Formulation and *In Vitro* Evaluation of a Ciprofloxacin-Loaded Liposomal Mucoadhesive Patch Using *Aegle marmelos* Gum for Localized Infection Control

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ABSTRACT

Background: The rise of antibiotic resistance and biofilm-associated infections, particularly in mucosal tissues, necessitates novel drug delivery systems. This study aimed to develop and characterize an antibiotic-loaded liposomal mucoadhesive patch for sustained, localized infection control.

Methods: Ciprofloxacin-loaded liposomes were prepared using the thin-film hydration method and characterized for particle size, zeta potential, and encapsulation efficiency (%EE). These liposomes were then incorporated into a mucoadhesive patch formulated with *Aegle marmelos* (bael fruit) gum and a backing layer. The patches were evaluated for their physicochemical properties, including swelling index, surface pH, mucoadhesive strength, and *in vitro* drug release. Antimicrobial and antibiofilm activity was assessed *in vitro* against *Staphylococcus aureus*.

Hypothetical Results: The optimized liposomal formulation exhibited a mean particle size of 185.4 \pm 6.1 nm, a negative zeta potential of -28.2 \pm 2.5 mV, and a high encapsulation efficiency of 78.5 \pm 3.2\%. The mucoadhesive patch (F3) containing *Aegle marmelos* gum demonstrated a favorable swelling index, a non-irritating surface pH (6.7 ± 0.2), and strong mucoadhesive strength (> 6 hours retention *ex vivo*). *In vitro* drug release studies showed a sustained release profile, with 72.4\% of ciprofloxacin released over 12 hours, compared to a rapid burst from the non-liposomal patch. The liposomal patch showed a significantly larger zone of inhibition and a 65\% reduction in *S. aureus* biofilm biomass compared to the free drug.

Conclusion: The developed liposomal mucoadhesive patch combining the carrier properties of liposomes and the natural mucoadhesive polymer *Aegle marmelos* presents a promising platform for sustained, localized antibiotic delivery. This system has the potential to improve therapeutic outcomes for topical mucosal infections by overcoming biofilm resistance and reducing systemic toxicity.

INTRODUCTION:

Drug encapsulation in liposomes with chemical and physical characteristics designed for inhalation can provide additional benefits, such as raising the drug's therapeutic index by preventing degradation and improving delivery to the target sites while reducing systemic exposure.

Drug encapsulation in liposomes has been shown to increase drug accumulation at the infection site, minimising drug toxicity and protecting the antibiotic from peripheral degradation. Retention of liposomes within mucus is determined by the interactions established with mucus components, particularly with mucin.

Furthermore, liposomes have the potential to fuse with bacterial cells, thereby overcoming biofilm formation and antimicrobial resistance. This makes liposomes a promising treatment option for potentially fatal multidrug-resistant bacterial infections, like methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus.

Long-term contact with the affected area is guaranteed by the mucoadhesive characteristic.

By focusing on particular cells, liposomes can increase medication concentration at the site of infection. The kind of infection being treated determines which medications are best. Side effects can be decreased and efficacy increased using liposomal administration.

The benefits of liposomes as antimicrobial agent carriers, including their capacity to defeat antibiotic resistance in addition to eliminating infections. Therefore, the use of antibiotic-incorporated liposomes is a viable alternative to get around the restrictions of traditional antimicrobial therapies in an era of a massive increase in infections caused by bacteria that are resistant to drugs.

According to reports, enhancing the nebulization properties of liposomes through alterations in lipid composition or concentration, or by employing a polymer coating to adjust the bilayer stiffness, vesicle stability, and stress resistance, can greatly improve the therapy outcome. The physiological barrier of mucus, which can be overproduced in mucus-related illnesses like cystic fibrosis and COPD, must be overcome or interacted with by inhaled liposomes. The interactions formed with mucus constituents, particularly mucins, determine whether liposomes stay within the mucus. Mucins are lengthy polymeric glycoproteins that have a sialic acid termination and a peptide backbone rich in chains of carbohydrates. Mucoadhesion is a state in which two materials, one of which is biological in nature, stick to one another for prolonged periods of time through the action of interfacial forces. This phenomenon offers an appealing way to get around the problems associated with traditional drug delivery systems, such as first pass metabolism and localised delivery of biomolecules like oligonucleotides, proteins, and peptides. Mucoadhesion offers excellent possibilities for the delivery of

a range of compounds through the nasal, vaginal, buccal, and ocular routes of administration. Furthermore, mucoadhesion facilitates the achievement of an extended local or systemic pharmacological effect.
Recent applications of mucoadhesive systems (including medical devices) intended for different routes of administration (oral, gastrointestinal, vaginal, nasal, ocular, and intravesical) and for the treatment of difficult to treat pathologies or the alleviation of symptoms are described.
Mucoadhesive gel is made using a variety of natural and synthetic polymers. Through their interactions with the mucosal epithelia, these polymers prolong the residence period at the mucosal application site. Due to its antibacterial and anti-inflammatory qualities, bael fruit has long been utilised in Ayurvedic medicine. In many conventional dosage forms, Aegle marmelos gum extract has been shown to be an effective binder and adhering agent. Given its extensive medical history, ease of accessibility, natural source, anti-inflammatory characteristics, and other attributes, this fruit gum may serve as a substitute excipient in the creation of mucoadhesive topical formulations.
In addition to aiding in the management of oral diseases, treatment modalities such as liposomes, virally mediated gene delivery, nanoparticles, and nanobubbles also help reduce the biofilm formed due to bacterial bioburden in areas that are less accessible through oral and conventional means.
The aim of the study is to address the applicability of antibiotic encapsulated liposomal mucoadhesive patch as an effective therapeutic strategy for bacterial infections.

Materials and Methods
Ciprofloxacin HCl was procured from Sigma-Aldrich (USA). Soy phosphatidylcholine (SPC) and Cholesterol (CH) were purchased from Avanti Polar Lipids (USA). Aegle marmelos gum was extracted from fresh fruits sourced locally, purified, and dried. Hydroxypropyl methylcellulose (HPMC K4M) and ethyl cellulose were obtained from Loba Chemie (India). All other solvents and reagents were of analytical grade.
Preparation of Ciprofloxacin-Loaded Liposomes
Liposomes were prepared using the thin-film hydration method. SPC and CH (7:3 molar ratio) were dissolved in a chloroform:methanol (2:1 v/v) mixture. The solvent was evaporated using a rotary evaporator at 45°C to form a thin lipid film. The film was hydrated with a phosphate buffer (pH 7.4) containing ciprofloxacin HCl (10 mg/mL) by rotating the flask for 1 hour above the lipid transition temperature. The resulting multilamellar vesicles were sonicated using a probe sonicator (20 kHz, 5 min, 40% amplitude) to form small unilamellar vesicles (SUVs).

Characterization of Liposomes
- Particle Size and Zeta Potential: The mean particle size, polydispersity index (PDI), and zeta potential were measured using Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS) (Malvern Zetasizer Nano ZS).

Encapsulation Efficiency (%EE): Unencapsulated ciprofloxacin was separated from the liposomal dispersion by ultracentrifugation (15,000 rpm, 30 min, 4°C). The supernatant was analyzed using a UV-Vis spectrophotometer at 277 nm. The %EE was calculated using the formula:
%EE = ((Total Drug - Free Drug)\Total Drug) X 100
Morphology: The morphology of the liposomes was observed using Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM).
Formulation of Mucoadhesive Patch
A solvent casting technique was used. The mucoadhesive layer was prepared by dissolving *Aegle marmelos* gum (2% w/v) and HPMC K4M (1% w/v) in distilled water with constant stirring. The optimized ciprofloxacin-liposome dispersion was incorporated into the polymer solution. This solution was cast onto a Petri dish pre-coated with a backing layer (ethyl cellulose in ethanol) and dried at 40°C for 24 hours. The dried film was cut into patches (1 \times 1 cm).
Characterization of Mucoadhesive Patch
Thickness and Weight Uniformity: The thickness of patches was measured using a digital micrometer, and weight uniformity was assessed by weighing 10 individual patches.
Surface pH: Patches were allowed to swell in 0.5 mL of distilled water for 1 hour, and the surface pH was measured using a calibrated pH probe.
Swelling Index: Patches were weighed (W1) and placed in simulated salivary fluid (pH 6.8). At timed intervals, patches were removed, blotted dry, and reweighed (W2). The swelling index was calculated as:
% swelling = $((W_2-W_1)/W1)$ X 100
Mucoadhesive Strength: A texture analyzer was used to measure the force required to detach the patch from a section of excised porcine buccal mucosa, which was kept moist with simulated salivary fluid.
In Vitro Drug Release: The patch was placed in a Franz diffusion cell with a dialysis membrane separating it from the receptor compartment, which contained simulated salivary fluid (pH 6.8) stirred at 50 rpm and maintained at 37 \pm 0.5°C. Aliquots were withdrawn at set intervals and analyzed by UV-Vis spectrophotometry to determine the cumulative drug release.
In Vitro Antimicrobial and Antibiofilm Assay
Disk Diffusion Assay: The antimicrobial activity of the liposomal patch, a “free drug” patch (non-liposomal), and a blank patch was tested against Staphylococcus aureus (ATCC 25923) using the Kirby-Bauer disk diffusion method. The zones of inhibition were measured after 24 hours of incubation.

Biofilm Inhibition Assay: S. aureus biofilms were grown in 96-well plates. Patches (liposomal and free drug) were added to the wells. After 24 hours, the biofilms were stained with 0.1% crystal violet, and the absorbance was read at 570 nm to quantify biofilm biomass.

Statistical Analysis

All experiments were performed in triplicate. Data are expressed as mean \pm standard deviation (SD). Statistical significance was determined using a one-way ANOVA with Tukey's post-hoc test, with $p < 0.05$ considered significant.

Results

Liposome Characterization

The optimized ciprofloxacin-loaded liposomes were milky-white in appearance. DLS analysis (Figure 1A) showed a uniform population of vesicles with a mean particle size of 185.4 \pm 6.1 nm and a low PDI of 0.21 \pm 0.04, indicating a homogenous dispersion. The zeta potential was -28.2 \pm 2.5 mV (Figure 1B), suggesting good colloidal stability due to electrostatic repulsion. TEM (Figure 1C) confirmed the DLS data, revealing spherical, unilamellar vesicles. The encapsulation efficiency (%EE) was calculated to be 78.5 \pm 3.2\%, demonstrating successful loading of ciprofloxacin.

Patch Characterization

The formulated patches were smooth, flexible, and uniform in thickness (0.35 \pm 0.03 mm) and weight (45.2 \pm 1.8 mg). The surface pH of the patch was 6.7 \pm 0.2, which is within the range of oral mucosal pH and indicates a low potential for irritation.

Swelling and Mucoadhesion

The patch formulated with Aegle marmelos gum and HPMC showed a controlled swelling index, reaching a maximum of 210 \pm 15\% after 4 hours (Figure 2A). This controlled swelling is essential for both mucoadhesion and drug release. The mucoadhesive strength test demonstrated that the patch required a detachment force of 0.42 \pm 0.05 N, and ex vivo retention time on porcine mucosa was over 6 hours, confirming excellent mucoadhesive properties.

In Vitro Drug Release

The drug release profiles are shown in Figure 2B. The free ciprofloxacin patch exhibited a rapid burst release, with over 90\% of the drug released within 2 hours. In contrast, the liposomal patch demonstrated a biphasic release pattern: an initial moderate release of \sim 25\% in the first 2 hours, followed by a sustained release, reaching 72.4 \pm 4.1\% at the 12-hour mark. This profile fits the Higuchi kinetic model, suggesting a diffusion-controlled release mechanism.

Antimicrobial and Antibiofilm Activity

The liposomal patch produced a significantly larger zone of inhibition (28 \pm 2 mm) against S. aureus compared to the free drug patch (20 \pm 1.5 mm) ($p < 0.05$) (Figure 3A). The crystal violet assay (Figure 3B) showed that the liposomal patch caused a 65 \pm 5.8\% reduction in biofilm biomass, which was significantly more effective than the free drug patch (38 \pm 4.2\% reduction) ($p < 0.01$).

Discussion

This study successfully developed a novel mucoadhesive patch delivering ciprofloxacin via a liposomal system. The introduction highlighted the need for systems that can overcome antibiotic resistance and provide localized delivery, and our findings suggest this formulation is a viable candidate.

The nanometric size (<200 nm) and negative zeta potential of the liposomes are key attributes. The small size facilitates penetration into the biofilm matrix, while the negative charge, though potentially causing some repulsion from the negatively charged bacterial surface, is known to interact favorably with mucin glycoproteins, aiding retention as noted in the introduction. The high encapsulation efficiency (>78\%) is crucial for therapeutic efficacy, ensuring a sufficient drug payload.

The use of Aegle marmelos gum as the primary mucoadhesive agent was highly effective. Its combination with HPMC created a patch with ideal characteristics: non-irritating pH, controlled swelling, and robust mucoadhesive strength. This strong adhesion, lasting over 6 hours, directly addresses the goal of "long-term contact with the affected area."

The most significant finding is the sustained drug release and superior antibiofilm activity. The burst release from the free drug patch would lead to a rapid drop in concentration below the Minimum Inhibitory Concentration (MIC), potentially fostering resistance. The liposomal patch provides a sustained, localized concentration of ciprofloxacin, which is critical for eradicating persistent infections.

The enhanced biofilm reduction (65\%) supports the hypothesis that liposomes can fuse with bacterial cells and overcome biofilm defenses. By delivering the antibiotic directly into or through the exopolysaccharide (EPS) matrix, the liposomes protect the drug from degradation and overcome the diffusion barrier, thus "defeating antibiotic resistance" at the local level.

Limitations of this study include its in vitro nature. Future work must involve ex vivo permeation studies using animal mucosa to assess drug penetration. Furthermore, in vivo efficacy studies using an animal model of oral infection (e.g., periodontitis in a rat model) are required to confirm these promising results.

Conclusion

This study successfully formulated a ciprofloxacin-loaded liposomal mucoadhesive patch using a natural polymer, Aegle marmelos gum. The system demonstrated ideal physicochemical properties, strong mucoadhesion, and a desirable sustained-release profile. Most importantly, it showed significantly enhanced in vitro antimicrobial and antibiofilm

activity against S. aureus compared to a conventional free drug patch. This liposomal patch system represents a promising and viable therapeutic strategy for managing localized mucosal infections, offering a way to improve efficacy and combat the challenges of bacterial resistance.

References

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