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NANOCHEMISTRY: TRANSFORMING THE LANDSCAPE OF FOOD TECHNOLOGY

Sofia I. Hussain[*1]

[*1]Professor, Department Of Chemistry Government Meera Girls' College, Udaipur-(Rajasthan), India.

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ABSTRACT

Recent advancements in nanochemistry have brought about transformative changes in various scientific and industrial sectors, with significant implications for the food industry. The applications of nanochemistry have become increasingly relevant due to the growing demand for nanoparticles in diverse areas of food science and food microbiology. These applications span a wide range, encompassing food processing, food packaging, the development of functional foods, food safety, the detection of foodborne pathogens, and the extension of the shelf life of food and food products. This paper aims to provide an overview of the potential applications of nanoparticles within the food industry, aiming to ensure the delivery of safe and uncontaminated food to consumers, while also enhancing the functional attributes of these consumables. Furthermore, the utilization of nanochemistry to augment the nutritional content and organoleptic qualities of food items is briefly explored. Additionally, the paper offers insights into the safety considerations associated with nano-processed food products, as well as the regulatory challenges that need to be addressed to ensure the consumer acceptance of these innovations.

Keywords: Nanochemistry, Nanoparticles, Food Processing, Food Preservation, Nutrition.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nanochemistry has emerged as a captivating technological paradigm that has ushered in a transformative era for the food industry. Operating on a nanometer scale, nanotechnology pertains to the manipulation of atoms, molecules, and macromolecules, typically ranging in size from 1 to 100 nm. Its primary objective is to design and utilize materials with unique properties that arise from their nanoscale dimensions. These engineered nanomaterials exhibit external dimensions or internal structures within the 1 to 100 nm range, enabling the manipulation and observation of matter at this intricate level. Remarkably, these nanomaterials display distinct characteristics that set them apart from their larger-scale counterparts. This divergence is attributed to factors such as the substantial surface-to-volume ratio and other novel physicochemical attributes encompassing color, solubility, strength, diffusivity, toxicity, magnetic behavior, optical properties, and thermodynamic traits (Gupta et al., 2016).

Escalating concerns among consumers regarding food quality and the potential health advantages have propelled researchers to seek avenues that can elevate food quality without compromising its nutritional integrity. This quest for a harmonious balance has led to an increased demand for nanoparticle-based materials within the food industry, owing to their possession of essential elements and their proven non-toxic nature (Otchere et al., 2023). Additionally, these materials have demonstrated remarkable stability even under elevated temperatures and pressures, further enhancing their appeal (Liu et al., 2024). The realm of nanochemistry presents comprehensive solutions across the entire spectrum of food-related processes, spanning from manufacturing and processing to packaging. The integration of nanomaterials introduces a profound transformation not only in terms of elevating food quality and ensuring its safety but also in augmenting the potential health benefits delivered by food products (Dasgupta et al., 2015).

The applications of nanochemistry within the food sector can be categorized into two primary groups: food nanostructured ingredients and food nanosensing. The domain of food nanostructured ingredients spans a wide range of applications, extending from food processing to food packaging. Within food processing, these nanostructures find utility as food additives, carriers for precision nutrient delivery, anti-caking agents, antimicrobial agents, and fillers to enhance the mechanical strength and durability of packaging materials, among other functions. On the other hand, food nanosensing is harnessed to enhance the evaluation of food quality and safety (Ezhilarasi et al., 2013). This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the role played by nanochemistry in the realms of food science and food microbiology. It also delves into the nuanced aspects, addressing certain potential concerns associated with the application of nanotechnology in this context.

II. NANOCHEMISTRY IN FOOD PROCESSING

Nanochemistry contributes to extending the shelf life of diverse food materials while simultaneously reducing food wastage attributed to microbial intrusion (Pradhan et al., 2015). Nanocarriers have found application as delivery systems, facilitating the incorporation of food additives into food products without altering their fundamental structure. The size of particles plays a direct role in determining the delivery efficiency of bioactive compounds to various sites within the body. Notably, some cell lines exhibit enhanced absorption only for submicron nanoparticles, as opposed to larger micro-particles (Ezhilarasi et al., 2013). The integration of nanotechnology into processes involving encapsulation, emulsions, biopolymer matrices, simple solutions, and associative colloids offers delivery systems that are efficient, while embodying the aforementioned attributes. Nano polymers are emerging as prospective replacements for conventional materials in the realm of food packaging. Additionally, nanosensors hold the potential to confirm the presence of contaminants, mycotoxins, and microorganisms within food products (Bratovcic, 2015).

Nanoparticles exhibit superior encapsulation and release properties compared to conventional encapsulation systems. Nanoencapsulations offer the ability to mask odors or tastes, regulate the interactions of active ingredients with the food matrix, control the release of active agents, ensure their availability at specific times and rates, shield them from moisture, heat (Emin, 2022), chemical, or biological degradation during processing, storage, and utilization, and maintain compatibility with other compounds in the system (Weiss et al., 2006). Additionally, these delivery systems possess the capacity to deeply penetrate tissues due to their smaller size, facilitating efficient delivery of active compounds to targeted sites in the body (Lamprecht et al., 2004). A diverse range of synthetic and natural polymer-based encapsulating delivery systems have been developed to enhance the bioavailability and preservation of active food components. Remarkably, nanotechnology not only encompasses the aspects mentioned above but also catalyzes significant modifications in food products, imparting them with novel qualities.

III. NANOCHEMISTRY AND TEXTURE, TASTE, & APPEARANCE OF FOOD

Nanostructured food ingredients are currently under development with the promise of elevating taste, texture, and consistency. Within the realm of nanochemistry, diverse avenues exist for enhancing food quality and enriching taste. Nanoencapsulation methods have found widespread application to enhance the release and retention of flavors, ensuring culinary equilibrium (Nakagawa, 2014). For instance, Zhang et al. (2014) harnessed nanoencapsulation for anthocyanins, plant pigments known for their reactivity and instability. By encapsulating cyanidin-3-O-glucoside (C3G) molecules within the inner cavity of apo recombinant soybean seed H-2 subunit ferritin (rH-2), they achieved improved thermal and photostability. Rutin, a vital dietary flavonoid with notable pharmacological benefits, often faces limited application in the food industry due to poor solubility. Encapsulation within ferritin nanocages amplified the solubility, thermal resilience, and UV radiation stability of rutin, offering a solution to its solubility challenges (Yang et al., 2015). Nanoemulsions have gained significant popularity as carriers for lipid-soluble bioactive compounds. Their appeal lies in their capacity to be produced from natural food ingredients using straightforward manufacturing techniques, while enhancing water dispersion and bioavailability (Ozturk et al., 2015). In contrast to larger particles that typically release encapsulated substances gradually over extended durations, nanoparticles offer a potential avenue for enhancing the bioavailability of nutraceutical compounds due to their sub-cellular dimensions, resulting in increased drug bioavailability. Traditional applications of metallic oxides like titanium dioxide and silicon dioxide (SiO_2) in food products have centered on coloration or flow enhancement. Notably, SiO_2 nanomaterials have gained prominence as carriers of fragrances or flavors in food items (Dekkers et al., 2011).

IV. NANOCHEMISTRY AND NUTRITIONAL VALUE

Many bioactive compounds, including lipids, proteins, carbohydrates, and vitamins, are vulnerable to the acidic conditions and enzymatic activity of the stomach and duodenum. Encapsulation of these compounds not only shields them from such harsh environments but also facilitates their absorption within food products.

Achieving this in their non-encapsulated form is challenging due to the low water solubility of these compounds. To address this, nanoparticles are being employed to create minuscule edible capsules, aimed at enhancing the delivery of medicines, vitamins, or delicate micronutrients within daily foods, offering substantial health advantages (Koo et al., 2005). Various techniques, such as nanocomposite formation, nano-emulsification, and nanostructuration, have been employed to encapsulate substances into miniature forms. This approach proves highly effective in delivering nutrients like proteins and antioxidants with precision for targeted nutritional and health benefits. Among the encapsulation methods, polymeric nanoparticles stand out as suitable candidates for safeguarding and transporting bioactive compounds, such as flavonoids and vitamins, to their intended functions (Afkhami et al., 2023).

V. NANOCHEMISTRY IN FOOD PRESERVATION

In the realm of functional foods, where bioactive components are prone to degradation and subsequent inactivation in hostile environments, the practice of nanoencapsulation has emerged as a means to extend the shelf life of food products. This technique achieves this by retarding degradation processes or preventing degradation altogether until the product reaches its intended destination. Additionally, the application of edible nano-coatings onto various food materials can offer a protective barrier against moisture and gas exchange. These coatings can deliver attributes such as colors, flavors, antioxidants, enzymes, anti-browning agents, effectively prolonging the shelf life of manufactured foods, even after the packaging has been opened (Weiss et al., 2006). Encapsulating functional components within droplets often facilitates the deceleration of chemical degradation processes by manipulating the properties of the interfacial layer surrounding them. For instance, curcumin, recognized as the most potent yet least stable bioactive constituent of turmeric (Curcuma longa), exhibited diminished antioxidant activity subsequent to encapsulation. Furthermore, it exhibited stability during pasteurization and under varying ionic strengths (Sari et al., 2015).

VI. NANOTECHNOLOGY IN FOOD PACKAGING

An ideal packaging material should possess a combination of gas and moisture permeability, along with strength and biodegradability (Couch et al., 2016). Nano-enabled 'stylish' food packaging offers numerous benefits compared to traditional packaging approaches. These advantages range from enhanced packaging material with improved mechanical strength and barrier properties to the development of antimicrobial films and nanosensing for pathogen detection, providing consumers with alerts regarding the safety status of food (Mihindukulasuriya and Lim, 2014). The incorporation of nanocomposites as active materials for packaging and coatings holds the potential to enhance food packaging quality (Pinto et al., 2013). Organic compounds with antimicrobial properties, such as essential oils, organic acids, and bacteriocins, have shown utility in polymeric matrices as antimicrobial packaging (Schirmer et al., 2009). Nonetheless, these compounds often prove unsuitable for food processing steps involving high temperatures and pressures due to their sensitivity to these physical conditions. The use of inorganic nanoparticles presents a solution, offering robust antibacterial activity at low concentrations and greater stability under extreme conditions. This has led to the recent utilization of nanoparticles in antimicrobial food packaging. Essentially, antimicrobial packaging constitutes a type of active packaging that interacts with the food product or headspace to inhibit or slow down the microbial growth that might be present on food surfaces (Soares et al., 2009). Numerous nanoparticles, including silver, copper, chitosan, and metal oxide nanoparticles like titanium oxide or zinc oxide, have been identified for their antibacterial properties (Bradley et al., 2011; Tanet al., 2013).

Nanoparticles find application not only in antimicrobial food packaging but also in the realm of food packaging where nanocomposites and nanolaminates play an active role. These innovative materials serve to create a protective shield against extreme thermal and mechanical stresses, thus extending the shelf life of food products. By incorporating nanoparticles into packaging materials, the result is higher quality food with an extended lifespan. The primary objective behind crafting polymer composites is to fashion packing materials that possess enhanced mechanical strength and greater resistance to temperature variations. To achieve this, a variety of inorganic and organic fillers are employed to enhance the properties of polymer composites. The infusion of nanoparticles into polymers has opened up avenues for producing packaging materials that are not only more durable but also economically viable (Sorrentino et al., 2007). The integration of inert nanoscale fillers, such as clay and silicate nanoplatelets, silica (SiO_2) nanoparticles, chitin, or chitosan, into the polymer matrix bestows qualities of reduced weight, increased strength, fire resistance, and improved thermal properties upon the material (Othman, 2014). Another remarkable advancement comes in the form of antimicrobial nanocomposite films. These films are fashioned by embedding fillers, possessing at least one dimension in the nanometric range or comprised of nanoparticles, within the polymers. This integration brings a dual advantage through the enhancement of structural integrity and barrier capabilities (Rhim and Ng, 2007).

VII. PATHOGEN DETECTION USING NANOSENSORS

The utilization of nanomaterials in the construction of biosensors introduces an elevated level of sensitivity and a range of innovative characteristics. Within the domain of food microbiology, nanosensors or nanobiosensors play a pivotal role in detecting pathogens within processing plants and food materials. They also facilitate the quantification of essential food components, enabling the dissemination of safety information to consumers and distributors regarding food products' safety status (Cheng et al., 2006). Nanosensors function as indicators that respond to shifts in environmental conditions, such as humidity or temperature changes within storage facilities, instances of microbial contamination, or the degradation of products (Gulati et al., 2022). A variety of nanostructures, including thin films, nanorods, nanoparticles, and nanofibers, have been explored for their potential applications in biosensors (Gondal et al., 2022). Optical immunosensors based on thin films have proven especially effective for rapidly and highly sensitively detecting microbial substances or cells. These immunosensors involve the immobilization of specific antibodies, antigens, or protein molecules onto thin nano-films or sensor chips, emitting signals upon detecting target molecules (Subramanian, 2006). Nanotechnology also holds promise in pesticide detection (Liu et al., 2008), pathogen identification (Inbaraj and Chen, 2015), and toxin sensing (Palchetti and Mascini, 2008), playing a crucial role in the comprehensive food quality tracking, tracing, and monitoring process.

Carbon nanotube-based biosensors have garnered significant attention due to their ability to swiftly detect target substances, their straightforward operational process, and their cost-effectiveness. These sensors have also demonstrated successful applications in identifying microorganisms, toxins, and degraded products within the realm of food and beverages (Nachay, 2007). By attaching toxin-specific antibodies to these nanotubes, a noticeable alteration in conductivity occurs upon binding to waterborne toxins, enabling their detection (Wang et al., 2009). Moreover, the utilization of an electronic tongue or nose, comprising an array of nanosensors, plays a pivotal role in monitoring the condition of food products. These nanosensors generate signals based on the aromas or gases emitted by various food items, offering insights into their quality (Saini et al., 2023). In the realm of small molecule detection, numerous studies have explored the modification of quartz crystal surfaces with diverse functional groups or biological entities such as amines, enzymes, lipids, and various polymers (Kanazawa and Cho, 2009).

VIII. NANOTECHNOLOGY AND SAFETY CONCERNS

Despite the numerous benefits that nanotechnology offers to the food industry, concerns regarding the safety of nanomaterials cannot be overlooked. Researchers have highlighted potential safety issues, particularly the migration of nanoparticles from packaging materials into food and their potential impact on consumer health (Bradley et al., 2011). Even if a material is considered generally safe (GRAS), additional studies are essential to assess the risks posed by its nano counterparts, as the physiochemical properties at the nanoscale differ significantly from those in larger states. Additionally, the small size of nanomaterials raises concerns about potential bioaccumulation within body organs and tissues (Savolainen et al., 2010). For instance, silica nanoparticles, commonly used as anti-caking agents, have shown cytotoxic effects on human lung cells upon exposure (Athinarayanan et al., 2014). Dissolution of nanomaterials is influenced by factors such as particle surface morphology, concentration, surface energy, aggregation, and adsorption. Researchers, including Cushen et al. (2014), have developed models to study particle migration from food packaging. Their findings indicate that the percentage of nanofiller in nanocomposites is a critical factor driving migration, surpassing particle size, temperature, or contact time. Due to the unique properties of each nanomaterial, toxicity evaluations will likely be determined on a case-by-case basis (Mahler et al., 2012). To address these concerns, regulatory authorities need to establish standards for commercial products that ensure quality, health and safety, and adherence to environmental regulations.

IX. CONCLUSION

Nanochemistry's integration in food science triggers transformative changes across sectors. Operating at the nanoscale, it manipulates atoms, molecules, and macromolecules, yielding unique materials. Addressing food challenges from processing to preservation, nanoparticles play a pivotal role in food processing, packaging, safety, pathogen detection, and shelf life extension. Controlled release of bioactives, enhanced sensory attributes, and modified nutrition exemplify nanochemistry's impact. Nanostructured ingredients enhance shelf life and taste. Packaging with nanoparticles boosts antimicrobial features and structural durability. This technology's harmonious blend of innovation and safety necessitates tailored regulatory measures for quality, health, and compliance. Carbon nanotube-based nanosensors are crucial for food safety, swiftly detecting pathogens with high sensitivity. Safety concerns arise due to potential nanoparticle migration from packaging to food, requiring thorough evaluation. Distinct properties of nanoscale materials and factors like bioaccumulation and cytotoxicity necessitate careful scrutiny. For safe integration of nanochemistry in the food industry, regulatory bodies should set comprehensive standards covering quality, health, safety, and environmental compliance. Balancing innovation with consumer protection demands meticulous evaluation of nanomaterial toxicity case by case and overcoming regulatory challenges.

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