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**Nanomedicine formulations for the delivery of antiviral drugs: A promising solution for the treatment of viral infections**

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# Nanomedicine formulations for the delivery of antiviral drugs: A promising solution for the treatment of viral infections

## Abstract

**Introduction.** Viral infections represent a public health problem and one of the leading causes of global mortality. Nanomedicine strategies can be considered a powerful tool to enhance the effectiveness of antiviral drugs, often associated with solubility and bioavailability issues. Consequently, high doses and frequent administrations are required, resulting in adverse side effects. To overcome these limitations, various nanomedicine platforms have been designed.

**Area covered.** This review focuses on the state of the art of organic-based nanoparticles for the delivery of approved antivirals. A brief description of the main characteristics of nanocarriers is followed by an overview of the most promising research addressing the treatment of most important viral infections.

**Expert Opinion.** The activity of antiviral drugs could be improved with nanomedicine formulations. Indeed, nanoparticles can affect the fate of the encapsulated drugs, allowing controlled release kinetics, enhanced bioavailability, modified pharmacokinetics, and reduced side effects. In addition, the physicochemical properties of nanocarriers can enable their capability to target specific sites and to interact with virus structures. In this regard, nanomedicines can be considered an opportunity to enhance the therapeutic index of antivirals. Efficacy, safety, and manufacturing issues need to be carefully assessed to bring this promising approach to the clinic.

**Keywords:** antiviral drugs, nanomedicines, viral infections, nanoparticles, nanotherapeutics, targeted delivery.

25 **Article highlight box**

- 26 • Nanocarrier incorporation of antiviral drugs can modify their pharmacokinetics and  
27 pharmacodynamics properties and reduce the side effects.
- 28 • Long-acting nanoformulations can be applied in the treatment of infectious diseases to promote  
29 compliance and patient adherence.
- 30 • Nanomedicines formulations can overcome biological barriers and achieve effective drug  
31 concentrations in viral reservoirs.
- 32 • The peculiar physico-chemical properties of nanocarriers can enable their capability to interact  
33 with virus structures.
- 34 • Nanomedicine can provide an effective platform for treating viral diseases by small interfering  
35 RNA (siRNA) delivery.
- 36 • Nanomedicine strategies can be considered a powerful tool to enhance the potential of currently  
37 approved antiviral drugs.

38

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## 47 **1. Introduction**

48 Viral infections pose significant global health challenges, particularly because resistant viral strains and  
49 adverse side effects associated with the prolonged use of antiviral drugs can reduce the effectiveness of  
50 antiviral therapies. In the past several decades, a new paradigm for enhancing the efficacy of bioactive  
51 molecules – the use of nanotechnology in medicine (i.e., nanotherapeutics and nanodelivery systems) –  
52 has attracted increasing attention and has been largely exploited in many medical fields, both in basic  
53 research and in the drug development pipeline [1].

54 The use of nanodelivery systems offers some advantages that can improve therapeutic treatments.  
55 Indeed, the biopharmaceutical properties, and those of absorption, distribution, metabolism and  
56 excretion (ADME), of conventional drugs depend upon their physicochemical characteristics.

57 Nanomaterials can affect and govern the fate of the encapsulated drug [2]. Interestingly, nanocarrier  
58 formulations can modify the physico-chemical properties of the incorporated molecules, thereby  
59 allowing sustained/controlled release, modified pharmacokinetics, and targeting specific sites of action.  
60 This can lead to an increase in the effectiveness of the drug and a decrease in the associated side effects  
61 [3].

62 In this context, the nanomedicine rationale can be exploited to enhance the therapy of viral infections,  
63 taking into consideration the narrow therapeutic indices, high doses, and frequent administration  
64 needed for a number of antiviral drugs due to their limited aqueous solubility, short half-life, and/or  
65 slow uptake by the body tissues [4]. In addition to the physico-chemical limitations of drugs, prolonged  
66 anti-viral therapy can result in the development of drug-resistant virus strains necessitating daily  
67 repeated administrations, which can lead to a demanding drug-regimen. This is especially the case of  
68 chronic diseases, such as the acquired human immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) due to human  
69 immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection, where no suspension of treatment is allowed in order to avoid  
70 viral resistance [5]. Thus, it is clear that the treatment of viral diseases is a challenging problem.

71 However, nanomedicine-based strategies may be useful for both the prevention and therapy of these  
72 diseases. The design of a nanodelivery systems can be approached from different points of view,  
73 although it generally takes into account the type of nanocarrier/nanomaterial used and the type of viral  
74 disease, leading to approaches that are respectively technologically and biologically driven.

75 Viruses act as intracellular parasites that use the replication system of the infected cells because they  
76 lack the genetic information necessary for the generation of metabolic energy and macromolecular  
77 synthesis. This behavior leads to an intricate relationship between viruses and infected cells that should  
78 be considered in the development of efficient, safe and targeted therapies. Current antiviral drugs  
79 interfere with specific phases of the virus life cycle by targeting viral structures and enzymes that are  
80 essential for virus replication. The major mechanisms of antivirals actions against DNA and RNA  
81 viruses are reported in Figure 1. Most RNA viruses replicate in the cytoplasm, whereas DNA viruses,  
82 Influenza virus and retroviruses (HIV) enter into the nucleus for genome replication. Notably, HIV  
83 reverse transcriptase acts before the entry of the genome into the cellular nucleus; by contrast, HBV  
84 reverse transcriptase acts on a viral RNA genome of new viral progeny.

85 Intriguingly, nanomedicine formulations could represent a new avenue for controlling the amount,  
86 dosage frequency, and delivery site of antivirals, as well as for targeting the virus life cycle. Indeed, the  
87 features of nanoparticles, such as sizes, morphology and surface charge, can be modulated to promote  
88 the targeting of the drugs. Moreover, nanocarriers can be engineered to enhance their ability to reach  
89 specific extracellular or intracellular targets and to compete with viruses for attachment to cell surface  
90 receptors, both of which are key factors for controlling viral diseases and overcoming drug resistance.  
91 Consequently, passive and active drug targeting are possible with nanomedicine approaches, as  
92 previously described for anticancer drugs [6]. Passive targeting depends on the composition and  
93 physicochemical characteristics of the nanocarriers; active targeting is based on the presence of a  
94 specific ligand on the nanocarrier surface, which acts as a recognition device for viral nanostructures.



95 These drug-targeting strategies might facilitate the local and specific release of antiviral drugs while  
96 minimizing damage to healthy cells and tissues, thereby preventing side effects.

97 In addition, these approaches can be exploited for the design of broad-spectrum antiviral-based  
98 nanodelivery systems that target the viral membrane or cell receptor to compete with attachment of the  
99 virus to the target cell, thereby preventing virus internalization [7]. Recently, suitable engineered  
100 nanoparticles (NPs) were developed that interact with cell receptors (i.e., glycan receptors) and  
101 competitively bind to cells to prevent viral infection [8]. Interestingly, this rationale has been proven by  
102 using liposomal decoys to capture influenza virus and delay the disease [9]. Alternatively,  
103 nanoassemblies have been generated to mimic glycan receptors, thereby neutralizing heparin sulfate  
104 dependent viruses [10]. In addition, the site-specific drug release potential, as well as the ability to  
105 overcome biological barriers of nanomedicine, can offer the advantage of decreasing the administered  
106 dose regimen of antivirals. To date, a number of nanocarriers, either organic (e.g., liposomes, NPs,  
107 micelles) or inorganic (e.g., silver and gold NPs), have been studied to improve the delivery and  
108 therapeutic efficacy of antiviral medicines. Consequently, various potential nanostructures might be  
109 fine-tuned and employed to meet the different needs of viral disease therapy [11].

110 This review highlights the state of the art of organic NPs used for the delivery of approved antiviral  
111 drugs. A brief classification of the main types of nanomedicines is given, and a detailed overview of the  
112 most common viral infections is provided. Given the large number of papers and reviews on this topic,  
113 it has not been possible to reference all the literature in the field, but some examples are reported which  
114 indicate how the formulation of antivirals as nanomedicines could represent a promising solution for  
115 the prevention and treatment of viral infections.

116

## 117 2. Nanodelivery systems for antiviral drugs

118 Various organic-based nanodelivery systems for antiviral agents, including liposomes, polymeric NPs,  
119 solid lipid NPs, hybrid NPs, dendrimers, nanoemulsions, micellar systems and self-assembled  
120 nanostructures, have been proposed [12]. To develop efficient nanocarrier platforms, various criteria  
121 should be considered, including safety, biocompatibility, biodegradability and compatibility with the  
122 drug. It is worth noting that the main parameters that determine NP functionality are particle size, size  
123 distribution, shape and surface characteristics (e.g., chemistry, charge) [13]. Additionally, NP features  
124 should be fine-tuned to optimize the pharmacokinetics profile, *in vivo* biodistribution and viral  
125 interactions. Figure 2 reports an overview of the main drawbacks of antivirals and nanotechnological  
126 strategies to overcome the limits of antiviral therapy. For example, nanocarriers for oral  
127 nanoformulations should be resistant to the acidic pH of stomach and intestinal enzymes, and be able to  
128 penetrate the mucus secretion that limits the intestinal presence of these drugs. Drug release kinetics is  
129 another important parameter that influences the therapeutic effectiveness of nanodelivery systems. An  
130 ideal system should incorporate a good amount of drug and release its payload once it has arrived at the  
131 site of action. Smart nanocarriers that are able to control and self-regulate drug delivery have been  
132 investigated, particularly for cancer therapy and also for infectious diseases [14]. Finally, to enhance  
133 the effectiveness of the drug, it is necessary to take the route of administration into account. The  
134 majority of antiviral drugs are administered orally, although some are delivered via intravenous or  
135 subcutaneous routes (Fig. 3). With regard to the toxicity of organic NPs based on biocompatible  
136 components, many papers have reported no or slight toxicity related to the surface charge or solvent  
137 residues [15]. The general characteristics of current nanoformulations for antivirals are described  
138 below.

139

## 140 **2.1 Liposomes**

141 Liposomes are nanocarriers comprised of phospholipid bilayers encapsulating an aqueous core [12].  
142 These spherical lipid vesicles improve the solubility of compounds by compartmentalizing,  
143 solubilizing, and delivering a wide range of hydrophilic and hydrophobic molecules. These unique  
144 capabilities, coupled with their biocompatibility, biodegradability and low toxicity make liposomes  
145 very attractive as drug delivery vehicles. They have consequently been widely investigated as one of  
146 the most extensively used nanocarriers, and in 1995 the first liposomal product, consisting of  
147 doxorubicin-loaded pegylated liposomes was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration  
148 (FDA) for cancer treatment. Liposomes range in size from 20 nm in the case of small unilamellar  
149 vesicles, to more than 100 nm for large and multilamellar vesicles. In basic research, the most common  
150 preparation method is the dehydration-rehydration technique, which has relatively high loading  
151 efficiency compared with other methods, such as reverse-phase evaporation or detergent depletion, all  
152 of which have lower encapsulation efficiencies. Liposomes have a natural tendency for hepatic  
153 accumulation, and thus represent an optimal drug delivery system for the treatment of liver diseases,  
154 including chronic hepatitis C virus infections [16]. However, as drug carriers, liposomes have certain  
155 drawbacks. Besides their low *in vitro*–*in vivo* stability, they have low encapsulation efficiency and have  
156 a high production cost. In addition, their rapid removal from the blood and capture by cells of the  
157 reticuloendothelial system restrict their therapeutic applications.

158

## 159 **2.2 Niosomes and ethosomes**

160 Niosomes are vesicular delivery systems that result from the self-assembly of hydrated surfactant  
161 monomers. They may have some advantages over liposomes with respect to chemical stability, lower  
162 cost of chemicals, and the large number of surfactant classes available for the design of this vesicular  
163 system [17]. Niosomes can encapsulate both hydrophilic and lipophilic molecules, by entrapping

164 hydrophilic ones in vesicular aqueous core or adsorbed on the bilayer surfaces, while lipophilic drugs  
165 are encapsulated by their partitioning into the lipophilic domain of the bilayers. Because of their  
166 nonionic nature and high biodegradability, niosomes have shown excellent biocompatibility and low  
167 toxicity. However, segregation of non-ionic surfactants may cause toxicity [18].

168 Ethosomes are lipid multilamellar vesicles composed of phospholipids, ethanol and water. Because of  
169 their ability to fuse with skin lipids, ethosomes deliver topical agents to the skin more efficiently than  
170 liposomes. On the basis of their composition, they can be classified into classical ethosomes, binary  
171 ethosomes, and transethosomes. Classical ethosomes are composed of phospholipids, a high  
172 concentration of ethanol up to 45% w/w, and water. They are a modification of classical liposomes  
173 showing better skin permeation and stability profiles. Binary ethosomes were developed by adding  
174 another type of alcohol (i.e. propylene glycol and isopropyl alcohol) to the classical ethosomes.  
175 Transethosomes are the new generation of ethosomal systems developed in order to combine the  
176 advantages of classical ethosomes and deformable liposomes (transfersomes). They contain the basic  
177 components of classical ethosomes and an additional compound, such as a penetration enhancer or an  
178 edge activator (surfactant) in their formula [19].

179

### 180 **2.3 Polymeric nanoparticles**

181 Polymeric nanoparticles (NPs) were developed later than liposomes to improve their stability and drug  
182 payload. They are solid colloidal particles, generally below 500 nm in size, and are composed of a  
183 biocompatible polymeric matrix that can be made of synthetic or natural polymers [12]. The  
184 therapeutic molecule is either entrapped, adsorbed or covalently attached. Because of their polymeric  
185 composition, polymeric NPs may have greater stability than liposomes in biological fluids and under  
186 storage conditions. Polymeric NPs are prepared by several methods, including solvent evaporation,  
187 spontaneous emulsification, solvent diffusion and polymerization. The preparation conditions have

188 important effects on the characteristics of the NPs obtained, such as size and release rate. NPs can be  
189 loaded with lipophilic and hydrophilic drugs, and different chemical approaches have been proposed,  
190 including covalent chemistry, hydrophobic interactions and entrapment.

191 The synthetic polymers most widely used are polyesters, such as polylactides (PLAs), and polylactide–  
192 polyglycolide copolymers, poly(lactic-co-glycolic acid) (PLGAs), polycaprolactones (PCLs) and  
193 polyacrylates (PCAs). The most common polymer used is PLGA, and several PLGA drug delivery  
194 systems have been approved by the FDA. Natural polymers, such as alginate and chitosan, have also  
195 been used, and they generally exhibit immunogenicity lower than that of synthetic ones.

196

## 197 **2.4 Polymeric micelles**

198 Polymeric micelles are colloidal structures of block copolymers, such as poly(butyl methacrylate)  
199 (PBMA), polystyrene (PLS), PLA or poly(ethyleneoxide)–poly(propylene oxide) (PEO–PPO). The  
200 polymers spontaneously form micellar structures above the critical micelle concentration and  
201 temperature, causing the polymer chains to become hydrophobic and resulting in aggregation [12]. On  
202 the other hand, the polymers become insoluble in aqueous solution, and they act like inert materials  
203 below the aforementioned critical conditions. The hydrophobic fragments form the spherical inner core,  
204 in which poorly-water soluble-drugs can be encapsulated, and hydrophilic fragments form the outer  
205 shell. The outer hydrophilic shell can be functionalized with different moieties, such as folate,  
206 monoclonal antibodies and monosaccharides (i.e. mannose, glucose, fructose), to achieve active  
207 targeting and/or pH/temperature responsive nanocarriers. They have raised particular interest as nano-  
208 sized drug delivery systems, not only because they provide increased solubility and stability of  
209 hydrophobic drugs, but also due to their *in vivo* advantages versus the free drug, such as increased  
210 circulation half-life, enhanced bioavailability and improved cellular uptake [20]. Polymeric micelles  
211 suitable for drug delivery have the appropriate charge density and polymer chain length, and the

212 particle diameter is usually within 5–100 nm. Size control depends on the chemical structure of the  
213 polymers and is not dependent on the preparation process, which is an advantage that other types of  
214 NPs lack. Similar to other organic NPs, polymeric micelles have low toxicity because they disassemble  
215 into single polymer chains that can be easily excreted and exhibit no toxicity. Micellar stability mainly  
216 depends on the copolymer self-aggregation tendency. Since polymeric micelles are dynamic systems,  
217 they are liable to dissociate, especially upon administration when they are diluted to a concentration  
218 below the CMC. Moreover, blood components can alter the kinetic stability of micelles and cause  
219 dissociation [21].

220

## 221 **2.5 Solid lipid nanoparticles**

222 Solid lipid nanoparticles (SLNs) are made of lipids that are solid at body temperature, such as fatty  
223 acids and triglycerides [17]. The method of preparation usually involves heating to liquefy the lipids.  
224 Upon cooling, SLNs separate and can be readily dried. They are stabilized with emulsifiers and  
225 co-emulsifiers, such as polysorbates, poloxamers, fatty acid co-esters, lecithin and bile salts. The  
226 amount of stabilizer used must be enough to prevent aggregation without reducing drug uptake. The  
227 proper selection of lipids and surfactants can affect the particle size, long-term stability during storage,  
228 drug loading and behaviors of release. SLNs are less toxic and easier to scale up than synthetic polymer  
229 NPs. Furthermore, the state of the lipids depends upon the characteristics of the medium (e.g.,  
230 temperature, pH), which allows for better controlled release, safety and efficacy. Common  
231 disadvantages of SLNs are unpredictable gelation tendency and inherent low incorporation rates  
232 resulting from the crystalline structure of the solid lipid [22].

233

234

235

## 236 **2.6 Dendrimers**

237 Dendrimers are nanosized, radially symmetric molecules with homogenous, well-defined and  
238 monodisperse structures, which typically have a symmetric core, an inner shell and an outer shell.  
239 These polymers are shaped like the head of a tree and have two unique characteristics, namely, a  
240 globular structure and polyvalency, which is found in many naturally occurring systems. Tomalia *et al.*  
241 reported the synthesis of the first family of dendrimers, known as poly(amido amine) (PAMAM),  
242 which is one of the most successfully used dendrimers [23]. One of the dendrimer-based formulations  
243 was designed specifically with HIV and HSV antiviral activity. Vivagel<sup>®</sup>, a carbomer gel containing a  
244 dendrimer (SPL7013), has demonstrated efficacy against human immunodeficiency virus and herpes  
245 simplex virus in *in vitro* and animal models. Phase I clinical trials have been conducted, and the results  
246 concerning its safety were generally favorable [24-25].

247

## 248 **2.7 Cyclodextrin derivatives**

249 Cyclodextrins are nanometric biomaterials consisting of  $\alpha$ -1,4-linked cyclic glucopyranose oligomers,  
250 and they are synthesized by enzymatic action on hydrolyzed starch. The most common (so-called  
251 “native”) forms of cyclodextrins are  $\alpha$ -,  $\beta$ -, and  $\gamma$ -cyclodextrin, consisting of six, seven or eight  
252 glucopyranose units, respectively. They have a characteristic toroidal shape formed by linkages of  
253 multiple glucose units, thereby creating a hydrophilic exterior and a hydrophobic cavity. This  
254 distinctive structure can form inclusion complexes with compounds whose geometry and polarity are  
255 compatible with that of their cavity. The production of drug/cyclodextrin complexes has become one of  
256 the most extensively investigated approaches to improve the stability, solubility, dissolution rate and  
257 bioavailability of drugs. Indeed, cyclodextrins have been employed to overcome the main  
258 biopharmaceutical drawbacks of antiviral agents [26]. Cyclodextrin-based nanosponges are hyper-

259 cross-linked polymers that have cyclodextrin units as their building blocks, and they are characterized  
260 by their marked capacity to encapsulate a great variety of substances [27].

261

## 262 **2.8 Nanoemulsions**

263 Nanoemulsions are biphasic systems consisting of oil nanodroplets in the order of 100 nm. A typical  
264 nanoemulsion contains oil, water and an emulsifier. The addition of an emulsifier is critical for the  
265 creation of small droplets as it decreases the interfacial tension (i.e., the surface energy per unit area)  
266 between the oil and water phases of the emulsion [28]. Nanoemulsions are potential tools for improving  
267 the oral bioavailability of poorly aqueous soluble drugs. Self-nanoemulsifying drug delivery systems  
268 (SNEDDS) are anhydrous homogenous liquid mixtures consisting of oil, surfactant, drug and co-  
269 emulsifier or solubilizer, which spontaneously form oil-in-water nanoemulsions of approximately 200  
270 nm or less upon dilution with water under gentle stirring [29]. These systems offer a number of  
271 advantages including decreased dose and dosing frequency (due to improved bioavailability), high  
272 drug-loading efficiency and high stability. However, questions regarding the physical and chemical  
273 stability of drugs solubilized in lipid and excipients mixture have not yet been adequately addressed  
274 [30]. Successful large-scale production of the SNEDDS exemplified for two HIV protease inhibitors  
275 ritonavir (Norvir<sup>®</sup>, Abbott Laboratories, Abbott Park, IL, USA) and saquinavir (Fortovase<sup>®</sup>, Roche  
276 Pharmaceuticals, Nutley, NJ, USA), has generated considerable interest.

277

## 278 **2.9 Nanosuspensions**

279 Nanosuspensions or nanocrystals are nanoformulations comprising 100% pure drug nanoparticles with  
280 sizes in the nanoscale range, generally stabilized by surfactants or polymers. These drug nanodelivery  
281 systems are derived from traditional pharmaceutical technology. Nanosuspensions are usually obtained  
282 in liquid media by bottom-up or top-down methods or a combination of both techniques. They have



283 been designed to enhance the solubility, dissolution rate and bioavailability of drugs via various  
284 administration routes. Due to their small sizes, nanosuspensions can also be considered  
285 nanotechnology-based drug delivery systems for nanomedicine products. Many nanocrystal  
286 formulations have been developed to increase the bioavailability of drugs and to decrease adverse side  
287 effects [31]. Currently, 9 nanocrystal-based drug products are on the market.

288

## 289 **2.10 Hydrogel based nanocarriers**

290 Hydrogels are swellable polymer networks, cross linked together either by physical or chemical cross-  
291 linking, with high fluid absorption capacity. The use of these versatile, highly biocompatible structures  
292 for drug delivery has been extensively studied. Some hydrogels exhibit a high drug loading efficiency  
293 and display prolonged drug release. Moreover, drug release from hydrogel nanoparticles can be  
294 controlled physically or chemically. Hydrogels at the nanoscale have a large surface area for  
295 multivalent conjugations and subsequent surface modifications. The targeting capacity can be enhanced  
296 by coupling targeting ligands to the nanoparticle surface [32]. Efforts are being made to functionalize  
297 hydrogel-based nanoformulations for brain delivery to eradicate neuro-AIDS. Owing to their  
298 biodegradability and biocompatibility, bio-polymeric nanogels have shown excellent potential as  
299 targeted drug carriers for the central nervous system. Nanogels might be modified using hydrophobic  
300 moieties or many such compounds with the ability to enhance the permeability of BBB by crossing the  
301 tight junctions between endothelial cells. Moreover, nanogel surface charge and hydrophobicity have a  
302 great influence on plasma protein adsorption, affecting the uptake via transcytosis [33].

303 Hydrogels have been also explored for intravaginal drug delivery to prevent sexual transmission of  
304 HIV and other vaginal infections, providing excellent convenience for frequent usage and prolonged  
305 drug release. They could be topically applied over the vulvovaginal area to achieve a high  
306 bioavailability at the targeted tissues and potentially reduce the side effects associated with oral

307 formulations [34]. Thermosensitive hydrogels provide a method for convenient administration,  
308 showing the ability to spread along the vaginal canal after injection and coat the vaginal epithelium by  
309 hydrogel formation. Furthermore, the formed hydrogel acts as a drug reservoir releasing the drug that  
310 would be absorbed by epithelia or directly penetrated into virus to prohibit virus propagation [35].

311 Nanolipogels are an emerging platform being investigated as an alternative to the more widely used  
312 liposomes or polymer nanoparticles. These dual structure nanoparticles have a distinct lipid bilayer  
313 encompassing a polymer core, and they have been synthesized by UV-induced gelation of a hydrogel  
314 network within liposomes using various processes. Nanolipogels have been used to incorporate  
315 physico-chemically diverse agents within the lipid bilayer and in the hydrogel core, showing high  
316 encapsulation efficiency and controlled release kinetics. Studies have demonstrated the biological  
317 utility of nanolipogels for use in HIV infection chemoprophylaxis as topical microbicides [36].

318

## 319 **2.11 Stimuli responsive drug delivery systems**

320 On-demand drug delivery is becoming feasible through the design of stimuli-responsive systems that  
321 recognize specific triggers and react in a dynamic way. Nanoscale stimuli-responsive systems are able  
322 to control drug release in response to specific stimuli, either exogenous (variations in temperature,  
323 magnetic field, ultrasound intensity, light or electric pulses) or endogenous (changes in pH, enzyme  
324 concentration or redox gradients). They can take advantage of specific microenvironmental changes  
325 associated with pathological situations such as neoplastic diseases, ischemia, inflammatory diseases or  
326 infections [37].

327 Smart nanoparticles with stimuli responsive release are proposed for delivery of anti-retroviral agents,  
328 exploiting as triggers semen, enzymes, endosomal escape, temperature and magnetic field [38]. Novel  
329 stimuli-responsive strategies are provided especially in the development of vaginal nanocarriers for the  
330 prevention of sexually transmitted infections. Among them are Eudragit<sup>®</sup> S100-based vaginal delivery

331 systems for Tenofovir. The presence of Eudragit<sup>®</sup>, a pH-sensitive methacrylic acid/methyl methacrylate  
332 copolymer (soluble at pH 7.6 but insoluble at pH 4.5), enabled the release of drug depending on  
333 environment pH changes as occurring upon intravaginal ejaculation and, therefore, increased the  
334 release of Tenofovir from nanoparticles in simulated seminal fluid [39]. Furthermore, Huang et al.  
335 developed pH-sensitive cellulose acetate phthalate (CAP) nanofibers to deliver tenofovir disoproxil  
336 fumarate- or etravirine, and fibers dissolved quickly in the presence of human semen releasing the drug  
337 payload [40]. Moreover, many enzymes in the semen, like hyaluronidase and prostate specific antigen,  
338 can act as triggers for the delivery of drugs on contact with semen.

339

## 340 **2.12 Toxicology aspects**

341 To date, the toxicity of nanomaterials delivering antiviral drugs has been studied predominantly *in vitro*  
342 or to assess the component biocompatibility [41]. Generally, *in vivo* biodistribution studies of injected  
343 nanoformulations have revealed high accumulation of drugs in various organs without investigating the  
344 toxicity profile after prolonged administration. Furthermore, the effects of oral nanoformulations on gut  
345 microbiota is also an important aspect to take into account when analyzing possible modulation on the  
346 metabolic activity of enteric bacteria after treatment. Studies of immunogenicity, hypersensitivity  
347 reactions or other adverse immune effects of orally or intravenously administered drug delivery  
348 systems used to cure infections are poor and require more attention [42]. Increasing evidence suggests a  
349 potent immune modulatory role of nanoformulations, especially lipid nanoparticles and engineered  
350 liposomes used as vaccine adjuvants, in order to boost antigen-specific immune responses [43-45]. In  
351 the past decade, nanoformulated vaccine candidates have been developed and tested *in vivo* against  
352 viral infections, such as respiratory syncytial virus and HIV. Interestingly, nanoparticles efficiently  
353 enter the lymphatic system, and through classic receptor-mediated endocytosis particles smaller than  
354 150 nm are endocytosed by macrophages and dendritic cells and antigens are presented for following

355 activation of T cells. A different effect on the immune response has been observed according to the  
356 nanoparticle size: a stronger CD4 or CD8 T cell response has been promoted by a particle size major or  
357 minor than 50nm, respectively [46].

358 Cellular uptake and interaction of nanocarrier are affected by their composition, size, shape, and  
359 surface properties (area, porosity, charge, surface modifications, coating) [47,48]. The biological  
360 activity and therapeutic efficacy achieved by drug loaded in nanosystems depend on these different  
361 physico-chemical parameters. They are likely to modify biological responses, such as translocation  
362 across epithelia to other organs, induction of oxidative stress, binding to proteins and receptors, and  
363 localization in cellular organelles as mitochondria.

364 In regard to the safety of human exposure to nanomaterials, genotoxicity studies, including the Ames  
365 test (the Salmonella typhimurium reverse mutation assay), mouse lymphoma assay (*in vitro*  
366 mammalian assay) and chromosome aberration assay (in vivo rodent assay), are crucial. These studies  
367 have often revealed a high genotoxicity especially by inorganic nanoparticles [49].

368 Furthermore, nanomaterials should be tested on primary cells and cell lines to test their genotoxic  
369 potential to induce strand breaks and oxidized DNA lesions and to affect the cell cycle progression

370

### 371 **3. Nanoformulations for approved drugs against specific human viral infections**

#### 372 **3.1 HIV infection**

373 The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is the cause of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome  
374 (AIDS) and represents a major public health issue and cause of mortality globally [50]. At present,  
375 there is no effective vaccine for HIV or a way to eradicate the established infection due to its peculiar  
376 pathogenesis: 1) HIV has a high mutation rate that promotes immune escape and antiviral resistance; 2)  
377 the HIV replication cycle requires integration of the viral genome (provirus) in cellular DNA; and 3)  
378 cellular HIV reservoirs (i.e., latently infected CD4+ memory T cells, macrophages and hematopoietic

379 cells) and anatomical HIV reservoirs (i.e., mucosa, brain, lymph nodes) are created where low levels of  
380 viral replication are maintained even in the presence of treatment [51].

381 As shown in Table 1, there are currently 29 approved antiretroviral drugs to treat the infection [52],  
382 belonging to five different classes based on the phase of replication affected: 1) nucleoside/nucleotide  
383 reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NRTIs) [53]; 2) non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors  
384 (NNRTIs) [54]; 3) integrase inhibitors [55]; 4) protease inhibitors (PIs) [56]; 5) fusion/entry inhibitors  
385 [57]. To reduce the incidence of viral resistance and increase drug efficacy, the gold standard of care for  
386 treatment of HIV infection involves the use of a combination of at least three antiretroviral therapy  
387 (ART) drugs belonging to different classes, which are administered orally at least once a day. Only one  
388 anti-HIV drug, the oligopeptide Enfuvirtide, requires subcutaneous administration [58]. Despite the  
389 potent activity of antiretroviral products, many challenges remain in eradicating HIV from infected  
390 cells due to the toxicity and poor bioavailability of approved anti-HIV drugs, drug-drug interactions,  
391 achieving efficacious drug concentrations in viral reservoirs, poor patient compliance, development of  
392 drug resistance and systemic side effects. To overcome these problems, different ART nanodelivery  
393 approaches have been developed in the last several decades, and they have been described in recent  
394 reviews [59-62].

395 Here, we highlight the most promising nanotechnology strategies for treatment of HIV infection, taking  
396 into account the key limitations of the drugs (see Table 2). It is worth noting that the majority of the  
397 marketed antiretroviral drugs are administered orally. Consequently, the new oral nanodelivery systems  
398 should be able to overcome the various challenges raised either by the physico-chemical properties of  
399 the drug or by the conditions of the gastrointestinal tract [63]. To address poor water solubility  
400 problems, nanocrystal formulations could be used [31]. The formulation rationale is that nanoparticles  
401 produce a huge increase of the surface area, resulting in a significant increase of the drug dissolution  
402 rate, consequently improving the oral bioavailability. Moreover, nanocrystals have mucoadhesion

403 properties, thus prolonging the retention time in the intestinal mucosa. Drug nanosuspensions,  
404 consisting of 100 % pure drug nanocrystals, can be easily translated into clinical studies because they  
405 can be obtained with low amounts of excipients and exploiting current pharmaceutical manufacturing  
406 processes. This type of nanoformulation can be considered a tool useful for traditional and innovative  
407 product production. Liquid nanocrystal nanoformulation can permit the administration of antiretrovirals  
408 to pediatric patients and to patients with swallowing problems. Nanocrystals are also able to mask the  
409 drug's unpleasant taste, favoring the patient's compliance considering that HIV medicinal products are  
410 for chronic use.

411 Nanocrystals as innovative nanodelivery systems can be used to obtain sustained release [31]. For  
412 example, paliperidone nanocrystals is a long acting injectable formulation on the market. Recently, two  
413 antiretroviral drug nanocrystals have been considered for clinical phases, one developed by Janssen  
414 (rilpivirine LA) [64], and the other prepared by ViiV/Healthcare (cabotegravir LA) [65]. Both are long-  
415 acting formulations produced by the nanotechnology top-down process of wet bead milling. The  
416 versatility of nanocrystals can permit the delivery of different therapeutics for a synergistic therapy.  
417 Intriguingly, an efficient targeted combination treatment might be obtained by the co-delivery of  
418 different drug nanocrystals.

419 An interesting nanoART formulation consisting of a nanocrystal mixture of atazanavir, efavirenz, and  
420 ritonavir was prepared by high-pressure homogenization, followed by *in vitro* characterization. The  
421 results demonstrated that physical characteristics such as particle size, surfactant coating, surface  
422 charge and shape affected cell uptake and antiretroviral efficacy [66]. In addition nanocrystals can be  
423 used as such or surface-modified. Nevirapine nanocrystals were developed and their surfaces were  
424 modified with albumin, polysaccharides or polyethylene glycol to enhance drug targeting potential  
425 after intravenous administration to rats [67].

426 Polymers, either natural or synthetic, are key components of nanodelivery systems. They can be used as  
427 solid matrices, self-assembled aggregates, or coating materials (as reported for nanocrystals), according  
428 to their chemical structure and preparation process of nanomedicines. The interest of these materials is  
429 mainly related to their ability to protect the encapsulated drugs and to control the release kinetics.

430 Polymer-based nanosystems, such as nanoparticles and micelles, represent a versatile platform for  
431 improving HIV infection therapy.

432 The use of surfactant micelles is a technological strategy commonly used to increase the drug  
433 solubility. Interestingly, polymer micelles have a high solubilization capability and an increased  
434 stability with respect to surfactant micelles, as recently demonstrated with anticancer drugs.

435 The encapsulation in polymer micelles can govern the drug release kinetics and protect the drug from  
436 the external environment. The application of polymer micelles for the delivery of anti-HIV drugs was  
437 widely investigated.

438 Chiappetta *et al.* [68] studied polymeric micelles of different poly(ethylene oxide)-poly(propylene  
439 oxide) (PEO-PPOs) block copolymers for the treatment of pediatric patients which encapsulated  
440 efavirenz with increased aqueous solubility up to 34 mg/mL (drug solubility = 4 $\mu$ g/mL). Moreover,  
441 good oral bioavailability was obtained after the administration of the nanoformulation to rats. The  
442 highest bioavailability was obtained with smaller micellar size [68]. Subsequently, the oral  
443 pharmacokinetics of efavirenz-loaded micelles was evaluated in adult healthy volunteers in comparison  
444 to suspension and oil solution of the drugs. The micellar system showed a 3-fold increase in the oral  
445 bioavailability [69].

446 To expand the application of polymeric micelles to mucosal administration routes, Sosnik *et al.* [70]  
447 generated mucoadhesive thermo-responsive chitosan-g-poly(N-isopropylacrylamide) polymeric  
448 micelle-encapsulated indinavir, and a significant 24-fold increase in aqueous solubility was obtained

449 [70]. Other architectures and compositions are currently under investigation to improve the residence  
450 time of drug-loaded micelles.

451 Various types of nanoparticles encapsulating antivirals, have been studied using polymers approved by  
452 the regulation agencies, such as PLGA and PCL. Polymer nanoparticles can improve the performance  
453 of antiviral drugs. In particular, they can provide the sustained release of the encapsulated drug, thus  
454 decreasing the administration frequency – which is a feature important for chronic treatments.  
455 Interestingly, efavirenz-loaded poly(epsilon-caprolactone) (PCL) nanoparticles have been obtained by a  
456 spray-drying method and compared with efavirenz-loaded micelles and pure drug nanocrystals. The  
457 encapsulation within polymer nanoparticles significantly increased the maximum concentration in  
458 plasma and the oral bioavailability [71]. PLGA-based NPs containing didanosine have been developed  
459 to study their uptake by macrophages *in vitro*, and sustained drug release was demonstrated for up to 60  
460 days [72].

461 The co-delivery of two or more drugs in the same polymer nanocarrier is an attractive strategy for  
462 obtaining a combination therapy. Combinations of ART drugs from different classes have been proved  
463 to offer sustained efficacy, durability and long-term safety. Destache *et al.* [73] developed PLGA NPs  
464 to simultaneously encapsulate ritonavir, lopinavir and efavirenz, and evaluated their phagocytosis into  
465 monocyte-derived macrophages. The sustained release of drugs from the PLGA nanocarrier showed  
466 high levels of antiretrovirals in cells until day 28 without cytotoxicity. Furthermore, PLGA NPs were  
467 tested for efficacy *in vivo* after intraperitoneal injection in mice. The sustained release of the drugs was  
468 confirmed, as the nanoformulated antiretrovirals were detected in blood and organs up to 35 days after  
469 administration [73].

470 Another interesting approach is the development of lipid nanoformulations such as SNEDDS for  
471 improving oral drug delivery. This type of formulation was designed to overcome the stability problems  
472 of emulsions. They can be reconstituted in water just before the administration or administered filled



473 in capsules, being an anhydrous system able to form o/w emulsions in the gastrointestinal environment  
474 [30]. In this regard, Patel *et al.* developed SNEDDS consisting of Maisine 35-1 as oil for improvement  
475 of oral bioavailability of nelfinavir mesylate [74]. The *ex vivo* drug release through rat intestinal  
476 membrane was much faster from both liquid (reconstituted) and solid SNEDDS nanoformulations in  
477 comparison with the administration pure drug suspension, suggesting the enhancement in oral  
478 permeability. Some products based on this nanotechnology are on the market [63].

479 Moreover, other kinds of lipid-based drug carriers have been proposed to enhance the oral  
480 bioavailability of antiretrovirals. Tenofovir loaded-cationic phosphatidylcholine proliposomes have  
481 been formulated with different stearylamine levels to improve the drug permeability for oral delivery.  
482 Proliposomes with 5% and 15% stearylamine presented enhancements of permeability by 16.5-fold and  
483 5.2-fold, respectively [75].

484 Liposomes, due to their fluid lipid bilayer structure, have been successful in improving oral  
485 bioavailability of drugs. They can better adhere to biomembranes, form mixed-micelle structures with  
486 bile salts in the gut to increase the solubility of poorly-soluble drugs and are suitable candidates for  
487 lymphatic uptake [76]. To increase low bioavailability of saquinavir and increase delivery to  
488 mammalian cells, a novel liposome formulation was prepared and compared to PEGylated liposomes.  
489 PEGylated liposomes showed more sustained drug release, which persisted for 50 hours, and they were  
490 less cytotoxic than non-PEGylated liposomes or free drug [77].

491 Various lipid based formulations have been studied to enhance the intestinal lymphatic uptake after oral  
492 administration as an alternative pathway to reach blood circulation. The lymphatic absorption via  
493 Peyer's patches can protect the drug from the hepatic first-pass metabolism [78]. Previously, Cavalli *et*  
494 *al.* [79,80] demonstrated that SLNs administered intraduodenally to rats were mainly targeted to the  
495 lymph. This strategy was exploited also with antivirals. SLNs loaded with lopinavir, which has very  
496 poor oral bioavailability, were formulated to target intestinal lymphatic vessels. The lipid formulation

497 increased the cumulative percentage dose into the lymph of rats, as well as the drug's bioavailability,  
498 most likely by crossing the gut via endothelial intercellular gaps [81,82]. Gaur *et al.* [83] developed  
499 efavirenz-loaded SLNs to enhance the oral bioavailability of this poorly water-soluble drug. The  
500 nanoformulation exhibited a 5.32-fold increase in peak plasma concentration and a 10.98-fold increase  
501 in the area under the curve compared with the drug aqueous suspension after oral administration [83].  
502 Notably, one of the significant challenges in treating HIV infection is the abolishment of cellular and  
503 anatomical reservoirs of HIV, where viruses can persist and drug concentrations are suboptimal [60,84].  
504 Different delivery strategies have been explored to improve targeting on the critical sites of HIV  
505 infection such as macrophages, lymph nodes and the brain [60,85-87]. Macrophage uptake of drugs  
506 depends on the different physical characteristics of nanocarriers such as particle size, surfactant  
507 coating, surface charge and shape. Polymeric NPs have been the principal nanoformulation investigated  
508 for drug uptake in target cells of HIV-1 infection.

509 To optimize macrophage targeting specificity, suitable ligands can be conjugated to nanocarrier  
510 surfaces, such as small molecules that are able to bind to target cell receptors [62,88]. The mannose  
511 receptor of macrophages may also serve as drug delivery cellular portals for nanocarriers. Thus,  
512 mannosylated poly(ethylene glycol)-conjugate nanocarriers have recently been explored in cellular  
513 uptake studies [89].

514 Atazanavir-encapsulated galactosylated liposomes were prepared to target the lectin receptors present  
515 on macrophages. The nanoformulations resulted in increased uptake by alveolar macrophages and  
516 better drug distribution in the lymph nodes, liver, spleen and lungs compared with free atazanavir  
517 (AZT). In addition, no toxicity was observed after intravenous injection in rats, confirming that the  
518 galactosylated liposomes might be a potential system for targeted drug delivery [90].

519 One of the main limitations in using AZT lies in their poor intracellular activation by cellular kinases  
520 into their active triphosphorylated forms. The administration of tri-phosphorylated molecule (AZT-TP)

521 may bypass the metabolic triphosphorylation by cellular kinases in cell cytoplasm, but these derivatives  
522 do not diffuse intracellularly because of their too hydrophilic feature. Several nanoformulations directly  
523 encapsulating the tri-phosphorylated molecule have been studied. Hillaireau *et al.* [91,92] prepared  
524 aqueous-cored poly(isobutylcyanoacrylate) nanocapsules as carriers to overcome the cellular delivery  
525 of AZT-TP. To prevent leakage of the drug through the nanocapsule membrane, due to its relatively low  
526 molecular weight, AZT-TP was complexed to cationic polymers, such as chitosan or polyethylenimine.  
527 Nanocapsules efficiently delivered AZT-TP *in vitro* to macrophages, reaching relevant cellular  
528 concentrations for therapeutic purposes [91,92].

529 Furthermore, chitosan nanoparticles based on ionic interactions between chitosan and AZT-TP were  
530 developed by Giacalone *et al.* for macrophage targeting [93]. They showed very high drug loading (up  
531 to 44% w/w) and increased *in vitro* delivery in murine macrophages compared with the free molecule  
532 [93].

533 It is known that, even at effective plasma drug concentrations, insufficient drug exposure to lymphoid  
534 tissue may be one of the key factors in the inability to completely eliminate residual virus.

535 A number of nanoformulations to enhance drug accumulation in the lymph nodes are currently being  
536 evaluated [94]. Among them, an attractive approach for the sustained and targeted delivery of anti-HIV  
537 drugs is the use of surface-modified liposomes.

538 Zidovudine-loaded liposomes have been engineered by incorporating charges (positive or negative  
539 using stearylamine and dicetyl phosphate, respectively) or the site-specific ligand mannose to enhance  
540 uptake and localization of the liposomes in the lymph nodes and spleen, and increasing quantities of the  
541 drug were detected in these organs [95].

542 A lipid-drug nanoparticle containing lopinavir, ritonavir, and tenofovir was developed and administered  
543 as a single subcutaneous dose in primates, resulting in a 50-fold higher intracellular drug concentration  
544 in the lymph nodes compared with free drug. After 7 days, persistent levels of the drugs were detected

545 in the blood, and therefore an improvement on what is achieved using current oral therapies [96].  
546 Endsley *et al.* [97] designed novel peptide-coated lipid NPs for targeting IDV on CD4-expressing cells.  
547 Four candidate peptides showed marked binding specificity to CD4 and were used to anchorate  
548 on lipid NPs to be targeted in the lymph nodes [97]. Terminal cysteine containing candidate peptides  
549 were conjugated to lipid nanoparticles through maleimide-linked phospholipids for targeting to CD4  
550 cells. Interestingly, two peptides bounded on lipid nanoparticles showed a CD4 selectivity in a peptide  
551 dose dependent manner. The results proved the key role played by peptide-tagged nanoparticles for  
552 targeting delivery.

553 Roy *et al.* [98] developed an efavirenz-loaded polymer-based Pluronic nanocarrier, which was  
554 bioconjugated with anti-M-cell-specific antibodies to target the microfold cells in the gut-associated  
555 lymphoid tissue. A significantly improved sustained release and increased anti-HIV activity of the  
556 targeted loaded drug were observed compared with the free drug [98].

557 However, the treatment of virus reservoirs in the central nervous system (CNS) remains a challenge.  
558 The brain is one of the main HIV reservoirs due to the inability of antiretroviral drugs to reach effective  
559 concentrations in the CNS.

560 Delivering therapeutics across blood-brain barrier (BBB) have been deeply investigated. Nanoparticle  
561 chemical modification or physical triggers can be used to enhance drug penetration to CNS [99].  
562 Nanoparticle features can be tuned to favour the BBB passage, particularly exploiting their surface  
563 functionalization. The binding of specific ligands such as peptides, glutathione, transferrin and  
564 transferrin antibody, lectins and lactic acid, to the nanoparticle surface have been extensively explored  
565 to achieve drug delivery to the brain [100]. Interestingly, to increase the brain targeting efficacy  
566 nanoparticles can be functionalized with apolipoprotein E modified peptide responsible for low-density  
567 lipoprotein receptor (LDL) binding, highly expressed in the brain [101].

568 Different strategies have been explored to increase the penetration of ART across the BBB, as  
569 summarized by Nair *et al.* [102]. To overcome the limitations of CNS delivery, a valid approach is to  
570 eradicate the treatment of neuroAIDS, as reported in a number of recent review articles [102-106]. The  
571 design of specific sized and structured nanocargo able to cross the BBB and reach the HIV brain  
572 reservoir is one of the goals of nanomedicine. For these purposes nanodelivery systems triggered by  
573 external physical stimuli might have great potential for future treatments, i.e. magnetic fields or  
574 ultrasound [107].

575 Polymeric NPs, properly modified to obtain an effective passive or active permeability across BBB,  
576 have been designed for drug delivery to the CNS.

577 The delivery of stavudine, zidovudine, and lamivudine across an *in vitro* BBB model has been explored  
578 using both methylmethacrylate-sulfopropylmethacrylate (MMA-SPM) and poly(butyl cyanoacrylate)  
579 (PBCA)-based NPs [108]. More recently, Kuo *et al.* [109] have investigated the ability of MMA-  
580 SPM nanoparticles with grafted RMP-7, a synthetic linear pseudopeptide agonist of bradykinin type II  
581 (B2) receptor, to deliver stavudine, delavirdine, and saquinavir across the BBB in a co-culture model  
582 containing human brain-microvascular endothelial cells and human astrocytes [109]. Tat-peptide-  
583 conjugated ritonavir-loaded PLGA/PLA based NPs, formulated using an emulsion–solvent evaporation  
584 technique, delivered drug to neural cells, both with and without Tat-peptide conjugation [110].

585 The transferrin receptor is highly expressed in the brain; therefore transferrin-conjugated nanocarriers  
586 are internalized by endocytosis. Transferrin-grafted poly(lactide-co-glycolide) nanoparticles have been  
587 developed to deliver the nevirapine across the BBB into human brain microvascular endothelial cells  
588 [107]. Lamivudine loaded on PAMAM dendrimer, and mannose-capped poly(propyleneimine)-PPI  
589 dendrimers, exerted stronger anti-HIV activity than free drug solution, with a 21-fold increase in  
590 cellular uptake [112].

591 Liposomes have been extensively investigated for delivery of anti-HIV drugs to the brain [113]. The  
592 physico-chemical features of lipid systems allow them to cross the BBB easily, and their ability to  
593 reach the CNS can be further increased by surface engineering with BBB targeting moieties or cell-  
594 penetrating peptides (CPPs) [114].

595 Interestingly, a saquinavir-loaded flaxseed oil-based nanoemulsion was developed for brain delivery.  
596 When orally administered to mice, it had the ability to cross the BBB, probably due to the small size of  
597 the lipid-based nanocarrier [115].

598 Nasal administration as a means to deliver therapeutic agents preferentially to the brain has gained  
599 significant recent interest. Intranasal delivery is a non-invasive approach that allows direct access of the  
600 therapeutic substances to the brain, bypassing the BBB. Animal and human studies have shown that  
601 drugs can be transported directly from the nasal cavity to the CNS via the olfactory epithelium and/or  
602 the trigeminal nerve system [116]. A nanoemulsion was prepared for the intranasal saquinavir mesylate  
603 delivery to the brain. A higher *in vivo* concentration of saquinavir in the brain was detected after  
604 intranasal administration of the nanoemulsion compared with intravenous administration [117].

605 More recently, Chiappetta *et al.* developed PEO–PPO polymeric micelles loaded with efavirenz for  
606 targeting on the CNS. After intranasal administration in rats, an increased accumulation of micelles in  
607 the brain was detected, and a 5-fold relative exposure index (the ratio between the area under the curve  
608 in the CNS and the area under the curve in the plasma) was calculated compared to intravenous  
609 administration [118].

610 Finally, the use of magnetic nanoformulations allows targeting on specific anatomic sites by applying  
611 an external magnetic field and determination of site specific dosing through magnetic resonance  
612 imaging [119]. Magnetoliposomes loaded with 3'-azido-3'-deoxythymidine-5'-triphosphate (AZTTP)  
613 were developed for targeted delivery across the BBB and consisted of magnetic nanoformulations  
614 encapsulated into liposomes, to escape the reticuloendothelial systems. Magnetoliposomes, packed in

615 monocytes/macrophage, increased the *in vitro* BBB transmigration of the drug and did not affect the  
616 BBB integrity. Furthermore, they maintained antiviral activity and resulted in a sustained AZTTP  
617 release for two weeks [120]. Jayant *et al.* [121] engineered magnetic nanoparticles for sustained release  
618 of Tenofovir by a layer-by-layer assembly of dextran sulfate and drug, exploiting the interaction  
619 between the negative sulphate group of dextran and positive charged drug. These magnetic  
620 nanoformulations showed a stronger antiviral activity in infected astrocytes and greater ability to cross  
621 the BBB compared with the free drug [121]. HIV latency-breaking agents such as vorinostat can be  
622 packaged into ultrasmall magnetic nanoparticles in conjunction with tenofovir in order to  
623 simultaneously reactivate and kill HIV in a sustained manner for 5-7 days across the BBB.  
624 Nanoformulation showed a good BBB transmigration ability with marked *in vitro* antiviral efficacy in  
625 primary human astrocytes, with good cell viability after HIV infection [122].

626 There is a critical requirement to select an efficient and biocompatible nanocarrier, which can be  
627 externally guided for on-demand delivery of cargo across the BBB. Magneto-electro carriers (MENCs)  
628 of BaTiO<sub>3</sub>@CoF<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> (BTO@CFO) were explored for on-demand controlled release of anti-HIV drugs  
629 as potential therapy against NeuroAIDS. After administration MENCs were uniformly distributed  
630 inside the brain, and were non-toxic to the brain and other major organs and did not affect hepatic,  
631 kidney and neurobehavioral functioning [123].

632

### 633 **3.2 Herpes virus infections**

634 Herpes viridae is a family comprising several human pathogens divided into three different subfamilies  
635 ( $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$ ): herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) and type 2 (HSV-2) and Varicella Zoster virus  
636 (VZV) belong to the  $\alpha$ -herpes virus subfamily; human cytomegalovirus (HCMV), human herpes virus  
637 6 (HHV-6) and human herpes virus 7 (HHV-7) belong to the  $\beta$ -herpes virus subfamily; while Epstein-  
638 Barr virus (EBV) and Kaposi's sarcoma-associated herpes virus (KSHV) belong to the  $\gamma$ -herpes virus  
639 subfamily. Following primary infection all these viruses establish life-long latency in different cell  
640 types and tissues and they are all able to reactivate at a later point in time, leading to asymptomatic or  
641 symptomatic infections. The approved drugs shown in Table 3 treat the acute symptomatic infections  
642 but they are unable to eradicate the latent infections. Various nanomedicines are currently under  
643 investigation for the treatment of herpetic infections (see Table 4).

644 Acyclovir (ACV) is the drug of choice for treating HSV infections. However, due to its short half-life  
645 and incomplete absorption it must be taken in its oral dosage form five times daily (up to 1200  
646 mg/day), and the dosage interval for intravenous formulations is 8 h.

647 Infections caused by HSV are incurable, so that the main goal of antiviral therapy with ACV is to  
648 inhibit the replication of the virus and thereby prevent associated epithelial damage [124]. Currently,  
649 the treatments available for herpes simplex are conventional tablets and topical gel for application on  
650 outbreaks. The drugs that are commonly used for herpes simplex are acyclovir, valaciclovir and  
651 famciclovir.

652 ACV was the first antiviral to be licensed for the treatment of HSV infections, and it is the drug of  
653 choice for the treatment of epidermal, ocular or systemic herpetic infections, despite the fact that most  
654 of its currently available dosage forms, that is, tablets, suspension, cream, fail to achieve suitable levels  
655 at target sites following oral, local, or parenteral administration [125]. The main reason is that  
656 Acyclovir is a class III drug according to the Biopharmaceutics Classification System [126]: it is



657 slightly soluble in water, has a short plasma half-life, its absorption from gastrointestinal tract is slow  
658 and incomplete, and oral bioavailability ranges from only 10% to 30%. As a consequence, higher doses  
659 are prescribed, resulting in systemic toxicity and adverse reactions [126]. Also in local therapy, ACV  
660 bioavailability is low and highly variable, associated with low retention at the vaginal mucosa and poor  
661 patient compliance, and requires frequent administrations [127-129].

662 For these reasons, the development of efficient nanoformulations of ACV is of increasing importance.

663 Moreover, the increased incidence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) raises concern about the  
664 limitations of currently available therapies. Among various STDs, the infections with human *Herpes*  
665 *simplex* virus type-1 and type-2 remain among the most common [130].

666 Over the course of the past decade, different types of nanoparticles based on cyclodextrin have been  
667 developed to improve the physico-chemical features of ACV [131-133]. In general, cyclodextrin-based  
668 formulations allow high loading and the sustained release of ACV; in some cases, they also improve its  
669 *in vitro* antiviral efficacy.

670 Recently, Eudragit RLPO<sup>®</sup>, a copolymer of ethyl acrylate, methyl methacrylate and a low content of  
671 methacrylic acid ester with quaternary ammonium groups, has been selected for preparation of ACV  
672 loaded nanoparticles [134]. *In vitro* studies show that this formulation provides sustained drug release  
673 over a period of 24 h.

674 Amany and colleagues [135] prepared stealth PLGA nanoparticles loaded with ACV with the aim of  
675 extending the drug plasma half-life after intravenous administration [135]. In another study, PLGA  
676 surface tailored nanoparticles were prepared for targeted hepatic delivery of ACV with the purpose of  
677 minimizing side effects [136]. Galactose, actively taken up by asialoglycoprotein receptors (ASGP-R),  
678 was conjugated to PLGA nanoparticles, to exploit the exclusive presence of ASGP-R on hepatocytes  
679 for liver targeting.

680 *In vitro*, the galactosylated nanoparticles resulted in less haemolysis and successfully exhibited a  
681 sustained release pattern. *In vivo* studies showed an improved bioavailability, increased residence time,  
682 and enhanced delivery of ACV to the liver upon galactosylation [136].

683 Nano-niosomes have also been used to encapsulate ACV and were found to increase ACV effectiveness  
684 and decrease its side effects [137].

685 In regard to ACV vaginal therapy of HSV-2 sexually transmitted infections, high drug concentrations in  
686 genital tissues are desirable. Unfortunately, the incomplete coverage and short duration of action limit  
687 the effectiveness of vaginally administered drugs, including ACV. The use of mucoadhesive polymers  
688 such as poly(acrylic acid) derivatives, in the preparation of delivery systems, may overcome these  
689 limitations. For instance, mucoadhesive ACV-containing liposomes coated with mucoadhesive  
690 polymers (Carbopol® or chitosan) have been developed [138]. In recent years, efforts have been made  
691 to develop new types of mucoadhesive polymers that form a covalent bonding with the mucous  
692 membrane, producing a stronger bio-adhesion compared to conventional polymeric mucoadhesive  
693 materials. In this regard, Yandrapu *et al.* [139] developed new thiolated dendrimers for mucoadhesive  
694 drug delivery. The thiolated dendrimers were synthesized by conjugating PAMAM dendrimer with  
695 cysteamine and further encapsulated with ACV [139]. The thiolated dendrimers showed sustained  
696 release of ACV in addition to a high mucoadhesion capability.

697 The dendrimer SPL7013 has been formulated in a mucoadhesive carbopol gel (VivaGel®) for use as a  
698 topical microbicide in the prevention of HIV and HSV infections. Potent antiviral activity against HIV-  
699 1 and HSV-2 was observed following vaginal administration of VivaGel® in human [25].

700 An interesting strategy to enhance the accumulation of nanoparticles is the design of mucus penetrating  
701 systems. Ensign prepared mucus-penetrating particles (MPPs) for mucosal drug delivery in order to  
702 enhance the distribution and increase the retention in the vagina *in vivo* [140]. MPPs provided uniform

703 distribution over the vaginal epithelium in mice, whereas conventional nanoparticles were aggregated  
704 by the animals' vaginal mucus, resulting in poor distribution.

705 Solid lipid nanoparticles can play an important role as ocular delivery system [141]. In 2013, Seyfoddin  
706 and colleagues [142] developed two lipid formulations (namely solid lipid nanoparticles and  
707 nanostructured lipid carriers) to improve the ocular bioavailability of ACV [142]. The high  
708 encapsulation efficiency, superior physical properties and good release profile obtained from  
709 nanostructured lipid carriers indicated that this formulation could be used as a potential ocular drug  
710 delivery system for ACV.

711 Interestingly, solid lipid nanoparticles and nanoemulsions were studied for enhancing dermal delivery  
712 of ACV by Jain [143]. Mechanism of topical permeation and dermal distribution studies suggested that  
713 pilosebaceous route was followed by solid lipid nanoparticles for skin penetration, without major  
714 morphological changes on rat skin surface.

715 Another class of nanocarriers which has been investigated for the topical dermal drug delivery of ACV  
716 are nanoemulsions. Schwarz and colleagues [144] optimized several water/oil/water nanoemulsions for  
717 the dermal application of ACV by using the phase inversion temperature method [144].

718

719 Nanoformulations have been also proposed for the two derivatives of Acyclovir, i.e. penciclovir and  
720 valaciclovir. For example, SLNs have been prepared and evaluated as nanocarriers for the topical  
721 delivery of penciclovir to prolong the drug release [145].

722 Ganciclovir (GCV) is the the first choice antiviral treatment for human cytomegalovirus infections.  
723 However, the low bioavailability and short half-life of GCV necessitate the development of a carrier. In  
724 a recent study, guanosine-based GCV was used to synthesize hydrophobic GCV-poly(caprolactone)  
725 (GCV-PCL), which was then grafted with hydrophilic chitosan to form amphiphilic copolymers for the  
726 preparation of stable micelles [146]. Solid lipid nanoparticles were also investigated as drug delivery

727 systems for GCV. Intriguingly, borneol can be used as penetration enhancer. Recent studies  
728 demonstrated that borneol increased the permeation of drugs across BBB and enhanced their  
729 distribution in the brain tissue [147]. Ren prepared borneol-modified and non-borneol ganciclovir-  
730 loaded SLNs and showed that borneol could enhance the transport of ganciclovir (GCV) incorporated  
731 in solid lipid nanoparticles to the brain in mice after their intravenous administration [148].

732 GCV plays an important role also in the treatment of ocular HCMV infections. Akhter [149] used the  
733 reverse-phase evaporation technique to prepare GCV mucoadhesive nanoemulsions, chitosan  
734 nanoparticles, and mucoadhesive niosomal dispersions [149]. All three formulations were successfully  
735 shown to be non-irritant and non-toxic. These results may therefore be useful for the development of  
736 GCV formulations for the treatment of ocular infections.

737 Then, Akhter and colleagues [150] prepared nano-niosomes in order to improve the oral bioavailability  
738 of GCV. *In vitro* release studies confirmed a sustained release profile of the niosomal dispersions;  
739 whereas *in vivo* studies in rats revealed a five-fold increment in GCV bioavailability after the oral  
740 niosome administration compared with the standard tablet formulation [150].

741 Foscarnet is a pyrophosphate analog mainly used for the treatment of GCV-resistant HCMV infections  
742 in patients with AIDS or in transplant recipients. A novel nanoparticulate system for foscarnet delivery  
743 was developed by Russo *et al.* [151]. Nanoparticles were obtained by ionotropic gelation of chitosan  
744 induced by foscarnet itself, acting as an ionotropic agent. Crosslinked nanoparticles showed a  
745 controlled drug release, and foscarnet released from nanoparticles maintained the antiviral activity of  
746 the free drug when tested *in vitro* against HCMV.

747

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749

750

### 751 **3.3 Influenza virus infection**

752 Seasonal orthomyxoviruses cause influenza in humans every year, affecting approximately 5% to 10%  
753 of the global adult population annually and associated with 250,000 to 500,000 deaths every year. To  
754 date, three classes of anti-influenza drugs have been approved: inhibitors of the ion channel matrix 2  
755 (M2) protein, known as adamantanes, inhibitors of neuraminidase, that are analogues of sialic acid,  
756 blocking the release of progeny viruses from infected cells and, finally, a recent inhibitor of the viral  
757 RNA polymerase (Table 5). Neuraminidase inhibitors, like oral Oseltamivir or inhaled Zanamivir, are  
758 the main drugs currently recommended for antiviral treatment. Zanamivir presents poor oral  
759 bioavailability (approximately 2%), and it is therefore administered by inhalation. However, the  
760 inhalation route is not recommended in patients with chronic respiratory conditions. Different  
761 approaches to increasing the oral bioavailability of Zanamivir have been investigated.

762 Cao *et al.* prepared Zanamivir-loaded SLNs, which achieve relatively high entrapment efficiency, using  
763 a double emulsion solvent evaporation method [152]. Wang *et al.* developed dendrimer-cyclodextrin  
764 conjugates encapsulated with different guest molecules, including amantadine hydrochloride. The  
765 combination of PAMAM dendrimer and CDs can improve the drug loading ability of dendrimer and  
766 make amantadine hydrochloride suitable for dendrimer-based drug delivery systems. Indeed, they  
767 demonstrated that the drug is encapsulated within  $\beta$ -cyclodextrin cavity in the dendrimer conjugate  
768 [153].

769

### 770 **3.4 HBV infection**

771 Despite the availability of a prophylactic vaccine, Hepatitis B virus (HBV) causes 780,000 deaths every  
772 year and 240 million people were infected in 2014. The current approved therapy for chronic infection  
773 is based on immunomodulating peptides, such as interferon- $\alpha$ , and nucleos(t)ide analogues targeting  
774 the HBV polymerase.

775 Orally administered polymerase inhibitors have certain drawbacks, including the poor oral  
776 bioavailability, as reported for Adefovir dipivoxil, and long-term treatment-induced viral resistance.  
777 Several drug delivery systems have been developed to improve the activity of the existing anti-HBV  
778 drugs (Table 5). While nanocarriers for interferon- $\alpha$  are reported in the paragraph relative to Hepatitis C  
779 virus, nanoformulations for the delivery of nucleos(t)ide analogues are described below.

780 To improve the bioavailability of adefovir dipivoxil, Dodiya and colleagues prepared and studied SLNs  
781 and nanosuspensions *in vivo* [154]. Both nanoformulations exhibited good bioavailability of 52% and  
782 78%, for the nanosuspension and SLNs, respectively. Furthermore, higher accumulation of adefovir  
783 dipivoxil was detected in the liver and other organs after 24 hours after administration.

784 Du and colleagues [155] prepared nanoassemblies of an adefovir lipid derivative with cytochrome  
785 P450-triggered drug release with the purpose of improving hepatocyte targeting [155]. Cytochrome  
786 P450-induced cleavage thus provides a way to trigger the release of the active drug within hepatocytes.  
787 To ensure hepatocyte targeting, a galactose-ended polyoxyethylene fatty ether was added to assemblies.  
788 After its intravenous administration into infected mice, the resulting nanoassemblies showed long  
789 circulation times, liver targeting, and very high anti-HBV activity.

790 Stearic acid-g-chitosan oligosaccharide micelles, able to self-aggregate in aqueous medium, were  
791 prepared and loaded with Lamivudine stearate, the prodrug of Lamivudine. The resulting micelles were  
792 characterized by high entrapment efficiency, drug loading, and pH-sensitive drug release. Low  
793 cytotoxicity and high levels of antigen expression inhibition, and DNA replication inhibition were  
794 found compared with the free drug [156].

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### 799 3.5 HCV infection

800 The approved treatment for chronic hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection is the combination of PEGylated  
801 interferon- $\alpha$  (IFN), ribavirin and protease inhibitors, such as boceprevir, telaprevir or sofosbuvir (Table  
802 5). A great deal of research has focused on the development of a carrier for ribavirin to improve its  
803 therapeutic effect and safety [157]. Clinical use of ribavirin is often accompanied by severe side effects,  
804 like hemolytic anemia, which occurs in approximately 50% of treated patients. Regarding liver  
805 targeting of hepatitis treatments, nanotechnologies may provide important tools with which to promote  
806 the selective accumulation of the drug in the target cells; in turn, decreasing their toxic effects in other  
807 tissues, improving drug efficacy and reducing administration frequency, with consequent increases in  
808 patient compliance.

809 Craparo *et al.* developed polymer-based targeting micelles bearing galactose moieties on the surface for  
810 the liver-targeted delivery of ribavirin [158-159]. Polymeric micelles were prepared starting with a  
811 galactosylated polylactide-polyaminoacid conjugate (PHEA-EDA-PLA-GAL copolymer) able to self-  
812 assemble into micelles. In order to increase the entrapment within the system, ribavirin tripalmitate was  
813 synthesized as a hydrophobic prodrug. No toxic effects on cell viability and good hemocompatibility  
814 were observed. The specificity of ribavirin tripalmitate-loaded PHEA-EDA-PLA-GAL micelles against  
815 HepG2 was demonstrated *in vitro* by their ability to be internalized in HepG2 cells and the enhanced  
816 accumulation of prodrug compared with non-galactosylated systems.

817 Biodegradable nanoparticles encapsulating ribavirin have also been developed with the aim of  
818 modulating the pharmacokinetics of the drug [160]. Ribavirin monophosphate-loaded nanoparticles  
819 were prepared from a mixture of poly(D,L-lactic acid) homopolymer and arabinogalactan (AG)-poly(l-  
820 lysine) conjugate. The stable retention of ribavirin by the nanoparticles within the systemic circulation  
821 can prevent accumulation of ribavirin in erythrocytes, and in turn reduce haemolytic anaemia.

822 Ribavirin was shown to accumulate in the liver of mice following the intravenous administration of the  
823 drug-loaded nanoparticles.

824 Hashim and colleagues [161] prepared ribavirin niosomes with the aim of investigating the influence of  
825 niosomal encapsulation upon the capacity to target the drug on the liver in rats. Niosomal formulations  
826 significantly increased the ribavirin liver concentration (6-fold) in comparison with ribavirin-free  
827 solution following intraperitoneal administration of a single dose of 30mg/kg.

828 Interferon- $\alpha$  (IFN $\alpha$ ) has enormous potential as an anti-viral treatment for Hepatitis C, but its clinical  
829 success is hampered by its limited bioavailability, relatively narrow therapeutic index, and short half-  
830 life following parenteral administration. To achieve better tolerability, a PEGylated-IFN $\alpha$  formulation  
831 has been developed with better pharmacokinetics.

832 Liu and colleagues [162] investigated a method to obtain IFN $\alpha$ -loaded nanoparticles favourable for the  
833 preservation of IFN $\alpha$ -2b integrity and biological functionality [162]. The antiviral activity of the  
834 polysaccharide nanoparticles was shown to be highly preserved (above 97%) both *in vitro* and *in vivo*.

835 Li and co-workers encapsulated IFN- $\alpha$  into SLNs using the double emulsion solvent evaporation  
836 method. Antiviral assays demonstrated that SLNPs preserved the bioactivity of IFN- $\alpha$  after  
837 encapsulation; i.e. it maintained its antiviral activity [163].

838

#### 839 **4. Future challenges**

840 Many strategies using nanomedicines have been proposed in order to improve the current treatment of  
841 viral infections. Although numerous efforts have been made in the field of nanotechnology-based drug  
842 delivery, and although pre-clinical and clinical results are encouraging, a number of problems remain  
843 that need to be addressed in the future (Figure 4). First, a crucial challenge for the clinical application  
844 of nanomedicines concerns their safety. Suitable long-term toxicity studies in animal models are  
845 necessary, especially in relation to their use in the treatment of chronic infections. Particular attention



846 should be paid to immune system compatibility, complement activation, and coagulation effect. The  
847 design of novel biocompatible and biodegradable nanomaterials might overcome some toxicity  
848 drawbacks. However, some of the advantages associated with nanocarriers, such as the reduced drug  
849 doses and the possible oral administration, may themselves limit the undesirable side effects. In  
850 addition, nanomedicine limitations can be related to poor drug loading capability and nanotoxicology  
851 issues. In this regard, more research is needed to provide the robust preclinical data necessary to justify  
852 clinical trials of biocompatible nanoformulations with good biodistribution profiles, sustained release  
853 dosages, and no significant side effects. Another challenge to address in the future is the design of  
854 nanocarriers with high drug payload. High drug amounts within a nanosystem involve the use of less  
855 amounts of excipients that may have safety problems. In addition, nanomedicine may be able to exploit  
856 innovative administration routes, such as pulmonary and nasal, to overcome administration limitations.  
857 An important property of a nanocarrier should be its persistent stability for a sufficient length of time,  
858 both *in vitro* and *in vivo*, to assure safety and its localization to the sites of interest and to minimize  
859 toxicity of the liver and kidneys. In this regard, it is crucial to integrate nanotechnology with  
860 physiological and pharmacological knowledge, and with an understanding of drug distribution and  
861 metabolism in specific tissues. Pharmacokinetics studies play a key role. Stability should be also  
862 assured during storage and administration.

863 Nanocarriers with modified drug release kinetics, such as sustained release systems, will be able to  
864 decrease the number of administrations required and doses. Currently, long-acting injectable delivery  
865 systems represent an important solution for problems caused by patient incompliance with infrequent  
866 dosing, thereby guaranteeing better long-term adherence especially in chronic diseases [164]. Another  
867 important challenge is related to the manufacturing of nanomedicines. Scaling-up their preparation  
868 method might not be easy and may prove to be expensive. Therefore, investments will need to be made  
869 in industrial processes in order to provide large batches of nanoproducts and render them cost-effective.

870 However, the potential for nanocarriers to reduce the required doses might compensate for the cost  
871 increase required for technological upgrades.

872 In addition, the regulatory aspects of nanomedicines should be taken into account to translate in  
873 industrial products, suitable to clinical application.

874 Treatment of viral infections could be substantially improved in the future by the development of  
875 “smart” delivery systems, such as stimuli sensitive nanocarriers. The design of triggered release  
876 nanocarriers allows on-demand purchase of the drug. For this purpose, responsive polymers might be  
877 used as a key component, either in self-assembling copolymer aggregates or as a coating on the surface  
878 of nanoparticles and nanocrystals, as reported previously. Their ability to undergo rapid structural  
879 changes in their network in a triggered manner and to exhibit the desired drug release has been  
880 exploited to design smart nanosystems. The literature offers some initial evidence supporting the proof  
881 of concept of such “smart” delivery systems. For example, Duan et al. [165] proposed pH-responsive  
882 atazanavir or darunavir-loaded lipid nanoparticles as a long-acting targeted antiretroviral therapy [165].  
883 Additionally, purposely surface-modified nanocarriers might allow antiviral accumulation in infected  
884 sites. Targeted delivery is a strategy to be exploited for addressing specific tissues, such as lymph  
885 nodes.

886 Moreover, the future design of nanocarriers targeted on specific viral nanostructures is an important  
887 milestone, and it will be achieved by studying the mechanisms of interaction between viruses and  
888 nanoparticles. Deeper knowledge about the selective interactions can be exploited in strategies aimed at  
889 weakening the viral activity and in the therapy of infections. A possible challenge to targeting the  
890 delivery of drugs by nanomedicine is the possible induction of drug resistant mutations in not targeted  
891 anatomical sites where drugs reach suboptimal doses.

892 Nanodelivery of combinations of several drugs might be preferable, especially against viruses  
893 characterized by a high degree of genetic variability, like HIV-1. Therefore, “combo” delivery systems  
894 will be one of the future goals.

895 In the future, new antiviral drug candidates continue to be developed and subjected to in-depth  
896 investigations. These candidates may be proteins, siRNA or antisense oligonucleotides; and purposely  
897 tuned nanomedicines will be required for their protection and delivery. Nanoformulations are needed  
898 for their administration. Although these studies are generally still in their early stages, encouraging  
899 results have been obtained. The development of microbicides against viral sexually transmitted  
900 diseases has attracted much research [166]. In this context, RNA interference (RNAi) provides a highly  
901 valid tool for downregulating the expression of viral and host mRNA targets required for viral infection  
902 and/or replication. The latest advances made in RNAi technology towards the treatment of HIV-1  
903 infection have been recently summarized [167]. Currently, two RNAi products for HBV treatment from  
904 Arbutus Biopharma are undergoing clinical trials: ARB-1467 (Phase II) and ARB-1598 (Phase I) [168].  
905 Finally, advanced nanomedicine will be considered. A novel approach now emerging is the cell-based  
906 drug delivery system, which entails the use of cells as carriers of drug-encapsulated nanoformulations.  
907 In particular, macrophages represent a proof of concept of this mechanism. They have been used as  
908 cellular vehicles because of their ability to migrate to lymph nodes or travel across the BBB, ensuring  
909 the sustained release of drugs over an extended period of time.

910

## 911 **5. Conclusion**

912 In this review the most common nanomedicine strategies for the delivery of approved antivirals have  
913 been described. Future nanomedicine design should address many challenges, such as high payload,  
914 target delivery, and toxicity issues, to overcome the limitations of current conventional formulations. A  
915 further understanding of the nanoparticle behavior either *in vitro* or *in vivo* might accelerate their

916 pharmaceutical development. A multidisciplinary approach of research with collaborative industrial  
917 partners may permit the faster translation of nanoformulations to clinics and on the market for patients.

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## 922 **6. Expert Opinion**

923 Considering the continual occurrence of viral infections, new drug delivery strategies are required to  
924 treat and eradicate viral diseases. Nanomedicine formulations can play multiple roles in achieving this  
925 goal by improving the biopharmaceutical properties of approved antiviral drugs. Moreover,  
926 nanocarriers can enable the delivery of drugs to specific infection sites.

927 Moreover, it is the specific physico-chemical properties of nanocarriers that underlie their ability to  
928 overcome biological barriers or interact with virus nanostructures being in the same size range. In  
929 addition, nanoparticles with engineered surfaces can act as multifunctional systems able to interact with  
930 selective receptors able to inhibit viral infections.

931 Interestingly, the peculiar properties of nanomedicines, such as nanoscale size and surface charge, can  
932 be exploited to improve the mucosal permeability of encapsulated drugs. Recently, numerous efforts  
933 have been made in using nanotechnology to efficiently deliver and cross the mucosal barrier, mainly  
934 thanks to the development of mucoadhesive and mucopenetrating nanoparticle systems [59,140,169].

935 Mucoadhesive particles may protect encapsulated drugs from the low gastric pH and proteolytic  
936 enzymes, improve the residence time in the gastrointestinal tract and, as a consequence, the  
937 bioavailability of orally administered drugs. In particular, polymer nanoparticles have been studied for  
938 mucoadhesion, cell targeting and uptake, exploiting hydrophobic interactions, van der Waals  
939 interactions and polymer chain interpenetration with mucin. For these reasons, mucopenetrating

940 nanoparticles able to penetrate the adherent mucus layer and thus be retained longer seem more suitable  
941 for oral and vaginal delivery than mucoadhesive nanosystems. However, it must be taken into account  
942 that, during infection, the properties of mucus may be altered and nanoformulations could be  
943 transported differently.

944 To overcome some limitations of antiviral drugs, the co-delivery of multimodal therapeutics for  
945 “combo” therapy, previously investigated for cancer therapy, can be also proposed with nanomedicine.  
946 Much research attention has been directed over the last few years to developing antiviral drug delivery  
947 systems for combinations of drugs or a minimum of at least two drugs. This issue is most relevant to  
948 infections that require the simultaneous administration of multiple drugs to prevent the generation of  
949 resistance and viral rebound. Instead of the co-encapsulation of several antiviral drugs in the same  
950 nanoparticle, an alternative approach could consist of the administration of multiple single drug-loaded  
951 nanocarriers. The advantages of this approach are: better encapsulation efficiencies and drug loading  
952 associated with the single drugs; greater ease in obtaining the correct ratio of drugs; and better patient  
953 compliance.

954 Numerous efforts have also been made to optimize nanoformulations in order to improve their ability  
955 to cross the BBB by reducing particle size, by means of surface engineering and BBB transmigration  
956 studies. Nanomedicines can also provide the delivery proteins and biotech products, such as siRNA, by  
957 various administration routes, avoiding aggregation and chemical degradation, as well as stability  
958 during storage and administration [168].

959 Children constitute the most challenging population for infection treatment, such as HVI or RSV.  
960 Interestingly, nanomedicine could be an useful platform for the development of effective therapeutic  
961 systems and appropriate dose adjustment for children and special patients with swallowing problems.

962 The advantages offered by long-acting injectables over oral formulations include eliminating the need  
963 for daily oral tablet administration and therefore first-pass metabolism, lower antiviral doses with

964 consequently reduced hepatic and renal toxicities, and prevention of resistance. Long-acting injectable  
965 products have been successfully applied in the treatment of infectious diseases, most notably chronic  
966 HIV infection, promoting compliance and patient adherence and reducing the burden of regimens  
967 requiring daily treatment. Some long-acting injectable nanosuspensions of nonnucleoside reverse  
968 transcriptase inhibitors, and integrase inhibitors are currently in clinical study and are highly  
969 anticipated medications for the prevention of HIV infection [170]. Pharmacokinetic studies in humans  
970 have demonstrated sustained drug concentrations after intramuscular administration at 4 weekly and 8  
971 weekly intervals of rilpivirine long-acting injectable nanosuspension [171]. Preliminary *in vivo* studies  
972 have shown that intramuscular cabotegravir can prevent simian/HIV acquisition from rectal, vaginal,  
973 and intravenous challenge. Currently, there are two ongoing Phase II studies assessing cabotegravir as a  
974 preexposure prophylaxis agent in humans [172]. Crystalline nanoparticle formulations for the co-  
975 administration of rilpivirine and cabotegravir have progressed into phase II clinical trials as long-acting  
976 intramuscular maintenance therapy [173]. Nanomedicine production is generally more complex than  
977 traditional small molecule based drugs. It is worth noting that complex formulations present unique  
978 chemistry, manufacturing and control (CMC) properties, in particular when changes are needed for  
979 manufacturing scale-up. The development of nanotherapeutic products should be optimized with the  
980 Quality by Design (QbD) approach to identify critical process parameters and material attributes. For  
981 several nanotechnologies, the scaling up of manufacturing production processes using current  
982 pharmaceutical technologies can be used.

983 Finally, the possibility of reducing the required number of antiviral doses might compensate for the  
984 increased costs associated with technological upgrades.

985 Based on these premises, nanomedicines have the potential to become a revolutionary solution for the  
986 treatment of viral diseases, although some issues still need to be addressed and solved for the  
987 successful translation of nanotech products onto the market.

988

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1432 **Figure legend**

1433 **Figure 1.** Antiviral targeting strategies of drugs at different steps of the viral life cycle.

1434 **Figure 2.** Overview of main drawbacks of antivirals and nanotechnological strategies to overcome  
1435 limits of antiviral therapy

1436 **Figure 3.** Administration routes of nanosystems studied in *in vivo* experiments and animal models used  
1437 according to viral infections

1438 **Figure 4.** Future challenges of nanoformulations for antiviral drugs

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