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Inhibiting the gastric burst release of drugs from enteric microparticles: the influence of drug molecular mass and solubility

Mohamed A. Alhnan, Daniele Cosi, Sudaxshina Murdan and Abdul W. Basit*

Department of Pharmaceutics, The School of Pharmacy, University of London,
29/39 Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AX

Tel.: +44 20 7753 5865
Fax: +44 20 7753 5865
E-mail Address: abdul.basit@pharmacy.ac.uk
*Corresponding author
Abstract

Undesired drug release in acid medium from enteric microparticles has been widely reported. In this paper we investigate the relative contribution of microparticle and drug properties, specifically microsphere size and drug’s molecular weight and acid solubility, on the extent of such undesired release. A series of nine drugs with different physicochemical properties were successfully encapsulated into Eudragit S and Eudragit L microparticles using a novel emulsion solvent evaporation process. The process yielded spherical microparticles with a narrow size distribution (25-60 μm and 35-55 μm for Eudragit L and Eudragit S microparticles respectively). Upon incubation in acid medium (pH 1.2) for 2 h, the release of dipyridamole, cinnarizine, amprenavir, bendroflumethiazide, budenoside, prednisolone from both Eudragit microparticles was less than 10% of drug load and conformed with USP specification for enteric dosage forms. In contrast, more than 10% of the entrapped paracetamol, salicylic acid and ketoprofen were released. Multiple regression revealed that the drug’s molecular weight was the most important factor that determined its extent of release in the acid medium, while its acid solubility and microsphere’s size had minor influences.

Keywords: Microspheres, delayed release, enteric polymers, methacrylic polymers, gastric resistance, colonic delivery.
INTRODUCTION

The last two decades witnessed the emergence of microencapsulation technology in pharmaceutical formulations\(^1,^2\), which provided a unique platform for delayed and site-specific oral drug delivery\(^3\). Modified release microparticles provide several advantages over conventional enteric and delayed release formulations such as larger surface area, potentially more uniform gastric emptying, and a more consistent drug release profile. Unfortunately, the particulate nature and large surface area are accompanied by a major challenge: the inhibition of drug release until the target site is reached. In \textit{in vitro} dissolution tests, enteric formulations may release no more than 10\% of their drug content during a two-hour incubation in 0.1N HCl, and subsequently should release more than 80\% of their drug content within 45 min of changing the dissolution medium to intestinal conditions. While drug release in intestinal conditions is easily achieved given that readily suspended microparticles have a large surface area, minimising/inhibiting drug release in acidic conditions has proven challenging, and insufficient control of drug release from microparticles in acid media has been reported\(^4-^10\).

It is commonly assumed that the microparticles’ surface area is the major factor influencing drug release from matrix microparticles\(^11,^12\). This is in contrast to a previous report by our group which showed that reducing the size of Eudragit S microparticles by two thirds did not alter prednisolone release in the acidic medium\(^13\). Very little attention has been given to the chemical properties of the drug molecule itself. Silva and Ferreira\(^7\) used an empirical approach to explore the major factors affecting drug release from microparticles and suggested that high molecular weight and poor drug solubility in acid favours low drug release in acid medium. We have shown that the control of drug release was not necessarily influenced by drug distribution within the microparticle or by high drug solubility in acid\(^14\). Nevertheless, the relative importance of all these factors is still unclear.

The aim of the work described in this paper was therefore to explore the relative importance of three drug and particle properties that have been directly related to drug release in gastric conditions\(^6,^7,^15\), namely, drug molecular weight and its solubility in acid, and microsphere size. Using an efficient o/o emulsion solvent evaporation method developed in our laboratory\(^13,^16\), small uniform-size microparticles loaded with one of nine drug molecules of different physicochemical properties were produced using two different
pH responsive polymers; Eudragit S and Eudragit L (pH thresholds 7.0 and 6.0 respectively). In addition, multiple regression was used to investigate the relative importance of the 3 drug/microsphere properties and to explore the limitations of pH responsive matrix microparticles.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials

Paracetamol was supplied by Knoll AG (Ludwigshafen, Germany) and prednisolone was obtained from Sanofi-Aventis, (Romainville, France). Budenoside and amprenavir were gifts from Astra Zeneca (UK) and GlaxoSmithKline (UK) respectively. Ketoprofen, salicylic acid, dipyridamole, cinnarizine, bendroflumethiazide, sorbitan sesquioleate (Span 83, Arlacel 83) and liquid paraffin were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich, (Poole, UK). Polymethacrylate polymers, Eudragit S and L, were generously provided by Evonik Degussa Chemicals (Darmstadt, Germany).

Preparation of microparticles

Drug loaded Eudragit S or Eudragit L microparticles were prepared as reported previously. Briefly, 0.3 g of drug (indomethacin, paracetamol, salicylic acid, ketoprofen, naproxen, prednisolone, budenoside, bendroflumethiazide, amprenavir or dipyridamole) and 3 g of polymer (Eudragit S /L) were dissolved in 30 ml of absolute ethanol. The resulting solution was emulsified into 200 ml liquid paraffin containing sorbitan sesquioleate (Span 83) (1% w/w) as the emulsifier by stirring at a speed of 1000 rpm (Heidolph RZR1 stirrer, Heidolph Instruments, Schwabach, Germany) for 18 hours at room temperature. Solidified microparticles were collected by vacuum filtration, followed by washing three times using fresh batches of 50 ml n-hexane. Due to cinnarizine’s low solubility in ethanol, the drug and the polymer (Eudragit S or Eudragit L) were dissolved in 30 ml of a mixture of ethanol: acetone (1:1 v/v) and microparticles were prepared as above.

Microspheres size analysis

The volume median diameter of each microparticle formulation suspended in 0.1N HCl was measured in triplicate using laser light scattering using a Malvern Mastersizer 2000 with a 45mm lens (Malvern Instruments Ltd., Malvern, UK). Span of microsphere size was calculated as [(D(v,0.9)−D(v, 0.1)) /D(v,0.5)] where D(v,0.9), D(v,0.5) and D(v,0.1) are the
particle diameters at the 90th, 50th and 10th percentile respectively of the microsphere size
distribution curve. Microsphere size analysis of each formulation was carried out in
triplicate.

**X-Ray Powder Diffraction**

A Philips PW3710 Scanning X-Ray Diffractometer (Philips, Cambridge, UK) with a Cu Kα
filter generated at 30mA and 45 kV was used to characterize the drug loaded
microparticles. Samples were placed in a round disc sample holder and gently compressed
and smoothed using Perspex block. Samples were scanned at 0.02 °/sec from 5° to 45°. The
peak was calculated using X’Pert HighScore data analysis software (version 2.0a).

**Differential Scanning Calorimetry**

A DSC 7 Differential Scanning Calorimeter (PerkinElmer Instruments, Beaconsfields, UK)
calibrated with indium, was used to assess the presence of crystalline drug in Eudragit S
and Eudragit L microparticles. Microparticles (3-5 mg) were accurately weighed and
placed in non-hermetic aluminum pan. Before starting the thermo scan, an isothermal
period at 100 °C (90˚C for ketoprofen microparticles) was applied for 5 min (to eliminate
residual water content), then the samples were cooled and scanned from 50 °C to 200 °C at
a rate of 10 °C/min. Pyris Thermal Analysis Software was used to record and analyze the
data.

**Drug encapsulation efficiency in microparticles**

Drug loaded microparticles (50 mg) were dissolved in 50ml methanol. The resulting
solution was then diluted 10 times with HCl 0.1 N (for neutral and basic drugs) or with
phosphate buffer pH 7.4 (for acidic drugs). Samples were filtered using a 0.22µm Millex
filter and assayed spectrophotometrically. UV-Vis absorbance was measured using
spectrophotometer at λ<sub>max</sub> = 243, 301, 254, 245, 246, 254, 263, and 280 nm for
paracetamol, salicylic acid, ketoprofen, prednisolone, budenoside, bendroflumethiazide,
amiprenavir, and dipyridamole respectively. The encapsulation efficiency of cinnarizine was
determined by dissolving 50 mg of microparticles in 50 ml methanol; 10 ml was taken and
0.1M HCl was added to precipitate the polymers and made up to 100 ml. Samples were
filtered through 0.22 µm Millex filters and 3.75 ml of the filtrate was added to 5 ml of
acetonitrile followed by the addition of 1.25 ml of triphosphate buffer. Cinnarizine was
assayed using Hypersil column Thermo Scientific (Runcorn, UK). A Hewlett-Packard 1050
series HPLC system (Agilent Technologies, UK) supplied with Waters 470 Millipore fluorescence detector (Milford, MA, USA) was utilized to detect samples. The mobile phase, consisting of acetonitrile (70% v/v) and 10 mM potassium dihydrogen phosphate buffer (30% v/v), was eluted at a flow rate of 1 ml/min. The injection volume was 10 µl, and the fluorescence detector employed an excitation wavelength of 249 nm and emission wavelength of 311 nm.

For each formulation, 3 different batches were assessed. Drug encapsulation efficiency was calculated as:

\[
\text{encapsulation efficiency} = \frac{\text{measured mass of drug in microparticles}}{\text{theoretical mass of drug in microparticles}} \times 100
\]

**Eq.1**

**Drug solubility in acidic medium**

In order to assess the influence of the drug’s solubility in acid on its release, the solubility of all encapsulated drugs in acidic medium were assayed. An excess amount of drug was added to 10 ml of HCl 0.1 N solution and shaken for 24 hours at 200 rpm and 37 °C. The saturated solutions were filtered (0.22 µm Millipore syringe filters), diluted as appropriate, and UV absorbance was measured at \(\lambda_{\text{max}}\) as detailed in encapsulation efficiency section. Drug solubility was calculated from Beer-Lambert plots. In case of cinnarizine, drug concentration was assessed in saturated solution according to the HPLC method reported in the previous section.

**In vitro drug release from microparticles**

The USP II paddle apparatus (Model PTWS, Pharmatest, Hainburg, Germany) equipped with inline analysis coupled with 0.22 µm filter was employed to assess the microparticles’ dissolution profiles. Microparticles (0.1g) were accurately weighed and filled into capsule size 0. Each capsule was placed in a metal sinker to ensure a submerged position in a vessel containing 750 mL of 0.1N HCl as dissolution medium at 37 ± 0.5 °C. After 120 min, 250 mL of 0.2M tri-sodium phosphate (equilibrated to 37 ± 0.5 °C) was added to the dissolution vessel, and the pH of the solution was adjusted to 7.4±0.05 if necessary using 5N HCl or 4N NaOH solutions, and the dissolution experiment was continued for another 4 hours. Samples were taken every 5 min, the speed of the paddle was 100 rpm and each dissolution test was replicated 3 times. Data were processed using Icalis software (Icalis Data Systems Ltd, Berkshire, UK). A standard calibration curve was prepared for each drug in acidic and
buffer media. The absorbance of blank microparticles following the same dissolution procedure was measured and subtracted from those of the drug loaded microparticles to remove any interference from the Eudragit polymer and gelatin capsules. In case of cinnarizine, HPLC method reported above was applied to medium solutions.

**Multiple Regression**

Standard multiple regression using SPSS statistics software 17.0.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, U.S.) was conducted to assess the feasibility of predicting the control of drug release from microparticles in acidic medium from the following variables: drug molecular weight and its solubility in acid and microparticle diameter. The highly spherical morphology of the microparticles and the narrow size distribution of the majority of the prepared particles allowed the use of the square of diameter as representative of particles surface area. No violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicolinearity and homoscedasticity was found.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Microsphere properties**

All nine drugs were successfully encapsulated into Eudragit L and Eudragit S microparticles. The particles were spherical and had a uniform size distribution of 25-60 µm and 35-55 µm for Eudragit L and Eudragit S respectively (Table 1). Representative SEM images of amprenavir and prednisolone loaded microparticles are shown in Fig.1. According to the SEM images, there was no evidence of porosity in any of the fabricated microparticles. In addition, X-ray powder diffraction and thermal analysis showed no evidence of crystallinity in the microparticles.

Eudragit S microparticles were significantly larger than Eudragit L ones (paired samples t-test, t(11)=3.39, p<0.01). A greater size of Eudragit S microparticles prepared under the same conditions as Eudragit L microparticles was also reported by Kendall et al. (2009) and was attributed to the nature of polymers; the higher viscosity of Eudragit S solution leading to the formation of larger emulsion droplets under the same stirring conditions. The encapsulation efficiency was high for all drugs (60-90%, Table 1) with Eudragit S microparticles having slightly (but statistically significantly) higher encapsulation
efficiencies than Eudragit L microparticles (paired samples t-test, t(11)=5.76, p<0.0005). The data shows the universal ability of this microparticle system to encapsulate drug molecules with a wide range of physicochemical properties.

**In vitro drug release from microparticles**

The release profiles of the nine drugs from Eudragit S and Eudragit L microparticles are shown in Figs. 2 and 3 respectively. Release of dipyridamole, cinnarizine, amprenavir, bendroflumethiazide, budenoside, prednisolone in acidic medium was well-controlled from both Eudragit S and Eudragit L microparticles, being less than 10% of the total drug content after 120 min. In contrast, the release of paracetamol, salicylic acid and ketoprofen were poorly controlled (>10% of drug content).

Upon changing the pH to 6.8 and 7.4 for Eudragit L and Eudragit S microparticles respectively, rapid and complete drug release was achieved within 20 min and 45 min for Eudragit L and Eudragit S respectively for all drugs except for cinnarizine (Figs. 2 and 3). The slower release from Eudragit S microparticles could be due to its larger size (and hence smaller surface area), as well as a slower dissolution of the Eudragit S polymer. A lower dissolution rate of Eudragit S films (compared to Eudragit L ones) has been reported. The limited release of cinnarizine at high pH is attributed to the poor solubility of the basic drug in phosphate buffer. It was noted that drug crystals appeared in the dissolution medium after pH change, indicating a rapid precipitation of cinnarizine.

**Influence of drug and particle properties on the control of drug release in acid medium**

Plots of drug release versus: i) drug molecular weight, ii) solubility in acidic medium and iii) microsphere size are shown in Figs. 4-6. No clear relationship was found between the solubility of the drug in acid medium or microsphere size and drug release in the acidic medium. In contrast, the drug’s molecular weight seemed to have a significant impact on its release, drug release decreasing exponentially with increasing molecular weight. A minimum molecular weight of around 300 Da seems to be necessary for control of drug release in acid medium (Fig. 6). A larger molecular size of the drug is likely to impede its movement through the polymeric network of the microparticle matrix and hence its release in acid medium. The relative importance of the two drug properties, molecular weight and
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drug acid solubility, can be visualised in Figs. 7a-b. The figures clearly illustrate that release of larger drug molecules (>300 Da) are likely to be well-controlled and fulfil the USP criteria for delayed release formulations regardless of the drug’s solubility in the medium.

To quantify the different influences, multi-linear regression was conducted, and yielded the following equation:

\[
\text{Drug Released (\%)} = 55.123 - 0.123 \text{ MW} + 9.7 \log (\text{Sol}) - 0.012 d^2 + 1.55 P
\]

\[\text{Eq.5}\]

where MW = drug molecular weight (Da), Log(Sol) = logarithm of drug saturation solubility in the acidic medium at 37 °C assessed in mg/L, \(d\) = Median diameter of microparticles (µm) and P is a constant relating to the polymer, P = 0 for Eudragit S and P = 1 for Eudragit L.

It can be seen that drug release was increased by higher drug solubility and reduced by higher drug molecular weight and larger microparticle size. The multiple regression standardized coefficients revealed that molecular weight was by far the most prominent factor in controlling drug release (Standardized coefficient Beta = -0.617, \(p<0.001\)) while drug solubility (Beta = 0.403, \(p<0.01\)) and microsphere size (Beta = -0.396, \(p<0.05\)) had smaller influences. The model also suggests that the nature of polymethacrylate polymer (Eudragit S or Eudragit L) has no significant effect in controlling drug release in the acidic medium (Beta= 0.03, \(p=0.79\)). According to the model, replacing Eudragit S with Eudragit L was expected to increase drug release after two hours in the acid by less than 2%. Equation 5 was able to describe 84 % of the total variance (\(F (4, 17) = 22.111, p< 0.0005\)). Other factors not investigated in this study are also expected to affect drug release from polymeric matrix systems such as drug-polymer interactions\(^{18-21}\).

**CONCLUSIONS**

Nine drugs with different chemical natures were encapsulated in Eudragit L and Eudragit S microparticles using a novel emulsion solvent evaporation method. This showed the universality of the employed method for the preparation of delayed release particulate
formulations. The particles had the desirable properties of spherical morphology, smooth surface, small microsphere size (<100µm) and a uniform size distribution. However, all the drug-loaded microparticles did not conform to USP specifications with respect to control of drug release in acid medium for delayed release preparations i.e. release of <10% of drug content following a 2 hour incubation in an acid medium. Paracetamol, ketoprofen and salicylic acid were released at >10%. When the influences of the drug’s molecular weight, acid solubility and microsphere size on drug release in acid medium were modelled using multiple regression, the drug molecular weight was found to be the most important predictor while the drug’s acid solubility and the microsphere size were less influential.
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Fig. 2. % drug release from Eudragit L microparticles with time, using a pH-change dissolution method.

Fig. 3. % drug release from Eudragit S microparticles with time, using a pH-change dissolution method.
Fig. 4. % drug release from microparticles as a function of drug acid solubility (the dotted line represents USP criteria)

Fig. 5. % drug release from microparticles as a function of microsphere size (the dotted line represents USP criteria)

Fig. 6. % drug release from microparticles as a function of drug molecular weight (the dotted line represents USP criteria)

Fig. 7. Relative importance of drug molecular weight and drug acid solubility on drug release from (a) Eudragit S and (b) Eudragit L microparticles after 2 hours in gastric medium (sphere size is proportional to drug molecular weight, the dotted line represents USP criteria).

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Table 1: Drug’s molecular weight and microsphere size, encapsulation efficiency and percentage drug release in acid medium from Eudragit S and Eudragit L microparticles.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drug</th>
<th>Solubility in acidic medium (mg/L)</th>
<th>Molecular weight (Da)</th>
<th>Particle size D(0,5)±SD µm (Span ±S.D)</th>
<th>Encapsulation efficiency (%) ±SD</th>
<th>Drug release after 2hours (%)±SD</th>
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<td>Salicylic acid</td>
<td>1,435.5</td>
<td>138.1</td>
<td>46 ± 4.2 (3.0 ± 4.0) 31 ± 1.3 (0.7 ± 0.0)</td>
<td>107.2 ± 5.1 104 ± 1.9</td>
<td>40.8 ± 0.5 86.9 ± 1.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paracetamol</td>
<td>12,309</td>
<td>151.1</td>
<td>38 ± 1.9 (0.8 ± 0.07) 30 ± 1.2 (1.2 ± 0.1)</td>
<td>83.5 ± 0.7 83 ± 1.0</td>
<td>57.3 ± 0.3 63.2 ± 0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ketoprofen</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>254.2</td>
<td>36 ± 1.2 (0.9 ± 0.3) 28 ± 0.9 (0.9 ± 0.1)</td>
<td>91.1 ± 1.1 90 ± 0.9</td>
<td>6.9 ± 0.8 17.1 ± 2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prednisolone</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>360.4</td>
<td>48 ± 1.6 (0.6 ± 0.4) 38 ± 0.5 (0.7 ± 0.2)</td>
<td>80 ± 3.2 77 ± 1.2</td>
<td>1.6 ± 0.3 7.1 ± 0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinnarizine</td>
<td>2,110.6</td>
<td>369.5</td>
<td>49 ± 2.4 (0.7 ± 0.1) 56 ± 6.8 (1.2 ± 0.3)</td>
<td>64 ± 2.7 62 ± 1.9</td>
<td>0.0 ± 0.0 1.5 ± 0.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bendroflumethiazide</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>421.4</td>
<td>46 ± 13.5 (1.0 ± 0.1) 41 ± 4.1 (1.0 ± 0.1)</td>
<td>68 ± 0.9 63 ± 1.0</td>
<td>1.6 ± 0.3 3.1 ± 0.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Budenoside</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>430.5</td>
<td>44 ± 1.6 (1.0 ± 0.2) 33 ± 0.5 (0.7 ± 0.1)</td>
<td>59 ± 5.7 53 ± 1.6</td>
<td>1.7 ± 0.8 3.4 ± 0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dipyridamole</td>
<td>29,200</td>
<td>504.7</td>
<td>56 ± 0.2 (0.8 ± 0.1) 60 ± 5.9 (0.9 ± 0.1)</td>
<td>75 ± 1.7 70 ± 0.8</td>
<td>0.5 ± 0.4 0.0 ± 0.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amprenavir</td>
<td>89.0</td>
<td>505.6</td>
<td>36 ± 0.2 (0.9 ± 0.1) 27 ± 1.1 (0.9 ± 0.2)</td>
<td>68 ± 3.1 60 ± 0.8</td>
<td>0.0 ± 0.0 0.0 ± 0.0</td>
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Figure 1a
423x350mm (72 x 72 DPI)
Figure 1c
423x316mm (72 x 72 DPI)
% drug release from Eudragit L microparticles with time, using a pH-change dissolution method
% drug release from Eudragit S microparticles with time, using a pH-change dissolution method

228x141mm (96 x 96 DPI)
% drug release from microparticles as a function of drug acid solubility (the dotted line represents USP criteria)

228x141mm (96 x 96 DPI)
% drug release from microparticles as a function of microsphere size (the dotted line represents USP criteria)

220x143mm (96 x 96 DPI)
% drug release from microparticles as a function of drug molecular weight (the dotted line represents USP criteria)

220x140mm (96 x 96 DPI)
Relative importance of drug molecular weight and drug acid solubility on drug release from (a) Eudragit S and (b) Eudragit L microparticles after 2 hours in gastric medium (sphere size is proportional to drug molecular weight, the dotted line represents USP criteria)

211x127mm (96 x 96 DPI)
Relative importance of drug molecular weight and drug acid solubility on drug release from (a) Eudragit S and (b) Eudragit L microparticles after 2 hours in gastric medium (sphere size is proportional to drug molecular weight, the dotted line represents USP criteria).