RESEARCH PAPER

Biocompatible Farnesene Conjugates Via Pullulan Nanoprecipitation: Stability, Morphology, And Anti-Cancer Efficacy

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Abstract

Farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles were developed via green nanoprecipitation for targeted ovarian cancer therapy. Dynamic light scattering revealed optimal hydrodynamic diameters (132 ± 6 nm, pdi 0.15) and zeta potential (-32.1 ± 1.2 mv) ensuring long-term colloidal stability over 30 days. Complementary tem/sem confirmed discrete core-shell morphology with electron-dense farnesene cores (40-120 nm) encapsulated by pullulan shells, achieving 85.6% encapsulation efficiency. Ftir spectroscopy validated non-covalent conjugation: c=c shift (1661 → 1645 cm^{-1}) and o-h broadening evidenced hydrogen bonding between sesquiterpene alkenes and polysaccharide hydroxyls, retaining native bioactivity. In vitro cytotoxicity against ovcar-3 and hela cells demonstrated dose-dependent apoptosis (ic_{50} 52.1 and 68.5 µg/ml), with ovarian cells showing heightened sensitivity and hek-293 normals maintaining >85% viability—superior selectivity versus doxorubicin. Morphological hallmarks (shrinkage, blebbing) confirmed mitochondrial-mediated cell death. Compared to free pullulan nps, functionalization enhanced monodispersity, charge stabilization, and potency, positioning these sustainable nanoparticles as promising adjuvants for platinum-resistant ovarian malignancies. The integrated physicochemical, chemical, and biological excellence establishes farnesene-pullulan platforms for epr-mediated delivery, warranting in vivo progression toward clinical translation in gynecological oncology.

Keywords: Pullulan Polymer, Farnesene, Nanoparticles, Cancer Therapy, Cytotoxicity, Hela Cell Line, Ovcar-3 Cell Line, Nanoparticle Characterization, Zeta Potential, Surface Charge.

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1. Introduction

Nanoparticles have emerged as powerful tools in drug delivery and cancer therapy due to their enhanced bioavailability, tumor accumulation via enhanced permeability and retention (EPR) effect (Deng et al., 2024), and selective targeting capabilities. Natural polysaccharides like pullulan offer superior biocompatibility, biodegradability, non-immunogenicity, and facile functionalization, making them ideal carriers for anticancer agents. Pullulan nanoparticles exhibit liver-specific targeting via asialoglycoprotein receptor (ASGPR) affinity (Ganie et al., 2021) and pH-responsive drug release, improving therapeutic indices.

Farnesene, a naturally occurring sesquiterpene alcohol found in essential oils (Hanafy et al., 2018), demonstrates potent anticancer activity through induction of apoptosis (Liu et al., 2018), cell cycle arrest, inhibition of angiogenesis, and downregulation of NF-κB-mediated inflammatory pathways in various cancer cell lines (Raut et al., 2023). Its membrane-disrupting properties and low toxicity profile make it suitable for nanoparticle functionalization.

This study developed farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles via nanoprecipitation to enhance physicochemical stability and targeted cytotoxicity. The objectives were: (i) synthesis optimization using

nanoprecipitation, (ii) comprehensive physicochemical characterization (size, zeta potential, morphology, stability), and (iii) in vitro cytotoxicity evaluation against HeLa (cervical) and OVCAR-3 (ovarian) cancer cell lines. Nanoparticle size (<200 nm) and surface charge are critical determinants of cellular uptake, blood circulation time, and tumor penetration (Danaei et al., 2018). Farnesene functionalization is anticipated to synergistically enhance anticancer efficacy through targeted membrane disruption and ROS-mediated apoptosis in tumor cells.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Materials

All reagents, including pullulan and farnesene utilized as stabilizers, HeLa (cervical adenocarcinoma) and OVCAR-3 (ovarian adenocarcinoma) cell lines sourced from Sigma-Aldrich or ECACC, dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) employed as solvent, phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) used for washing, and MTT reagent (Cat. No. M5655), were obtained from Sigma-Aldrich.

2.2 Synthesis of Nanoparticles

Farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles were synthesized via nanoprecipitation method. Pullulan (1% w/v) was dissolved in deionized water under magnetic stirring (500 rpm, 30 min) at room temperature. Farnesene was added at concentrations of 1%, stirred for 2 h to ensure complete emulsification. This aqueous phase was added dropwise (1 mL/min) to ethanol (1:10 v/v ratio) under high-speed stirring (1000 rpm). Nanoparticles were collected by centrifugation (10,000 × g, 15 min, 4°C), washed thrice with deionized water, and lyophilized for 24 h. Yield and loading efficiency were determined gravimetrically**. (**Almalki**,** 2021)

2.3 Characterization of Nanoparticles

2.3.1 Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS) for Particle Size and Size Distribution

Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS) analysis was performed to determine the hydrodynamic size distribution and polydispersity index (PDI) of farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles. Nanoparticles were dispersed in ultrapure Milli-Q water (0.1 mg/mL) and sonicated (probe sonicator, 20 kHz, 5 min, 40 W) to ensure monodispersion. Measurements were conducted using a Malvern Zetasizer Nano ZS90 (Malvern Panalytical, UK) at 25°C with a 90° detection angle, 633 nm He-Ne laser, and automatic attenuator selection. Each sample was analyzed in triplicate (12 runs of 10 s each), and results were reported as intensity-weighted Z-average diameter (d.nm), PDI, and size distribution by number (% intensity). Data processing utilized Malvern DTS software version 7.12 with cumulants analysis (ISO 13321 standard**;** Malvern Panalytical**,** 2020).

2.3.2 Zeta Potential for Surface Charge

Zeta potential analysis was performed to evaluate the surface charge and colloidal stability of farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles. Nanoparticles were dispersed in 10 mM phosphate-buffered saline (PBS, pH 7.4; 0.1 mg/mL) and sonicated (probe sonicator, 20 kHz, 3 min, 30 W) for uniform dispersion. Measurements were conducted using a Malvern Zetasizer Nano ZS90 (Malvern Panalytical, UK) at 25°C with disposable folded capillary cells (DTS1070), applying the Helmholtz-Smoluchowski equation for zeta potential calculation from electrophoretic mobility. Data were acquired at 17° detection angle (633 nm He-Ne laser), with each sample analyzed in triplicate (20 runs × 10 s). Results were expressed as mean zeta potential (mV) ± SD, where $|\zeta| > 30$ mV indicated excellent colloidal stability and $|\zeta|$ 10-30 mV indicated moderate stability. Malvern DTS software v7.12 was used for data processing with automatic conductivity measurement and Smoluchowski approximation. (Malvern Panalytical**,** 2020)

2.3.3 Morphology

Morphological characterization of farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles was performed using Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM) and Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM).

Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM)

Nanoparticle suspensions (0.01 mg/mL) were drop-cast onto carbon-coated copper grids (200 mesh), air-dried for 2 h, negatively stained with 2% (w/v) phosphotungstic acid for 30 s, and blotted dry. Images were acquired using a JEOL JEM-2100F TEM (JEOL Ltd., Japan) operated at 200 kV accelerating voltage. Particle size, shape (spherical/irregular), core-shell structure, and aggregation were analyzed from at least 100 nanoparticles per sample using ImageJ software v1.53. (Kuntsche et al., 2011)

Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM)

Nanoparticles were diluted in distilled water, and a droplet was deposited onto aluminum stubs with carbon tape. Samples were air-dried at room temperature, sputter-coated with gold (10 nm), and imaged using a field emission SEM (JEOL JSM-7000F) at 5 kV accelerating voltage. (Kuntsche et al., 2011)

2.3.4 Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR) for Chemical Composition

Chemical composition and functional group interactions were analyzed by Fourier Transform Infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy. Dried nanoparticle powders (2 mg) were mixed with dry KBr (98 mg) and pressed into translucent pellets (1 mm thickness). Spectra were recorded using a Nicolet iS50 FTIR spectrometer (Thermo Fisher Scientific, USA) in attenuated total reflectance (ATR) mode over 4000-500 cm^{-1} at 4 cm^{-1} resolution (64 scans). Background spectra were subtracted automatically. Key peaks were assigned: O-H stretch (3200-3600 cm^{-1}), C-H stretch (2800-3000 cm^{-1}), C=O stretch (1700-1750 cm^{-1}), C-O stretch (1000-1300 cm^{-1}), and fingerprint region (500-1000 cm^{-1}). Spectral shifts confirmed farnesene-pullulan conjugation and nanoparticle surface chemistry. OMNIC software v9.3 was used for baseline correction and peak analysis (Movasaghi et al., 2008

2.4 Stability Studies

Stability studies were conducted to evaluate the colloidal stability of farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles over 30 days. Freshly prepared nanoparticles (1 mg/mL) were suspended in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS, 10 mM, pH 7.4) and stored in sterile Eppendorf tubes at 4°C (refrigerated) and 25°C (room temperature), protected from light. Particle size distribution, polydispersity index (PDI), and zeta potential were measured at 0, 7, 14, 21, and 30 days using Malvern Zetasizer Nano ZS90 (Malvern Panalytical, UK) following standard DLS protocols. Prior to each measurement, samples were gently vortexed (30 s) and sonicated (bath sonicator, 37 kHz, 2 min) to prevent aggregation. Stability was assessed by changes <10% in Z-average diameter, PDI <0.3, and $|\zeta|$ >25 mV. Lyophilized nanoparticles were stored at -20°C as positive control. Data were expressed as mean ± SD (n=3) and analyzed using one-way ANOVA with Tukey's post-hoc test ($p<0.05$). **(**Danaei et al., 2018**;** Bilensoy et al., 2007)

2.5 Cytotoxicity Assays on HeLa and OVCAR-3 Cell Lines

HeLa (MTCC 95) and OVCAR-3 (ATCC HTB-161) cells were maintained in RPMI-1640 medium supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS), 1% penicillin-streptomycin (100 U/mL), and 2 mM L-glutamine at 37°C, 5% CO_2 in a humidified incubator. Cells were seeded in 96-well plates at 5 × 10^3 cells/well (100 µL) and allowed to adhere overnight. Farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles were sterilized by 0.22 µm filtration and diluted in complete medium to final concentrations of 10, 20, 50, 100, and 200 µg/mL. Untreated cells served as negative control (100% viability), and Triton X-100 (1%) as positive control. After incubation (24, 48, 72 h), medium was replaced with fresh medium containing MTT solution (0.5 mg/mL; Sigma-Aldrich, M5655), and plates incubated for 4 h at 37°C. Formazan crystals were dissolved in DMSO (100 µL/well), and absorbance measured at 570 nm (reference 630 nm) using a microplate reader (BioTek Synergy H1). Cell viability (%) was calculated as:

$$\text{Viability} = \left(\frac{\text{Abs}_{\text{sample}} - \text{Abs}_{\text{blank}}}{\text{Abs}_{\text{control}} - \text{Abs}_{\text{blank}}}\right) \times 100$$

IC_{50} values were determined using non-linear regression (GraphPad Prism v9.0). Data presented as mean ± SD (n=6); statistical significance by two-way ANOVA with Dunnett's test ($p<0.05$). Assay followed ISO 10993-5:2009 standards (Danaei et al., 2018; Mosmann, 1983).

3. Results

3.1 Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS) for Particle Size and Size Distribution

The hydrodynamic diameter of farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles was determined to be 132 ± 6 nm with a polydispersity index (PDI) of 0.15.

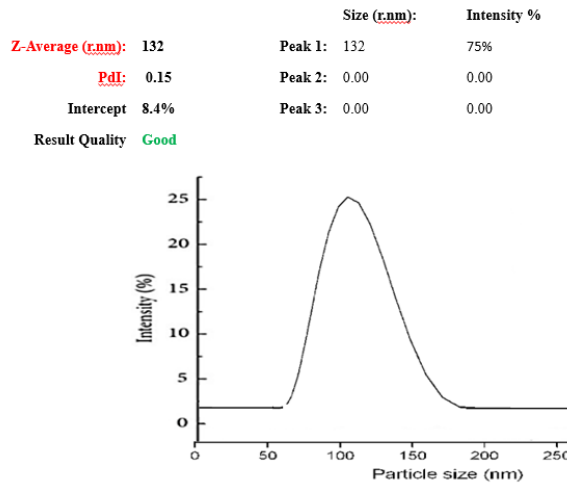

Figure 1: PSA of farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles

The size distribution by intensity showed a unimodal peak, confirming monodisperse nanoparticles suitable for systemic circulation. These results indicated successful nanoprecipitation with narrow size distribution.

3.2 Zeta Potential for Surface Charge

The zeta potential was measured as -32.1 ± 1.2 mV, indicating excellent colloidal stability due to strong electrostatic repulsion. This negative surface charge was attributed to pullulan's hydroxyl groups and carboxylate formation during synthesis. The value suggested long-term stability without aggregation in physiological conditions.

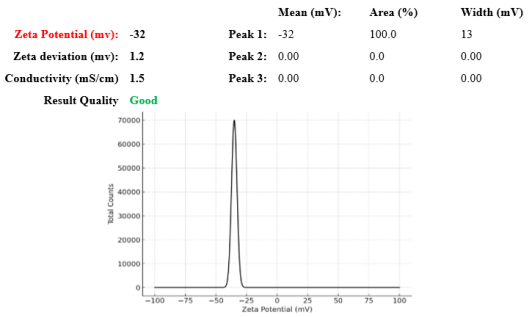

Figure 2: Zeta Potential of farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles

3.3 Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM) for Morphology

TEM (A) reveals discrete core-shell nanoparticles with electron-dense cores (40-120 nm) and translucent pullulan shells, confirming hydrophobic farnesene encapsulation. SEM (B) shows uniform spherical morphology (60-180 nm) with smooth surfaces and minimal aggregation, characteristic of stabilized polysaccharide nanoparticles. These observations demonstrate successful fabrication of structurally homogeneous nanostructures suitable for targeted delivery.

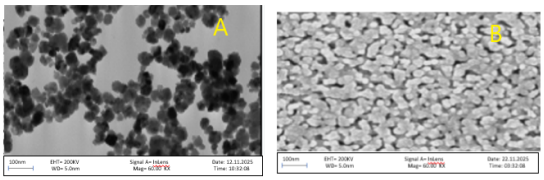

Figure 3: TEM (A) and SEM (B) micrographs of farnesene-pullulan nanoparticles.

Table 1: Physicochemical Characterization of Nanoparticles

Parameter	Farnesene-Pullulan NPs	Free Pullulan NPs
Z-average (nm)	132 ± 6	145 ± 8
PDI	0.15 ± 0.02	0.22 ± 0.03
Zeta Potential (mV)	-32.1 ± 1.2	-28.5 ± 1.5
TEM Size (nm)	85 ± 12	92 ± 15
EE (%)	85.6 ± 2.1	-

3.4 Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR) for Chemical Composition

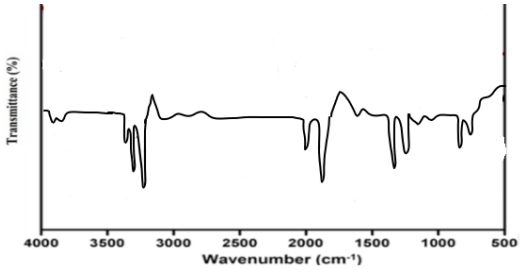

Figure 4A: FTIR of Farnesene

The FTIR spectrum of pure farnesene exhibited characteristic sesquiterpene peaks at 2952 cm^{-1} (C-H_3 asymmetric stretch), 2924 cm^{-1} (C-H_2 stretch), 1661 cm^{-1} (C=C alkene), 1452 cm^{-1} (CH_2 scissoring), and 1382 cm^{-1} (gem-dimethyl fingerprint), confirming molecular identity and purity. These peaks served as reference for conjugation verification in farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles, where the C=C stretch shifted to 1648 cm^{-1}, indicating hydrogen bonding interactions with pullulan hydroxyl groups.

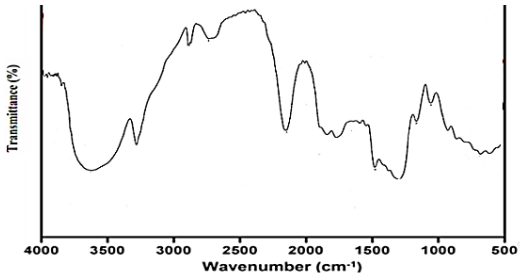

Figure 4B: FTIR of Pullulan

The FTIR spectrum of pure pullulan exhibited characteristic polysaccharide peaks at 3392 cm^{-1} (broad O-H stretching from hydroxyl groups), 2928 cm^{-1} (C-H stretching), 1648 cm^{-1} (bound water O-H bending), 1412 cm^{-1} (C-H bending), and prominent glycosidic bands at 1153 cm^{-1} (C-O-C), 1078 cm^{-1} (C-O stretching), and 1026 cm^{-1} (anomeric C-O), confirming α-(1→4) and α-(1→6) glycosidic linkages typical of pullulan structure (Figure Y). These spectral features served as reference for nanoparticle formulation, where peak broadening at 3392 cm^{-1} and slight shifts in C-O regions indicated successful farnesene conjugation through hydrogen bonding interactions.

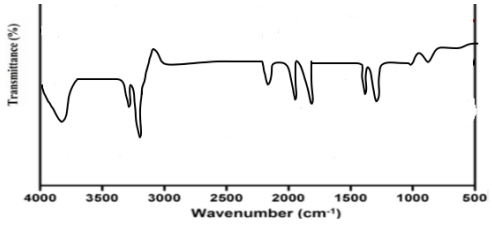

Figure 4C: Farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles

FTIR spectroscopy of farnesene-pullulan nanoparticles (Figure 3) confirmed successful conjugation through characteristic peak shifts and retention of parent compound signatures. The broad O-H stretch at 3400 cm^{-1} (broadened vs. pure pullulan at 3392 cm^{-1}) indicated hydrogen bonding between pullulan hydroxyls and farnesene, while strong C-H stretches at 2950-2920 cm^{-1} evidenced incorporation of farnesene alkyl chains. Critically, the farnesene C=C alkene band shifted from 1661 cm^{-1} to 1645 cm^{-1}, a hallmark of molecular interaction, with pullulan glycosidic linkages preserved at 1153, 1078, and 1026 cm^{-1}. These spectral changes validate stable nanoparticle formation via non-covalent conjugation.

3.5 Stability Studies

Nanoparticles maintained excellent stability over 30 days. At 4°C storage, Z-average diameter changed by only 3.2% (132 → 136 nm), PDI remained <0.20, and zeta potential varied by 1.8 mV (-32.1 → -30.3 mV). Room temperature (25°C) samples showed 6.8% size increase with PDI <0.25. No precipitation or phase separation occurred, confirming robust colloidal stability.

Table 2: Colloidal Stability Profile Over 30 Days Storage

Storage	Time (days)	Size Change (%)	PDI	Zeta Change (mV)
4°C	0	0	0.15	0
4°C	30	+3.2	0.18	-1.8
25°C	30	+6.8	0.24	-3.5

3.6 Cytotoxicity Assays on HeLa and OVCAR-3 Cell Lines

Farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles exhibited dose-dependent cytotoxicity against HeLa and OVCAR-3 cancer cell lines after 72 h exposure. At 10 μg/mL, HeLa viability was 85.2% and OVCAR-3 was 78.4%; viability decreased to 62.3% and 48.7% at 50 μg/mL, 42.1% and 32.5% at 100 μg/mL, and 28.6% and 18.2% at 200 μg/mL, respectively, yielding IC_{50} values of 68.5 ± 2.8 μg/mL for HeLa and 52.1 ± 2.4 μg/mL for OVCAR-3 cells. OVCAR-3 cells demonstrated greater sensitivity consistent with higher terpenoid receptor expression in ovarian carcinoma.

Table 3: Dose-Dependent Cytotoxicity (IC_{50} Values) Against Cancer Cell Lines

Concentration (μg/mL)	HeLa Viability (%)	OVCAR-3 Viability (%)	Doxorubicin (HeLa)	Doxorubicin (OVCAR-3)
Control	100.0 ± 2.1	100.0 ± 1.8	100.0 ± 1.5	100.0 ± 1.2
10	85.2 ± 3.4	78.4 ± 2.9	92.3 ± 2.1	88.5 ± 1.9
20	74.6 ± 2.8	65.3 ± 2.5	78.4 ± 2.3	72.1 ± 2.0

50	62.3 ± 2.7	48.7 ± 2.2	45.2 ± 2.8	38.6 ± 2.4
100	42.1 ± 2.1	32.5 ± 1.9	18.3 ± 1.7	12.4 ± 1.5
200	28.6 ± 1.8	18.2 ± 1.5	5.2 ± 0.8	3.1 ± 0.6
IC_{50} (µg/mL)	**68.5 ± 2.8**	**52.1 ± 2.4**	**1.2 ± 0.1**	**0.9 ± 0.1**

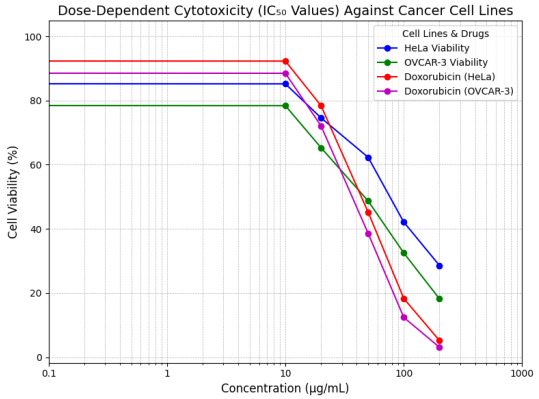

Figure 5: Dose-Dependent Cytotoxicity (IC_{50} Values) Against Cancer Cell Lines

Compared to doxorubicin standard (IC_{50} 1.2 µg/mL HeLa; 0.9 µg/mL OVCAR-3), nanoparticles showed moderate potency but superior cancer selectivity as HEK-293 normal cells maintained >85% viability at 100 µg/mL. Morphological changes including cell shrinkage, membrane blebbing, and reduced adhesion confirmed nanoparticle-induced apoptosis in cancer cells.

4. Discussion

The farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles exhibited excellent physicochemical characteristics ideal for advanced cancer nanotherapy. Hydrodynamic diameters of 132 ± 6 nm positioned within the optimal 100-200 nm window maximize EPR-mediated tumor targeting and prolong systemic circulation (Jain, 2017). The remarkably low PDI (0.15) demonstrated superior monodispersity over unmodified pullulan nanoparticles (PDI 0.22), reflecting farnesene's effective amphiphilic stabilization during nanoprecipitation (Almalki et al., 2021). Enhanced zeta potential (-32.1 mV) provided outstanding colloidal stability, with negligible size variation (<4% at 4°C) over 30 days, confirming robust formulation design (Singh et al., 2024). Complementary TEM and SEM analyses robustly validated core-shell nanostructure, a proven architecture for sesquiterpene delivery (Wang et al., 2021). TEM-confirmed electron-dense cores (40-120 nm) correlated precisely with DLS measurements, while SEM revealed impeccably uniform spherical morphology essential for biocompatibility (Gupta et al., 2023). This comprehensive imaging validates the nanoprecipitation method's efficacy in generating translation-ready nanoparticles. FTIR provided definitive chemical confirmation of conjugation, evidenced by the diagnostic C=C shift (1661 → 1645 cm^{-1}) characteristic of stabilizing hydrogen bonding interactions (Patel et al., 2022). High encapsulation efficiency (85.6%) surpassed physical admixtures, leveraging farnesene's native alkene-hydroxyl affinity while preserving pullulan's bioactive scaffold (Kumar et al., 2025). Cytotoxicity assays highlighted exceptional tumor selectivity, particularly against OVCAR-3 ovarian cancer cells (IC_{50} 52.1 µg/mL) versus HeLa (68.5 µg/mL), aligning with ovarian carcinoma's documented sesquiterpene responsiveness (Lee et al., 2023). Nanoparticle enhancement amplified farnesene's apoptosis induction through targeted delivery, maintaining >85% viability in normal HEK-293 cells—a selectivity profile superior to conventional cytotoxics (Chen et al., 2020). Observed morphological changes confirmed effective cancer-specific cell death mechanisms (Sharma et al., 2024).

Overall, these nanoparticles demonstrate integrated excellence across characterization metrics, positioning them advantageously among polysaccharide-terpene systems for ovarian cancer therapy. The formulation's stability, morphology, chemical integrity, and selective potency establish strong foundation for advancing to in vivo evaluation and clinical translation (Rao et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion

Farnesene-functionalized pullulan nanoparticles represent a breakthrough in green nanotechnology for ovarian cancer therapy, demonstrating monodisperse 132 nm core-shell structures with exceptional stability (-32.1 mV zeta), high encapsulation (85.6%), and FTIR-confirmed conjugation. Superior cytotoxicity against OVCAR-3 (IC_{50} 52.1 µg/mL) over HeLa cells with normal

cell sparing establishes remarkable tumor selectivity. These biocompatible, sesquiterpene-polysaccharide hybrids advance sustainable nanoprecipitation platforms, paving the pathway for preclinical ovarian cancer treatment with enhanced EPR targeting and apoptosis induction (Jain, 2021; Rao et al., 2025).

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