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(Article begins on next page)

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Application of lipid nanoparticles to ocular drug delivery

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Abstract

Introduction

Although eye drops are widespread as drug delivery systems for the anterior segment of the eye, they are also associated with poor drug bioavailability due to transient contact time and rapid washout by tearing. Moreover, effective drug delivery to the posterior segment of the eye is challenging, and alternative routes of administration (periocular and intravitreal) are generally needed, the blood retinal barrier being the major obstacle to systemic drug delivery.

Areas covered in this review

Nanotechnology, and especially lipid nanoparticles, can improve the therapeutic efficiency, compliance and safety of ocular drugs, administered via different routes, to both the anterior and posterior segment of the eye.

This review highlights the main ocular barriers to drug delivery, as well as the commonest eye diseases suitable for pharmacological treatment in which lipid nanoparticles have proved efficacious as alternative delivery systems.

Expert opinion

Lipid-based nanocarriers are among the most biocompatible and versatile means for ocular delivery. Mucoadhesion with consequent increase in pre-corneal retention time, and enhanced permeation due to cellular uptake by corneal epithelial cells, are the essential goals for topical LN delivery. Gene delivery to the retina has shown very promising results after intravitreal administration of lipid nanoparticles as non-viral vectors.

1. Introduction

Eye drops have been globally accepted as a formulation for anterior segment applications, although they are also associated with some limitations in terms of desired pharmacological and pharmacokinetic profile, dosing frequency, systemic untoward effects, patient non-compliance, low drug bioavailability due to transient contact time, rapid washout by tearing and lachrymal drainage [1]. In addition, conventional ocular formulations are generally unable to overcome the anatomical/physiological barriers between eye surface and the inner eye structures. Therefore, effective ocular drug delivery is a challenging proposition for the pharmaceutical scientist, and nanotechnology approaches can improve the therapeutic efficiency, compliance and safety of ocular drugs [2]. Lipid-based nanocarriers are among the newer and more interesting colloidal drug delivery systems; their extreme biodegradability and biocompatible chemical nature have secured them the title of ‘nanosafe’ carriers [3]. This review highlights the main ocular barriers for drug delivery, as well as the commonest eye diseases treated with lipid nanoparticles (LN) as alternative delivery systems.

2. Anatomy and physiology of the eye

The human eye possesses a well-defined anatomy divided into two regions (Figure 1): the anterior segment (cornea, conjunctiva, iris, ciliary body, the anterior and posterior chambers, the lens, the lachrymal apparatus and the eyelids) and the posterior segment (sclera, choroid, retina, and vitreous) [4, 5, 6, 7, 8].

The cornea is the clear transparent outer layer of the eye. It is a non-vascularized structure composed of three layers, namely epithelium, stroma, and endothelium, separated respectively by the Bowman’s and Descemet’s membranes. The region where the cornea and the sclera converge is covered by the conjunctiva, a thin vascularized mucus membrane with a clear transparent surface in which are located the goblet cells responsible for the mucus secretion. This secretion constitutes the innermost layer of the pre-corneal tear film that covers the eye surface [9]. The tear film has also an

outermost layer composed of a mixture of lipids secreted by the Meibomian glands in the eyelids [10], and an aqueous middle layer that consists of a salt solution of a wide variety of proteins secreted predominantly by the lachrymal gland [11, 12].

The anterior and posterior chambers in the anterior segment are filled with aqueous humor, which is responsible for the intraocular pressure (IOP) [13]. The anterior chamber is bounded in front by the cornea and a small portion of the sclera, and behind by the iris, the lens and a part of the ciliary body. The posterior chamber is limited by the iris and the lens.

In the posterior segment of the eye, the sclera is an opaque fibrous protective layer, slightly elastic, with a composition similar to that of the cornea, although the structural organization of the collagen fibres differs. Scleral collagen has wider fibrils and a much more interwoven structure than the cornea. Sclera maintains IOP and serves as the attachment site for the extraocular muscles, which maintain eye shape during ocular movement [14, 15] The retina and the lens surround the vitreous, in which is located the vitreous humor, a transparent gelatinous fluid necessary to let the light reach the retina and to maintain the shape of the eye [16].

3. Routes and barriers of ocular drug delivery

The blood ocular barriers (BOB) are highly specialized and selectively control the inward/toward traverse of compounds. They are the main obstacles in the systemic treatment of intra-ocular disorders. The two main sites of the BOB are [17]:

- i) the blood aqueous barrier (BAB), located in the anterior part of the eye, which is composed of endothelial cells of blood vessels in the iris and the non-pigmented ciliary epithelium.
- ii) the blood retinal barrier (BRB), located in the posterior part of the eye. The BRB is composed of two types of cells, i.e. the retinal capillary endothelial cells and the RPE cells, which constitute the inner and the outer BRB, respectively [18, 19]. The tight

junctions of the RPE and the inner BRB slow down the drug's penetration from the blood into the posterior segment of the eye after systemic administration.

The permeability of the BOB also varies depending on the drug's characteristics. It is higher for lipophilic drugs, since they are permeable through retinal capillaries and through the RPE; however, the blood flow to the posterior segment of the eye is limited [20]. Consequently, high doses are necessary, and there is a significant risk of adverse effects, thus hampering the use of drugs with a narrow therapeutic range [21]. Corticosteroids, immunosuppressive agents, and antibiotics are examples of orally administered drugs for the treatment of posterior segment eye diseases [22], but alternative ocular drug delivery systems or administration routes are now being considered [23, 24]. There are several possible routes for drug delivery into the ocular tissues, depending on the target tissue (Figure 1).

3.1. Anterior segment of the eye

For the management of diseases in the anterior segment of the eye, topical administration is by far the commonest route. Drug transport via corneal/non-corneal routes involves several intricate biological processes; consequently, the bioavailability of topically applied drugs is poor in the internal tissues of the eye [17].

The main barriers for ocular drug delivery are [25]:

- i) Elimination from lachrymal fluid (pre-corneal barrier): most of the instilled volume is either drained from the conjunctival sac into the naso-lachrymal duct or cleared from pre-corneal area, resulting in poor bioavailability of drugs.
- ii) Corneal barrier: anatomically, the corneal barrier is due mainly to intercellular tight junctions (*zonula occludens*) which completely surround the superficial epithelial cells, serving as a selective barrier for small molecules and completely preventing the diffusion of macromolecules via the paracellular route. Corneal stroma, instead, is a highly hydrophilic tissue with an open structure that allows the diffusion of hydrophilic

drugs up to 500 kDa size, while it is a rate-limiting barrier for most lipophilic drugs. The corneal endothelium is responsible for maintaining normal corneal hydration, and it has been estimated that drugs with molecular dimensions up to about 20 nm can diffuse.

The drug transport across the corneal epithelium is essentially via paracellular or transcellular routes. The hydrophilic drugs penetrate primarily through the paracellular pathway, while lipophilic drugs prefer the transcellular route. Lipophilicity, solubility, molecular size, charge and degree of ionization also affect the route and rate of penetration in the cornea [26].

Particulate material in the nanometer range has been reported to follow the endocytic pathway depending on the optimized lipophilic-hydrophilic properties of the matrix and on reduced particle size [27].

- iii) Non-corneal absorption: topically applied ocular drugs may be absorbed through the bulbar conjunctiva and the underlying sclera into the uveal tract and vitreous humor, which results in drug loss at desired site.

Moreover, it should be considered that the drug reaching the anterior eye chamber can bind to melanin pigments in the iris and ciliary body, reducing its bioavailability. As regards drug pharmacokinetics, it is also influenced by drug metabolism in ocular tissues mediated by enzymes such as esterases and cytochrome P-450 reductase [28].

In some particular cases, intracameral injections are used for direct drug delivery to the anterior chamber (e.g. acetylcholine [29]). However, general anesthesia is necessary for administration, and physical damage to intraocular structures, such as the corneal endothelium, iris and lens, may be associated with intracameral injections [26].

3.2 Posterior segment of the eye

Unfortunately, topical administration achieves negligible or very low drug levels in the retina and vitreous humor. Among the alternative routes, intravitreal injection delivers drugs directly into the vitreous. Small molecules, usually below 500 Da, diffuse more rapidly than large ones. After intravitreal injection the administered drug is eliminated by two main routes, either anterior and/or posterior (via blood flow and aqueous turnover). Nonetheless, frequent administration of drugs via this route can lead to retinal detachment, retinal haemorrhage, endophthalmitis and increased IOP or cataract [30, 31]. To minimize some of these complications, novel drug-delivery systems have been developed, such as biodegradable or non-biodegradable implants, which can be placed long term in the vitreous [32].

Another possible route is subretinal injection. This route allows contact of the active molecules with the outer retina, and it is especially useful for retinal degenerations originating in photoreceptors and RPE. This invasive method is usually employed in gene therapy studies [33], although it is associated with ocular damage (i.e. lesions in RPE, hemorrhages, retinal tears, sub- or pre-retinal fibrosis, and retinal detachment) [34].

The commonest route of instillation for posterior eye tissues is periocular administration, including subconjunctival and retrobulbar injections. This enables the deposition of molecules on the external surface of the sclera, thereby minimizing the risk of endophthalmitis and retinal damage associated with the intravitreal route of administration [25, 28]:

- i) Subconjunctival route: the formulation is placed beneath the conjunctival membrane that covers the sclera. This enables the drugs to bypass the conjunctiva–cornea barrier, giving direct access to the transscleral route. The sclera is less resistant to permeation of molecules and has lower protease activity compared to the cornea.
- ii) The retrobulbar route involves inserting a needle through the eyelid and orbital fascia and depositing a drug behind the globe into the retrobulbar space. Retrobulbar injection may sometimes damage orbital structures such as the optic nerve.

4. Commonest eye diseases suitable for pharmacological treatment

Ocular diseases range from minor troubles, such as conjunctivitis, to vision-threatening disorders which can affect both the anterior and posterior segments of the eye. The different diseases require suitable drug administration routes and drug delivery systems according to the target tissue. The intravitreal route is widely used to deliver drugs to the retina, even if it is associated with recurrent side effects [27, 35]. The topical route represents a safer administration, but it is limited to the anterior segment of the eye: moreover, because of poor corneal retention, only 1–10% of the instilled dose crosses this barrier and roughly 1% reaches the aqueous humor [27, 35]. The systemic route (e.g., oral, parenteral) is limited by the BOB [27, 35].

4.1 Corneal diseases

Different corneal diseases can potentially benefit from pharmacological treatments with LP, through topical administration [36].

- i) *Graft rejection after keratoplasty*: immunosuppressant treatment is required after surgery to prevent the recurrence of graft rejection. Topical treatment with corticosteroids is currently the gold standard. Moreover, infections produced by Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV-1) are responsible for most cases of rejection of corneal grafts [37].
- ii) *Dry eye syndrome* is a chronic and typically progressive condition. In most cases, it can be managed successfully, usually resulting in noticeably greater eye comfort, fewer dry eye symptoms, and sometimes sharper vision as well. Because dry eye disease can have a number of causes, a variety of therapeutic approaches are used, ranging from immunosuppressant drugs like Cyclosporine A (CsA), to artificial tears or anti-inflammatory treatments like steroid eye drops.
- iii) *Corneal neovascularisation* is a sight-threatening condition usually associated with disorders of the ocular surface. Anti-Vascular Endothelial Growth Factor (VEGF) therapy, obtained both through corneal gene therapy and monoclonal antibody can

significantly decrease corneal neovascularization and lymphangiogenesis, resulting in increased graft survival in keratoplasty [38].

- iv) *Wounds of the corneal epithelium*: Corneal wound healing is a complex process involving cell death, migration, proliferation, differentiation, and extracellular matrix remodelling. It can be treated with various approaches, including the use of trans-retinoic acid for corneal re-epithelization [39].

4.2 Glaucoma

Glaucoma is a multi-factorial optic neuropathy and is the second leading cause of blindness worldwide. A major risk factor is increased IOP in the eye, when the ratio between aqueous humor formation (inflow) and its outflow is unbalanced.

Lowering IOP via various pharmaceuticals and/or surgical techniques is currently the mainstay of glaucoma treatment. The topical route is the one most commonly used, owing to its suitability for chronic administration. Drug bioavailability can be improved by the delivery system, also decreasing the dosage [40]. Treatment options are “inflow inhibitors” (beta-antagonists, carbonic anhydrase inhibitors) and “outflow enhancers” (alpha-agonists, prostaglandin analogs and miotic agents) [41]. Innovative “inflow” (hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase-1 inhibitors; melatonin) and “outflow” agents (dopamine, serotonin and adenosine agonists, cannabinoids) are currently under study [42, 43].

4.3 Retinal diseases

- i) *Angiogenesis-related blindness (ARB)* indicates the spectrum of retinal disorders whose pathogenesis is related to pathologic angiogenesis, including age-related macular degeneration (AMD), diabetic retinopathy, and retinopathy of prematurity. All these conditions produce retinal and choroidal neovascularization, leading to visual loss. Conventional treatment options for ARB used to be surgery and focal treatment, such as

laser photocoagulation and cryotherapy. In recent years, intravitreal injection of anti-VEGF monoclonal antibodies has been widely performed to treat pathologic angiogenesis. Its main limitations are its relatively short durability, the difficulty of performing repeated injections, and the risk of aggravating retinal ischemia, inducing mitochondrial disruption of photoreceptor cells [44].

- ii) *Retinal degeneration* occurs in inherited or genetic ocular diseases such as retinitis pigmentosa, Stargardt disease, Leber Congenital Amaurosis (LCA), X-linked juvenile retinoschisis (XLRS). Most of these disorders have no pharmacological therapy aside from the experimental use of antioxidants in some cases [44], and there is no definite cure treatment. Nowadays, due to their genetic origin, these diseases are studied as targets of gene therapy.

4.4 Ocular inflammation

Intraocular inflammation is a clinical disorder induced by various biological (bacteria, virus, fungus, or parasites), chemical or physical agents (as a result of injury to the eye). In some cases, ischemia, hypersensitivity, or autoimmunity causes may be involved. Postoperative inflammation is a common occurrence following ophthalmic surgical procedures, especially keratoplasty [17, 45].

Inflammation can affect several structures of the anterior and posterior segment of the eye, although the inflammation of the uveal tract (uveitis) is the commonest inflammatory disease of eye. It can be classified as anterior, intermediate, and posterior uveitis. Anterior uveitis (iritis, cyclitis) is the most frequent and has serious implications including glaucoma and cataract [17, 45] and is usually treated by the topical route.

Corticosteroids are the preferred choice for the treatment of ocular inflammation. The long-term side effects of corticosteroid include IOP, glaucoma and cataract [46]. Non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAID) have mild anti-inflammatory activity compared with corticosteroids, and, additionally, some undesired effect on the eye, like irritation and burning sensation or

superficial punctate keratitis [47]. Mydriatic/cycloplegic (anticholinergic) drugs are specifically used in the management of anterior uveitis because they minimize the pain by immobilizing the iris, preventing its adhesion to the anterior lens. Immunosuppressants (methotrexate and azathioprine) are used in patients resistant to corticosteroids [17, 45].

4.5 Ocular infectious diseases

Infections concerning the cornea (infective keratitis) and/or conjunctiva (infective keratoconjunctivitis) are the most frequent. They are treated by topical route. For bacterial keratitis, broad-spectrum antibiotics demonstrating adequate coverage against both Gram-positive and Gram-negative pathogens are used (fluoroquinolones, aminoglycosides, chloramphenicol). Herpetic keratitis has a long history of safe treatment with acyclovir. Corneal fungal infections (*Candida*, *aspergillus*) are rare, but very serious: besides topical antifungal drug administration, addition of oral antifungal treatment is indicated in the case of deep corneal invasion and intraocular spread [48].

Endophthalmitis is a rare, but frequently devastating infection of the vitreous, caused mainly by bacteria, mycobacteria (tuberculosis) or fungi. Exogenous endophthalmitis is most frequently post-operative (keratoplasty); endogenous endophthalmitis, caused by the hematogenous spread of organisms from a remote infectious site into the eye, accounts for 2–15 % of all cases. The most important component of treatment is the intravitreal injection of antibiotics, along with vitrectomy in severe cases [49].

5. Animal and alternative models for ocular drug delivery systems

Corneal permeation of drugs has been extensively studied on animals, rabbits in particular. Drug pharmacokinetic in the aqueous humor, after topical administration in the lower conjunctival sac, can be followed either through anterior chamber paracentesis in anesthetized animals, or after animal sacrifice, which allows explantation of all other ocular tissues as well. Considering the

availability of quantifiable ocular responses *in vivo* (miosis, mydriasis, IOP, aqueous humor flow), pharmacological response measurements usually replace concentration assays in experimental studies [35]. Pre-corneal retention time, instead, can be evaluated, after topical administration, through withdrawal of the rabbit lachrymal fluid from the conjunctival sac by means of a capillary. However, in recent years various models have been developed in order to perform *ex vivo/in vitro* permeation studies, limiting the use of animals: the most widely used are excised cornea tissues, usually from rabbits [50]. Alternative models include primary cultures of the cornea, mainly also from rabbits [51], reconstructed tissue cultures (three-dimensional cornea constructs from fetal porcine corneal cells, or completely engineered organotypic human cornea constructs) [51], immortalized cell lines from rabbit or human cornea and conjunctiva [52].

In order to test the corneal toxicity of ocular formulations, Draize's technique, performed *in vivo* on rabbits, is currently approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). However, the need to limit the use of animal models in toxicity studies is leading towards the validation of alternative methods [53]. The ones most employed in experimental papers are the following:

- i) *chorioallantoic membrane (CAM) test*: the CAM, that is the vascularised respiratory membrane surrounding a chick developing inside an egg, is incubated with the test formulation, and then changes in its morphology are scored
- ii) *cornea opacity and permeability test (BCOP)*: in this procedure, bovine corneas are explanted and quickly mounted on specially designed holders composed of two separate chambers. Corneal opacity and Na-fluorescein permeability through the cornea are measured as toxicity parameters after 10 minutes exposure to test formulations (EURL-ECVAM validated)
- iii) *determination of corneal hydration levels* evaluated through determination of the corneal fresh and dry weight and compared to untreated corneas
- iv) *commercial kits*: EYTEX™, EpiOcular™

As to retinal pharmacotherapy, immortalized human retinal pigment epithelial (ARPE-19) cells have been fully characterized regarding their morphology, the expression of retina-specific markers and their barrier properties, and they have been used for the development of targeted drug delivery systems to the posterior segment of the eye [52]. For animal experiments, the most used and widely accepted animals are rabbits [54]. Because retinal and choroidal neovascularization are the main mechanisms related to ARB, suitable animal models have been developed [55]. In the case of genetic retinal disorders, various animal models have been also generated [56, 57, 58, 59].

6. Colloidal carriers for ocular delivery

Colloidal carriers for topical administration are designed to be endocytosed by the corneal epithelial cells and act as a reservoir to release the drug slowly. These carriers prevent tear washout by providing a sustained release of ocular drugs. Moreover, they can inhibit the activity of P-gp expressed on epithelial cells [60], and open corneal tight junctions by means of non-ionic surfactants present in the formulations [12]. In the treatment of posterior segment diseases, they can act as controlled release systems that reduce administration frequency.

They usually contain particles smaller than 1000 nm. Nonetheless, 50 to 400 nm particles are better tolerated by patients than larger ones, because they are abler to penetrate across the corneal barrier [61].

Among colloidal carriers, vesicular systems (liposomes, niosomes), nanoemulsions, lipid and polymeric nanoparticles are the most promising for ophthalmic drug delivery. Table 1 summarizes the advantages and drawbacks of these carriers.

Biodegradable polymeric nanoparticles can be composed of various polymers in which the drug is dissolved, entrapped, encapsulated, or attached to the surface [61].

Nanoemulsions are fine dispersions of biocompatible oils droplets in the nanometer range, stabilized by high surfactant concentration. They restore both the lipid and water component of the tear film, thus reducing evaporative fluid loss and, owing to the emulsifiers, they have been found

to improve the 'wettability' of tear film [12]. However, in some cases this produces a sticky feel of the formulation and subsequent intolerance [60].

Liposomes are vesicular systems with diameters ranging from 50 nm to several microns and composed of natural biocompatible phospholipids [62]. Niosomes are non-ionic amphiphiles vesicular self-assemblies. Compared to other vesicular systems they are chemically very stable, biodegradable, biocompatible and non-immunogenic. [12] The vesicular membrane is flexible and supports deformation stress, allowing repeated intraocular injections to treat posterior segment ocular diseases [60].

7. Lipid nanoparticles (LN)

LN are particles in the 50-1000 nm range whose matrix is made of biocompatible solid lipids or mixtures of solid and liquid lipids.

Solid lipid nanoparticles (SLN) are considered to be among the most effective lipid-based colloidal vehicles. They are constituted by a solid lipid matrix surrounded by a layer of surfactants in an aqueous dispersion. The main SLN production methods are based on solidified nanoemulsion technologies, the most important of them being high pressure homogenization, melt-emulsification, and ultrasonication. Among the other best-known methods for SLN production, microemulsion templates, solvent-based methods, coacervation, supercritical fluid technology, and the membrane contactor method have been described [63].

Nanostructured lipid carriers (NLC) are LN characterized by a solid lipid core consisting of a mixture of solid and liquid lipids: the resulting matrix of the lipid particles shows a melting point depression compared with the original solid lipid, but the matrix is still solid at body temperature. Depending on the method of production and on the lipid blend composition, different types of NLCs are obtained: imperfect, amorphous and multiple type. In the imperfect type, lipid crystallization is altered by small amounts of oils. In the amorphous type, the lipid matrix is solid

but not crystalline (amorphous state): this can be achieved by mixing special lipids, for example, hydroxyoctacosanyl hydroxystearate with isopropyl myristate. In the multiple type, the solid lipid matrix contains tiny oil compartments: they are obtained by mixing a solid lipid with a higher amount of oil. The basic idea is that by altering the nanostructure of the lipid matrix, the payload for active compounds is increased and expulsion of the compound during storage is avoided [63]. (Figure 2)

Due to the lipidic core of SLN and NLC, the loading capacity of hydrophilic drugs is limited. To overcome this limitation, lipid-drug conjugates (LDC) nanoparticles have been developed. In a typical process, an insoluble drug-lipid conjugate bulk is first prepared either by salt formation (e.g., with a fatty acid) or by covalent linking (e.g., esters or ethers) [63]. The lipophilic conjugate may be used alone or processed in the same way as SLN or NLC [66].

So far, when compared to other colloidal systems, LN have been described as superior carriers, with various advantages [61, 64, 65], as mentioned in Table 1.

8. Application of LN in ocular delivery

Significant and recent experimental works have assessed the potential of LN as carriers for both the topical and alternative routes in the ocular delivery of different drugs commonly used for the most frequent ocular diseases (Table 2). Experimental studies have been compared in terms not only of the results obtained but also of the experimental models used, which can be related to their current stage of development.

8.1 Delivery to the anterior segment of the eye

LN suspensions are mainly conceived for topical administration, and consequently for the anterior segment of the eye. In these cases, the main objective for nanoparticulate formulation is to increase retention time at the corneal surface by muco-adhesion and improve corneal permeation through endocytic uptake by cornea epithelial cells.

Cationic LN obtained by using cationic lipid as surfactants [67, 68, 69, 70, 71] or functionalized with chitosan [72, 73, 74] are frequently used for this purpose, since they can interact with negatively charged mucus. Thiolated LN can be used to enhance muco-adhesion as well [75, 76]. Moreover, due to their physico-chemical stability, LN can be included in thermo-gelling medium in order to increase permanence of the formulation in contact with the cornea and avoid drainage from lachrymal fluid [77].

However, despite the biocompatibility of the lipid matrix for the topical application, a potential toxicity issue of LN should be considered: the surfactant used for the formulation of nanoparticles. A recent study, performed with a modified Draize test method, revealed a limit concentration for ocular tolerability of SLN stabilised with some specific surfactants, even if generally considered as GRAS [78].

8.1.1 Infectious disease

The delivery of drugs against infectious diseases in LN aims to enhance precorneal retention by increasing concentration in the biophase, compared to conventional eye drops. Moreover, LN should provide sustained drug release, so that the released drug can exert a suitable biocidal activity.

Different antibiotics commonly used for eye infectious diseases, such as tobramycin [79], chloramphenicol [80] gatifloxacin [81, 82, 83] or levofloxacin [84], have been loaded in LN, although the loading capacity was low compared to the antibiotic efficient dose. Ion paired tobramycin [79] was entrapped in SLN and after topical administration to rabbits, ocular tobramycin bioavailability increased due to greater ocular residence time and entrapment of SLN in the mucin layer, owing to their small particle size (80 nm) and the lecithin surfactant employed, resulting in a sustained release of tobramycin. In other work [83], gatifloxacin loaded cationic SLN have shown promising corneal permeation on excised goat corneas, causing no significant effect on the corneal hydration level. SLN-entrapped levofloxacin [84] has exhibited cumulative amounts

permeated through excised cornea and maintained cornea hydration. Moreover, SLN has shown comparative antibacterial activity against *S. aureus* and *E. coli in vitro* with respect to marketed eye drops; however, *in vivo* studies for levofloxacin-SLN should be performed to determine its ophthalmic delivery efficacy.

Antifungal and antiviral drugs have also been encapsulated in LN. For example, itraconazole was successfully loaded in stearic acid and palmitic acid SLN [85]. Drug permeation, tested through an *ex-vivo* model of excised goat corneas, was higher from stearic acid SLN than from palmitic acid SLN. Ketoconazole [86] was successfully entrapped in the lipid core of SLN, providing enhanced permeation through cornea and higher bioavailability in the aqueous humor and also in the vitreous. The developed SLN were able to cross the ocular barrier, reach even the posterior segment of the eye, and had significant antifungal potential.

In another case, acyclovir loaded NLC and SLN were compared [87]. NLC showed higher encapsulation efficiency, superior physical properties, better release profile, and drug permeation was good only for NLC formulation. The oily component of the NLC probably plays an important role in drug encapsulation, with consequences on biological activity of nanoparticles.

8.1.2 Inflammatory diseases

Topical administration of LN is the preferred route to manage ocular inflammations of the anterior segment of the eye, precorneal retention and corneal-conjunctival uptake being the main mechanisms of action hypothesized. In some processes, i.e. those inducing a decrease of visual acuity or further complications (e.g. ocular surgery), rapidity in establishing the treatment is a crucial factor in avoiding inflammatory reaction and improving the patient's visual rehabilitation; consequently, sustained release of the drug from nanoparticles is a major requirement.

The majority of experimental works have dealt with NSAID, such as diclofenac [88], ibuprofen [67], flurbiprofen [72, 89], indomethacin [90], even if one experimental work has considered corticosteroid triamcinolone acetonide [91].

Diclofenac sodium-loaded SLN were prepared by using goat fat templated with Phospholipon 90G[®] [88]. Phospholipids were essential, both in order to avoid drug burst release effect, and to increase drug ocular bioavailability, in a reconstructed cornea construct.

When ibuprofen was loaded in cationic NLC [67] the presence of stearylamine (cationic lipid) enhanced pre-ocular retention *in vivo* on rabbits; moreover, in *ex vivo* corneal permeation studies, different NLC formulations revealed significant permeation enhancement, compared to simple eye drops. Formulations containing Gelucire[®] 44/14 and Transcutol[®] P significantly enhanced penetration in rabbit excised cornea. Gelucires can enhance corneal penetration, mainly due to their lipophilic properties, whereas Transcutol[®] P enhances permeation by a mechanism involving structural changes in the epithelium as a result of micelle formation. All the tested formulations were not irritant *in vivo*.

In studies concerning flurbiprofen-loaded NLC [72], chitosan coating provided a longer pre-ocular retention time *in vivo* on rabbits, due to its mucoadhesive properties, and an improved penetration rate in excised rabbit cornea.

8.1.3 Oxidative stress

Antioxidants can potentially be used for the therapy of both the anterior and the posterior segment of the eye. Since the oxidative stress is a major factor in ocular inflammatory diseases, antioxidants or reactive oxygen scavengers are potent alternatives for this therapeutic application, and they may be useful to reduce the oxidative stress involved in the formation of senile cataract, which is the most common age-related eye complication. Moreover, antioxidants can protect against damage of retinal epithelia related to AMD, although in this case administration to the posterior segment of the eye should be used.

To date, three antioxidants have been considered for ocular therapy through LN: baicalin [92], quercetin [93], and epigallocatechin gallate [71].

Quercetin-loaded SLN showed good biocompatibility with corneal cells and enhanced permeation through cornea in excised porcine eyes [93]. In an in-depth study with baicalin loaded SLN, besides Draize test and *ex vivo* permeation studies on excised rabbit corneas, a pharmacokinetic analysis was performed through microdialysis of the anterior chamber of rabbits. SLN formulation promoted the prolonged release of baicalin and greatly increased the concentration of this drug in the ocular tissues when compared with the conventional eye drops [92].

Epigallocatechin gallate [71] was loaded in cationic LN which provided prolonged *ex vivo* transcorneal release; moreover, they proved to be safe and non-irritant. The use of drug-loaded cationic LN proved a promising strategy for the treatment of ocular diseases related to anti-oxidant and anti-inflammatory pathways.

8.1.4 Corneal wound healing

Calendula officinalis extract was entrapped in SLN for ocular delivery and demonstrated its wound-healing capacity on cultured Wong–Kilbourne derivative of Chang Conjunctival Epithelial Cells [94].

8.1.5 Immune-mediated ocular surface symptoms

Topical CsA has been successfully used in a variety of immune-mediated ocular surface phenomena like vernal conjunctivitis, dry eye syndrome and the prevention of corneal allograft rejection. However, CsA cannot be prepared in formulations based on the commonly used aqueous ophthalmic vehicles because of both its hydrophobicity and its extremely low aqueous solubility. Numerous formulations have been developed to avoid repeated injections and to achieve controlled release of CsA or to enhance efficacy of topical administration [95]. Due to its physico-chemical characteristics, it is suitable to be entrapped in LN intended for topical delivery [68, 69, 73, 75, 76, 96]. LN can load CsA, due to its lipophilicity, and enhance its bioavailability. On the one hand, LN

can be taken up by the cornea epithelial cells, and on the other, LN surface can be modified (cationic lipids, chitosan, thiolated) to increase mucoadhesion.

8.1.6 Glaucoma

Since anti-glaucoma drugs are very potent, non-productive absorption from eye drops may cause serious side effects, i.e for β -antagonists on heart and airways in susceptible individuals: consequently, the development of an alternative to classic eye drops able to provide sustained and controlled drug delivery is a major challenge.

According to the literature, four drugs have been encapsulated in SLN for glaucoma treatment: pilocarpine [97], a cholinergic; timolol [98], a β -antagonist, which showed high and sustained permeation in human cornea construct; brimonidine, an α -agonist [99]; and methazolamide [74], a carbonic anhydrase inhibitor. Methazolamide was loaded in chitosan-coated SLN. *In vitro* (excised rabbit cornea, corneal hydration) and *in vivo* (IOP measurement and Draize test) results suggest that chitosan-coated SLN have a great potential for topical delivery, with the added advantage of being patient-friendly [74]. Brimonidine-loaded SLN and NLC were physically stable after autoclaving and showed excellent ocular tolerance, and no sign of ocular irritancy was observed in any of the rabbits' eyes during the study period [99].

Recently, melatonin receptors, a class of G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs), have been detected in ciliary body, and melatonin and its analogues proved able to reduce the IOP in several species [41]. Melatonin has been loaded in cationic SLN as an innovative drug for glaucoma treatment. Melatonin-loaded SLN elicited a significant ($p < 0.01$) IOP reduction in rabbit eye (maximum IOP reduction: 7 mmHg), and their effect lasted approximately 24 h [70].

8.2 Delivery to the posterior segment of the eye

Despite the apparent advantages of LN as a drug delivery to the eye, the number of publications is even smaller in cases where these systems have been applied to deliver drugs to the posterior

segment of the eye. Intravitreal injection of ophthalmic suspensions containing triamcinolone acetonide has become increasingly popular to treat a broad spectrum of retinal diseases [100], despite the risks associated with this administration route. In this regard, Araujo et al. [91, 101] developed a formulation based on NLC containing triamcinolone acetonide for ocular instillation. NLC were detected in the retina, reaching a peak 40 min after administration, decreasing thereafter, and almost disappearing 160 min after administration.

However, some significant studies in the literature have aimed to exploit the potential of SLN as non viral vectors for ocular gene therapy, especially for retinal targeting [102, 103, 104, 105].

According to the European Medicine Agency [106], a gene therapy medicinal product generally consists of a vector or delivery formulation/system containing a genetic construct engineered to express a specific therapeutic sequence or protein responsible for the regulation, repair, addition or deletion of a genetic sequence.

The potential of gene therapy in the clinical management of retinal diseases has been demonstrated in four clinical trials [107, 108, 109, 110] with patients suffering from LCA treated with a viral vector. However, the limitations of viral gene therapy due to risk of immunogenicity and oncogenicity [111] or presence of virus particles in the brain after intravitreal injection [112] make the development of an efficacious non-viral vector for the eye of supreme importance [113]. In this sense, SLN have shown promising results in the treatment of XLRS.

SLN are complexed with the peptide protamine, which condenses and protects the genetic material and improves gene transduction, and a polysaccharide [114, 115]. The particles containing dextran as polysaccharide were administered to Wistar rat eyes bearing a plasmid that encodes the enhanced green fluorescent protein (EGFP). After intravitreal injection, protein expression was mainly detected in ganglion cells, after subretinal administration in RPE and photoreceptors, and after topical administration preferably in corneal cells [103]. In a further study, when dextran was exchanged by hyaluronic acid a 7-fold increase in the efficacy was detected in vitro in ARPE-19 cells [104]. In another recent experimental work, the same SLN, complexed with protamine and

hyaluronic acid or dextran, were loaded with a plasmid encoding for both the EGFP and the therapeutic retinoschisin. Two weeks after injection to retinoschisin-deficient mice, as model of the human disease, EGFP and retinoschisin expression was detected in almost all retinal layers, which was maintained for at least two months after administration, and was related to a partial recovery of the retina. This work shows for the first time a successful gene transfer to retinoschisin-deficient animals using non-viral nanocarriers, with promising results that point to non-viral gene therapy as a feasible future therapeutic tool for retinal disorders [105].

More recently, the non-viral vectors based on SLN have been used for cell-specific gene delivery *in vivo* by using the cell-specific promoter mOPS. This promoter ensures specific expression of retinoschisin in photoreceptors, cells where retinoschisin is naturally produced. Using the mOPS as promoter of the gene that encodes the retinoschisin, two weeks after the injection of the vectors to retinoschisin-deficient mice, the improvement of the retina was slightly higher than that obtained with an ubiquitous promoter [116].

Despite these encouraging results obtained *in vitro* and *in vivo* for gene therapy in the retina, LN toxicity on retinal cells should be validated before applying to real patients, given the complex and sensitive physiology of the retina. In retinopathy, most studies on nanotoxicology have been performed as a part of studies on the therapeutic effect of nanoparticles, and reports focusing solely on the toxic effect of nanoparticles are few. Lipids are biocompatible components, but size, surface charge, concentration, and time of exposure are important factors in retinal toxicity [44].

9 Regulatory aspects and clinical trials

Since 2002, a number of ophthalmic lipid-based formulations have appeared on the market, and several more products are currently in the pipeline in preclinical and clinical trials [12]. The use of GRAS components, the large-scalable production methods, and the improved drug safety demonstrated by the use of lipid-based nanocarriers make these nanoformulations an ideal drug delivery system that fulfils the requirements for the pharmaceutical market [117; 118].

However, despite the potential therapeutic promise demonstrated by nanotechnology for ocular drug delivery, the bench to bed transition from patent inventions to marketed drug products has been insignificant. To date, the majority of recent clinical trials documented by the literature concern liposomal and polymeric nanoparticulate formulations: liposome-based ocular topical therapy has been studied in 72 patients affected by seasonal allergic rhinoconjunctivitis [119] and in 73 patients for the symptomatic treatment of dry eye, with encouraging results [120]; liposomally-entrapped ganciclovir was used for intravitreal injections in 5 AIDS patients suffering cytomegalovirus, increasing the time period required for reinjections [121]; an increased trans-scleral transport of carboplatin-loaded polymethylmethacrylate nanoparticles, without any associated short-term side effects was documented after posterior subtenon injection in 6 patients affected by advanced retinoblastoma [122].

On the contrary, most of the LN technologies discussed, instead, are still in the development and testing phase for commercial viability. Moreover, studies are in progress to assess ocular tolerance and nanotoxicity for prolonged use of nanoparticles [60].

10 Expert opinion

Considering that the ocular bioavailability of topically applied drugs is very poor, effective drug delivery to both the anterior and, especially, posterior segment of the eye is a challenging proposition for the pharmaceutical scientist. The main drawbacks are the elimination from lachrymal fluid and the corneal barrier after topical administration; moreover, for retinal targeting, alternative routes of administration (periocular and intravitreal) are generally needed, because BRB is the major obstacle to systemic drug delivery. In particular, repeated intravitreal administrations are associated with recurrent endophthalmitis, with sight-threatening effects.

Nanotechnology approaches can improve the therapeutic efficiency, compliance and safety of ocular drugs; and lipid-based nanocarriers are among the most biocompatible and versatile ones.

LN are among the most innovative colloidal systems used for drug delivery; they are very versatile and safe, being composed of biocompatible GRAS lipid molecules and produced through solvent free methods.

Mucoadhesion with consequent increase of pre-corneal retention time, and enhanced permeation due to cellular uptake by corneal epithelial cells, are the essential goals for topical LN delivery to the anterior segment of the eye. The small-sized biocompatible LN can be considered valid means to these ends both for their size-dependent ability to be endocytosed and for the retention-promoting effect of some of the surfactants used in the formulations. Moreover, functionalized, cationic or thermo-gelled formulations may also be used for this purpose. In fact, most experimental studies with LN concern topical administration covering a wide range of diseases that require a pharmacological treatment.

Because of their great kinetic stability and controlled release properties, LN can also be used as drug delivery systems to the posterior segment of the eye, thus reducing frequency of administration.

To date, various studies have been conducted on the use of LN in ocular drug delivery, although the different experimental models employed show that they are at different stages of development. An important limitation is the current lack of clinical trials: this can be attributed to a relatively recent approach compared to more established formulations (i.e. liposomes).

In fact, obtaining marketed LN formulations should be considered the ultimate goal for ocular drug delivery. However, the growing literature and patenting activity concerning LN for ocular delivery suggest that their full potential will be exploited in the next few years, considering that their versatility of production and ease of functionalization allow the entrapment of many active molecules. In this regard, it should be noted that delivery of macromolecules (especially peptides) within LN is a widely discussed research field, but no specific application for ocular delivery has yet been studied.

Moreover, within this field special attention should be paid to ocular genetic diseases, which currently cannot be treated pharmacologically. Gene delivery to the retina, obtained through intravitreal administration of plasmid complexed LN, has shown very promising potential. However, despite the encouraging results obtained and the safety of the vehicle, because of the sensitivity of the retina, this approach should be further validated before it is applied to real patients.

Disclosure statement

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Table 1: Advantages and drawbacks of colloidal carriers in ocular delivery

	Advantages	Drawbacks	References
Colloidal carriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - small particle size, promoting endocytosis - adhesive properties, with improvement of drug pre-ocular retention - P-gP inhibition - improvement of bioavailability of poorly water-soluble drugs - protection of sensitive molecules (especially vs enzyme inactivation) - targeted and controlled release characteristics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tissue accumulation and aggregation in the eye - low drug/matrix ratio: suitable only for potent drugs, with a low therapeutic dose 	[12, 60, 61]
	Additional advantages	Specific drawbacks	
Polymeric nanoparticles (nanospheres, nanocapsules)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - biodegradability - biocompatibility - mucoadhesiveness - ease and low cost of production - possibility to freeze-dry and reconstitute, with increased long-term stability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - possible systemic toxic effects from polymer degradation products - possible toxicity from residual organic solvents 	[61]
Nanoemulsions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reconstruction of the tear film - improving the 'wettability' of tear film 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sticky feel and subsequent intolerance because of surfactants 	[12, 60]
Liposomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - made of natural biocompatible phospholipids - encapsulation of both hydrophilic (in the inner aqueous core) and hydrophobic (in the vesicle membrane) molecules - flexibility, allowing repeated intraocular injections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lower drug loading capacity compared to nanoparticles 	[60, 62]
Niosomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - biodegradability - biocompatibility - non-immunogenicity - encapsulation both hydrophilic and hydrophobic drug molecules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lower drug loading capacity compared to nanoparticles 	[12]
LN (SLN, NLC, LDC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - low or absence of in vivo toxicity, related to the use of GRAS excipients - good long-term stability - economic and solvent free production techniques - easy production at large scale - possibility to be autoclaved or sterilized - great kinetic stability compared to liposomes and niosomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - drug expulsion during storage (for SLN) 	[61, 64, 65]

Table 2: Case study of LN used for ocular drug/gene delivery

Therapeutic aim	Drug category	Addressed issues	Drug	Formulation	Preparation method	Administration route	Pharmacological tests performed	Toxicity test performed	references
Treatment of ocular infectious diseases	antibiotic	enhanced precorneal retention; sustained drug release; increased biocidal activity	tobramycin	SLN	warm microemulsion dilution	topical	pre-ocular retention on rabbits; ocular pharmacokinetic in rabbits	-	79
			chloramphenicol	SLN	melt-emulsion ultrasonication	topical	-	-	80
			gatifloxacin	Cationic SLN	warm microemulsion dilution	topical	<i>ex vivo</i> corneal permeation;	determination of corneal hydration levels	81, 82, 83
	levofloxacin		SLN	emulsion-solvent evaporation	topical	<i>ex vivo</i> corneal permeation	CAM test	84	
	antifungal		itraconazole	SLN	melt-emulsion ultrasonication	topical	<i>ex vivo</i> corneal permeation	determination of corneal hydration levels	85
			ketoconazole	SLN	HPH		<i>ex vivo</i> corneal permeation	Draize test	86
	antiviral		acyclovir	SLN/NLC	modified warm microemulsion dilution	topical	<i>ex vivo</i> corneal permeation	determination of corneal hydration levels	87
Ocular inflammation treatment	NSAID	precorneal retention; corneal-conjunctival	diclofenac	SLN	HPH	topical	<i>in vitro</i> permeation on human corneal constructs	-	88

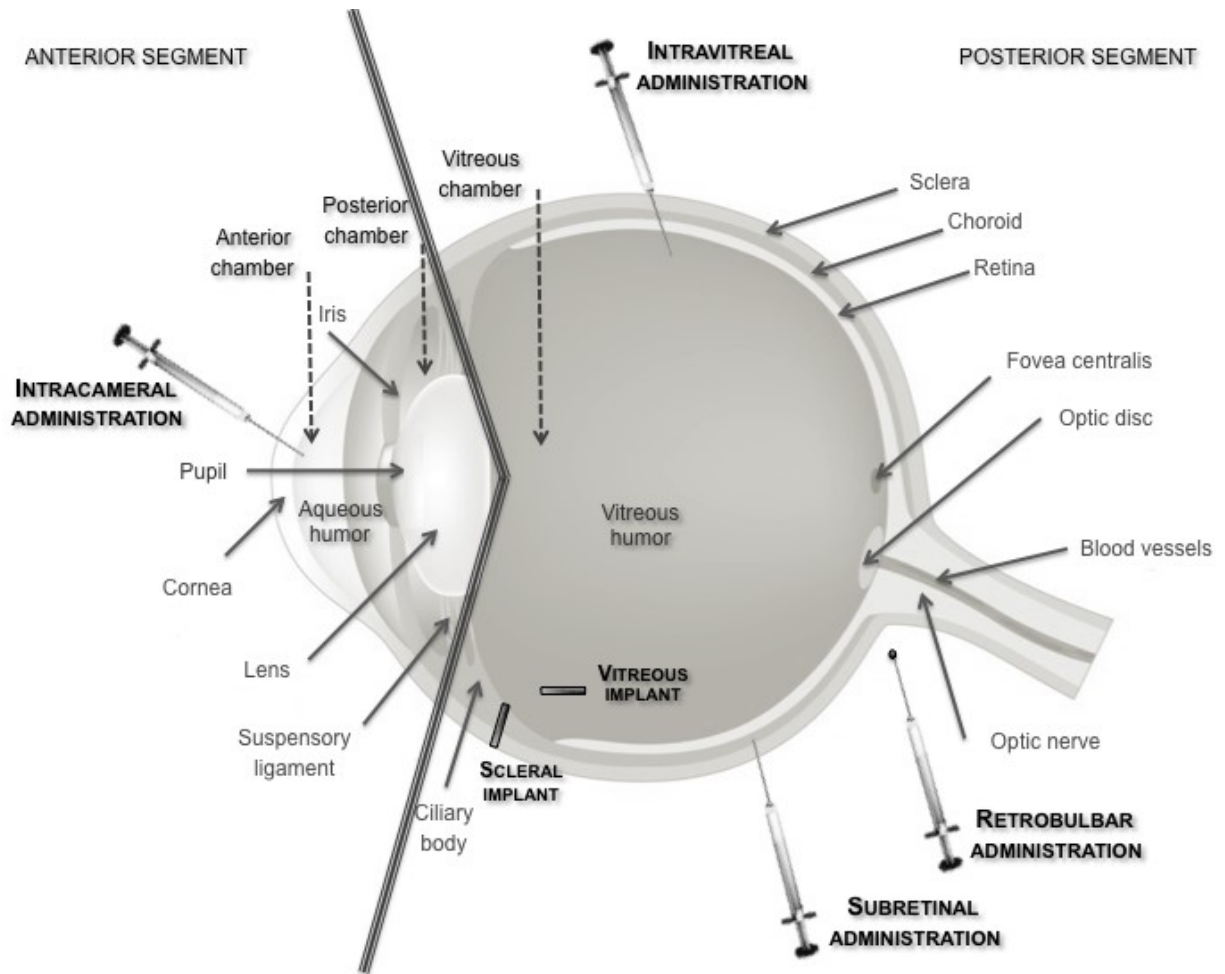
		uptake; enhancement; sustained drug release	ibuprofen	Cationic NLC	melt-emulsion ultrasonication	topical	pre-ocular retention on rabbits; <i>ex vivo</i> corneal permeation	Draize test; determination of corneal hydration levels	67
			flurbiprofen	NLC	melt-emulsion ultrasonication	topical	-	Draize test; EYTEX™	89
				Chitosan coated NLC	melt-emulsion ultrasonication	topical	pre-ocular retention on rabbits; <i>ex vivo</i> corneal permeation	-	72
			indomethacin	SLN	HPH	topical	-	-	90
	corticosteroid		triamcinolone acetonide	NLC	HPH	topical	-	-	91
	corticosteroid	controlled release	triamcinolone acetonide	NLC	HPH	intravitreal	<i>in vivo</i> permeation to the posterior segment of the eye	-	101
ocular inflammation treatment through oxidative stress reduction	antioxidant	precorneal retention; conjunctival uptake enhancement;	baicalin	SLN	melt-emulsion ultrasonication	topical	ocular pharmacokinetics; <i>ex vivo</i> corneal permeation	Draize test; determination of corneal hydration levels	92
			quercetin	SLN	melt-emulsion ultrasonication	topical	<i>ex vivo</i> corneal permeation	-	93
		controlled drug release	epigallocatechin gallate	Cationic SLN	Hot/cold multiple emulsions	topical	<i>ex vivo</i> corneal permeation test;	determination of corneal hydration levels;	71

								CAM test	
ocular wound healing	lenitive extract	solubility enhancement	<i>Calendula officinalis</i> extract	SLN	warm microemulsion dilution	topical	conjunctival cell cultures	-	94
Treatment of immune-mediated ocular surface symptoms (dry eye syndrome, preventing corneal rejection, ocular inflammation)	Immuno-suppressant	solubility enhancement; controlled release; precorneal retention	CsA	Thiolated NLC	melt-emulsification	topical	ocular pharmacokinetic in rabbits	-	75
				Cationic SLN	HPH	topical	Drug levels in aqueous and vitreous humor after topical administration in sheep	-	68
				Chitosan coated SLN	coacervation	topical	<i>ex vivo</i> corneal permeation;	BCOP	73
				SLN	melt-emulsion ultrasonication	topical	<i>in vitro</i> permeation on immortalized cells; <i>ex vivo</i> corneal permeation	-	96
				Cationic SLN	melt-emulsion ultrasonication	topical	pre-ocular retention on rabbits	-	69
				Thiolated NLC	melt-emulsification	topical	pre-ocular retention on rabbits;	Draize test	76
Glaucoma treatment	beta-antagonist	reduction of non-productive absorption;	timolol	SLN	melt-emulsification	topical	<i>in vitro</i> permeation on human cornea construct	-	98
	carbonic anhydrase inhibitor	sustained drug release	methazolamide	Chitosan coated SLN	emulsion-solvent evaporation	topical	<i>ex vivo</i> corneal permeation; <i>in vivo</i> IOP measurement in rabbits	Draize test; determination of corneal hydration	74

measurement in rabbits
corneal hydration

								levels	
	cholinergic		pilocarpine	SLN	warm microemulsion dilution	topical	-	-	97
	IOP reducing agent		melatonin	Cationic SLN	Solvent injection	topical	<i>in vivo</i> IOP measurement in rabbits	Draize test	70
	α 2 agonist		brimonidine	SLN and NLC	melt-emulsion	topical	-	Draize test	99-
gene delivery for XLRS	plasmid	Plasmid complexation, internalization and expression by retinal cells	EGFP plasmid; retinoschisin plasmid	SLN	emulsion-solvent evaporation	subretinal	ARPE-19 cell cultures; <i>in vivo</i> transfection studies	-	103,104,105, 116

SLN: solid lipid nanoparticles; NLC: nanostructured lipid carriers; HPH: high pressure homogenization; NSAID: Non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs; BCOP: cornea opacity and permeability test; IOP: intraocular pressure; EGFP: enhanced green fluorescent protein; ARPE-19: human retinal pigment epithelial cells; XLRS: X-linked juvenile retinoschisis.



Nanostructured lipid carriers (NLC)

