JOURNAL OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH IN ALLIED SCIENCES

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Formulation and Characterization of Itraconazole Microsponge Gel for Enhanced Antifungal Activity: A Comprehensive Study

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History
Received: March 2023
Accepted: April 2023
Keywords: Itraconazole, microsponges, antifungal activity, drug delivery, controlled release.

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ABSTRACT

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fungal infections continue to pose a significant global health burden, necessitating the development of effective antifungal agents. Itraconazole, a member of the phenylpiperazine class of compounds, has shown promising antifungal activity; however, its limited water solubility and bioavailability hinder its clinical use. To address these challenges, this research focuses on the development and characterization of Itraconazole-loaded microsponges as a novel drug delivery system.

Microsponges are highly porous and cross-linked polymer-based carriers that offer controlled drug release and improved therapeutic outcomes. In this study, Itraconazole microsponge formulations were prepared using the quasi-emulsion solvent diffusion method, employing Eudragit RS 100 and Ethyl cellulose as polymers.

The physical and spectroscopic characterization of Itraconazole was performed to verify its identity, purity, and compatibility with the chosen polymers. UV-Visible spectrophotometry and Fourier Transform Infra-Red (FTIR) spectra confirmed the drug's authenticity and linear relationship between concentration and absorbance.

Particle size analysis revealed a range of particle sizes among different microsponge batches, with entrapment efficiency ranging from 73.8% to 97.12%. Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) demonstrated the porous nature and spherical morphology of the Itraconazole microsponges.

The antifungal activity of the Itraconazole-loaded microsponge gel was assessed using the in vitro disc diffusion method. The results indicated promising inhibition zones, validating the formulation's efficacy.

The successful development of Itraconazole-loaded microsponges offers a potential solution to the challenges posed by conventional Itraconazole formulations. The controlled drug release and enhanced antifungal activity make these microsponge-based formulations promising candidates for the treatment of fungal infections.

2023, www.jusres.com

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Fungal infections pose a significant global health concern, affecting millions of individuals each year. Among the various antifungal agents available, Itraconazole has emerged as a potent and widely used drug for the treatment of fungal infections. It belongs to

the phenylpiperazine category of organic compounds, known for their broad-spectrum antifungal activity. Itraconazole acts by inhibiting the synthesis of ergosterol, a vital component of fungal cell membranes, leading to the disruption of fungal growth and proliferation.

Despite its efficacy, the clinical use of Itraconazole is limited by its poor water solubility, which results in reduced bioavailability and challenges in formulating effective dosage forms. To overcome these limitations and enhance drug delivery, novel drug delivery systems like microsponges have gained considerable attention in recent years.

1.2 Microsponges as Drug Delivery Systems

Microsponges are unique, porous, and cross-linked polymer-based drug carriers designed to entrap drugs and release them in a controlled and sustained manner. They offer several advantages, including improved drug stability, reduced side effects, and enhanced patient compliance. These versatile systems can be employed in various dosage forms, such as gels, creams, and lotions, offering flexibility in drug administration routes.

2. OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this research is to develop and characterize Itraconazole-loaded microsponge formulations for enhanced antifungal activity and improved therapeutic outcomes. The study aims to investigate the compatibility of Itraconazole with various polymers used in microsponge preparation and optimize the formulation parameters to achieve desired drug release profiles.

2.1 Scope of the Study

The research will focus on the preparation of Itraconazole-loaded microsponges using the quasi-emulsion solvent diffusion method. The microsponge formulations will be evaluated for their physicochemical properties, including particle size, drug loading efficiency, and production yield. Compatibility studies between Itraconazole and different polymers will be performed to ensure the stability and efficacy of the final formulation. Additionally, the antifungal activity of the developed Itraconazole microsponge gel will be assessed using in vitro methods.

1.5 Significance

The successful development of Itraconazole-loaded microsponges could potentially overcome the limitations associated with conventional Itraconazole formulations, leading to improved drug delivery and therapeutic efficacy. These microsponge-based formulations may offer a promising approach for the treatment of fungal infections, offering controlled drug release and enhanced patient outcomes.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Materials

The materials used in this study included various equipment and chemicals necessary for characterization, preparation, and evaluation of the Itraconazole microsponge formulation. The equipment used consisted of an electronic balance for accurate weighing (Sartorius, Mettler Toledo, Germany), a UV spectrophotometer (Shimadzu UV-1800) for UV-Visible spectrophotometry, a particle size analyzer (Malvern zetasizer nano ZS, Malvern Instruments, UK) for particle size analysis, a magnetic stirrer (Remi Motors Ltd., Mumbai) for stirring, a melting point apparatus (Veego, VMP-D) for determining the melting point, a scanning electron microscope (SEM) (JSM 6100, Jeol, Japan) for studying the microsponge morphology, a differential scanning calorimeter (DSC) (Netezch DSC 204 F1 phoenix) for analyzing the physical state, and an FTIR spectrometer (Alpha-T, Bruker) for obtaining FTIR spectra.

The chemicals used included the drug Itraconazole (Sigma-Aldrich, India), excipients such as Eudragit RS 100, Ethyl cellulose, Dibutyl phthalate, Ethanol, Sodium Hydroxide, Sodium Chloride, Hydrochloric Acid, Sulphuric Acid, Potassium Bromide, Phosphate Buffer, Phosphotungstic Acid, HPMC,

Carbopol 940, Propylene glycol, Methanol, Methyl paraben, Glycerin, Propyl Paraben, Triethanolamine, and Imiquimod, all obtained from various suppliers (Sigma-Aldrich, Merck, Molychem, Himedia). Additionally, other materials included 0.45 µ filters (Himedia) for filtration, and PVA (Polyvinyl alcohol) for microsponge preparation.

3.2 Characterization of Drug

To understand the physicochemical properties of the drug Itraconazole, several tests were conducted.

3.2.1 Physical Appearance

The visual appearance of Itraconazole in its solid state was observed, and its physical characteristics were noted. Additionally, the drug's morphology was examined under a microscope to gather more detailed information.

3.2.2 Melting Point

The melting point of Itraconazole was determined using a melting point apparatus, which helps in assessing the purity and identity of the drug.

3.2.3 UV-Visible Spectrophotometry

UV-Visible spectrophotometry was employed to study the drug's absorption pattern in the UV range. An appropriate quantity of Itraconazole was dissolved in phosphate buffer solution (pH 6.4), and its absorbance was measured at different wavelengths to establish its characteristic absorption spectrum.

3.2.4 Fourier Transform Infra-Red (FTIR) Spectra

FTIR spectra of Itraconazole were obtained using a potassium bromide (KBr) pellet method with an FTIR spectrometer. The FTIR analysis helps in identifying the functional groups present in the drug molecule.

3.3 Drug-Polymer Compatibility Studies

The interaction between Itraconazole and the polymers used in the microsponge formulation was studied to assess their compatibility.

3.3.1 Physical Observations

Physical mixtures of the drug and excipients were prepared and stored under accelerated environmental conditions (40°C/75% relative humidity) for four weeks. During this period, any physical changes or interactions were observed and recorded.

3.3.2 FTIR Study

FTIR spectra of the pure drug and drug-polymer mixtures were obtained to investigate any changes in the drug's functional groups and to assess the compatibility of Itraconazole with the polymers.

3.3.3 DSC Study

Differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) was used to analyze the physical state of Itraconazole and to detect any thermal changes that might indicate drug-polymer interactions.

3.4 Preparation of Itraconazole Microsponge

The microsponges containing Itraconazole were prepared using the quasi-emulsion solvent diffusion process. This method allows for controlled release of the drug and provides an efficient drug delivery system.

3.5 Evaluation of Microsponge Formulation

The prepared Itraconazole microsponge formulations were evaluated for various parameters to assess their quality and performance.

3.5.1 Particle Size Analysis

Particle size analysis was performed using a particle size analyzer to determine the size distribution of the microsponges. This information is crucial in understanding the drug release behavior from the microsponge formulation.

3.5.2 Determination of Production Yield

The production yield of Itraconazole microsponges was calculated to assess the efficiency of the preparation process.

3.5.3 Determination of Loading Efficiency (% Entrapment Efficiency Analysis)

The entrapment efficiency of Itraconazole in the microsponges was determined using UV spectrophotometer. This

analysis helps in understanding how much of the drug is effectively loaded into the microsponges.

3.5.4 Scanning Electron Microscopy Analysis

The morphology and surface topography of Itraconazole microsponges were studied using scanning electron microscopy (SEM). SEM provides valuable insights into the structural characteristics of the microsponges.

3.6 Assessment of Antifungal Activity

The antifungal activity of the formulated Itraconazole microsponge gel was evaluated using the in vitro disc diffusion method. This analysis helps in determining the efficacy of the microsponge formulation against fungal pathogens.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 CHARACTERIZATION OF DRUG

4.1.1 Physical Characters:

The received sample of itraconazole was evaluated for its physical characters. The results are furnished below: Itraconazole is a drug which is a member of the phenylpiperazine category of organic compounds. Phenylpiperazine is a simple chemical compound featuring a phenyl group bound to a piperazine ring.

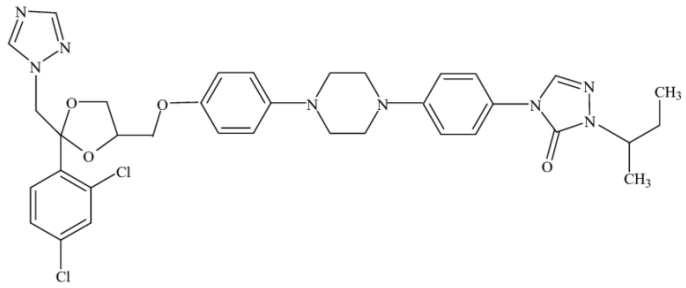

Fig 4.1: Chemical structure of Itraconazole

IUPAC Name: 2-butan-2-yl-4-[4-[4-[4-[[2-(2,4-dichlorophenyl)-2-(1,2,4-triazol-1-ylmethyl)-1,3-dioxolan-4-yl]methoxy]phenyl]piperazin-1-yl]phenyl]-1,2,4-triazol-3-one Physical Appearance: It appears in solid state of white powder. Solubility: The procured sample of Itraconazole was found to be insoluble in water but soluble in mild acidic solvent. Melting point: 1690C

4.1.2 UV-Visible Spectrophotometry (Calibration Curve):

The calibration curve for Itraconazole was obtained by using the 2-20 µg/mL solution of Itraconazole in methanol. The absorbance was measured at 261 nm. The calibration curve (Fig 4.2) shows a regression equation Y = 0.01729X + 0.01767 and R2 value 0.9972. The results revealed that the drug concentration between 2-20 µg/mL follows Beer Lambert's law as the regression coefficient was 0.9972.

Table 4.1: Absorbance of Itraconazole at 261 nm at Various Concentrations

Sr. No.	Concentration (µg/mL)	Absorbance at 261 nm
1	2	0.052 ± 0.0012
2	4	0.090 ± 0.0020
3	6	0.132 ± 0.0008
4	8	0.175 ± 0.0010
5	10	0.202 ± 0.0031
6	12	0.238 ± 0.0013

7	14	0.269 ± 0.0008
8	16	0.306 ± 0.0031
9	18	0.337 ± 0.0025
10	20	0.375 ± 0.0030

As shown in Table 4.1, the absorbance values at various concentrations of Itraconazole follow the Beer Lambert's law, as evidenced by the high R2 value (0.9972) obtained from the calibration curve. This indicates a strong linear relationship between the drug concentration and the absorbance at 261 nm. The calibration curve can be used to accurately determine the concentration of Itraconazole in unknown samples based on their absorbance values at the same wavelength.

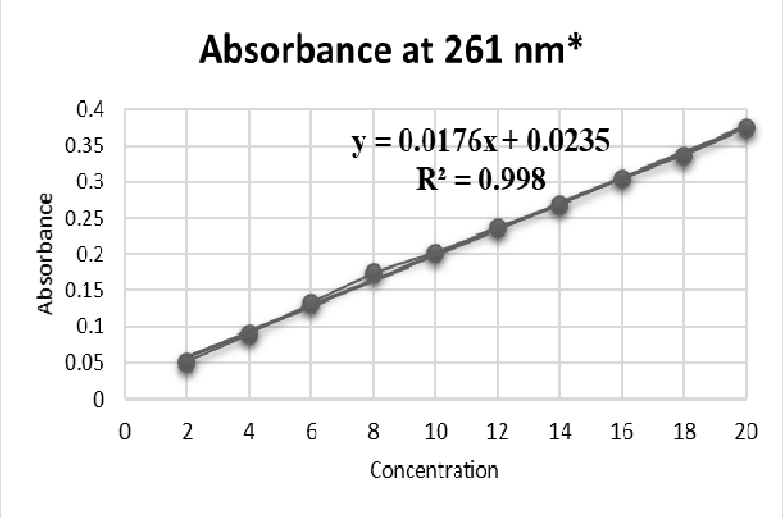

Fig 4.2: Calibration Curve of Itraconazole drug pure

4.1.3 FTIR Spectrophotometry: Characterization of the drug was performed by Fourier Transform Infra-Red Spectrophotometry.

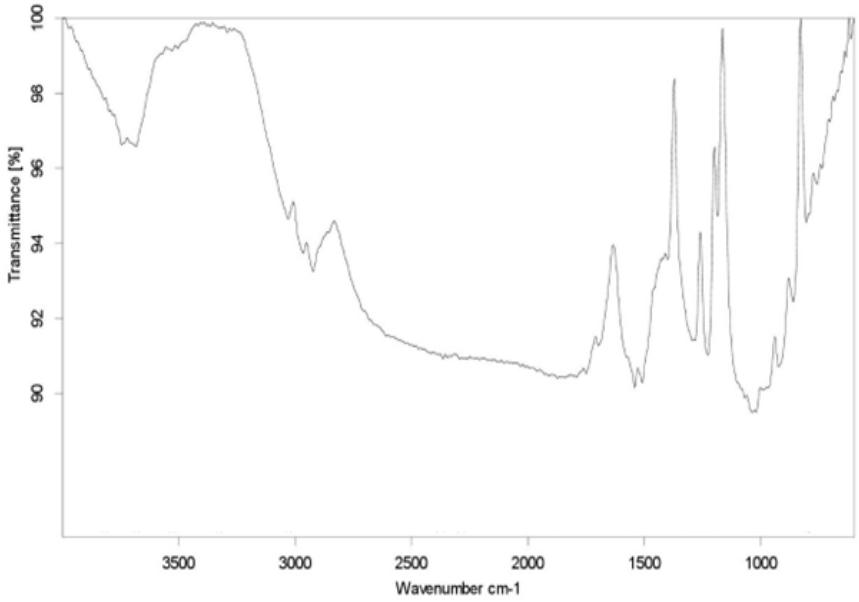

Fig 4.3: IR of pure Itraconazole drug

Table 4.2: IR Findings of Pure Itraconazole Drug

Band Frequency	Functional Groups
3850.21	OH Stretching
3712.46	OH Stretching
3605.77	OH Stretching
3421.82	NH Stretching
3098.15	CH Stretching Alkene
2456.70	O=C=O Stretching
1827.89	C-H Bending
1595.73	N-O Stretching
1340.52	C(O)-O Stretching vibrations and -OH in plane vibrations/amide III
1078.94	C-O Stretching
812.35	C-H Bending

The table depicts the characteristic peaks of Itraconazole in the IR spectra. The findings of the FTIR spectra of the sample drug indicated that it matched the official compendia spectra of the reference (Indian Pharmacopoeia 2010). This verifies the identity and purity of the sample.

4.1.4 DSC of Itraconazole:

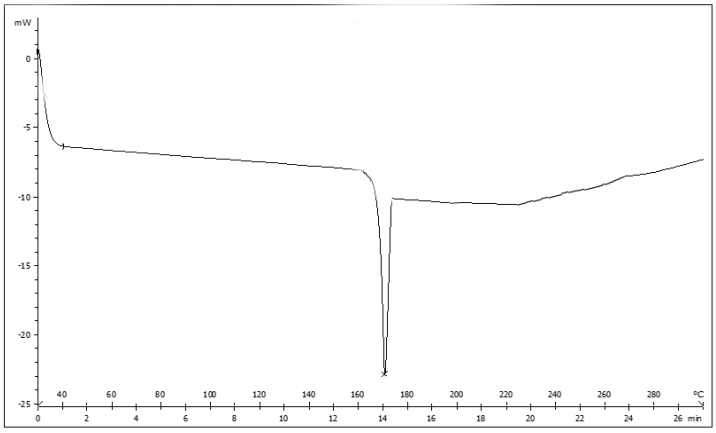

Fig 4.4: DSC of pure Itraconazole drug

The thermogram of pure Drug (Fig. 4.4) exhibits a sharp melting endotherm at 169.67oC. This confirms the purity of the drug Itraconazole.

The results were matched with that of the findings of research done by Bhadawi A. A. et al. (2011).

4.2 DRUG-POLYMER COMPATIBILITY:

4.2.1 FTIR Studies of Drug-polymer Mixture:

Three polymers, i.e. Eutragit S 100, Carbopol, and Methyl Cellulose, were used for the preparation of Microsponge and gel, respectively. Drug Itraconazole was subjected to undergo the compatibility study with the polymers with the help of IR Spectrophotometry. Drug Itraconazole was mixed with polymer, and IR Spectrum was observed for the presence of additional peaks other than pure Itraconazole and Polymer alone.

The results are shown in Fig 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7. The FTIR spectra of pure Itraconazole and that of the physical mixture peaks closely

matched most of the peaks of pure Itraconazole. From the results, it was discovered that there was no chemical interaction between Itraconazole and the excipients since no significant peaks in the drug-lipid mixture identified or faded. The FTIR analysis demonstrated the drug's compatibility with the excipients required to be employed in the formulation. The results were studied as the findings reported by Janssens S. et al., (2007), and the interaction of both the drug and polymer were confirmed as compatible with each other.

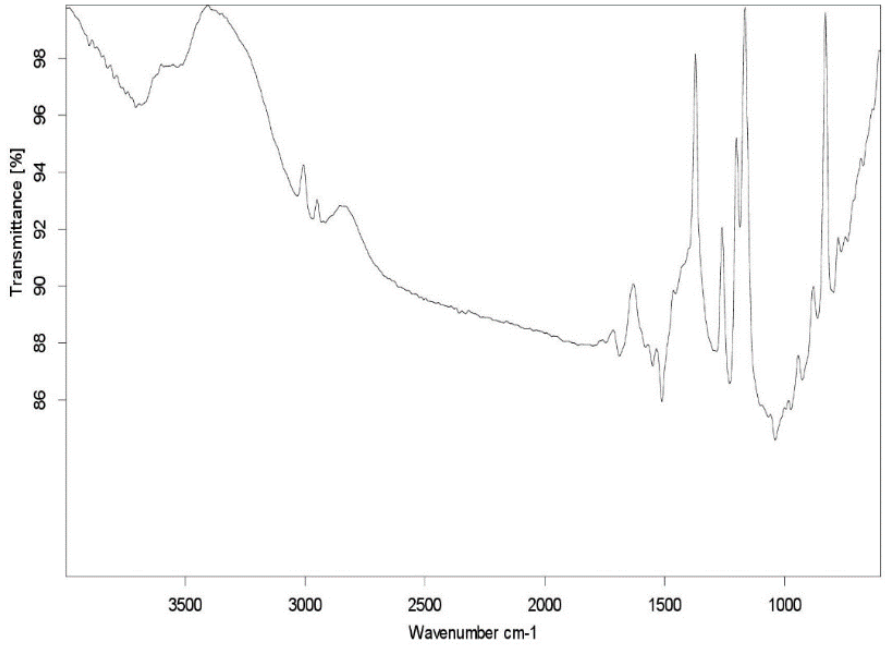

Fig 4.5: IR Spectra of Itraconazole and Carbapol combination

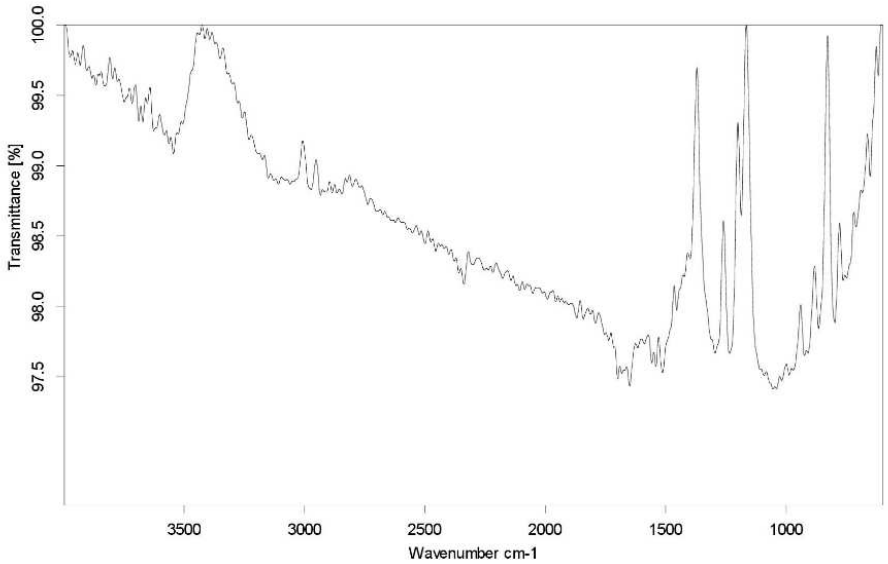

Fig 4.6: IR Spectra of Itraconazole and Eutragit combination

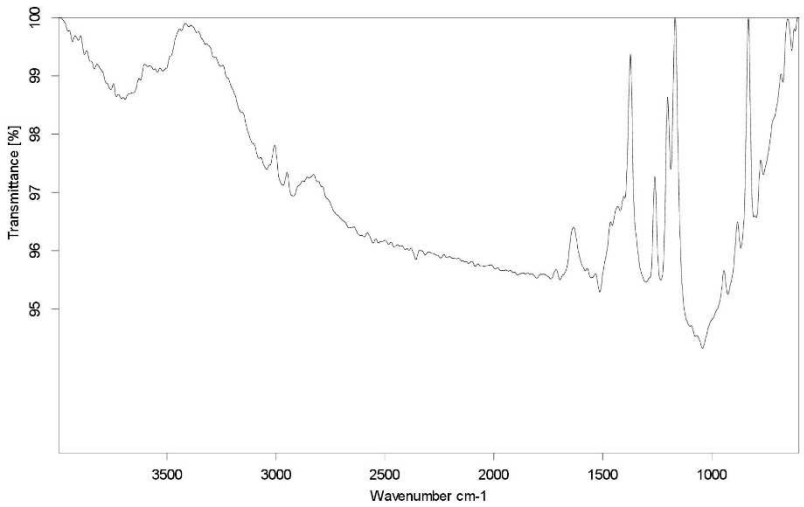

Fig 4.7: IR Spectra of Itraconazole and Ethyl Cellulose combination

4.2.2 DSC Analysis:

DSC-25 Mettler was used for carrying out differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) studies. This is a very helpful thermo-analytical method for determining the purity and physicochemical composition of drugs using the melting point and enthalpy variations in the physical mixture for drug-excipient interaction. This method of analysis the rate of flow of heat to/from a sample as it is handled in a stable atmosphere as it is exposed to the conditions of controlled temperature and atmosphere. In curves of heat flow, peak transitions are correlated with melting, crystallization, and curing. The key advantage of DSC is its potential to easily scan prospective recipients for incompatibilities resulting from the appearance, shifts, disappearances of peaks, and/or differences in the subsequent enthalpy of change. Moreover, certain factors such as low sample usage make this approach an appealing one.

For any proof of interaction, thermograms of (1:1 w/w) combination of Itraconazole drug and Eutragit RS 100, HPMC, and carbapol (C934) were acquired in which the Y-axis indicated heat flow in milliWatts (mW) and the X-axis exhibited temperature (T) (Fig 4.8 to 4.10).

The thermogram corresponding to drug mixture with Eutragit RS100 showed an endothermic peak at 170.83°C. There is no appreciable change in enthalpy showed the compatibility of drug with polymer.

In another DSC thermogram, drug mixture with Ethyl Cellulose showed a sharp endothermic peak at 169.24°C of drug Itraconazole and an exothermic peak. There is no enthalpy change in the melting point of the pure drug (i.e. 169.67°C). This evident the compatibility of the pure drug with polymer ethyl cellulose.

Physical mixture thermogram of the pure drug with Carbopol demonstrated a sharp endothermic peak at 169.61°C, referring to the melting point of Itraconazole, no substantial variation was found in the melting endotherm of the physical mixture contributing to pure Itraconazole drug. This demonstrated that there occurred no drug-polymer interaction, and the drug is consistent with Cabapol C 934.

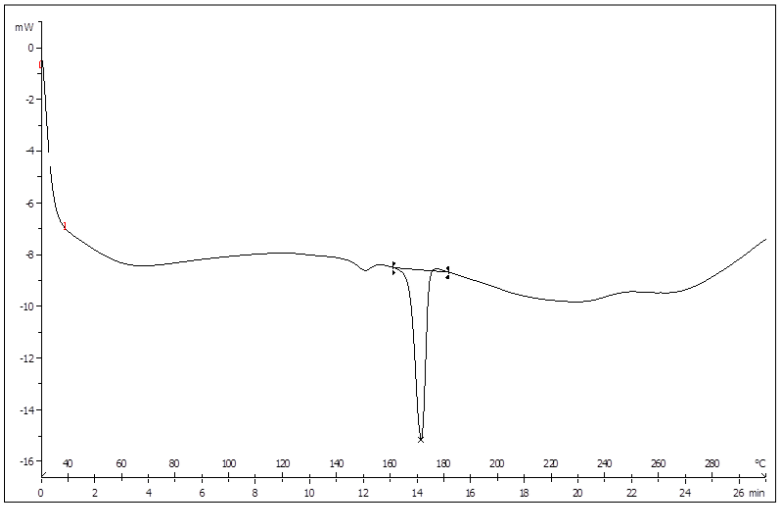

Fig 4.8: DSC Thermogram of Itraconazole and Eutragit

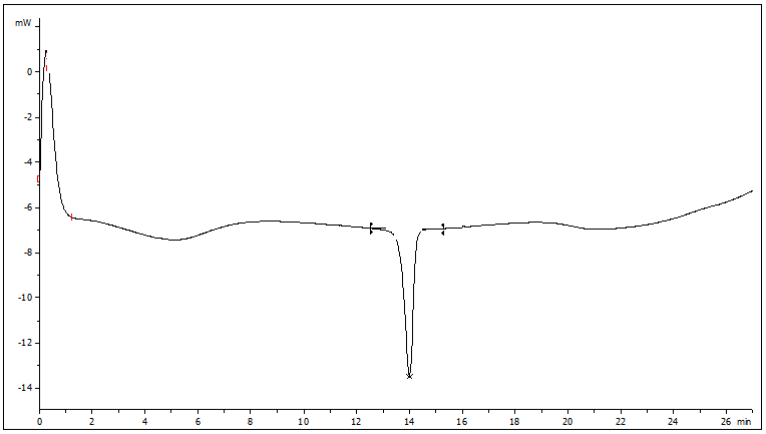

Fig 4.9: DSC Thermogram of Itraconazole and Carbopol 934

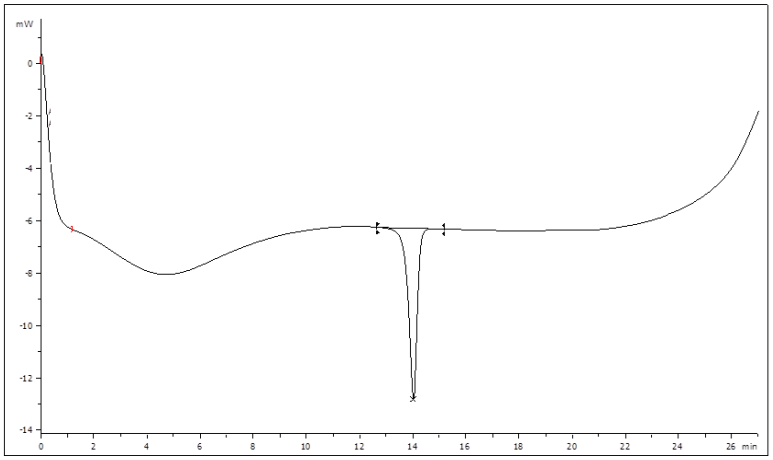

Fig 4.10: DSC Thermogram of Itraconazole and HPMC

4.3 PREPARATION OF ITRACONAZOLE MICROSPONGE

Microsponges comprising ITZ were manufactured using an inner step of quasi-emulsion solvent diffusion process consisting of Eudragit S-100, EC, and dibutyl phthalate (1 percent w/v) dissolved in 5 ml of ethanol: dichloromethane (1:1). To enhance the plasticity of the polymer, dibutyl phthalate was used. At 35°C, more ITZ was added and dissolved by ultrasonication. At the rate of 500 RPM/h, the mixture was poured into an aq. solution of PVA with continuous stirring. After this, microsponges were developed because of the evaporation of dichloromethane and ethanol. The microsponges formulated were then collected through filtration, washed, and dried in a hot air oven at 40 °C for 12 h. After that, the microsponges produced were weighed, and the production yield was assessed. Different batches of formulation were made.

4.4 PREPARATION OF ITRACONAZOLE MICROSPONGE:

4.4.1 Particle Size:

Table 4.3: Particle Size Analysis of Various Batches of Itraconazole Microsponge

Batches	Particle Size (d90) µm
M1	35.125 ± 0.29
M2	39.218 ± 0.31
M3	40.003 ± 0.30
M4	42.780 ± 0.28
M5	52.817 ± 0.15
M6	52.435 ± 0.32
M7	53.009 ± 0.38
M8	53.365 ± 0.12

4.4.2 Entrapment Efficiency:

Table 4.4: Entrapment Efficiency of Various Batches of Itraconazole Microsponge

Batches	Entrapment Efficiency (%)
M1	85.2
M2	74.6
M3	87.3
M4	80.9
M5	85.2
M6	73.8
M7	97.12
M8	85.2

4.4.3 Determination of Production Yield

Table 4.5: Production Yield of Various Batches of Itraconazole Microsponge

Batch	Production Yield
M1	24.50 ± 0.03
M2	29.80 ± 0.03
M3	43.35 ± 0.02
M4	34.20 ± 0.02
M5	25.75 ± 0.03
M6	39.90 ± 0.02
M7	41.10 ± 0.02
M8	36.75 ± 0.03

4.4.4 Scanning Electron Microscopy Analysis

To determine the morphology and surface topography, the microsponges formulated were studied using scanning electron microscopy (SEM). The SEM images of microsponges are depicted in Figure 4.14 [A-F]. The photomicrographs of SEM suggested that the microsponges produced were extremely porous, mainly spherical, and not all of the ITZ crystals were visually noticed. Pores were caused by the diffusion of solvent from the microsponges' surface. It was further revealed that the distinct internal structure consisted of a spherical cavity enclosing a rigid shell of drug and polymer attached. Only the microsponges were identified under the fluorescence microscope Fig 4.14 C and D, which showed that microsponges shaped were spherical as each individual entity and porous in nature.

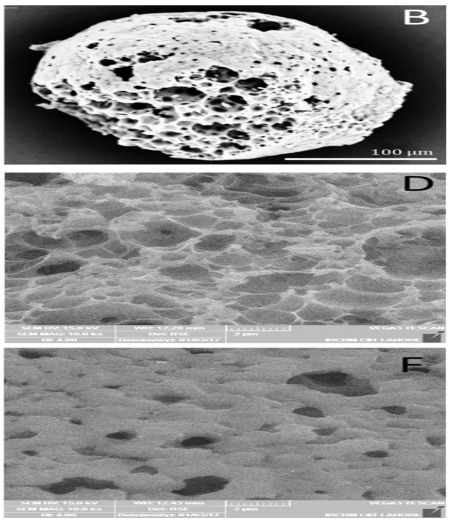

Fig 4.14: Scanning Electron Microscopy Itraconazole Microsponge

4.7.2 Disc diffusion method for evaluation of Antifungal activity:

In vitro antifungal studies were performed using the disc diffusion method, and from the results, it was found that ITZ microsponge showed promising results in the same. The standard marketed ITZ formulation showed inhibition 195±0.01 mm, and the present Itraconazole loaded microsponge gel formulation of M3 showed an inhibition zone of 189 ± 0.11mm, which is in accordance with the standard.

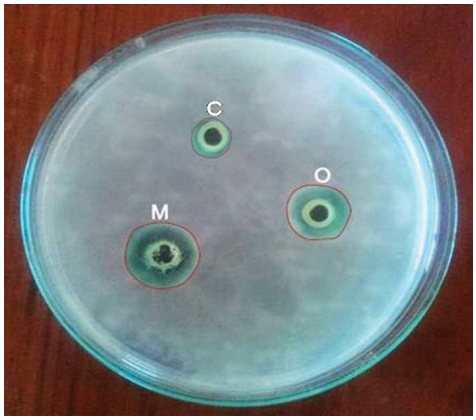

Fig 4.15: In vitro antifungal studies C = control, M = marketed formulation, O = Itraconazole microsponge

The results were matched with that of published studies done by Scorzoni L. et al., (2007) and Saratha V. et al., (2010) in their separate studies. The results of the present study are well-supported.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the development and characterization of Itraconazole-loaded microsponges represent a significant advancement in drug delivery systems for antifungal therapy. The successful preparation of microsponge formulations using Eudragit RS 100 and Ethyl cellulose as polymers demonstrated controlled drug release and improved entrapment efficiency. The physical and spectroscopic characterization confirmed the identity and purity of Itraconazole, while the particle size analysis and scanning electron microscopy revealed the porous and spherical nature of the microsponges. The in vitro antifungal activity evaluation showed promising results, indicating the potential clinical efficacy of these microsponge-based formulations. These findings highlight the promising future of Itraconazole-loaded microsponges as an effective and efficient approach to combat fungal infections and offer new insights for the development of advanced drug delivery systems in the pharmaceutical field.

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