ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 11| Issue: 8| August 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

SOLID LIPID NANOPARTICLE-BASED TRANSDERMAL FILMS: A PROMISING PLATFORM FOR CONTROLLED DRUG DELIVERY

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ABSTRACT

Transdermal drug delivery offers several advantages over oral and injectable routes, including controlled release, avoidance of first-pass metabolism, and improved patient compliance. Solid lipid nanoparticles (SLNs) have emerged as versatile nanocarriers owing to their biocompatibility, stability, and ability to encapsulate a wide range of drugs. Incorporating SLNs into polymeric transdermal films enhances drug permeation, provides sustained release, and improves therapeutic efficacy by combining lipid-based nanocarriers with flexible, adhesive matrices. This review summarizes formulation strategies, physicochemical properties, and mechanisms of drug permeation associated with SLN-loaded transdermal films. Particular focus is given to polymer–lipid interactions, release kinetics, and skin penetration pathways. Recent applications include delivery of antihypertensives, antidiabetics, analgesics, and phytoconstituents, demonstrating their potential across diverse therapeutic areas. Challenges such as stability, large-scale production, and regulatory considerations are also highlighted. Overall, SLN-based transdermal films represent a promising platform for controlled drug delivery with opportunities for clinical translation.

KEYWORDS: *Solid lipid nanoparticles (SLNs), Transdermal films, Controlled drug deliver, Skin permeation , Nanocarriers*

INTRODUCTION

Drug delivery research has increasingly focused on developing systems that enhance therapeutic efficacy while minimizing side effects and improving patient compliance. Conventional oral and parenteral routes often suffer from limitations such as low bioavailability, rapid clearance, first-pass metabolism, and poor patient adherence due to frequent dosing or invasive administration. To overcome these challenges, transdermal drug delivery systems (TDDS) have emerged as a non-invasive, patient-friendly approach that enables controlled and sustained drug release, bypasses hepatic metabolism, and maintains steady plasma concentrations.

Solid lipid nanoparticles (SLNs), composed of physiological lipids stabilized by surfactants, represent a promising class of nanocarriers for enhancing dermal and transdermal drug delivery. They offer advantages such as biocompatibility, protection of labile drugs, improved solubility, and controlled release properties. Incorporating SLNs into polymer-based transdermal films further augments drug permeation and stability while ensuring flexibility, adhesion, and ease of application.

In recent years, SLN-loaded transdermal films have gained considerable attention for delivering a wide range of therapeutic agents including antihypertensives, antidiabetics, analgesics, and natural bioactives. This review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of formulation strategies, drug release mechanisms, therapeutic applications, and future prospects of SLN-based transdermal films as an advanced platform for controlled drug delivery.

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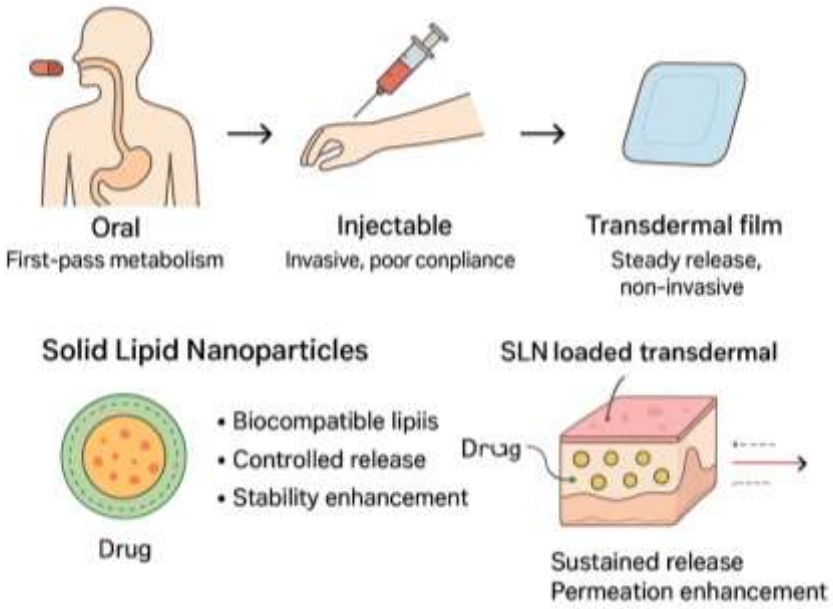


Figure 1. Schematic illustration of oral, injectable, and transdermal drug delivery routes, along with the structure of solid lipid nanoparticles and their mechanism when incorporated into transdermal films.

OVERVIEW OF SOLID LIPID NANOPARTICLES (SLNS)

Solid Lipid Nanoparticles (SLNs) are advanced drug delivery carriers composed of physiologically compatible lipids stabilized by surfactants. The basic structure consists of a solid lipid core in which the drug is incorporated, surrounded by surfactant molecules that provide stability. They are generally prepared using methods such as hot homogenization, ultrasonication, and solvent evaporation, each allowing the encapsulation of bioactive compounds while maintaining particle size in the nanometer range. This unique composition makes SLNs a versatile system for delivering both hydrophilic and lipophilic drugs.

The **drug loading and release profile** of SLNs depends on several key factors, including the type of lipid used, the concentration and nature of surfactants, and the size of the nanoparticles. Smaller particle sizes generally enhance bioavailability and facilitate penetration across biological membranes. Controlled release is achieved through the gradual diffusion of the drug from the solid lipid matrix, making them particularly suitable for topical and systemic delivery. The ability to modulate drug release kinetics adds to their therapeutic potential, especially in chronic disease management.

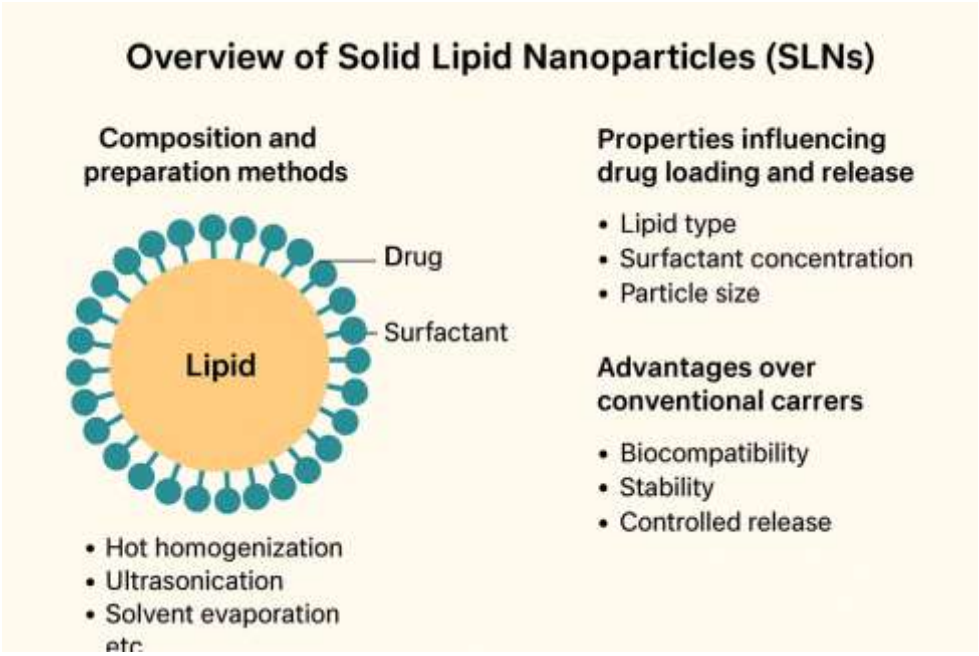


Figure 2: Overview of Solid Lipid Nanoparticles (SLNs)

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Compared to conventional drug carriers, **SLNs offer multiple advantages** such as excellent biocompatibility, high stability, and the ability to provide controlled and sustained drug release. They improve the solubility of poorly water-soluble drugs, protect sensitive bioactive compounds from degradation, and reduce systemic side effects by allowing targeted delivery. Their non-toxic and biodegradable nature further enhances their acceptability for pharmaceutical and cosmetic applications. Overall, SLNs represent a promising platform for next-generation drug delivery systems.

Comparison: Conventional Carriers vs. Solid Lipid Nanoparticles (SLNs)

Parameter	Conventional Carriers (Ointments, Emulsions, etc.)	Solid Lipid Nanoparticles (SLNs)
Composition	Oil, water, emulsifiers, synthetic bases	Solid lipids stabilized with surfactants
Stability	Prone to phase separation, degradation	High physical and chemical stability
Drug Solubility	Limited solubility for poorly water-soluble drugs	Improves solubility and bioavailability
Drug Release	Immediate or irregular release	Controlled and sustained release
Targeting Ability	Poor targeting, nonspecific	Can be designed for site-specific delivery
Biocompatibility	May cause irritation or systemic side effects	Biocompatible and biodegradable
Patient Compliance	Greasy, sticky, less cosmetically appealing	Non-greasy, elegant, more acceptable
Applications	Mainly topical and basic formulations	Topical, oral, parenteral, cosmetic, and advanced therapies

TRANSDERMAL FILMS AS DRUG DELIVERY SYSTEMS

Transdermal drug delivery has gained significant attention in pharmaceutical research as an alternative to conventional oral and parenteral routes. Among the various approaches, **transdermal films** are considered one of the most promising systems because they offer controlled, non-invasive, and patient-friendly drug administration. A transdermal film is a thin, flexible strip applied to the skin surface that delivers drugs across the stratum corneum into systemic circulation, thereby bypassing hepatic first-pass metabolism and improving therapeutic efficacy.

Film-Forming Polymers: Polymers play a crucial role in transdermal film formulation, as they form the backbone of the drug delivery matrix. The choice of polymer determines the **mechanical strength, drug release rate, stability, and patient acceptability** of the film.

- **Hydroxypropyl Methylcellulose (HPMC):** Provides good film-forming ability, mechanical strength, and controlled release properties. It is widely used due to its hydrophilic nature, which helps in uniform drug distribution
- **Chitosan:** A natural, biodegradable polymer that enhances drug permeation across the skin. Its bioadhesive properties improve the film's adherence to the skin, ensuring sustained drug delivery.
- **Polyvinyl Alcohol (PVA):** Offers transparency, flexibility, and smooth surface characteristics. It also stabilizes the formulation and improves patient comfort.
- **Other Polymers (Eudragit, Sodium Alginate, PVP):** Used alone or in combination to achieve desired flexibility, stability, and drug release profile.

The right combination of polymers ensures that the film maintains its **integrity, uniform thickness, and compatibility** with both the drug and excipients.

Role of Plasticizers and Permeation Enhancers

Plasticizers: Plasticizers are essential for imparting **flexibility and elasticity** to the transdermal films. Without them, films tend to be brittle, crack upon handling, or fail to adhere to the skin properly. Common plasticizers include:

- ✓ **Glycerol**
- ✓ **Polyethylene glycol (PEG)**
- ✓ **Propylene glycol**

Their primary functions are to:

a) Reduce the **glass transition temperature** of the polymer, improving flexibility.
b) Enhance **spreadability and smoothness** of the film.
c) Increase **patient comfort** during application by preventing cracking or rigidity.

Permeation Enhancers

Since the stratum corneum acts as the main barrier to drug absorption, permeation enhancers are incorporated to improve transdermal delivery. Examples include:

- **Fatty acids (oleic acid, lauric acid)**
- **Alcohols (ethanol, propylene glycol)**
- **Surfactants and solvents (DMSO, Tween 80)**

Their functions are to:

a) Alter the **lipid structure** of the stratum corneum.
b) Increase **drug partitioning and diffusion** into deeper skin layers.
c) Improve **bioavailability** of drugs with poor skin permeability.

Film Properties

For a transdermal film to be effective, it must exhibit the following critical properties:

- ❖ **Flexibility:** The film should be soft and elastic enough to adapt to skin movement without breaking or peeling off. This enhances patient compliance during daily activities.
- ❖ **Adhesiveness:** Proper adhesion ensures intimate contact with the skin surface, allowing sustained release of the

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drug. Poor adhesion leads to dose variability and reduced therapeutic effect.

- ❖ **Drug Stability:** The film should protect the drug against degradation factors such as moisture, light, and oxidation. Stable films ensure consistent therapeutic outcomes throughout their shelf life.
- ❖ **Mechanical Strength:** The film should resist tearing during handling and application.
- ❖ **Uniformity:** Uniform thickness and drug distribution are crucial for accurate dosing.

INTEGRATION OF SLNS INTO TRANSDERMAL FILMS

Techniques of Incorporating SLNs

The incorporation of solid lipid nanoparticles (SLNs) into polymeric films can be achieved using different strategies, each influencing the final performance of the delivery system:

i. **Direct embedding method:** SLNs are dispersed in a polymeric solution and subsequently cast into films. This technique ensures uniform distribution of nanoparticles within the matrix but may lead to aggregation if not properly stabilized.

ii. **Hydrogel-based films:** SLNs are incorporated into hydrophilic polymer gels (e.g., HPMC, chitosan, or carbopol), which are then dried to form flexible films. This approach improves drug entrapment efficiency and enhances controlled release.

iii. **Solvent evaporation and coating methods:** SLNs are first prepared and then layered or coated within polymeric sheets, ensuring stability and reduced burst release.

Effect on Physicochemical Properties

The addition of SLNs influences the structural and functional characteristics of transdermal films:

a. **Thickness:** Incorporation of nanoparticles generally increases film thickness, depending on lipid concentration and particle size.

b. **Tensile strength and flexibility:** SLN dispersion can modify the mechanical strength of the films, often improving flexibility while reducing brittleness.

c. **Water vapor permeability (WVP):** SLNs can reduce WVP by filling voids within the polymeric network, thereby enhancing occlusion and skin hydration.

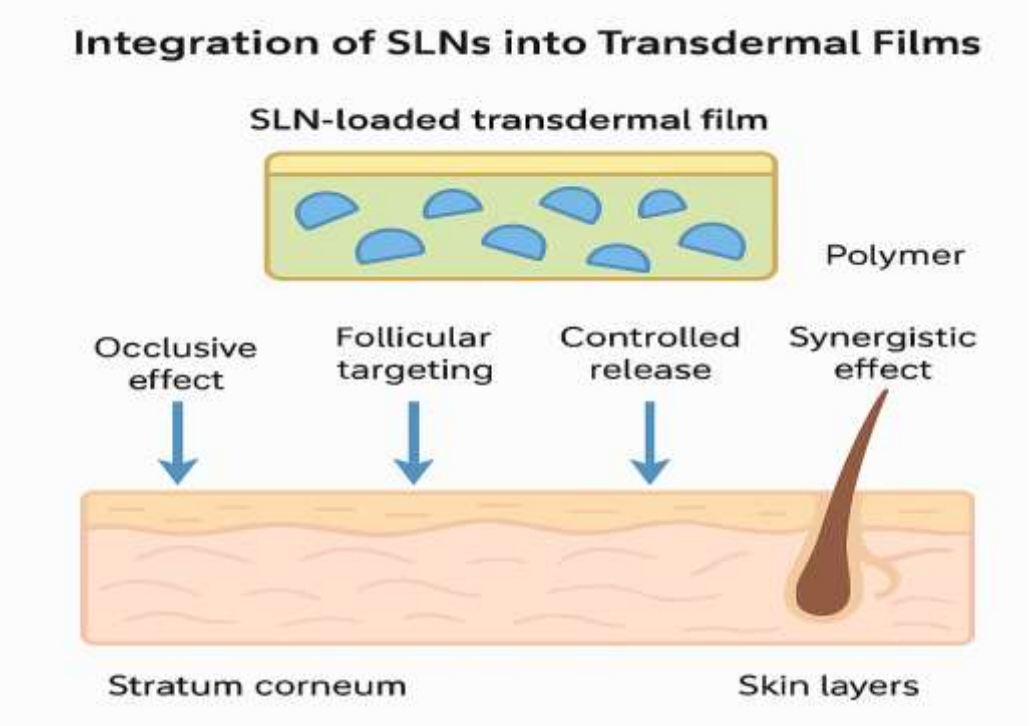
d. **Drug release profile:** The lipid matrix of SLNs provides a reservoir effect, enabling sustained and controlled release of the active pharmaceutical ingredient.

Mechanisms of Skin Permeation Enhancement

SLN-loaded films enhance transdermal drug delivery through multiple mechanisms:

- ➢ **Occlusive effect:** SLNs form a lipid-rich barrier on the skin surface, increasing hydration and fluidity of the stratum corneum, which facilitates drug penetration.
- ➢ **Follicular targeting:** Nanoparticles can penetrate into hair follicles, serving as reservoirs for prolonged drug release.
- ➢ **Controlled release:** The solid lipid matrix modulates drug diffusion, reducing dose dumping and prolonging therapeutic action.
- ➢ **Synergistic effect of polymer and lipid:** Polymers provide film flexibility and adhesion, while lipids enhance permeability and drug retention in skin layers.

Figure 3 ***Integration of SLNs into Transdermal Films***



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MECHANISM OF DRUG RELEASE AND PERMEATION

I. Role of Occlusion and Skin Hydration

Topical formulations such as gels and solid lipid nanoparticles (SLNs) often create an occlusive film over the skin, reducing transepidermal water loss (TEWL). This increases hydration of the stratum corneum, leading to swelling of corneocytes and loosening of lipid structures, which enhances drug permeation. Occlusion also prolongs drug contact time, ensuring sustained absorption at the site of application.

II. Follicular Targeting and Stratum Corneum Penetration

Apart from intercellular and transcellular diffusion, drugs can also penetrate through **hair follicles and sebaceous glands**, which act as reservoirs for nanoparticles and hydrophilic agents. This follicular targeting allows deeper and prolonged drug retention, especially useful for acne and other follicle-related skin disorders. Meanwhile, permeation across the stratum corneum (the main barrier) is facilitated by the small particle size, lipophilicity, and hydration effect of the formulation.

III. Release Kinetics (Mathematical Models)

Drug release from gels or SLNs typically follows well-established kinetic models:

- **Higuchi Model**: Describes drug release as a diffusion process based on Fick's law, where release is proportional to the square root of time.
- **Korsmeyer–Peppas Model**: Used for polymeric and nanoparticle systems to analyze both diffusion and erosion-controlled release mechanisms. The release exponent (n) indicates whether the mechanism is Fickian diffusion, anomalous transport, or case-II transport.

Together, these mechanisms explain how herbal drugs like neem can be released in a controlled manner, permeate effectively, and exert therapeutic activity on the skin.

THERAPEUTIC APPLICATIONS

SLN-based transdermal films have been investigated for a wide range of therapeutic categories due to their ability to improve solubility, stability, and skin permeation of drugs.

a) **Antihypertensives:** Drugs like nifedipine, propranolol, and atenolol delivered via SLN films have shown enhanced bioavailability and sustained release, minimizing frequent dosing.

b) **Antidiabetics:** Formulations of metformin and glibenclamide in SLN films improved plasma drug levels while bypassing hepatic first-pass metabolism.

c) **Pain management drugs:** NSAIDs such as diclofenac and ibuprofen incorporated into SLN films achieved better permeation with fewer gastrointestinal side effects.

d) **CNS drugs:** Avanafil-loaded SLN films demonstrated promising systemic delivery with improved patient compliance compared to oral dosing.

e) **Herbal actives:** Phytoconstituents like quercetin, curcumin, and resveratrol have been stabilized in SLN films, offering antioxidant and dermatological benefits.

f) **Comparative analysis with conventional patches** shows that while standard patches often suffer from poor permeation and dose variability, SLN-based films provide enhanced penetration, better drug protection, and more predictable release kinetics.

ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS

Advantages

- ✓ Enhanced drug permeation through the stratum corneum.
- ✓ Sustained and controlled drug release.
- ✓ Improved bioavailability and reduced dosing frequency.
- ✓ Increased patient compliance due to non-invasiveness and ease of use.
- ✓ Ability to encapsulate both hydrophilic and lipophilic drugs.

Limitations

- ➢ Scale-up and reproducibility of SLN formulations remain challenging.
- ➢ Stability concerns such as lipid polymorphism and aggregation.
- ➢ Limited drug loading capacity for highly hydrophilic compounds.
- ➢ Regulatory hurdles due to lack of standardized guidelines for nanocarrier-based films.

Future Perspectives

Emerging research is exploring innovative directions for SLN-based films:

- ❖ **Smart/stimuli-responsive films:** Designed to release drugs in response to temperature, pH, or enzymatic changes for site-specific delivery.
- ❖ **Hybrid nanocarriers:** Combining SLNs with polymeric nanoparticles or nanostructured lipid carriers (NLCs) to improve encapsulation and release profiles.
- ❖ **Personalized medicine:** Tailoring SLN-film formulations to individual patient needs, supported by advancements in 3D printing and precision drug loading.
- ❖ **Wearable drug delivery systems:** Integration of SLN films with microneedles or biosensors for real-time, controlled dosing.

CONCLUSION

SLN-based transdermal films represent a significant advancement in the field of controlled drug delivery. Their ability to combine the advantages of lipid nanocarriers with flexible film-forming matrices provides superior permeation, stability, and therapeutic outcomes compared to conventional patches. Despite challenges related to large-scale production, stability, and regulatory approval, ongoing research into smart delivery systems and hybrid nanocarriers positions SLN-based films as a promising technology for future clinical translation. Continued interdisciplinary efforts will be essential for realizing their full potential in patient-centered healthcare.

However, challenges such as large-scale production, stability of lipid nanoparticles, limited drug loading, and regulatory hurdles remain barriers to clinical translation. Addressing these issues through advancements in formulation strategies, hybrid nanocarriers, and stimuli-responsive films will be critical for future success. With ongoing innovation, SLN-based transdermal films hold strong potential to transform controlled

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drug delivery, moving closer to personalized, patient-centered, and wearable therapeutic solutions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I express my sincere gratitude to the management of Kamalakshi Pandurangan college of Pharmacy, Dr. D. Rajalingam, Principal, Dr. N. Gnanasekar, Vice Principal, Dr. V. Kannabirran HOD, Senthil Kumar Krishnan, Associate professor Mrs.M.Bharathi , Associate professor, faculty, and non-teaching staff for their guidance invaluable support and assistance in the successful completion of my work.

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