Translational Medicine
ISSN: 2161-1025
OPEN ACCESS Freely available online
Perspective

Nanotechnology-Based Drug Delivery Systems for Targeted Cancer Therapy

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DESCRIPTION

Cancer continues to be one of the most formidable health challenges worldwide, characterized by high mortality rates and complex treatment requirements. While conventional chemotherapy remains a cornerstone of cancer treatment, its systemic toxicity, lack of specificity, and development of multidrug resistance have limited its effectiveness. In recent years, nanotechnology-based drug delivery systems have emerged as a transformative approach in oncology, offering the potential for more precise, efficient, and less toxic cancer therapies. By leveraging nanoscale materials and engineering, researchers are now developing drug delivery systems that selectively target tumor cells, enhance drug accumulation at the tumor site, and reduce off-target effects.

Nanoparticles, typically ranging from 1 to 100 nanometers in size, possess unique physicochemical properties that make them ideal carriers for anticancer drugs. These include high surface-area-to-volume ratio, tunable surface chemistry, and the ability to encapsulate hydrophobic or hydrophilic agents. Nanocarriers can be composed of various materials, such as lipids (liposomes), polymers (polymeric nanoparticles), metals (gold nanoparticles), or even biological materials (exosomes), each offering specific advantages in drug loading, release, and biocompatibility.

One of the most significant advancements in nanotechnology for cancer therapy is the development of targeted drug delivery systems. Unlike traditional chemotherapy that affects both healthy and malignant cells, targeted nanoparticles are designed to accumulate preferentially at tumor sites. This can be achieved through two main mechanisms: passive and active targeting. Passive targeting exploits the Enhanced Permeability and Retention (EPR) effect, a phenomenon in which nanoparticles preferentially accumulate in tumor tissue due to leaky vasculature and poor lymphatic drainage. Active targeting involves functionalizing the surface of nanoparticles with ligands such as antibodies, peptides, or aptamers that recognize and bind to specific receptors overexpressed on cancer cells, enabling receptor-mediated endocytosis and intracellular drug delivery.

Targeted nanocarriers can deliver a wide range of therapeutic agents, including chemotherapeutics, nucleic acids (siRNA, miRNA, mRNA), proteins, and immunomodulators. For example, liposomal formulations like Doxil® (liposomal doxorubicin) have already reached the clinic, demonstrating improved pharmacokinetics and reduced cardiotoxicity compared to free doxorubicin. Newer platforms are now being designed to deliver multiple drugs simultaneously or to combine diagnostic and therapeutic capabilities in a single nanostructure-a concept known as theranostics. This dual functionality allows real-time monitoring of drug distribution and treatment response, paving the way for personalized cancer therapy.

Furthermore, nanotechnology offers solutions to overcome key challenges in cancer treatment, such as Multidrug Resistance (MDR). MDR often results from the overexpression of drug efflux pumps in cancer cells, which expel therapeutic agents before they can exert their effects. Nanocarriers can bypass these pumps by facilitating intracellular drug accumulation through endocytic pathways, thus restoring drug sensitivity. In addition, nanoparticles can be engineered to respond to specific stimuli-such as pH, temperature, enzymes, or redox conditions-ensuring controlled drug release within the tumor microenvironment while sparing normal tissues.

Despite these promising developments, several challenges must be addressed before nanotechnology-based drug delivery becomes a routine clinical practice. Manufacturing scalability, reproducibility, and regulatory approval remain significant hurdles. Moreover, the heterogeneity of tumors and variability in the EPR effect among patients may impact treatment efficacy. To overcome these barriers, researchers are developing more sophisticated nanocarriers capable of adapting to the dynamic tumor microenvironment and are incorporating patient-specific factors into the design process.

Preclinical studies and early-phase clinical trials have shown encouraging results, but long-term safety, biodistribution, and clearance profiles of nanoparticles require further investigation. Collaborations between material scientists, oncologists, and regulatory bodies are essential to ensure the safe translation of nanomedicine from bench to bedside. Additionally, integrating nanotechnology with other emerging modalities such as immunotherapy, gene editing, and artificial intelligence could further enhance the precision and impact of cancer treatments.

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Received: 19-May-2025, Manuscript No. TMCR-25-38411; **Editor assigned:** 21-May-2025, PreQC No. TMCR-25-38411 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 04-Jun-2025, QC No. TMCR-25-38411; **Revised:** 11-Jun-2025, Manuscript No. TMCR-25-38411 (R); **Published:** 18-Jun-2025, DOI: 10.35248/2161-1025.25.15.346

Citation: Eldridge K (2025). Nanotechnology-Based Drug Delivery Systems for Targeted Cancer Therapy. Trans Med.15:346.

CONCLUSION

Nanotechnology-based drug delivery systems represent a powerful and versatile tool in the ongoing fight against cancer. By enabling targeted, controlled, and efficient delivery of therapeutic agents, these systems hold the potential to transform current treatment paradigms, minimize adverse effects, and improve patient outcomes. As research progresses and translational challenges are overcome, nanomedicine is poised to become a cornerstone of future precision oncology.