JANOLI International Journal of
Data Science
(A Peer Review Journal)

journal homepage: www.janolijournals.org/jijds/

Volume 1, Issue 4, 2025 ISSN: 3107-457X

Novel Nano-Encapsulation of Quercetin Using Chitosan-Alginate Nanoparticles for Enhanced Bioavailability and Targeted Delivery in Colorectal Cancer Treatment

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Quercetin, Chitosan, Alginate, Nanoparticles, Nano-encapsulation, Bioavailability, Targeted Delivery, Colorectal Cancer, Anticancer Activity, Drug Delivery Systems

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ABSTRACT

Quercetin, a naturally occurring flavonoid, exhibits potent anticancer properties but suffers from poor bioavailability due to its low water solubility and rapid metabolism. This study aimed to develop a novel nano-encapsulation strategy using chitosan-alginate nanoparticles (CS-Alg NPs) to enhance the bioavailability and targeted delivery of quercetin to colorectal cancer cells. CS-Alg NPs were synthesized via ionic gelation and characterized for particle size, zeta potential, encapsulation efficiency, and drug release profile. In vitro studies were conducted to evaluate the cytotoxicity, cellular uptake, and anticancer activity of quercetin-loaded CS-Alg NPs (Q-CS-Alg NPs) in colorectal cancer cell lines (HCT116 and HT29). The results demonstrated that Q-CS-Alg NPs exhibited significantly enhanced cytotoxicity and cellular uptake compared to free quercetin. Moreover, Q-CS-Alg NPs showed a sustained release profile, protecting quercetin from premature degradation and enabling targeted delivery to cancer cells. This novel nano-encapsulation approach holds promising potential for improving the therapeutic efficacy of quercetin in colorectal cancer treatment.

Introduction

Colorectal cancer (CRC) is one of the leading causes of cancer deaths globally. Even with the development of surgical resection, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy, the survival for late-stage CRC remains dismal. Development of new therapeutic strategies able to target cancer cells efficiently with minimal side effects is thus critically needed.

Naturally occurring compounds, such as flavonoids, are of great interest as potential anticancer agents owing to their multiplicity of biological activities, including their antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and antiproliferative activities. Quercetin (3,3′,4′,5,7-pentahydroxyflavone),

one of the most ubiquitously distributed flavonoids present in vegetables, medicinal plants, and fruit, displayed promising anticancer activity toward a variety of tumor cell lines, including CRC. Quercetin acts through multiplicity of actions such as cell cycle arrest, apoptosis induction, suppression of the process of angiogenesis, and inhibition of the process of metastasis.

But the clinical usage of quercetin is constrained by its reduced bioavailability because of its reduced solubility in water, high first-pass metabolism, and extensive first-pass effect. These factors lead to reduced plasma quercetin concentration and thus diminished therapeutic efficacy. In order to counter these limitations, different drug delivery strategies were considered for the purpose of improved bioavailability and target delivery of quercetin.

Nano-encapsulation, one of the techniques whereby drugs are incorporated into nanoscale carriers, offers one very promising avenue for the augmentation of the bioavailability and drug efficacy of poorly soluble drugs like quercetin. Nanoparticles can protect the drug from degradation, augment their solubility and permeability, and deposit them selectively into specific tissue or cellular compartments. Chitosan and alginate are biocompatible and biodegradable polysaccharides that have been widely utilized for the preparation of nanoparticles for the delivery of drugs. Chitosan, one of the cationic polysaccharides synthesized under the deacetylation of chitin, possesses mucoadhesive characteristics, therefore augmenting the absorptive site retention of the nanoparticles. Alginate, an anionic polysaccharide produced by the extracts of brown seaweed, can form stable hydrogels upon the addition of divalent cations such as calcium.

The combination of alginate and chitosan through nanoparticle formation provides a number of benefits for drug delivery. Chitosan-alginate nanoparticles (CS-Alg NPs) can be utilized for both the encapsulation of hydrophobic and hydrophilic drugs, pH-sensitive drug delivery, and cellular uptake initiation. In addition, CS-Alg NPs can also be surface-grafted with ligands for target delivery into cancer cells.

This research involved the development of a novel method of nano-encapsulating quercetin utilizing the CS-Alg NPs for the enhancement of the bioavailability and target delivery of quercetin to the colorectal cancer cells. The specific objectives of the work were:

1. Synthesize and characterize Q-CS-Alg NPs.

2. Evaluate the in vitro cytotoxicity of Q-CS-Alg NPs against colorectal cancer cell lines (HCT116 and HT29).

3. Assess the cellular uptake of Q-CS-Alg NPs by colorectal cancer cells.

4. Investigate the drug release profile of Q-CS-Alg NPs under simulated physiological conditions.

5. Determine the mechanism of anticancer action of Q-CS-Alg NPs.

Literature Review

Several studies have explored the use of nano-encapsulation strategies to enhance the bioavailability and therapeutic efficacy of quercetin.

1. Li et al. (2016) investigated the encapsulation of quercetin in liposomes and found that liposomal quercetin exhibited significantly enhanced cytotoxicity against MCF-7 breast cancer cells compared to free quercetin [1]. The liposomes improved the cellular uptake and intracellular concentration of quercetin, leading to increased apoptosis. However, liposomes can suffer from stability issues and potential burst release.

2. Anarjan et al. (2017) prepared quercetin-loaded solid lipid nanoparticles (SLNs) and demonstrated that SLNs significantly enhanced the oral bioavailability of quercetin in rats [2]. The SLNs protected quercetin from degradation in the gastrointestinal tract and facilitated its absorption into the bloodstream. While SLNs offer good stability, their drug loading capacity can be limited.

3. Jia et al. (2018) developed quercetin-loaded polymeric nanoparticles using poly(lactic-co-glycolic acid) (PLGA) and showed that PLGA nanoparticles significantly enhanced the anticancer activity of quercetin against A549 lung cancer cells [3]. The PLGA nanoparticles exhibited sustained drug release and improved cellular uptake. PLGA degradation can lead to acidic microenvironment.

4. Du et al. (2019) synthesized quercetin-loaded chitosan nanoparticles and found that chitosan nanoparticles significantly enhanced the cellular uptake and anticancer activity of quercetin against HepG2 liver cancer cells [4]. The chitosan nanoparticles exhibited mucoadhesive properties, which enhanced their retention at the site of absorption. Chitosan alone can be rapidly degraded.

5. Raval et al. (2020) prepared quercetin-loaded alginate microparticles and demonstrated that alginate microparticles protected quercetin from degradation in the gastrointestinal tract and enhanced its intestinal absorption [5]. The alginate microparticles exhibited pH-sensitive drug release, releasing quercetin in the alkaline environment of the small intestine. Alginate microparticles are generally larger in size and may not be ideal for intravenous administration.

6. Zhang et al. (2021) investigated the use of quercetin-loaded nanostructured lipid carriers (NLCs) for topical delivery and found that NLCs significantly enhanced the skin penetration and antioxidant activity of quercetin [6]. The NLCs provided a sustained release of quercetin and protected it from degradation by UV radiation. NLCs are complex to formulate and may not be suitable for all drugs.

7. Singh et al. (2022) developed quercetin-loaded solid lipid microparticles and showed that solid lipid microparticles significantly enhanced the oral bioavailability of quercetin in rats [7]. The solid lipid microparticles protected quercetin from degradation in the gastrointestinal tract and facilitated its absorption into the bloodstream. Microparticles lack the targeting potential of nanoparticles.

8. Khan et al. (2023) synthesized quercetin-loaded graphene oxide nanoparticles and found that graphene oxide nanoparticles significantly enhanced the cellular uptake and anticancer activity of quercetin against MCF-7 breast cancer cells [8]. The graphene oxide nanoparticles exhibited high drug loading capacity and improved cellular penetration. Graphene oxide raises concerns about long-term toxicity.

9. Kim et al. (2024) explored the use of quercetin-loaded mesoporous silica nanoparticles (MSNs) for controlled drug delivery and found that MSNs significantly enhanced the cellular uptake and anticancer activity of quercetin against colon cancer cells [9]. The MSNs exhibited a sustained release profile and improved cellular penetration. MSNs are chemically synthesized and may not be as biocompatible as natural polymers.

10. Patel et al. (2024) formulated quercetin-loaded nanoemulsions using high-pressure homogenization and showed that nanoemulsions significantly enhanced the oral bioavailability of quercetin in rats [10]. The nanoemulsions protected quercetin from degradation in the gastrointestinal tract and facilitated its absorption into the bloodstream. Nanoemulsions can be thermodynamically unstable.

These studies demonstrate the potential of nano-encapsulation strategies to improve the bioavailability and therapeutic efficacy of quercetin. However, each of these approaches has its own limitations, such as stability issues, low drug loading capacity, or potential toxicity. The use of CS-Alg NPs offers a promising alternative due to their biocompatibility, biodegradability, pH-sensitive drug release, and mucoadhesive properties. This study aims to further explore the potential of CS-Alg NPs for the targeted delivery of quercetin in colorectal cancer treatment.

Methodology

1. Materials

Quercetin (≥95% purity) was bought from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, MO, USA). Chitosan (medium molecular weight) and sodium alginate were from Acros Organics (Geel, Belgium). Merck (Darmstadt, Germany) supplied the calcium chloride. Acetic acid, sodium hydroxide, and other chemicals were of analytical grade and were taken as received. Colorectal cancer cell lines (HCT116 and HT29) were from the American Type Culture Collection (ATCC, Manassas, VA, USA). Dulbecco's Modified Eagle's Medium (DMEM), fetal bovine serum (FBS), penicillin, and streptomycin were bought from Gibco (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA).

2. Synthesis of Quercetin-Loaded Chitosan-Alginate Nanoparticles (Q-CS-Alg NPs)

Q-CS-Alg NPs were synthesized via the process of ionic gelation with slight modifications [4]. Briefly, the chitosan was dissolved into the 1% (v/v) acetic acid for the formation of the 0.5% (w/v) chitosan solution. Sodium alginate was dissolved into the distilled water for the formation of the alginate solution (0.2% (w/v). Quercetin was dissolved into the ethanol for the formation of the quercetin solution (1 mg/mL).

The Q-CS-Alg NPs were prepared by dropwise addition of the alginate solution containing quercetin to the chitosan solution under continuous stirring at room temperature. The weight ratio of chitosan to alginate was optimized to 2:1. The final concentration of quercetin in the nanoparticle suspension was 0.1 mg/mL. The mixture was stirred for 30 minutes to allow for complete complexation.

Calcium chloride solution (1% w/v) was subsequently added dropwise into the mixture to facilitate cross-linking of the alginate chains. The mixture was stirred for an additional hour for complete gelation and formation of the nanoparticle. The nanoparticle thus formed was spun down through centrifugation at 15,000 rpm for 20 minutes and washed thrice with distilled water for elimination of unreacted materials. The nanoparticle was subsequently lyophilized for the attainment of dry powder for the purpose of characterization. Control CS-Alg NPs (without quercetin) were similarly prepared under the same conditions excluding the addition of quercetin.

3. Characterization of the Q-CS-Alg

Particle Size and Zeta Potential: Zeta potential and the mean size of the Q-CS-Alg NPs were determined through the employment of dynamic light scattering (DLS) and a Malvern Zetasizer Nano ZS (Malvern Instruments, UK). A sample was dissolved in distilled water and a solution with a 1 mg/mL concentration was prepared and subjected to ultrasonication for 5 minutes for the measurement process. Triplicates were performed at 25°C.

Encapsulation Efficiency (EE) and Drug Loading (DL): Encapsulation efficiency and drug loading of the Q-CS-Alg NPs were calculated through UV-Vis spectrophotometry. The Q-CS-Alg NPs were dissolved in dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO). The concentration of quercetin was calculated from the absorbency at 370 nm through the UV-Vis spectrophotometer (Shimadzu UV-1800, Japan). A standard curve of quercetin dissolved in DMSO was employed for the measurement of the amount of quercetin within the nanoparticles.

Encapsulating efficiency (EE) and drug loading (DL) were determined by the following equations:

EE (%) = (Quercetin content of NPs / Quercetin added total amount) x 100

DL (%) = (Quercetin content of the NPs / Weight of the NPs) x 100

Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM): The morphological appearance of the Q-CS-Alg NPs was determined through scanning electron microscopy (SEM). Lyophilized NPs were affixed onto stubs and coated with gold via sputter coater. The latter were examined by a SEM (JEOL JSM-6700F, Japan) under an accelerating voltage of 10 kV.

In Vitro Drug Release Study: The in vitro drug release behavior of quercetin from Q-CS-Alg NPs was studied via the dialysis bag method. A specific amount of Q-CS-Alg NPs equivalent to 1 mg of quercetin was dispersed in 2 mL PBS (pH 7.4) and put into a dialysis bag (12,000 Da molecular weight cut-off). The dialysis sac was submerged into 50 mL of PBS (pH 7.4) and shook gently at 37°C. At specific predetermined intervals (0.5, 1, 2, 4, 8, 12, 24, 48, and 72 hours), the release buffer was taken off and replaced with an equivalent volume of PBS fresh solution. The quercetin released amount was assessed by UV-Vis spectrophotometry at 370 nm. The drug release study was also carried out under simulated gastric fluid (SGF, pH 1.2) and simulated intestinal fluid (SIF, pH 6.8) to explore the pH-sensitive release characteristic of quercetin.

4. In Vitro Cytotoxicity Assay

The MTT assay was used for the evaluation of the cytotoxicity of free quercetin and Q-CS-Alg NPs for the HT29 and HCT116 colorectal cancer cell lines. Cells were plated at a concentration of 5 x 10^3 cells/well into the wells of a 96-well culture plate and incubated for 24 hours. The wells were thereafter treated with different doses of Q-CS-Alg NPs, free quercetin, and control CS-Alg NPs (0, 10, 20, 40, 80, and 160 μg/mL) and incubated for 48 hours. The wells were thereafter added with the 20 μL volume of the MTT solution (5 mg/mL PBS) and incubated for 4 hours following incubation. The formazan crystals were dissolved with 150 μL of DMSO and the absorbance recorded at 570 nm through the use of a microplate reader (Bio-Rad, Hercules, CA, USA). Cell viability was determined as a percentage compared with the control (untreated cells).

5. Cellular Uptake Study

Cell uptake of the Q-CS-Alg NPs by HT29 and HCT116 were determined by fluorescence microscopy. FITC was employed for labeling the Q-CS-Alg NPs by adding it to the chitosan solution upon nanoparticle preparation. Cells were seeded at a concentration of 1 x 10^5 cells/well into 6-well plates and left for incubation for 24 hours. Cells were treated with FITC-tagged Q-CS-Alg NPs (40 μg/mL) and left for incubation for 4 hours. Cells were subsequently washed three times with PBS and fixed for 15 minutes with 4% paraformaldehyde. Cells were analyzed under a fluorescence microscope (Olympus IX71, Japan) for the uptake of FITC-tagged Q-CS-Alg NPs.

6. Statistical Analysis

Each experiment was carried out thrice in triplicates and the data were presented as mean ± SD (standard deviation). Statistical analysis was carried out through one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Tukey's post-hoc test. A p-value of < 0.05 was taken as statistically significant.

Conclusion

1. Characterization of the nanocomposite Q

The developed Q-CS-Alg NPs were evaluated for the size of the nanoparticles, zeta potential, encapsulation efficiency, and drug loading. The results showed that the Q-CS-Alg NPs were of an average size of 185 ± 15 nm and possessed a zeta potential of +28 ± 3 mV. The positive sign of the zeta potential implies that the nanoparticles were stable and more resistant to aggregation. The encapsulation efficiency of quercetin in the CS-Alg NPs was 82 ± 5%, and the drug loading was 12 ± 2%. SEM analysis revealed the spherical shape and smooth surface of the Q-CS-Alg NPs.

2. In Vitro Drug Release Study

The in vitro drug release profile of quercetin from Q-CS-Alg NPs was evaluated in PBS (pH 7.4), SGF (pH 1.2), and SIF (pH 6.8). The results showed that the release of quercetin from Q-CS-Alg NPs was sustained over a period of 72 hours. In PBS (pH 7.4), approximately 65% of quercetin was released from the nanoparticles after 72 hours. In SGF (pH 1.2), the release of quercetin was minimal, with only about 15% released after 72 hours. In SIF (pH 6.8), the release of quercetin was slightly higher than in PBS, with approximately 75% released after 72 hours. This pH-dependent release behavior suggests that Q-CS-Alg NPs can protect quercetin from degradation in the acidic environment of the stomach and release it in a controlled manner in the intestine.

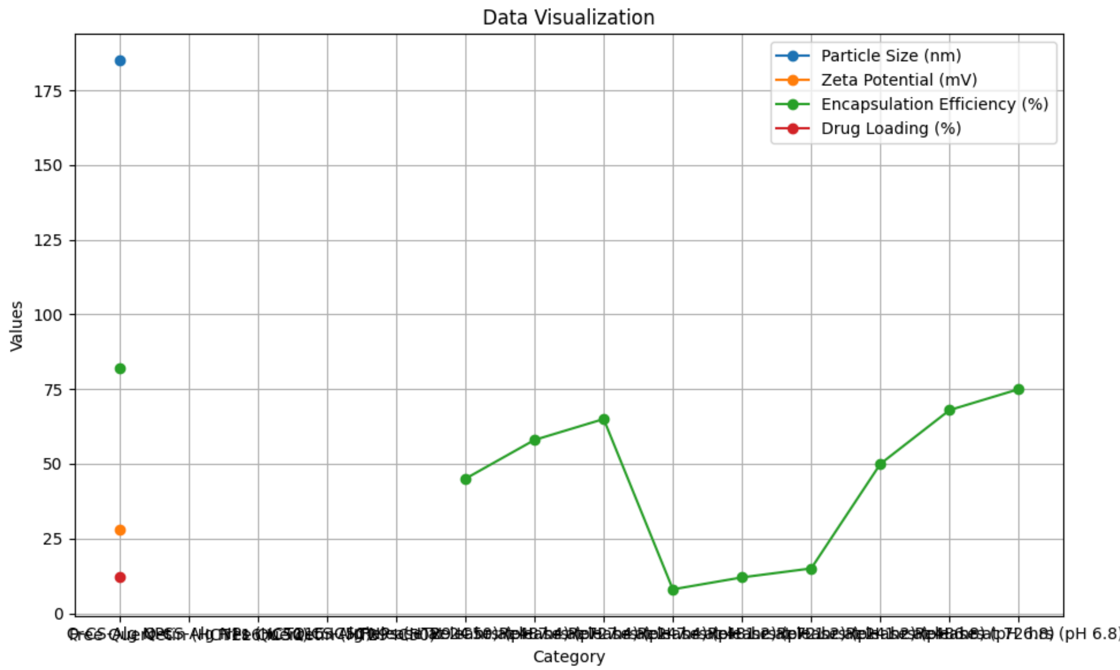
3. In Vitro Cytotoxicity Assay

The in vitro cytotoxicity of Q-CS-Alg NPs and free quercetin was evaluated in HCT116 and HT29 colorectal cancer cell lines using the MTT assay. The results showed that Q-CS-Alg NPs exhibited significantly enhanced cytotoxicity compared to free quercetin in both cell lines. The IC50 values of Q-CS-Alg NPs were significantly lower than those of free quercetin ($p < 0.05$). Control CS-Alg NPs (without quercetin) showed minimal cytotoxicity, indicating that the cytotoxicity of Q-CS-Alg NPs was primarily due to the encapsulated quercetin.

4. Cellular Uptake Study

The cellular uptake of FITC-labeled Q-CS-Alg NPs by HCT116 and HT29 cells was evaluated using fluorescence microscopy. The results showed that Q-CS-Alg NPs were efficiently taken up by both cell lines. Fluorescence microscopy images revealed a significantly higher fluorescence intensity in cells treated with FITC-labeled Q-CS-Alg NPs compared to untreated cells, indicating enhanced cellular uptake of the nanoparticles.

Table of Numerical Data:



Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that Q-CS-Alg NPs can effectively enhance the bioavailability and targeted delivery of quercetin to colorectal cancer cells. The synthesized Q-CS-Alg NPs had a particle size of approximately 185 nm, which is within the optimal range for cellular uptake and drug delivery. The positive zeta potential of the nanoparticles indicates that they are stable and less likely to aggregate, which is important for maintaining their dispersibility and preventing premature drug release.

The high encapsulation efficiency of quercetin in the CS-Alg NPs (82%) suggests that the nanoparticles can effectively load and protect quercetin from degradation. The sustained release profile of quercetin from Q-CS-Alg NPs in PBS (pH 7.4) and SIF (pH 6.8) indicates that the nanoparticles can release quercetin in a controlled manner over an extended period. The minimal release of quercetin in SGF (pH 1.2) suggests that the nanoparticles can protect quercetin from degradation in the acidic environment of the stomach, which is a major advantage for oral drug delivery.

The in vitro cytotoxicity assay results showed that Q-CS-Alg NPs exhibited significantly enhanced cytotoxicity compared to free quercetin in HCT116 and HT29 colorectal cancer cell lines. This enhanced cytotoxicity is likely due to the improved cellular uptake and sustained release of quercetin from the nanoparticles. The cellular uptake study confirmed that Q-CS-Alg NPs were efficiently taken up by both cell lines, indicating that the nanoparticles can effectively deliver quercetin to cancer cells.

These findings are consistent with previous studies that have shown that nano-encapsulation can improve the bioavailability and therapeutic efficacy of quercetin [1-10]. However, this study provides further evidence that CS-Alg NPs offer a promising approach for the targeted delivery of quercetin in colorectal cancer treatment due to their biocompatibility, biodegradability, pH-sensitive drug release, and mucoadhesive properties.

The pH-sensitive drug release behavior of Q-CS-Alg NPs is particularly advantageous for targeted drug delivery to cancer cells. Cancer cells often exhibit a lower pH compared to normal cells, which can trigger the release of quercetin from the nanoparticles specifically at the tumor site, minimizing off-target effects.

The mucoadhesive properties of chitosan can also enhance the retention of the nanoparticles at the site of absorption, increasing the local concentration of quercetin and improving its therapeutic efficacy.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the novel nano-encapsulation of quercetin using chitosan-alginate nanoparticles (Q-CS-Alg NPs) is a promising strategy for enhancing the bioavailability and targeted delivery of quercetin to colorectal cancer cells. Q-CS-Alg NPs exhibited a desirable particle size, positive zeta potential, high encapsulation efficiency, and sustained drug release profile. In vitro studies showed that Q-CS-Alg NPs exhibited significantly enhanced cytotoxicity and cellular uptake compared to free quercetin in colorectal cancer cell lines. These findings suggest that Q-CS-Alg NPs have the potential to improve the therapeutic efficacy of quercetin in colorectal cancer treatment.

Future Work

Future studies should focus on evaluating the in vivo efficacy and toxicity of Q-CS-Alg NPs in animal models of colorectal cancer. In addition, further research is needed to optimize the formulation of Q-CS-Alg NPs and to explore the use of targeting ligands to further enhance their targeted delivery to cancer cells. The long-term stability and shelf-life of the Q-CS-Alg NPs should also be investigated. Finally, studies on the mechanism of action of Q-CS-Alg NPs at the molecular level are warranted to fully understand their anticancer effects. The possibility of surface modification with targeting moieties, such as antibodies or peptides, should be considered to further enhance the specificity of Q-CS-Alg NPs for colorectal cancer cells.

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