



**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
PHARMACEUTICAL SCIENCES**
[ISSN: 0975-4725; CODEN(USA): IJPS00]
Journal Homepage: <https://www.ijpsjournal.com>



Review Article

A Review on Oral Thin Films for Enhancement of Bioavailability

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ARTICLE INFO

Published: 27 May 2026

Keywords:

Oral thin films,
Orodispersible films,
Bioavailability
enhancement, Buccal drug
delivery, Rapid
disintegration, Patient
compliance, Solvent casting
method, Polymers in drug
delivery and
Nanotechnology in OTFs.

DOI:

10.5281/zenodo.20404904

ABSTRACT

Oral thin films (OTFs) represent a rapidly evolving drug delivery platform that has gained significant attention in recent years due to their ability to enhance bioavailability, improve patient compliance, and provide a convenient alternative to conventional oral dosage forms. These films are thin, flexible strips composed of hydrophilic polymers that disintegrate quickly when placed on the tongue, releasing the active pharmaceutical ingredient (API) directly into the oral cavity. The drug is subsequently absorbed through the buccal or sublingual mucosa, thereby bypassing the gastrointestinal tract and hepatic first-pass metabolism. This unique mechanism results in faster onset of action and improved systemic availability, particularly for drugs with poor solubility or extensive presystemic metabolism. The formulation of OTFs involves careful selection of excipients to achieve desirable physicochemical and mechanical properties. Commonly used polymers include hydroxypropyl methylcellulose (HPMC), pullulan, polyvinyl alcohol (PVA), and sodium alginate, which provide film integrity and rapid dissolution. Plasticizers such as glycerol, polyethylene glycol (PEG 400), and propylene glycol are incorporated to impart flexibility and prevent brittleness. Superdisintegrants like croscovidone and croscarmellose sodium further accelerate disintegration, while taste-masking agents enhance patient acceptability. The solvent casting method is the most widely employed technique for preparation, ensuring uniform drug distribution and reproducibility. OTFs offer several advantages over traditional dosage forms. They eliminate the need for water during administration, making them suitable for pediatric, geriatric, and dysphagic patients. Their portability and ease of handling improve patient convenience, while accurate dosing ensures therapeutic efficacy. Moreover, OTFs are particularly beneficial in emergency situations, such as the administration of antiemetics (ondansetron), cardiovascular drugs (nitroglycerin, carvedilol, ivabradine), and analgesics (rizatriptan), where rapid therapeutic action is critical. Clinical studies have demonstrated improved pharmacokinetic profiles and enhanced bioavailability of drugs delivered via OTFs compared to conventional tablets or capsules. Evaluation of OTFs

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Relevant conflicts of interest/financial disclosures: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.



encompasses a wide range of parameters, including thickness, weight variation, drug content uniformity, tensile strength, folding endurance, disintegration time, dissolution profile, and stability under varying environmental conditions. These tests ensure consistency, reliability, and patient safety. Despite their advantages, OTFs face challenges such as limited drug loading capacity, moisture sensitivity, and the need for specialized packaging. Addressing these limitations requires innovative approaches, including the incorporation of nanoparticles, nanocrystals, or liposomal carriers into film matrices to improve drug solubility and stability. Future research directions in OTF technology are focused on the development of multilayer films for controlled release, biodegradable polymers for sustainability, and personalized medicine applications tailored to individual patient needs. Advances in nanotechnology and polymer science are expected to further expand the scope of OTFs, making them a versatile platform for delivering a wide range of therapeutic agents. Overall, OTFs represent a promising advancement in pharmaceutical technology, combining ease of administration with enhanced bioavailability, and are poised to play a pivotal role in next-generation drug delivery systems.

INTRODUCTION

Oral administration remains the most preferred route for drug delivery due to its convenience, non-invasiveness, and high patient compliance. Tablets, capsules, and syrups dominate the pharmaceutical market, offering ease of production and widespread acceptance. However, conventional oral dosage forms are often associated with limitations such as difficulty in swallowing (particularly among pediatric, geriatric, and dysphagic patients), delayed onset of action, and extensive first-pass metabolism that reduces systemic bioavailability. These challenges have prompted researchers to explore alternative oral delivery systems that can overcome these drawbacks while maintaining patient-centric design (1, 2).

Oral thin films (OTFs), also referred to as orodispersible films, have emerged as an innovative drug delivery platform designed to address the limitations of traditional oral dosage

forms. These films are thin, flexible strips composed of hydrophilic polymers that rapidly disintegrate upon contact with saliva, releasing the active pharmaceutical ingredient (API) directly into the oral cavity. The drug can then be absorbed through the buccal or sublingual mucosa, bypassing gastrointestinal degradation and hepatic first-pass metabolism. This mechanism results in faster onset of action and improved systemic availability, particularly for drugs with poor solubility or extensive presystemic metabolism (3, 4).

Bioavailability is a critical parameter in drug development, determining the proportion of an administered dose that reaches systemic circulation in an active form. Drugs with low aqueous solubility, high hepatic metabolism, or instability in gastric fluids often exhibit poor oral bioavailability, limiting their therapeutic efficacy (5, 6). OTFs provide a promising solution by enabling direct absorption into systemic circulation, thereby enhancing bioavailability. For example, antiemetic drugs such as ondansetron and cardiovascular agents like carvedilol have demonstrated improved pharmacokinetic profiles when delivered via OTFs compared to conventional tablets (7, 8).

The success of OTFs depends on careful selection of excipients and formulation strategies. Hydrophilic polymers such as hydroxypropyl methylcellulose (HPMC), pullulan, polyvinyl alcohol (PVA), and sodium alginate serve as the backbone, ensuring film integrity and rapid dissolution. Plasticizers like glycerol, polyethylene glycol (PEG 400), and propylene glycol impart flexibility and prevent brittleness (9, 10). Superdisintegrants such as croscopovidone and croscarmellose sodium accelerate disintegration, while taste-masking agents improve patient acceptability. The solvent casting method is the



most widely employed technique for preparation, offering uniform drug distribution and reproducibility. Advanced approaches, including hot-melt extrusion and electrospinning, are also being explored to improve drug loading and stability (11, 12).

This review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of oral thin films as a novel drug delivery system for enhancing bioavailability. It discusses formulation strategies, excipients, evaluation parameters, clinical applications, challenges, and future directions (13, 14). By synthesizing current knowledge and highlighting emerging trends, the review underscores the potential of OTFs to transform oral drug delivery and improve therapeutic outcomes. The insights presented herein will be valuable for researchers, pharmaceutical scientists, and healthcare professionals seeking to develop innovative dosage forms that prioritize patient compliance and clinical efficacy (15).

2. ADVANTAGES OF ORAL THIN FILMS

OTFs offer several advantages over conventional oral dosage forms (16-18):

- **Rapid onset of action:** Immediate disintegration and absorption lead to faster therapeutic response.
- **Improved bioavailability:** Bypassing first-pass metabolism enhances systemic drug levels.
- **Ease of administration:** No need for water, making them suitable for patients with swallowing difficulties.
- **Portability and convenience:** Thin, lightweight films are easy to carry and administer.

- **Accurate dosing:** Each film contains a precise amount of drug, ensuring consistency.
- **Patient compliance:** Particularly beneficial for pediatric, geriatric, and psychiatric populations.

3. CLINICAL APPLICATIONS

Oral thin films (OTFs) have demonstrated remarkable versatility across diverse therapeutic areas, offering rapid drug release, enhanced bioavailability, and improved patient compliance. Their clinical utility is particularly evident in conditions requiring immediate therapeutic action or where conventional dosage forms pose challenges in administration (19, 20).

Antiemetic therapy is one of the most established applications of OTFs. Ondansetron films are widely used in the management of chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting, providing rapid relief and improved patient convenience compared to oral tablets. The buccal absorption of ondansetron bypasses first-pass metabolism, ensuring higher systemic availability and faster onset of action, which is critical in oncology settings (21).

In **cardiovascular medicine**, drugs such as nitroglycerin and ivabradine benefit significantly from OTF delivery. Nitroglycerin films provide immediate relief in angina attacks by enabling rapid absorption through the oral mucosa, while ivabradine films offer improved bioavailability and patient compliance in chronic heart failure management. These applications highlight the importance of OTFs in emergency and long-term cardiovascular care (22).

Analgesics and anti-migraine agents have also been successfully formulated into OTFs. Rizatriptan films, for instance, provide faster onset



of action compared to conventional tablets, offering effective management of acute migraine episodes. The convenience of administration without water further enhances patient adherence during debilitating attacks.

Beyond conventional therapeutics, OTFs are being explored for vaccines, nutraceuticals, and personalized medicine. Vaccine-loaded films present a needle-free alternative, potentially improving immunization coverage in resource-limited settings. Nutraceutical films containing vitamins, minerals, or herbal extracts enhance compliance among health-conscious populations. Personalized medicine applications, including patient-specific dosing and customized formulations, represent a promising frontier for OTF technology (23).

Overall, the clinical applications of OTFs underscore their role as a patient-centric, versatile, and innovative drug delivery system, capable of addressing unmet needs across multiple therapeutic domains.

4. EVALUATION PARAMETERS

Comprehensive evaluation of OTFs is essential to ensure quality, safety, and efficacy (24, 25). Key parameters include:

- **Physicochemical properties:** Thickness, weight variation, drug content uniformity.
- **Mechanical properties:** Tensile strength, folding endurance, flexibility.
- **Performance characteristics:** Disintegration time, dissolution profile, bioavailability studies.
- **Stability testing:** Moisture uptake, shelf-life under varying environmental conditions.

These parameters collectively determine the reliability of OTFs as a dosage form and their suitability for clinical use.

5. CHALLENGES IN OTF DEVELOPMENT

Despite their numerous advantages, oral thin films (OTFs) face several formulation and manufacturing challenges that must be addressed to ensure their widespread adoption in pharmaceutical practice. One of the most significant limitations is restricted drug loading capacity. Due to their thin and lightweight nature, OTFs can only accommodate small doses of active pharmaceutical ingredients. This makes them unsuitable for drugs requiring high therapeutic doses, thereby limiting their application to potent molecules with low dose requirements (26, 27).

Another critical issue is **moisture sensitivity**. OTFs are typically composed of hydrophilic polymers that readily absorb water, which can compromise film integrity, cause stickiness, and reduce shelf-life stability. To counter this, specialized packaging such as aluminum foil pouches or moisture-resistant blister packs is required, which increases production costs and complicates distribution logistics (28, 29).

Taste masking remains a persistent challenge, particularly for bitter or unpleasant-tasting drugs. Since OTFs dissolve directly in the oral cavity, patient acceptability depends heavily on effective taste-masking strategies. Techniques such as flavoring agents, sweeteners, complexation with cyclodextrins, or encapsulation in nanoparticles are employed, but achieving complete masking without affecting drug release remains difficult (30).

From a manufacturing perspective, **large-scale production** of OTFs requires optimization of solvent casting and drying processes to ensure



uniform thickness, drug distribution, and mechanical strength. Variability in drying conditions can lead to non-uniform films, affecting dose accuracy and reproducibility. Advanced techniques like hot-melt extrusion and electrospinning are being explored, but they demand specialized equipment and process control (31, 32).

In summary, while OTFs offer rapid disintegration, enhanced bioavailability, and patient convenience, overcoming challenges related to drug loading, moisture sensitivity, taste masking, and manufacturing scalability is essential. Addressing these limitations through innovative formulation strategies and advanced technologies will be pivotal for the broader clinical and commercial success of OTFs.

6. FUTURE PROSPECTS

The future of OTF technology lies in innovation and integration with advanced drug delivery systems. Incorporation of nanoparticles, nanocrystals, and liposomal carriers into film matrices can improve drug solubility and stability. Development of multilayer films enables controlled or sustained release, expanding therapeutic applications. Biodegradable and eco-friendly polymers are being investigated to enhance sustainability. Personalized medicine approaches, including patient-specific dosing and customized formulations, are expected to revolutionize OTF technology. Advances in nanotechnology, polymer science, and manufacturing techniques will further strengthen the role of OTFs in next-generation drug delivery (33, 34).

The future of oral thin films (OTFs) lies in their ability to integrate advanced drug delivery technologies with patient-centric design. As pharmaceutical sciences evolve, OTFs are

expected to expand beyond conventional applications into more complex therapeutic domains. One promising direction is the incorporation of nanotechnology, where nanoparticles, nanocrystals, and liposomes can be embedded within film matrices to improve solubility, stability, and controlled release of poorly soluble drugs. This approach can significantly broaden the range of molecules suitable for OTF delivery.

Another area of growth is the development of multilayer films that enable sequential or sustained drug release. Such designs can be particularly useful for combination therapies, where two or more drugs with different release profiles are required. Advances in polymer science will also facilitate the use of biodegradable and eco-friendly polymers, aligning OTF technology with sustainability goals and reducing environmental impact (35).

Personalized medicine represents a transformative opportunity for OTFs. With the advent of 3D printing and precision manufacturing, patient-specific films can be produced with tailored doses, flavors, and release characteristics. This customization will enhance therapeutic outcomes and compliance, especially in pediatric and geriatric populations. Furthermore, OTFs are being explored for vaccine delivery, offering a needle-free alternative that could improve immunization rates in resource-limited settings. Nutraceutical films containing vitamins, minerals, and herbal extracts are also gaining popularity, bridging the gap between pharmaceuticals and wellness products.

On the industrial front, scaling up production will require optimization of solvent casting, hot-melt extrusion, and electrospinning techniques to ensure reproducibility and cost-effectiveness. Integration of automation and quality control



systems will be crucial for maintaining consistency in large-scale manufacturing. Regulatory frameworks will need to evolve to accommodate the unique characteristics of OTFs, ensuring safety, efficacy, and patient accessibility.

7. CONCLUSION

Oral thin films have emerged as a novel and versatile drug delivery system that addresses many limitations of conventional oral dosage forms. Their rapid disintegration, ease of administration, and ability to bypass first-pass metabolism make them particularly valuable for drugs requiring fast onset of action or improved bioavailability. Clinical applications in antiemetics, cardiovascular therapy, analgesics, and emergency medicine have already demonstrated their potential, while ongoing research continues to expand their scope into vaccines, nutraceuticals, and personalized medicine.

Despite these advantages, challenges such as limited drug loading capacity, moisture sensitivity, taste masking, and large-scale manufacturing must be overcome to fully realize the potential of OTFs. Innovative strategies involving nanotechnology, advanced polymers, and precision manufacturing are expected to address these limitations, paving the way for broader adoption in pharmaceutical practice.

In conclusion, oral thin films represent a patient-centric, innovative, and adaptable drug delivery platform. Their ability to combine convenience with enhanced bioavailability positions them as a promising solution for next-generation therapeutics. With continued research, technological advancements, and regulatory support, OTFs are poised to play a pivotal role in shaping the future of pharmaceutical drug delivery, ultimately

improving patient outcomes and healthcare accessibility worldwide.

8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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HOW TO CITE: Swapnil Mitkari, Ganesh Bahekar, Sharad Tayde, Vijay Borkar, A Review on Oral Thin Films for Enhancement of Bioavailability, *Int. J. of Pharm. Sci.*, 2026, Vol 4, Issue 5, 7160-7168. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20404904>

