RESEARCH PAPER

Smart Nanoformulations for Precision Medicine: Emerging Technologies, Therapeutic Applications, and Clinical Challenges

A. Helen Sonia[1*], A. Mohamed Ansar[2], D.L. Jayachandran[3], J.L. Arun[4], S. Uma Maheswari[5], R. Eshamugi[6], C.J. Shammah[7], P. Sathiya[8], S. Nagarajan[9]

[1]Professor, Dept. of Pharmaceutics, S.A. Raja Pharmacy College, Vadakkangulam, Tirunelveli Dt, Tamil Nadu

[2,3,4,5]Associate Professor, Dept. of Pharmaceutics, S.A. Raja Pharmacy College, Vadakkangulam, Tirunelveli Dt, Tamil Nadu

[6]Assistant Professor, Dept. of Pharmaceutics, S.A. Raja Pharmacy College, Vadakkangulam, Tirunelveli Dt, Tamil Nadu

[7]Assistant Professor, Dept. of Pharmaceutical Chemistry, S.A. Raja Pharmacy College, Vadakkangulam, Tirunelveli Dt, Tamil Nadu

[8]Assistant Professor, Dept. of Pharmaceutics, Sri Ram Nallamani Yadava College of Pharmacy, Tenkasi, Tamil Nadu

[9]Assistant Professor, Dept. of Pharmacy Practice, S.A. Raja Pharmacy College, Vadakkangulam, Tirunelveli Dt, Tamil Nadu

*Corresponding Author: A. Helen Sonia, Professor, Dept. of Pharmaceutics, S.A. Raja Pharmacy College, Vadakkangulam, Tirunelveli Dt, Tamil Nadu

Email: helensoniarajeshanpu@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Smart nanoformulations have emerged as promising platforms in precision medicine by enabling controlled drug delivery, improved therapeutic targeting, enhanced bioavailability, and potential reductions in systemic toxicity. Conventional drug delivery systems often encounter limitations associated with poor aqueous solubility, rapid clearance, inadequate tissue penetration, nonspecific biodistribution, and interpatient variability. Recent advances have facilitated multifunctional carriers including polymeric nanoparticles, liposomes, lipid nanoparticles, dendrimers, mesoporous silica nanoparticles, metallic nanoparticles, and biomimetic nanocarriers. These systems can respond to endogenous stimuli such as pH, reactive oxygen species, enzyme activity, hypoxia, and redox conditions, or exogenous stimuli including light, magnetic fields, temperature, and ultrasound. Integration with artificial intelligence, molecular imaging, genomic profiling, and theranostics offers opportunities for personalized therapy. Applications span oncology, neurological and cardiovascular disorders, inflammation, infectious diseases, and nucleic acid therapeutics. Although several nanomedicines have achieved regulatory approval, most complex stimuli-responsive and patient-specific systems remain investigational. Critical obstacles include biological heterogeneity, limited tissue accumulation, protein corona formation, immunogenicity, long-term toxicity, manufacturing complexity, scale-up, and regulatory requirements. This review discusses major technologies, mechanisms, characterization approaches, therapeutic applications, clinical challenges, and future directions, emphasizing biomarker-guided patient selection and clinical feasibility.

Keywords: Smart nanoformulations; precision medicine; targeted drug delivery; stimuli-responsive nanoparticles; lipid nanoparticles; theranostics; nanomedicine; artificial intelligence.

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1. Introduction

Precision medicine seeks to optimize medical interventions according to differences in disease biology, genetic features, environment, and treatment response. Nanotechnology has provided new ways to modify the pharmacokinetics, biodistribution, cellular uptake and release of therapeutics. Conventional pharmaceutical products may be limited by low bioavailability, rapid clearance, insufficient tissue penetration, and systemic toxicity.

Smart nanoformulations differ from simple nanoscale carriers by incorporating environmental responsiveness, targeting ligands, integrated imaging, or coordinated delivery. Their clinical relevance depends on demonstrating tangible improvements over existing treatments—not complexity alone. This

review examines their design, emerging technologies, therapeutic relevance, pharmaceutical evaluation, clinical translation challenges, and future prospects [1–3].

2. Fundamental Principles of Smart Nanoformulations

Smart formulations achieve functionality through material composition, carrier architecture, surface chemistry, targeting elements, and chemical bonds sensitive to environmental changes. Their performance is defined by the relationship among circulation stability, delivery to the intended site, intracellular trafficking, and drug release.

2.1 Passive targeting

Passive targeting exploits physiological differences between healthy and diseased tissues. The enhanced permeability and retention effect has been widely investigated in tumor delivery, but differs considerably among cancer types and patients. In a major meta-analysis, the median nanoparticle delivery to solid tumors was approximately 0.7% of the injected dose [4].

2.2 Active targeting

Antibodies, peptides, aptamers and small-molecule ligands can promote recognition and uptake through selected receptors. Yet receptor affinity does not necessarily translate to higher overall delivery into tumors or diseased organs; vascular and tissue barriers remain important.

2.3 Stimuli-responsive release

Controlled delivery may arise through chemical bond cleavage, polymer swelling, membrane destabilization, matrix degradation, or heating. Release should be characterized in both triggered and untriggered conditions using physiologically relevant models.

3. Classification of Smart Nanoformulations

Major platform classes include polymeric, lipid-based, inorganic, and biomimetic systems. Each presents distinct advantages and production or safety challenges.

Table 1. Principal nanoformulation classes

Platform	Characteristics	Potential use
Polymeric nanoparticles	Biodegradable polymer matrices; tunable release	Cancer, inflammation, gene delivery
Liposomes	Phospholipid bilayer vesicles	Anticancer and antifungal medicines
Lipid nanoparticles	Ionizable and helper lipids encapsulating nucleic acids	mRNA and siRNA delivery
Solid lipid nanoparticles	Predominantly solid lipid matrix	Drug stabilization and prolonged release
Nanostructured lipid carriers	Mixture of solid and liquid lipids	Poorly soluble compounds
Dendrimers	Branched architecture with multiple functional groups	Small-molecule and gene delivery
Mesoporous silica nanoparticles	Porous framework and functional surfaces	Controlled loading and release
Metallic/magnetic nanoparticles	Optical, catalytic or magnetic functions	Imaging and hyperthermia

Biomimetic nanoparticles	Cell-membrane or bioinspired surfaces	Immune-interactive and targeted delivery

3.1 Polymeric nanoparticles

Poly(lactic-co-glycolic acid), polylactic acid, chitosan and copolymers support diverse delivery architectures. Polymer composition and molecular weight affect release, breakdown, and stability. Difficulties include initial burst release, batch heterogeneity, and scale-up.

3.2 Liposomes and lipid nanoparticles

Liposomes house therapeutic molecules in an aqueous core or lipid bilayer. Lipid nanoparticles are important for nucleic acids and may contain ionizable lipids, phospholipids, cholesterol and lipid-conjugated polymers. Endosomal escape, stability, and organ specificity remain limiting steps.

3.3 Solid lipid nanoparticles and nanostructured lipid carriers

Solid and mixed-lipid matrices can improve handling of selected lipophilic payloads. Drug expulsion, lipid polymorphism, oxidation and storage instability require close monitoring.

3.4 Mesoporous silica and inorganic platforms

Porous silica systems offer high surface area and surface customization; magnetic or optically active materials may integrate imaging and externally induced therapy. Long-term biodistribution, degradation and elimination present critical translational considerations.

4. Stimuli-Responsive Nanoformulations

Endogenous triggers include pH, enzymatic activity, cellular reducing conditions, reactive oxygen species and hypoxia. Exogenous triggers include light, ultrasound, magnetic fields and applied heat. Successful systems must distinguish relevant biological signals from normal physiological variation.

Table 2. Mechanisms and limitations of smart release

Trigger	Representative mechanism	Challenge
pH	Protonation or acid-labile cleavage	Variable local pH
Redox	Cleavage of reduction-sensitive linkages	Heterogeneous intracellular environment
Enzymes	Protease- or enzyme-mediated degradation	Limited specificity
Reactive oxygen species	Oxidation-sensitive material breakdown	Variable oxidant concentrations
Light	Photochemical or photothermal activation	Tissue penetration
Ultrasound	Acoustic stimulation	Device-dependent effects
Magnetic field	Heating or magnetic manipulation	Material and device limitations
Temperature	Thermally induced structural change	Safe localized heating

4.1 pH and redox activation

Ionizable groups and acid-sensitive bonds can enable release in acidic intracellular compartments. Disulfide and other redox-cleavable bonds can exploit selected reducing environments. Physiological validation is essential because simplified buffer results may not predict in vivo performance.

4.2 Enzymatic and oxidative activation

Enzyme-degradable polymer segments and ROS-sensitive moieties can trigger carrier transformation in inflamed or diseased tissue. Non-specific enzyme expression and fluctuating oxidative conditions reduce predictability.

4.3 External triggers

Light, ultrasound, magnetic stimulation and temperature changes may control the timing of activation. Penetration depth, treatment geometry, specialized equipment and tissue safety must be incorporated into the development strategy [5].

5. Emerging Technologies in Precision Nanomedicine

Convergence with molecular medicine and modern manufacturing is shifting attention from generic nanoscale delivery to individually relevant therapeutic systems.

5.1 Artificial intelligence-assisted design

Machine learning and Bayesian optimization can correlate composition and processing with particle size, polydispersity, encapsulation, stability and release. Models require well-curated datasets, transparent validation and independent experimental replication.

5.2 Biomimetic nanocarriers

Extracellular vesicle-inspired and membrane-coated particles attempt to alter biological recognition and immune interactions. Variability of starting biological materials, contamination, characterization and scalable manufacturing are continuing concerns.

5.3 Nanotheranostics

Combined diagnostic and therapeutic components may permit monitoring of distribution or response through MRI, fluorescence or nuclear imaging. Added functionality can also add costs, toxicological concerns and regulatory complexity.

5.4 Nucleic acids and genome editing

Lipid and polymeric systems are studied for siRNA, mRNA, antisense oligonucleotides and gene-editing cargoes. Cargo protection, selective organ delivery and endosomal escape are central bottlenecks.

5.5 Biomarker-guided treatment

Patient stratification by receptor expression, molecular profiles, tissue characteristics and imaging findings may help identify likely responders. Clinical utility requires prospective evidence that the stratification improves outcomes.

6. Therapeutic Applications

Therapeutic opportunities are heterogeneous; an effective carrier in one disease or administration route cannot be assumed to work in another.

Table 3. Applications of precision nanoformulations

Clinical area	Promising role	Principal barrier
Oncology	Targeted chemotherapy, RNA delivery, immunomodulation	Tumor heterogeneity and low accumulation
Neurological disorders	CNS-directed delivery	Blood–brain barrier
Cardiovascular disease	Vascular imaging and targeted anti-inflammatory therapy	Flow conditions and blood interactions
Inflammatory disorders	Site-directed drug delivery	Variable inflammatory microenvironments
Infections	Antiviral, antibiotic and vaccine cargo delivery	Pathogen-specific efficacy and targeting
Genetic disorders	RNA delivery and genome editing	Endosomal escape and organ specificity

6.1 Oncology

Nanoformulations can modify chemotherapy exposure and are being studied for RNA therapies, photothermal treatment and immune modulation. Translation is restrained by vascular barriers, extracellular matrix and model-to-patient differences. Approved liposomal products show real benefits, but do not validate every sophisticated stimuli-responsive platform.

6.2 Neurological diseases

Nanocarriers are being explored for drug transport into the central nervous system, but inadequate brain accumulation continues to hinder therapeutic translation [6].

6.3 Cardiovascular and inflammatory conditions

Biomarker-responsive and tissue-targeted systems may deliver drugs to vascular lesions or inflamed tissues. Their design must address changing disease environments, coagulation, shear forces and immune-cell uptake [7].

6.4 Infectious diseases and nucleic acid medicines

Lipid nanoparticle technology is established in some nucleic acid medicines and vaccines. Additional pathogen-directed nanoformulations need validated pathogen-specific activity, exposure, host safety and clinically useful endpoints.

7. Established Clinical Nanomedicines

Commercial nanomedicines illustrate the feasibility of nanoparticle-based pharmaceuticals, but most should not be considered autonomous, patient-specific or stimuli-responsive systems.

Table 4. Selected marketed nanomedicines

Product	Technology	Use
Doxil	Pegylated liposomal doxorubicin	Selected malignancies
Abraxane	Albumin-bound paclitaxel	Selected malignancies
Onpattro	Lipid nanoparticle siRNA	Hereditary transthyretin amyloidosis with polyneuropathy
AmBisome	Liposomal amphotericin B	Serious fungal infections
Onivyde	Liposomal irinotecan	Selected pancreatic cancer regimens

8. Pharmaceutical Characterization and Evaluation

Clinical viability depends on a robust connection between the carrier structure and consistent quality attributes. Analytical methods should be validated for the selected formulation and biological medium.

Table 5. Core characterization approaches

Attribute	Method
Size and PDI	Dynamic light scattering
Morphology	Transmission or scanning electron microscopy
Surface charge	Electrophoretic light scattering
Drug content	HPLC or LC–MS/MS
Chemical interactions	FTIR and NMR
Thermal properties	DSC and TGA
Crystallinity	X-ray diffraction
Release kinetics	Validated in vitro release methods
Stability	Physical and chemical assays

Cellular compatibility	Appropriate toxicity and hemocompatibility methods
Biodistribution	Validated imaging or bioanalysis

Encapsulation efficiency (%) = (Encapsulated drug mass / Total drug mass added) × 100[11]

Drug loading (%) = (Encapsulated drug mass / Total mass of loaded nanoparticles) × 100

9. Clinical Challenges and Limitations

Protein corona formation can change surface identity, immune clearance and interactions with target cells. Biological barriers include vascular transport, extracellular matrix, intracellular trafficking and heterogeneous target expression. Toxicology must address acute reactions, immunogenicity, degradation products, repeated exposure and long-term organ distribution.

Complex synthesis methods create batch-to-batch variation in size, surface chemistry, loading, residual chemicals and stability. Manufacturing processes need well-defined critical quality attributes, control strategies and validated release assays. FDA guidance on drug products containing nanomaterials provides an important regulatory reference [8]. Economic feasibility and access to specialized clinical devices must also be assessed early.

10. Future Perspectives

Priority areas include simpler biodegradable responsive systems, standardized reporting, biomarker-guided patient selection, better intracellular delivery, validated predictive modeling, scalable microfluidic processing, and long-term safety studies. Combination of imaging, genomic profiling and delivery technology should be driven by clinical questions rather than technical novelty alone. Emerging reviews highlight AI-assisted and biomimetic strategies while emphasizing unresolved translational barriers [9-10].

11. Conclusion

Smart nanoformulations offer opportunities to improve pharmaceutical delivery and precision medicine through controlled release, surface engineering, responsive architectures and integration with diagnostics. Clinically established lipid and nanoparticle medicines demonstrate the value of nanoscale drug delivery, while more elaborate responsive and patient-specific systems remain predominantly investigational. Progress depends on meaningful therapeutic improvements, reproducible manufacturing, biomarker validation, rigorous safety evaluation, and appropriately designed clinical studies.

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