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Microsphere-Based Drug Delivery: A Critical Review of Innovations and Applications

Saurabh Jawahar Sanghavi[1], Satish Kumar Sarankar[2,*]

Abstract

Microspheres have emerged as a revolutionary approach in pharmaceutical sciences, offering controlled and targeted drug delivery with improved bioavailability, stability, and patient compliance. These spherical carriers, ranging from nanometers to micrometers in size, can encapsulate both hydrophilic and hydrophobic drugs, enabling sustained and site-specific release. The development of microspheres has been significantly driven by the need to enhance drug efficacy while minimizing systemic side effects. This review provides a comprehensive analysis of the latest advancements in microsphere fabrication techniques, including solvent evaporation, spray drying, coacervation, ionic gelation, supercritical fluid technology, and microfluidics. Each method offers unique advantages in terms of particle size control, drug encapsulation efficiency, and scalability. The integration of nanotechnology and artificial intelligence into microsphere development has further enhanced precision in drug formulation, optimizing release kinetics and therapeutic effectiveness. Recent innovations in drug encapsulation and release mechanisms have led to the development of smart microspheres responsive to physiological stimuli, such as pH, temperature, and enzymes. These intelligent delivery systems have shown promising applications in cancer therapy, gastrointestinal drug delivery, and chronic disease management. A comparative analysis between conventional and advanced microsphere formulations highlights the significant improvements in drug stability, controlled release, and targeted therapy. Despite these advancements, challenges, such as stability issues, large-scale production constraints, and regulatory concerns remain barriers to commercial success. However, emerging solutions, including biodegradable polymers, AI-driven drug formulation, and eco-friendly fabrication processes, are addressing these hurdles, paving the way for next-generation microsphere-based therapeutics. Looking ahead, microsphere technology is expected to play a crucial role in the evolution of personalized medicine, with the potential to revolutionize treatment modalities through patient-specific drug delivery systems. The integration of microspheres with innovative biomedical approaches holds immense promise for enhancing therapeutic efficacy and safety. This review aims to provide an in-depth understanding of pharmaceutical microspheres, their fabrication, applications, and future directions, offering valuable insights for researchers and industry professionals striving to optimize drug delivery strategies.

Keywords: Microspheres, controlled drug delivery, microsphere fabrication techniques, biodegradable polymers, targeted drug release, smart drug delivery systems

***Author for Correspondence**
Satish Kumar Sarankar
E Mail: satish.sarankar@gmail.com

[1]Research Scholar, Department of Pharmacy, Mansarovar Global University, Sehore, Madhya Pradesh, India
[2]Professor & Principal, Faculty of Pharmacy, Mansarovar Global University, Sehore, Madhya Pradesh, India

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INTRODUCTION

Microspheres have gained significant attention in the pharmaceutical industry due to their potential for controlled drug delivery, site-specific targeting, and improved bioavailability. These spherical particles, ranging from nanometers to micrometers in size, can be engineered to release drugs in a controlled manner, reducing side effects and enhancing therapeutic efficacy. Microspheres have

been extensively researched and developed for various pharmaceutical applications, including oral, injectable, and topical formulations. Their ability to encapsulate both hydrophilic and hydrophobic drugs makes them versatile carriers for a wide range of therapeutic agents [1]. The development of microsphere-based drug delivery systems is driven by the need for improved patient compliance, reduced dosing frequency, and enhanced drug stability. The choice of materials, including biodegradable polymers, such as polylactic-co-glycolic acid (PLGA), chitosan, and alginate, plays a crucial role in determining the drug release kinetics and biocompatibility of microspheres [2]. Furthermore, advancements in formulation techniques have enabled the production of microspheres with precise control over size, morphology, and drug loading efficiency.

Microspheres offer several advantages over conventional drug delivery systems, including protection of drugs from degradation, prolonged circulation time, and improved solubility of poorly water-soluble drugs. These benefits make them particularly useful for delivering proteins, peptides, vaccines, and genetic materials. Additionally, microspheres can be modified to exhibit site-specific drug release through ligand conjugation, ensuring effective treatment with minimal systemic toxicity. In recent years, there has been a surge in interest in smart microspheres that respond to physiological stimuli, enabling targeted drug delivery and minimizing systemic side effects. pH-sensitive, temperature-sensitive, and enzyme-responsive microspheres are being actively explored for their potential in cancer therapy, gastrointestinal drug delivery, and inflammatory disease treatment [3]. Moreover, the integration of nanotechnology and artificial intelligence in microsphere research has opened new avenues for optimizing drug delivery strategies, enhancing precision, and reducing the trial-and-error approach in formulation development.

The primary aim of this review is to explore the recent advancements in microsphere technology, focusing on fabrication techniques, drug encapsulation strategies, comparative analysis, challenges, and prospects. By understanding these developments, researchers can further improve microsphere-based drug delivery systems, ultimately leading to more effective and safer pharmaceutical formulations.

ADVANCES IN MICROSPHERE FABRICATION TECHNIQUES

- *Smart and Stimuli-Responsive Microspheres:* Smart microspheres are designed to respond to specific environmental stimuli, such as pH, temperature, and enzymatic activity, ensuring site-specific and controlled drug release. For instance, pH-sensitive microspheres made of Eudragit polymers are used in colon-targeted drug delivery, releasing drugs in response to the alkaline pH of the intestine. Similarly, thermosensitive microspheres composed of poly(N-isopropylacrylamide) (PNIPAM) can release drugs at body temperature, making them useful for localized therapies. Enzyme-responsive microspheres, such as those incorporating dextran-based carriers, are employed for site-specific release in cancer treatment, where enzymes overexpressed in tumor environments trigger drug release [4, 5]. Additionally, redox-sensitive microspheres, such as those composed of disulfide cross-linked polymers, are being explored for intracellular drug delivery, particularly in cancer and inflammatory diseases.
- *Microfluidics in Microsphere Synthesis:* Microfluidics has revolutionized microsphere synthesis by offering precise control over particle size, shape, and encapsulation efficiency. This technique uses micro-scale channels to produce uniform microspheres with high reproducibility. For example, liposomal microspheres synthesized via microfluidic methods show enhanced drug retention and bioavailability, making them ideal for targeted drug delivery. Polymeric microspheres fabricated through microfluidic platforms, such as PLGA-based microspheres for protein and peptide delivery, demonstrate superior encapsulation efficiency and stability compared to traditional emulsification methods. Additionally, microfluidics facilitates the production of multi-layered microspheres, allowing for complex drug release profiles in combination therapies [6]. Emerging research in digital microfluidics is further enabling the automated, high-throughput production of microspheres with tunable properties for personalized medicine.
- *3D Printing Applications:* The integration of 3D printing technology in microsphere fabrication has enabled the development of highly customized and precisely controlled drug delivery systems. 3D-

printed microspheres can be tailored for patient-specific treatments, optimizing drug release kinetics [7]. One example is the fabrication of hydrogel-based microspheres using stereolithography, which allows for controlled swelling and drug diffusion properties. Another innovative application is the use of fused deposition modeling (FDM) to create polylactic acid (PLA) microspheres loaded with anticancer drugs, offering sustained and localized drug release. Furthermore, 3D-printed porous microspheres, such as those used for vaccine delivery, allow for controlled antigen release and enhanced immune responses [8]. The ability of 3D printing to create composite microspheres incorporating multiple drugs or biomolecules has also opened new possibilities for multi-modal therapies, including combination cancer treatments and regenerative medicine.

- *Solvent Evaporation Method:* One of the most widely used techniques, this method involves dissolving both the drug and polymer in an organic solvent, followed by emulsification in an aqueous phase. The solvent is then evaporated, leading to microsphere formation. This approach is commonly used for hydrophobic drug encapsulation. The main advantage of this method is its simplicity and ability to produce microspheres with controlled size and drug release properties [9]. However, the use of organic solvents and the need for efficient solvent removal processes pose challenges in large-scale production.
- *Spray Drying:* This high-throughput method involves atomizing a drug-polymer solution into fine droplets, followed by rapid solvent evaporation to yield microspheres. Spray drying is advantageous for producing large batches of microspheres with uniform particle sizes and is particularly useful for thermolabile drugs. The process allows precise control over particle size, morphology, and drug distribution. However, high energy consumption and potential drug degradation due to heat exposure are some limitations of this technique [10].
- *Coacervation/Phase Separation:* In this technique, polymer-rich and polymer-poor phases are formed through the addition of a non-solvent, leading to microsphere precipitation. This method allows for efficient encapsulation of proteins and peptides while maintaining their structural integrity. Coacervation is particularly useful for the sustained release of macromolecules. However, process control and phase separation conditions must be optimized to ensure high encapsulation efficiency and uniform particle formation [11].
- *Ionic Gelation:* Commonly used for polysaccharide-based microspheres, this method involves crosslinking polymers, like alginate with divalent cations (e.g., calcium chloride), to form microspheres. It is widely utilized for the delivery of proteins and hydrophilic drugs due to its mild preparation conditions. The major advantage of ionic gelation is its biocompatibility and ability to preserve the biological activity of encapsulated drugs. However, instability in physiological conditions and limited drug-loading capacity are some challenges associated with this method [12].
- *Supercritical Fluid Technology:* An emerging technique that employs supercritical CO_2 as an anti-solvent to precipitate drug-polymer mixtures into microspheres. This method eliminates the need for organic solvents, making it an environmentally friendly alternative for microsphere fabrication. Supercritical fluid technology enables precise control over particle size, porosity, and drug distribution [13]. Despite its advantages, the high-pressure requirements and costly equipment setup limit its widespread adoption.

Each of these techniques has its own set of advantages and limitations, depending on the physicochemical properties of the drug, desired release profile, and intended route of administration. Continuous advancements in these methods are driving the development of more efficient and scalable microsphere fabrication processes (Table 1).

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN DRUG ENCAPSULATION AND RELEASE MECHANISMS

- *Nanoparticle-Loaded Microspheres:* Nanoparticle-loaded microspheres combine the benefits of nanoparticles and microspheres, improving drug encapsulation efficiency and controlled release. These microspheres are developed through techniques, such as emulsion-solvent evaporation, spray drying, or ionic gelation, ensuring uniform drug dispersion. A prominent example is the use of gold

nanoparticles embedded within PLGA microspheres to achieve a dual-release system, where nanoparticles enable rapid drug release while the microsphere matrix sustains long-term drug delivery [14, 15]. This approach is particularly useful in cancer therapy, where initial high-dose drug release is needed for tumor regression, followed by sustained drug release to prevent recurrence.

- *Hybrid Microspheres for Multifunctional Delivery:* Recent innovations include hybrid microspheres that integrate multiple drug delivery strategies, allowing co-delivery of hydrophilic and hydrophobic drugs. These microspheres are synthesized using methods, such as coacervation, spray drying, or layer-by-layer assembly to encapsulate multiple therapeutic agents [16]. For example, lipid-polymer hybrid microspheres have been developed using a combination of liposomes and PLGA, enabling both rapid and sustained drug release in a single formulation. Such hybrid systems are particularly beneficial in conditions, like tuberculosis, where both immediate and prolonged drug action is required to prevent bacterial resistance.
- *Innovations in Polymeric Carriers:* The development of advanced biodegradable and biocompatible polymers has significantly improved microsphere drug delivery. These microspheres are often synthesized through solvent evaporation, nanoprecipitation, or electrospinning methods, incorporating functional polymers for targeted and sustained release. For instance, pH-responsive polymers, like poly(β-amino ester) have been used to create microspheres that release drugs in response to the acidic tumor microenvironment, enhancing site-specific drug action while minimizing systemic toxicity [17]. Additionally, silk fibroin-based microspheres have demonstrated improved biocompatibility and tunable degradation rates, making them ideal for long-term therapeutic applications, such as sustained-release hormone therapies.
- *Layered and Core-Shell Microspheres:* Layered and core-shell microsphere designs have gained traction due to their ability to provide distinct drug release profiles. These microspheres are fabricated using techniques, such as electrospraying, emulsification-solvent diffusion, and phase separation, allowing for compartmentalized drug loading. Core-shell microspheres, created using coaxial electrospraying techniques, allow for precise control over drug loading in different layers, leading to biphasic or triphasic drug release. For instance, insulin-loaded core-shell microspheres provide an immediate burst release followed by a prolonged phase, improving glycemic control in diabetic patients [18].
- *Electrospun Microspheres for Enhanced Encapsulation:* Electrospinning, a technique traditionally used for nanofiber production, has been adapted for microsphere fabrication, allowing for high drug encapsulation efficiency and controlled drug release. These microspheres are developed by electrohydrodynamic processes that result in porous structures with high surface areas [19]. An example includes polycaprolactone (PCL)-based electrospun microspheres used for delivering antibiotics in chronic wound healing, where sustained release minimizes the need for frequent reapplication and reduces infection risks (Table 2).

Table 1. Key fabrication techniques for pharmaceutical microspheres, their advantages, limitations, and applications [14].

Fabrication Technique	Advantages	Limitations	Applications
Solvent Evaporation	Simple, controlled particle size, high drug loading	Organic solvent use, requires efficient removal	Hydrophobic drug delivery, controlled release
Spray Drying	High-throughput, uniform particle size	High energy use, potential thermal degradation	Peptide/protein drugs, vaccine delivery
Coacervation/Phase Separation	High encapsulation efficiency, preserves bioactivity	Process complexity, phase separation optimization	Sustained macromolecule release
Ionic Gelation	Biocompatible, mild processing conditions	Limited drug loading, stability issues in the body	Protein, hydrophilic drug delivery
Supercritical Fluid Technology	Solvent-free, precise control over properties	High pressure, expensive equipment	Environmentally friendly drug formulations
Microfluidics	High precision, monodisperse microspheres	Low throughput, challenging large-scale production	Personalized medicine, targeted therapy

Table 2. Some marketed pharmaceutical formulations containing microspheres [20].

Brand Name	Drug	Type of Microsphere	Method of Preparation	Application
Lupron Depot	Leuprolide Acetate	Biodegradable PLGA Microspheres	Solvent Evaporation	Treatment of prostate cancer, endometriosis, and precocious puberty
Sandostatin LAR	Octreotide	Biodegradable PLGA Microspheres	Spray Drying	Long-acting treatment for acromegaly and neuroendocrine tumors
Risperdal Consta	Risperidone	Biodegradable Polymer Microspheres	Coacervation/Phase Separation	Long-acting antipsychotic for schizophrenia and bipolar disorder
Trelstar Depot	Triptorelin	PLGA Microspheres	Solvent Evaporation	Treatment of prostate cancer
Vivitrol	Naltrexone	Biodegradable Microspheres	Spray Drying	Extended-release treatment for opioid and alcohol dependence
Zoladex	Goserelin	Biodegradable PLGA Microspheres	Ionic Gelation	Hormonal therapy for prostate and breast cancer
Bydureon	Exenatide	Biodegradable Microspheres	Supercritical Fluid Technology	Weekly injectable treatment for type 2 diabetes
Eligard	Leuprolide Acetate	PLGA Microspheres	Solvent Evaporation	Prostate cancer therapy

Comparative Analysis of Conventional vs. Advanced Microspheres

Conventional microspheres have been widely used in pharmaceutical applications for decades, but recent advancements have significantly enhanced their efficacy, functionality, and versatility. Traditional fabrication techniques, such as emulsion-solvent evaporation and spray drying, often lead to inconsistencies in particle size and drug loading. In contrast, advanced methods, like microfluidics and 3D printing, offer precise control over microsphere characteristics, ensuring uniformity and improved drug release kinetics. Advanced microspheres also provide enhanced drug protection and targeted delivery compared to conventional systems. For instance, while conventional microspheres may suffer from premature drug release and burst effects, layered and core-shell microspheres allow for sustained and multi-phasic drug release, improving therapeutic outcomes [21]. Additionally, hybrid microspheres combining polymeric and lipid components offer improved stability and bioavailability for poorly soluble drugs, a limitation often encountered in traditional microsphere formulations. Another significant advantage of advanced microspheres is their ability to integrate stimuli-responsive materials, enabling site-specific drug release.

Conventional microspheres rely primarily on diffusion-based drug release mechanisms, whereas modern designs incorporate pH-sensitive, temperature-sensitive, and enzyme-responsive polymers, allowing for precision medicine approaches. These advancements make microspheres particularly valuable in targeted therapies, such as cancer treatment and vaccine delivery. Furthermore, the scalability and cost-effectiveness of microsphere production remain key factors in pharmaceutical applications. While conventional methods are well-established and relatively low-cost, newer technologies, like microfluidics and 3D printing, though initially expensive, offer long-term benefits in terms of reproducibility, high-throughput production, and reduced batch-to-batch variations [22]. These improvements contribute to the overall efficiency and reliability of drug delivery systems, positioning advanced microspheres as the future of pharmaceutical innovation.

CHALLENGES AND EMERGING SOLUTIONS

- *Addressing Toxicity Concerns:* One of the primary challenges associated with microspheres is the potential toxicity of synthetic polymers used in their fabrication. Non-biodegradable or partially degradable polymers may lead to adverse effects, such as inflammatory responses or cytotoxicity. To mitigate this, researchers are focusing on developing naturally derived polymers, such as alginate, gelatin, and silk fibroin. Additionally, the use of biomimetic coatings, such as polyethylene

glycol (PEG), helps reduce immunogenicity and enhance biocompatibility, ensuring safer microsphere-based drug delivery systems [23].

- *Enhancing Scalability:* Large-scale production of microspheres with consistent size, morphology, and drug loading efficiency remains a critical challenge. Traditional fabrication methods, such as emulsion-solvent evaporation often lack reproducibility when scaled up. Emerging approaches, including continuous flow synthesis, spray drying, and microfluidic-assisted production, are being explored to improve scalability and maintain batch-to-batch uniformity [24]. Automation and artificial intelligence-driven process optimization are also being integrated to enhance the precision and efficiency of large-scale microsphere manufacturing.
- *Overcoming Regulatory Barriers:* The regulatory approval process for microsphere-based therapeutics is complex due to concerns related to stability, reproducibility, and long-term safety. Stringent guidelines set by agencies, such as the FDA and EMA require extensive preclinical and clinical evaluations, leading to prolonged development timelines. Strategies to overcome these challenges include adopting Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) from early development stages, conducting comprehensive toxicological assessments, and utilizing in silico modeling to predict microsphere behavior in vivo [25]. Collaboration between regulatory bodies and researchers can facilitate a smoother transition from laboratory research to commercial applications.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Microsphere technology is rapidly evolving, with advancements in personalized medicine, nanotechnology, and bioengineering paving the way for more sophisticated drug delivery systems. Future research will likely focus on:

- *Personalized Microsphere Formulations:* Using patient-specific data, including genetic and metabolic profiles, to design customized microspheres for optimized therapeutic effects. Personalized drug delivery strategies can improve treatment outcomes while minimizing side effects, especially for chronic diseases like diabetes and cancer [26].
- *Integration with Smart Technologies:* Development of microspheres that incorporate biosensors and responsive materials to enable real-time monitoring of drug release and physiological responses. These intelligent microspheres could be used for conditions requiring precise drug delivery, such as neurodegenerative disorders or cardiovascular diseases [27].
- *Advancements in Bioprinting:* Leveraging 3D bioprinting techniques to create microsphere-based scaffolds for tissue regeneration and regenerative medicine applications. Bioprinted microspheres can be designed to support stem cell growth, aiding in wound healing, bone regeneration, and organ repair [28].
- *Hybrid and Multifunctional Microspheres:* The future of microspheres lies in the development of hybrid microspheres that combine multiple functionalities, such as combining controlled drug release with imaging capabilities for theranostic applications. For example, iron oxide-loaded microspheres can provide simultaneous drug delivery and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) contrast enhancement [29].
- *Sustainable and Green Synthesis Methods:* The shift toward environmentally friendly and biocompatible production techniques is gaining traction. Green synthesis approaches using plant-derived polymers and solvent-free fabrication methods will likely become more prominent in future research and commercial applications [30].
- *Artificial Intelligence in Microsphere Design:* AI-driven modeling and machine learning algorithms can optimize microsphere formulations by predicting drug release profiles, stability, and biocompatibility. AI can also aid in automating the manufacturing process, improving reproducibility and efficiency .

CONCLUSIONS

Pharmaceutical microspheres represent a versatile and promising approach to drug delivery, offering controlled release, targeted delivery, and improved bioavailability. While conventional microspheres have provided valuable drug delivery solutions, recent advances in fabrication techniques, drug encapsulation strategies, and hybrid systems have significantly enhanced their potential. Despite existing challenges, ongoing research and technological innovations are paving the way for next-generation microsphere-based therapeutics, revolutionizing drug delivery systems and expanding their applications in personalized medicine and beyond.

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