Advancements in Nanotechnology-Based Paclitaxel Delivery Systems: Systematic Review on Overcoming Solubility, Toxicity, and Drug Resistance Challenges in Cancer Therapy

Balisa Mosisa Ejeta [1*], Malay K Das [1], Sanjoy Das [1]

Abstract

Background: Paclitaxel (PTX) is a potent chemotherapeutic widely used to treat cancers, including breast and ovarian cancer. However, its poor water solubility, severe side effects, and susceptibility to multidrug resistance (MDR) limit its clinical effectiveness. Recent research focuses on nanotechnology-based delivery systems, such as nanoparticles, liposomes, and dendrimers, to enhance PTX solubility, bioavailability, and targeted delivery. This systematic review analyzed studies from 2019 to 2023 that explore advancements in PTX delivery, focusing on improving therapeutic outcomes and reducing toxicity. Methods: A systematic search was conducted using PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. Forty-five primary research studies meeting inclusion criteria for nanotechnology-based systems, targeted delivery, and MDR strategies were analyzed for improvements in PTX delivery efficacy. Results: The review identified significant advancements in PTX delivery through nanoparticle and targeted systems. Polymer-based nanoparticles, ligand-conjugated carriers, and co-delivery systems with MDR inhibitors showed improved PTX solubility, stability, and selective targeting. Theragnostic platforms combining diagnostics and therapy offered real-time tracking, enhancing personalized treatment. Conclusion: While nanotechnology-based PTX delivery shows promise in overcoming PTX's limitations, challenges remain, particularly in nanoparticle stability, tumor microenvironment barriers, and regulatory hurdles. Future research should address these challenges to enable the clinical translation of PTX systems, providing more effective, accessible cancer treatments worldwide.

Keywords: Paclitaxel delivery systems, Nanotechnology-based chemotherapy, Targeted drug delivery, Multidrug resistance (MDR), Cancer Nanomedicine

Significance | This study showed advanced nanotechnology-based paclitaxel delivery systems, offering enhanced cancer targeting, reduced side effects, and potential solutions to drug resistance.

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Introduction

Paclitaxel (PTX) is one of the most effective chemotherapeutic agents widely used to treat various types of cancer, including breast, ovarian, and non-small cell lung cancers (Jordan & Wilson, 2004; Gelderblom et al., 2001). Despite its efficacy, the clinical application of PTX faces several significant challenges. PTX has inherently poor water solubility, which complicates its delivery and absorption in the body, limiting its bioavailability and therapeutic effect (Li et al., 2019). Moreover, PTX is associated with severe side effects, such as neuropathy and myelosuppression, due to its impact on healthy cells, making its use potentially debilitating for patients (Kumar et

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al., 2022). Additionally, multidrug resistance (MDR) remains a critical barrier to PTX's effectiveness, as cancer cells develop mechanisms that reduce the drug's efficacy over time, leading to treatment failure and cancer recurrence (Zhou et al., 2021). Consequently, there has been an intense focus in recent years on enhancing PTX delivery methods to improve its clinical efficacy and minimize these obstacles (Shen et al., 2021).

To overcome these limitations, recent research has focused on developing novel drug delivery systems that can improve the solubility, bioavailability, and specificity of PTX (Alexis et al., 2010; Suri et al., 2007). One of the most promising approaches has been the application of nanotechnology-based delivery systems (Sun et al., 2020). Nanoparticles, liposomes, polymeric micelles, and dendrimers have emerged as key nanotechnology tools for PTX delivery, offering unique properties such as targeted delivery, controlled drug release, and reduced systemic toxicity (Wang et al., 2021). These nanocarriers can encapsulate PTX, enhancing its stability and solubility and allowing for sustained drug release at the tumor site, which helps to mitigate off-target effects (Jiang et al., 2020; Fonseca et al., 2002).

The targeted delivery of PTX has also been a central area of investigation (Zhang et al., 2020). By modifying drug carriers with ligands that can recognize and bind to specific receptors overexpressed on cancer cells, researchers have developed systems that selectively target tumors while sparing normal cells (Chakravarthi & Robinson, 2011). Such systems, including folic acid-conjugated nanoparticles, demonstrate a promising increase in therapeutic efficacy with reduced adverse effects (Gallo et al., 2003). Moreover, novel co-delivery systems have been designed to transport PTX alongside MDR inhibitors, such as siRNA or P-glycoprotein inhibitors, which help counteract resistance mechanisms and improve drug accumulation within cancer cells (Fracasso et al., 2000; Jin et al., 2008).

Despite these advancements, several challenges continue to hinder the full clinical translation of PTX delivery systems (Storm et al., 1995; Jin et al., 2009). Stability issues, such as nanoparticle aggregation and degradation, remain a significant hurdle (Wang et al., 2021). These issues can compromise the performance and consistency of PTX delivery systems, particularly during storage and administration. Moreover, the tumor microenvironment (TME) presents additional challenges; its high interstitial fluid pressure, abnormal vasculature, and dense extracellular matrix hinder the effective penetration of drug carriers (Jain & Stylianopoulos, 2010).

Regulatory and cost-related challenges also pose significant barriers to the widespread clinical adoption of advanced PTX delivery systems (Haley & Frenkel, 2008). The complexity of nanoparticle-based formulations often results in high production costs and the need for rigorous regulatory approvals, which can delay or prevent their clinical use (Kumar et al., 2022). Additionally, the high cost associated with these novel therapies may limit their accessibility in resource-limited settings, impacting the broader availability of improved cancer treatments.

In this review, we systematically analyze studies from major scientific databases, including PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar, published between 2019 and 2023, to provide a comprehensive overview of the strengths and limitations of PTX delivery advancements. By synthesizing recent findings, this review highlights the potential of these emerging technologies to overcome PTX's limitations and improve cancer treatment outcomes. While significant progress has been made, further research is essential to address the stability, regulatory, and cost-related challenges that currently limit the clinical translation of PTX delivery systems (Zhou et al., 2021). Addressing these challenges will be crucial for realizing the full potential of PTX in cancer therapy, paving the way for more effective and accessible treatments for patients worldwide (Gelderblom et al., 2001; Sparreboom et al., 1996).

Materials and Methods

Literature Search and Selection Criteria

This systematic review was conducted to analyze recent advancements in paclitaxel (PTX) drug delivery systems, with a focus on studies published between January 2019 and January 2023. Four major databases were utilized for the search: PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. The search strategy included specific keywords: “Paclitaxel,” “drug delivery,” “nanoparticles,” “targeted delivery,” and “multidrug resistance.” Boolean operators were employed to refine the search, using combinations such as “Paclitaxel AND drug delivery,” “Paclitaxel AND nanoparticles,” and “Paclitaxel AND targeted delivery AND multidrug resistance.”

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following criteria were applied to select studies for review:

Inclusion Criteria:

Studies focused on nanotechnology-based delivery systems (e.g., liposomes, polymeric nanoparticles, dendrimers) for PTX.

Studies that addressed targeted delivery mechanisms, including ligand-conjugated nanoparticles and receptor-mediated targeting strategies.

The research explored approaches to overcome multidrug resistance (MDR), such as the co-delivery of PTX with MDR inhibitors or other agents.

Articles published in peer-reviewed journals between 2019 and 2023.

Studies presenting in vivo, in vitro, or clinical data relevant to PTX delivery and its efficacy.

Exclusion Criteria:

Review articles, conference abstracts, and editorials were excluded to focus on primary research findings.

Studies focusing on PTX formulations or delivery methods not involving nanotechnology or targeted systems.

Articles not published in English were excluded to ensure accessibility and comprehension of the content.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data were independently extracted by two reviewers to minimize bias. The following information was gathered from each selected study:

Study Objective: The specific PTX delivery system or strategy investigated.

Delivery System Type: Types of nanocarriers or targeted systems, such as liposomes, polymeric nanoparticles, or antibody-conjugated nanoparticles.

Mechanism and Benefits: Mechanisms involved in improving PTX delivery, including enhanced solubility, bioavailability, and controlled release.

Challenges Addressed: Strategies to overcome MDR, tumor microenvironment barriers, and toxicity issues.

Outcomes: Results indicate improvements in pharmacokinetics, bioavailability, therapeutic efficacy, and safety.

Quality Assessment

To ensure the reliability and validity of the included studies, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines were followed. The studies were appraised using a modified Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) checklist for evaluating drug delivery system research. Studies were rated based on experimental design, methodological rigor, sample size, and statistical analysis. Discrepancies between reviewers were resolved through discussion, with a third reviewer consulted if necessary.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive analysis was employed to summarize the characteristics of the delivery systems across studies. Where applicable, percentage improvements in pharmacokinetics, therapeutic efficacy, and drug accumulation in cancer cells were calculated based on reported data. No meta-analysis was conducted due to the heterogeneity of the methodologies and delivery systems in the selected studies. However, recurring trends and themes in results were tabulated to highlight the strengths and ongoing challenges in PTX drug delivery.

Results

The analysis of recent literature reveals substantial advancements in paclitaxel (PTX) drug delivery from 2019 to 2023, focusing on strategies aimed at overcoming the drug's intrinsic limitations, poor solubility, severe systemic toxicity, and multidrug resistance (MDR). By examining 45 studies published over this period, several promising innovations were identified across various delivery platforms. These platforms include nanoparticle-based systems, targeted delivery mechanisms, and combination therapies designed to enhance PTX's therapeutic profile and address MDR. Below is a detailed synthesis of the results.

Nanoparticle-Based Drug Delivery Systems

Nanoparticle-based systems have become a leading approach for improving PTX delivery due to their capacity to enhance solubility, control release rates, and minimize systemic toxicity. The studies reviewed highlight several nanoparticle formulations, including:

Polymeric Nanoparticles: These use materials like PLGA (polylactic-co-glycolic acid) and TPGS (D-α-tocopheryl polyethylene glycol succinate), enhancing PTX solubility and bioavailability. Encapsulation within these particles reduces PTX's adverse effects and increases circulation time, leading to a decrease in the dosing frequency needed to maintain therapeutic effects (Chen et al., 2020; Li et al., 2019).

Liposomes and Micelles: These carriers offer enhanced pharmacokinetics and protect PTX from rapid degradation, prolonging its therapeutic impact. Liposomal PTX formulations, in particular, are noted for their ability to provide more localized drug release at the tumor site, reducing systemic side effects (Zhou et al., 2021).

Targeted Drug Delivery Systems

Targeted delivery systems for PTX have demonstrated efficacy in selectively targeting cancer cells, thereby improving therapeutic outcomes and reducing damage to healthy cells. This selective targeting is achieved through conjugation with ligands or antibodies that bind specifically to receptors on cancer cells:

Ligand-Conjugated Nanoparticles: Folic acid and transferrin-conjugated nanoparticles have shown significant promise. By targeting receptors overexpressed on cancer cells, these systems enhance PTX accumulation within the tumor, improving drug efficacy while minimizing off-target effects (Zhang et al., 2020).

Antibody-Conjugated Carriers: Antibody-mediated targeting enhances the specificity of PTX delivery to tumor cells, which is particularly beneficial for cancers exhibiting MDR, as it reduces the likelihood of systemic drug clearance before the agent reaches the target (Zhang et al., 2020).

Strategies to Overcome Multidrug Resistance (MDR)

Overcoming MDR is a central focus in PTX research, as drug resistance significantly limits PTX's long-term efficacy. Studies reveal several methods to counteract MDR mechanisms:

Co-Delivery Systems: These involve delivering PTX alongside MDR inhibitors, such as P-glycoprotein (P-gp) inhibitors or siRNA, to suppress resistance pathways within cancer cells. These approaches have successfully enhanced PTX uptake in MDR cancer cells, potentially reversing resistance and prolonging treatment efficacy (Shen et al., 2021).

Alternative Drug Carriers: Using innovative materials like chitosan and dendrimers, PTX is delivered with increased biocompatibility

and bioavailability, which aids in circumventing MDR by facilitating prolonged intracellular retention of the drug (Kumar et al., 2022).

Multifunctional and Theranostic Platforms

Recent advancements in PTX delivery systems extend beyond drug delivery to encompass multifunctional platforms that integrate diagnostics and therapeutic functions:

Theranostic Nanoparticles: These platforms, which combine drug delivery with imaging agents (such as gold or iron oxide nanoparticles), allow real-time tracking of PTX's distribution and tumor response. This dual functionality offers personalized treatment options by enabling clinicians to monitor treatment effectiveness and adjust dosages as necessary (Sun et al., 2020).

Challenges in Paclitaxel Drug Delivery

Despite these advancements, several challenges persist in PTX delivery that may limit its translation to clinical use:

Stability and Scale-Up: The stability of nanoparticle systems is a significant hurdle, with issues related to aggregation, degradation, and premature drug release affecting storage and administration. Moreover, scaling up these complex formulations to clinical production levels while ensuring consistency remains a challenge (Wang et al., 2021).

Tumor Microenvironment (TME): The heterogeneity and complexity of the TME complicate PTX delivery. Factors like high interstitial fluid pressure, abnormal vasculature, and dense extracellular matrix restrict nanoparticle penetration into tumor tissues. While modifications to enhance TME penetration are under investigation, effectively overcoming this barrier remains difficult (Jiang et al., 2020).

Regulatory and Approval Challenges: The complexity of nanoparticle-based PTX systems introduces regulatory difficulties, as extensive testing is required to demonstrate safety and efficacy. High development costs and lengthy approval timelines delay clinical adoption, with the lack of standardization in assessment protocols adding further complexity (Chen et al., 2020).

Drug Resistance and Cancer Recurrence: Although new PTX delivery systems have shown potential in delaying MDR, resistance mechanisms can still develop, leading to treatment relapse. Long-term efficacy remains an issue, highlighting the need for continued research into combination therapies and new delivery approaches (Zhou et al., 2021).

Cost and Accessibility: The high cost associated with advanced PTX delivery systems may limit their accessibility, especially in resource-limited settings. Manufacturing these systems requires specialized materials and complex processes, which contribute to higher production costs, potentially limiting the widespread application of these therapies (Zhang et al., 2020).

Discussion

Research on paclitaxel (PTX) drug delivery has seen substantial progress, particularly with the development of nanoparticle-based and targeted delivery systems. These advancements have shown potential in addressing paclitaxel's major limitations such as poor water solubility, systemic toxicity, and multidrug resistance (MDR). However, while the field has made strides, significant challenges remain, particularly around the stability of delivery systems, complex tumor microenvironment dynamics, regulatory hurdles, and costs. This discussion delves into these advancements and challenges in greater detail, providing insight into the current state of PTX drug delivery and directions for future research.

Nanoparticle-Based Drug Delivery Systems

Nanoparticle-based systems have proven to be one of the most promising solutions for PTX delivery, addressing its poor solubility and toxicity issues. Research has shown that nanoparticles can improve PTX's solubility, bioavailability, and therapeutic index by encapsulating the drug and controlling its release. These encapsulation techniques use various nanomaterials, including polymers like PLGA-TPGS (polylactic-co-glycolic acid with D-alpha-tocopheryl polyethylene glycol succinate) and PLGA-PEG (polylactic-co-glycolic acid with polyethylene glycol), which enhance drug stability and extend PTX's circulation time in the bloodstream.

By reducing systemic exposure and increasing drug accumulation at the target site, nanoparticle-based systems minimize the frequency of dosing and decrease systemic toxicity. For example, polymeric nanoparticles have been shown to reduce toxicity in preclinical models, making treatments more tolerable for patients (Chen et al., 2020). Additionally, nanoparticles have been designed to degrade in a controlled manner, allowing for a slow and steady release of PTX. This prolonged release reduces peak plasma levels and thereby mitigates the severe side effects often associated with high-dose chemotherapy (Li et al., 2019).

Targeted Delivery Systems

Targeted delivery represents a key advancement in PTX therapy, particularly in improving the drug's specificity to cancer cells while sparing healthy tissues. By conjugating PTX with targeting ligands such as folic acid, transferrin, and antibodies, researchers have developed drug delivery systems that bind selectively to cancer cell receptors. This targeted approach is especially beneficial for drug-resistant cancers, where selective delivery reduces the likelihood of MDR and increases the therapeutic efficacy of PTX.

For instance, folic acid-conjugated nanoparticles have shown a high affinity for folate receptors, which are often overexpressed in cancer cells but under expressed in healthy cells. This targeting enables a more focused treatment that decreases side effects and prevents unnecessary damage to surrounding healthy tissue (Zhang et al., 2020). Targeted drug delivery is a promising strategy, but its success is contingent on understanding and exploiting the unique

characteristics of cancer cells, such as specific receptor overexpression. Thus, ongoing research into tumor biology will be critical for developing more effective and highly selective targeting agents.

Strategies to Overcome Multidrug Resistance (MDR)

MDR remains one of the major challenges in chemotherapy. Cancer cells often develop resistance to PTX through mechanisms like the overexpression of efflux transporters, such as P-glycoprotein (P-gp), which actively pumps the drug out of the cell, reducing its intracellular concentration and efficacy. To address this, researchers have developed co-delivery systems that incorporate PTX with MDR inhibitors, including P-gp inhibitors or siRNA, to prevent efflux and increase drug accumulation within cancer cells (Shen et al., 2021).

Some innovative co-delivery systems use dual-loading techniques, where both PTX and the MDR inhibitor are encapsulated within the same nanoparticle. This configuration ensures that both agents are delivered simultaneously to the cancer cells, enhancing the therapeutic effect and reducing the likelihood of resistance. Other approaches focus on modulating gene expression related to MDR, using agents like siRNA to silence MDR-related genes. Although promising, these strategies still require optimization, particularly regarding delivery efficiency and stability in the bloodstream.

Biocompatibility and Safety Enhancements

Biocompatibility and safety are critical in the development of PTX delivery systems. The use of biodegradable and biocompatible materials, such as PLGA, chitosan, and dendrimers, is particularly valuable in reducing the toxicity of PTX formulations. These materials not only enhance patient tolerance but also enable controlled release, thereby improving the therapeutic index and patient compliance (Kumar et al., 2022).

PLGA, for instance, is a widely used biocompatible polymer that degrades into lactic and glycolic acids, which are easily metabolized and eliminated from the body. Chitosan, a natural polysaccharide, has shown similar advantages, including minimal toxicity and immunogenicity. By choosing materials that the body can safely process, researchers are reducing the likelihood of adverse effects and improving the overall safety profile of PTX formulations. This approach aligns with the growing emphasis on patient-centered treatment, aiming to reduce treatment-related complications and improve quality of life.

Multifunctional Delivery Platforms and Theranostics

The development of multifunctional platforms, or "theranostic" systems, represents a frontier in PTX delivery. These systems combine therapeutic and diagnostic capabilities, allowing for real-time monitoring of drug delivery and tumor response. For instance, PTX-loaded nanoparticles containing imaging agents like gold or iron oxide nanoparticles enable clinicians to track the distribution and accumulation of PTX in vivo, providing crucial feedback on the treatment's efficacy (Sun et al., 2020).

Theranostic platforms hold great potential for personalized cancer treatment, enabling adjustments to be made in real-time based on the tumor's response to the therapy. By integrating therapeutic and diagnostic functionalities, these systems also open the door to earlier detection of drug resistance and timely interventions, ultimately improving clinical outcomes.

Challenges in PTX Drug Delivery

Despite the advancements, several challenges continue to hinder the clinical application of PTX delivery systems:

Stability and Scale-Up

The stability of nanoparticle-based systems is a critical barrier to clinical translation. Issues such as aggregation, degradation, or premature drug release during storage or administration can compromise the effectiveness of these systems. Maintaining nanoparticle stability requires meticulous design and precise manufacturing, which can be challenging at a larger scale (Wang et al., 2021). Furthermore, scaling up production often leads to variability in particle size and drug loading, which may affect the consistency and efficacy of the treatment. Addressing these stability issues will require robust manufacturing processes and may involve developing novel stabilizing agents or coatings.

Tumor Microenvironment Complexity

The tumor microenvironment (TME) poses a significant obstacle to effective drug delivery. Factors like high interstitial fluid pressure, dense extracellular matrix, and abnormal vasculature prevent efficient nanoparticle penetration into the tumor. Researchers are investigating ways to modify nanoparticles to improve penetration, including using smaller particles or incorporating enzymes that can break down the extracellular matrix. However, fully overcoming the barriers presented by the TME remains a challenging task, necessitating further research into the complex interactions within the tumor (Jiang et al., 2020).

Regulatory and Approval Challenges

Regulatory hurdles are a significant challenge for novel PTX delivery systems. The complexity of nanoparticle-based and targeted systems demands extensive safety and efficacy testing, which can be time-consuming and costly. Regulatory agencies require rigorous preclinical and clinical trials, and the lack of standardization in evaluating these systems adds further complexity (Chen et al., 2020). Streamlining regulatory processes and establishing guidelines specific to nanoparticle-based delivery systems may facilitate faster approval and bring these innovations to patients more rapidly.

High Cost and Accessibility Issues

The high cost of developing and manufacturing advanced PTX delivery systems limits their accessibility, particularly in low and

middle-income countries. Specialized materials, complex manufacturing processes, and the need for advanced facilities contribute to these costs. Ensuring that these promising therapies are accessible worldwide will require innovative strategies to reduce costs, such as simplified manufacturing techniques and investment in infrastructure (Zhang et al., 2020).

Conclusion

while advancements in paclitaxel (PTX) drug delivery, particularly nanoparticle-based and targeted delivery systems, show promise, several challenges remain. These innovative approaches have enhanced PTX's solubility, bioavailability, and therapeutic targeting, addressing key limitations like poor solubility, toxicity, and multidrug resistance (MDR). However, stability, scale-up issues, and the complex tumor microenvironment (TME) continue to hinder effective clinical translation. Additionally, regulatory hurdles, high production costs, and accessibility concerns limit the broader application of these delivery systems. Addressing these challenges requires robust manufacturing processes, better regulatory frameworks, and strategies for cost reduction. Future research must focus on optimizing stability, understanding TME interactions, and developing scalable, cost-effective solutions to make PTX delivery more effective and accessible worldwide. These advancements hold the potential to improve PTX therapy and patient outcomes significantly.

Author contributions

B.M.E. conceived the idea and prepared the outline of the review. M.K.D. performed literature searches and data extraction, analysis of extracted data, and manuscript preparation. S.D. supervised the manuscript preparation and prepared the final draft, did the final revision, and all authors read and accepted the final version of the manuscript.

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Competing financial interests

The authors have no conflict of interest.

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