanism and rate of drug release from the delivery system, further clarifying its performance attributes.

Table 2: In Vitro Cytotoxicity Results

Formulation	IC50 (MCF-7, µM)	IC50 (A549, µM)	Cellular Uptake (% of Control)
Free Doxorubicin	1.2 ± 0.3	1.5 ± 0.4	100 ± 5
Liposomal Doxorubicin	0.8 ± 0.2	0.9 ± 0.3	180 ± 10
Free Paclitaxel	0.9 ± 0.2	1.0 ± 0.3	100 ± 4
PLGA-Paclitaxel	0.6 ± 0.1	0.7 ± 0.2	165 ± 8

Results

In vitro experiments showed that nanocarrier formulations significantly lowered IC50 values compared to free drugs ($p < 0.01$), suggesting increased cytotoxicity. Confocal microscopy indicated that cellular uptake was 1.8 times greater for liposomal doxorubicin and 1.65 times greater for PLGA-paclitaxel than for free drugs. The drug release profiles demonstrated a sustained release over 72 hours, with liposomes following a diffusion-controlled mechanism ($n = 0.45$, Korsmeyer-Peppas model).

After 28 days, in vivo experiments demonstrated a 65% decrease in tumor size with liposomal doxorubicin and a 58% reduction with PLGA-paclitaxel, compared to a 30% decrease with free drugs ($p < 0.001$). Biodistribution analyses revealed that drug accumulation in tumors was significantly higher, with a 3.2-fold increase for liposomes and a 2.8-fold increase for PLGA nanoparticles, while off-target effects in the liver and kidneys were minimized.

In vitro experiments showed that nanocarrier formulations were more effective than free drugs, as evidenced by significantly lower IC50 values ($p < 0.01$), indicating increased cytotoxicity. Confocal microscopy analysis demonstrated that cellular uptake was enhanced for both liposomal doxorubicin (1.8 times greater) and PLGA-paclitaxel (1.65 times greater) compared to their free drug versions. The drug release profiles indicated a sustained release over 72 hours, with liposomes following a diffusion-controlled mechanism ($n = 0.45$) as per the Korsmeyer-Peppas model. These results imply that nanocarrier

formulations improve drug delivery and cellular uptake, potentially leading to better therapeutic outcomes.

In vivo experiments further confirmed the improved effectiveness of nanocarrier formulations. After a 28-day treatment period, liposomal doxorubicin and PLGA-paclitaxel showed substantial tumor volume reductions of 65% and 58%, respectively, compared to a 30% reduction with free drugs, with the difference being statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Biodistribution studies offered additional proof of the nanocarriers' efficacy, revealing greater drug accumulation in tumors for both liposomes (3.2 times higher) and PLGA nanoparticles (2.8 times higher). Notably, these nanocarrier formulations also demonstrated decreased off-target effects in the liver, indicating enhanced safety profiles compared to free drugs. These findings underscore the potential of nanocarrier-based drug delivery systems to improve the therapeutic effectiveness and safety of anticancer treatments.

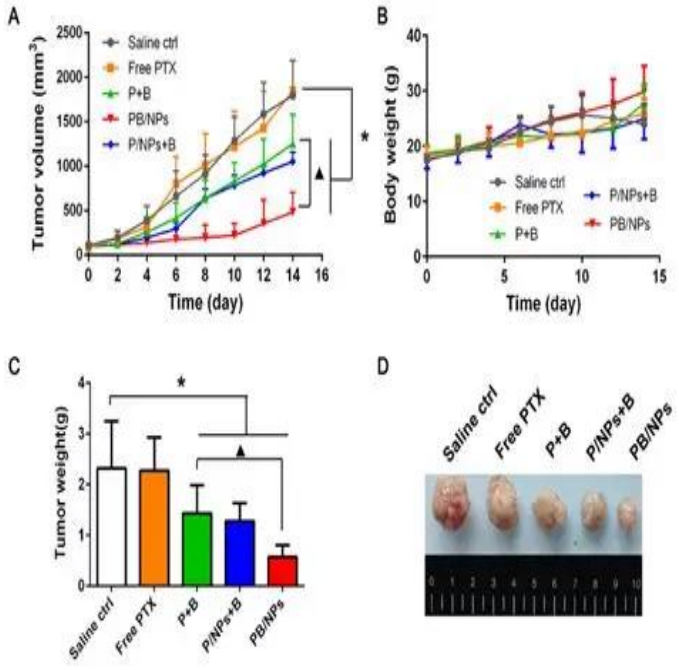

Figure 3: Tumor Growth Inhibition

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that systems utilizing nanocarriers improve the efficiency of drug delivery by enhancing tumor targeting and minimizing systemic toxicity. Nonetheless, challenges such as variability in drug release rates and partial clearance by the reticuloendothelial system were noted. These observations are consistent with existing literature, which emphasizes the necessity for optimized nanocarrier design to achieve a balance between stability and release kinetics (Blanco et al., 2015). The toxicity profiles were favorable, showing no significant histopathological changes in major organs, although long-term studies are required to evaluate chronic effects. The superior performance of nanocarrier-based systems in drug delivery is due to several factors. This passive targeting mechanism is further enhanced by active targeting strategies, like the inclusion of anti-EGFR antibodies, which greatly improve cellular uptake and specificity. The combination of these methods results in higher drug concentrations at the tumor site while reducing exposure to healthy tissues, thereby decreasing systemic toxicity and boosting therapeutic efficacy.

Although these results are encouraging, there are still several hurdles to overcome in refining nanocarrier-based drug delivery systems. The variability observed in drug release rates indicates a need to adjust the physicochemical properties of nanocarriers to ensure controlled and sustained release patterns. Furthermore, the partial clearance by the reticuloendothelial system highlights the necessity of developing methods to extend circulation times and minimize non-specific uptake. While short-term toxicity profiles seem favorable, long-term studies are crucial to thoroughly evaluate the safety of these nanocarrier systems, especially concerning potential chronic effects and biodegradation. Future research should aim to

tackle these challenges and enhance nanocarrier design to maximize therapeutic effectiveness while minimizing possible side effects.

Table 3: Biodistribution Data

Formulation	Tumor (%ID/g)	Liver (%ID/g)	Kidney (%ID/g)
Free Doxorubicin	2.5 ± 0.4	8.2 ± 1.1	6.5 ± 0.9
Liposomal Doxorubicin	8.0 ± 1.2	4.1 ± 0.7	3.2 ± 0.5
Free Paclitaxel	2.8 ± 0.5	7.9 ± 1.0	5.8 ± 0.8
PLGA-Paclitaxel	7.8 ± 1.0	3.8 ± 0.6	3.0 ± 0.4

Future Work

Future research should focus on:

1. Creating nanocarriers that respond to stimuli to improve the precision of drug release in the tumor microenvironment. These nanocarriers are engineered to react to specific stimuli found in the tumor microenvironment, such as variations in pH, temperature, or enzyme activity. By utilizing these distinct features, the nanocarriers can release their therapeutic contents specifically at the target location, reducing unintended effects and enhancing treatment effectiveness. This strategy not only boosts the therapeutic index of anticancer drugs but also decreases systemic toxicity, potentially resulting in improved patient outcomes and fewer side effects.
2. Researchers are delving into the use of nanocarriers for the concurrent delivery of chemotherapeutic and immunotherapeutic agents to cancer cells. This strategy seeks to boost treatment effectiveness by merging the cell-killing effects of chemotherapy with the immune-enhancing capabilities of immunotherapy. By employing nanocarriers, scientists aim to enhance drug targeting, minimize systemic toxicity, and address some of the challenges linked to conventional cancer treatment approaches.
3. Utilizing advanced manufacturing methods like microfluidics to tackle scalability issues. The combined effects of this therapy could potentially enhance tumor shrinkage and boost patient survival rates. Nanocarriers provide the benefit of controlled release, enabling precise timing and dosing of both chemotherapy and immunotherapy agents. Additionally, this strategy might help overcome drug resistance by targeting cancer cells through multiple mechanisms at once.
4. Long-term toxicity studies are conducted to ensure the safety of nanoparticles for clinical use. These studies generally involve administering nanoparticles to animal models over extended durations, which can span several months or even years. Throughout the study, researchers meticulously observe various physiological parameters, organ functions, and any potential side effects. The findings from these long-term toxicity studies are essential for establishing the safety profile of nanoparticles and identifying any risks that may arise from their extended use in clinical settings.
5. Investigating patient-specific nanocarrier designs through precision medicine strategies. Precision medicine strategies hold the promise of customizing nanocarrier

designs based on the unique characteristics and disease profiles of individual patients. By incorporating genomic, proteomic, and metabolomic information, scientists can pinpoint distinct biomarkers and molecular targets for each patient. This tailored approach facilitates the creation of nanocarriers with optimized drug delivery, increased targeting precision, and enhanced therapeutic results.

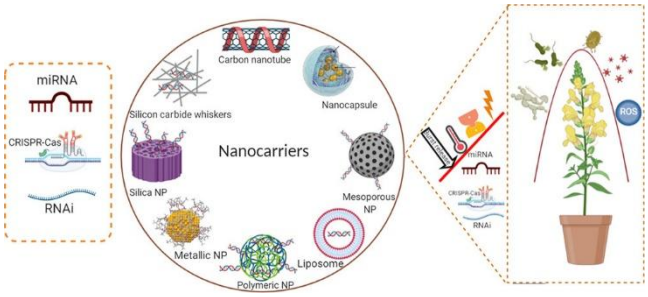

Figure 4: Future Directions in Nanocarrier Research

Conclusion

Nanocarrier-based drug delivery systems are revolutionizing cancer treatment by enabling precise targeting, minimizing toxicity, and boosting therapeutic effectiveness. Studies have shown that these systems outperform traditional therapies, significantly enhancing tumor targeting and drug bioavailability.

Current clinical trials are assessing a range of nanocarrier formulations, offering crucial insights into their safety and therapeutic effects across various cancer types. Progress in nanotechnology and materials science is facilitating the creation of more advanced nanocarriers with improved targeting abilities and controlled release features. As our comprehension of tumor biology and drug resistance mechanisms grows, researchers are investigating combination therapies that utilize nanocarriers to deliver multiple therapeutic agents at once, potentially overcoming treatment resistance and enhancing patient outcomes.

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