

Original Research

## Nanoliposomal formulation of *Agrostemma githago* aqueous extract shows enhanced cytotoxic effect on gastric cancer cell line

Shahab Bohlooli<sup>1, 2\*</sup>, Parisa Fathi<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Pharmacology, School of Pharmacy, Ardabil University of Medical Sciences, Ardabil, Iran

<sup>2</sup>Drug and Advanced Sciences Research Center, School of Pharmacy, Ardabil University of Medical Sciences, Ardabil, Iran

### Abstract

**Objective(s):** The objective of this study was to determine the cytotoxic effects of nanoliposomal form of lyophilized aqueous extract of *Agrostemma githago* (*A. githago*) seeds on gastric cancer cell line (AGS) using cell viability tests.

**Materials and Methods:** Lyophilized aqueous extract of *A. githago* seeds was prepared. Liposomes were also prepared by thin-film hydration method and their stability and size were characterized by SEM. The size and zeta potential were determined by Malvern Zetasizer. Cytotoxic effects of nanoliposomes on gastric cancer cell line was determined using MTT, Neutral Red and Frame methods.

**Results:** The size of liposomes was around 171.5 nm with proper dispersion (PDI=0.268). The morphology of the liposomes was suitable according to SEM images. The IC<sub>50</sub> values indicated that the nanoliposomal form of extract was 3-4 times more active than extract alone. Average IC<sub>50</sub> values for extract and liposomal form of extract were 13.02 ± 0.95 and 4.43 ± 1.49 µg/ml, respectively.

**Conclusion:** This study showed that liposomal form of aqueous extract of *A. githago* seeds exerts cytotoxic effect at significantly lower concentrations than the extract itself.

**Keywords:** *Agrostemma githago*, Cytotoxicity, Gastric cancer, Nanoliposome

---

\*Corresponding Author: Shahab Bohlooli, Department of Pharmacology, School of Pharmacy, Ardabil University of Medical Sciences, Ardabil, Iran.  
Tel.: +98-45-33523833, E-mail: [shahab.bohlooli@arums.ac.ir](mailto:shahab.bohlooli@arums.ac.ir)

➤ Please cite this paper as:

Bohlooli Sh, Fathi P. Nanoliposomal formulation of *Agrostemma githago* aqueous extract shows enhanced cytotoxic effect on gastric cancer cell line, *Nanomed J*, 2015; 2(1): 21-28.

### Introduction

*Agrostemma githago* L. also known as Corn Cockle which is usually found as weed in grain fields is known to be toxic for both human and animals (1, 2). Its seed extract contains saponins, agrostin, githagin, githagenin and agrostemic acid (3, 4). Studies elsewhere have exhibited that this plant has cytotoxic activity (5) related to a triterpenoid saponin, githagenin and a ribosome-inactivating protein (RIP), agrostin (6, 7). Agrostin is a type 1 RIP and combination with saponin augment its cytotoxic activity (5). This plant also contains flavonoids with cytotoxic (8-10) and antioxidant effects (11-13). Liposomes are vesicles, having stable membranes composed of two layers, firstly were described by British hematologist Dr. Alec D Bangham FRS in 1961 (14) and because of their specific properties have become one of the most important drug carriers (15). Nanoliposomes are nanoscale liposomes that are highly interesting pharmacologically because of their small size, high stability and therefore good tendency for application as drug carrier systems and have widely used as carrier agents in drug delivery systems for cancer chemotherapy (16-18). It is known that nanoparticles have a high tendency to be trapped in the reticuloendothelial system, such as spleen, liver and lung (19).

Using this phenomenon, nanoliposomes could be targeted toward tumor tissues as a strategy for cancer therapy (20).

On the other hand, it is known that the size of liposome is highly related to the stability and encapsulated solute leakage. The smaller the size, the more the stability and less the encapsulated solute might leak out (21). Numerous studies have demonstrated that both hydrophilic and lyophilic chemicals can be encapsulated on liposomes because of their amphipathic characteristics. Encapsulation of plant or animal extracts on liposomes and their application for different purposes such as cancer therapy have been studied.

It was shown that liposomes have suitable ability for entrapment and carrying not only the pure substances, but also the whole extract of a plant or animal (22-24). *A. githago* is used as traditional medicine by Turkish people (25) and also people of north west of Iran for treatment of some diseases. Although there are some studies about cytotoxicity of this plant extract (5), no study has been performed using liposome encapsulated extract. This plant is widely grown in Ardabil province, Iran. Therefore, in this study we investigated in vitro cytotoxic activity of nanoliposomal form of lyophilized extract of *A. githago* on AGS cell line.

### Materials and Methods

#### Materials

All solvents and chemicals were of analytical grade. Lecithin from soybean type IV-SL- $\alpha$ -phosphatidylcholine (PC) was obtained from Sigma Chemical Co. Cholesterol and Rutin were purchased from Merck and used without any further treatment.

#### Plant materials

*A. githago* seeds from suburb area of Ardabil province, North West of Iran were used for preparation of extract. Seeds were collected during the local harvesting season when the seeds were at their best condition and complete ripeness.

#### Preparation of *A. githago* lyophilized extract

Collected seeds were dried and grinded to make fine powder. Definite amount of powder was added into the distilled water and thoroughly mixed and homogenized using an ultrasonic homogenizer (UP200H, Hielscher, Germany) in maximum sonication level for complete cycle of 15 min. Subsequently the mixture was centrifuged and supernatant was collected and allowed to freeze at  $-80^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Afterward, the frozen extract lyophilized by Freeze dryer (ALPHA 2-plus, Martin Christ, Germany) and the residue stored at  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  for later use.

**Preparation of liposomes**

The thin-film hydration method was used for preparation of nanoliposomes (26-28). Lecithin phospholipid (L- $\alpha$ -phosphatidylcholine) was dissolved in chloroform to form the first solution. Cholesterol was also dissolved in chloroform to make the second solution. Two solutions were combined and firmly mixed using a rotator in a final ratio of 4:1 (w/w), respectively. This mixture was evaporated in a rotary evaporator system (Heidolph Germany) connected with a vacuum system and was kept under the lipid transition temperature ( $T_C$ ). Evaporation was performed under the atmosphere of nitrogen to prevent oxidation of phospholipids. This process was performed during 2 hours to remove whole solvents and the result was a thin film. The powder extract of plant was dissolved in distilled water and resultant solution was added to the film container. To improve the hydration process, glass beads (0.5 mm) were added and the mixture was stirred until the film was disappeared. For homogenizing of suspension and producing the nanoscale vesicles, obtained sample was sonicated for 15 minutes using ultrasonic homogenizer (UP200H, Hielischer, Germany). Homogenized suspension was taken under nitrogen atmosphere and was held under lipid transition temperature for 1 h. Then, product was centrifuged using a centrifuge (sigma 3- 30k, Germany) to yield a clear suspension of extract contained nanoliposomes and stored at 4°C until use.

**Characterization of nanoliposomes**

Polydispersity index (PDI), hydrodynamic diameter (size), and zeta potential of nanoliposome were determined by photon correlation spectroscopy using a Malvern Zetasizer (Nano ZS nanoseries, Malvern Instruments, UK). Size, PDI, and zeta potential were obtained at 25 °C using the water as dispersant agent. The data were analyzed using the Malvern software. The morphology of the prepared liposomes was

determined using Scanning Electron microscopy, SEM (LEO 1430VP, Germany and UK).

**Determination of encapsulated amount of extract**

*A. githago* extract contains some flavonoids that were used to determine the entrapment amount on nanoliposomes as an indicator for efficiency of whole extract entrapment.

UV-Vis absorption spectra on 415 nm at 25 °C were measured using a spectrophotometer (PG-Instrument LTD, England) for determination of the total flavonoids loaded on nanoliposomes. Rutin was used as reference flavonoid (29).

The total entrapment amount of plant extract on nanoliposomes was calculated by following formula:

$$\text{Loaded Extract} = \frac{\text{flavonoid}_{\text{total}} - \text{flavonoid}_{\text{remained}}}{\text{flavonoid}_{\text{total}}} \times 100$$

**Cell culture**

The human gastric cancer cell line, AGS, was provided from Pasteur Institute (Tehran, Iran). AGS cells were grown as monolayer culture at 37°C in RPMI-1640 medium (GIBCO, UK) containing 10% (v/v) fetal bovine serum (FBS; GIBCO, UK), penicillin (100 IU/ml) and streptomycin (100 µg/ml). Incubation was performed in a humidified atmosphere of 5% CO<sub>2</sub> in air until confluence. Cells were plated in 96-well plates at a density of 1×10<sup>4</sup> cells per well in 200 µl medium. After incubation for overnight, the medium was removed and cells were treated with a FBS-free medium supplemented with 10 mg/ml prepared extract-loaded nanoliposomes or nanoliposomes (without extract) and or extract (without nanoliposomes), by 1/4 serial dilutions in separate plates. Afterward, plates were incubated for 24 h.

#### ***Cytotoxicity studies by MTT assay***

For performing the MTT (3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide) assay. Four hours before completion of the incubation time, the medium of each well were replaced with 180  $\mu$ l FBS-free medium and 20  $\mu$ l of 2.5 mg/ml MTT (Merck, Germany). Finally, the medium were removed and 200  $\mu$ l DMSO was added to each well. The plates were shaken gently for 10 min by a shaker and the absorbance was measured by a plate reader (Synergy HT, BioTek) at 570 nm. The wells without cells were treated as blank (30).

#### ***Neutral red assay***

Neutral Red Uptake Assay was carried out as stated in our former study (31). Briefly, three hours before the end of the incubation period, the medium was aspirated from each well. Immediately, the working neutral red solution (0.05% of the neutral red stock in cell culture medium without serum) was added to each well and incubated for 3 hours. At the end of incubation time, the neutral red solution was removed and the wells were washed with warm PBS (37 °C). Subsequently, fixative solution (150  $\mu$ l) was added to each well and the absorbance was measured at 540 nm on the plate reader.

#### ***Protein content measurement***

FRAME (Fund for the Replacement of Animals in Medical Experiments) method was used for the determination of protein content using the Comassie protein assay reagent as described previously (31). Briefly, after neutral red uptake assay, the fixative solution was removed from each well and working stain solution (150  $\mu$ l) was added to the wells and the plates were shaken for 20 min. Then, the stain was removed and wash solution (250  $\mu$ l) was added to each well. Wells were washed for two times and desorbing solution (150  $\mu$ l, potassium acetate, 1M, in 70% ethanol) was placed into the wells. Plates were shaken on a

shaker vigorously until a homogenous solution was observed. The absorbance was measured at 595 nm using the plate reader.

#### ***Statistical data analysis***

Half Maximal Inhibitory Concentration (IC<sub>50</sub>) values were calculated using Sigma Plot 11 software. Measurements were triplicate (n = 3 per experimental group) and differences among treatment groups were assessed by Student's t-test. Differences were considered significant at confidence limits of  $p < 0.05$ . Data values for the cell viability study are presented as mean  $\pm$  standard deviation (SD).

### **Results and Discussion**

#### ***Photon correlation spectroscopy***

As it was shown in figure 1, zeta potential of prepared liposomes was -53 mV. Zeta potential value greater than 30 mV (negative or positive) is related with in vitro stability due to the electric repulsion between particles (32) and longer half-life of vesicles in intravascular system (16). Also, it was shown that negative value of zeta potential has a positive correlation with increased entrapment of water soluble pharmaceuticals, which is maximal at -30 mv (33). The average size of liposomes was 171.5 nm (figure 2) which was considered nanoscale based on IUPAC definition (34). PDI value of prepared liposomes was 0.268 (figure 2). It has been stated elsewhere that PDI values less than 0.3 is indicative of a good monodispersity of vesicles (32).

#### ***Scanning electron microscopy (SEM)***

Scanning electron micrographs of prepared liposomes exhibited the size of liposomes that are in nanoscale and this is in agreement with the results of Zetasizer. Also the morphology and size homogeneity of liposomes were in a range compatible with PDI value.

#### ***Entrapment efficiency***

The loaded amount of extract in liposomes was 66%.

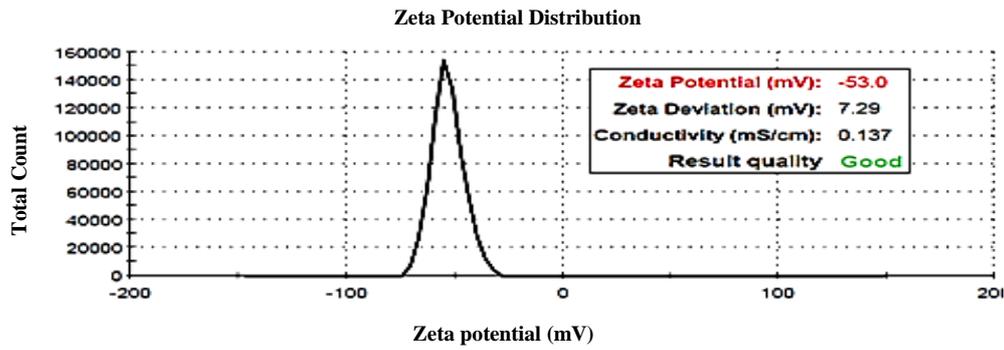


Figure 1. Zeta potential of encapsulated liposomes.

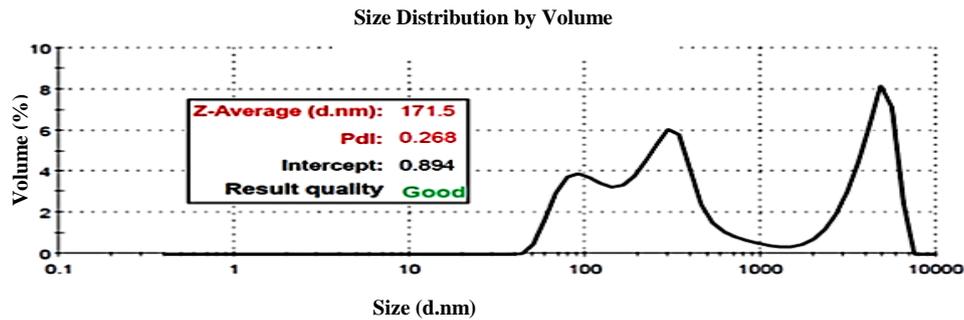


Figure 2. Size and PDI of encapsulated liposomes.

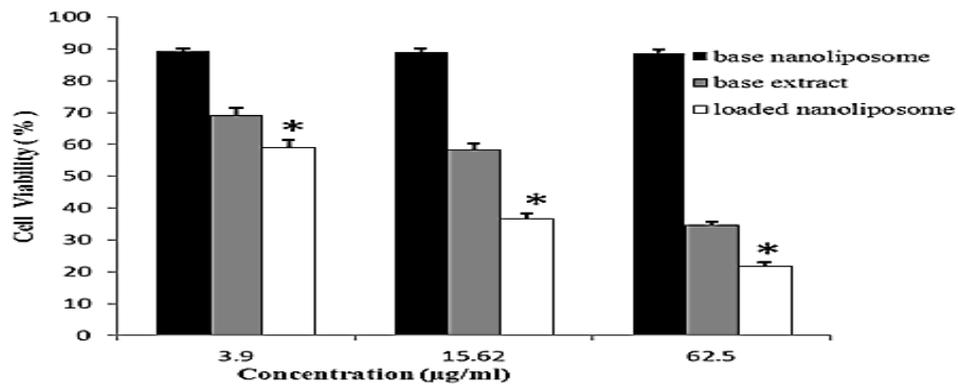


Figure 3. MTT assay of cytotoxic activity of nanoliposomal extract of *A. githago* on AGS cell line after 24 h compared to base extract. Data are presented as mean  $\pm$  SD. (n=3). (\* p < 0.0001 vs. base extract).

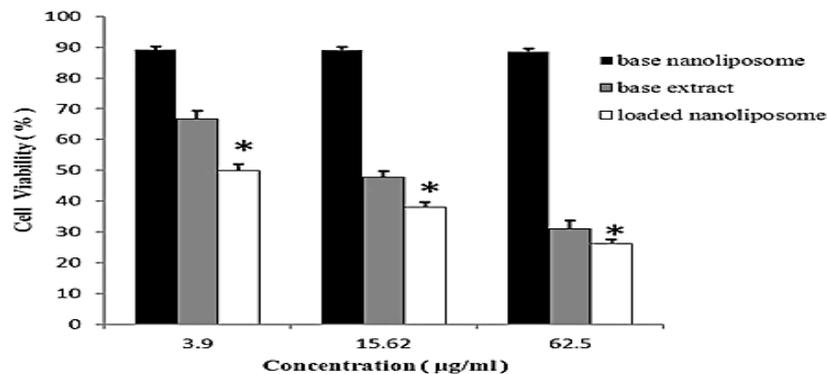
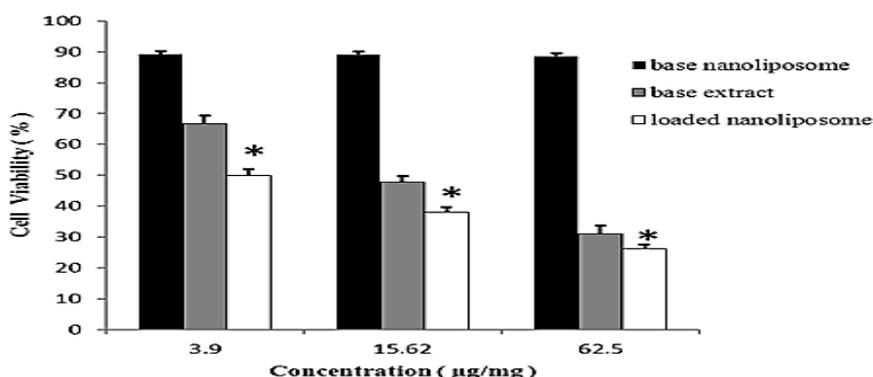


Figure 4. Neutral red assay of cytotoxic activity of nanoliposomal extract of *A. githago* on AGS cell line after 24 h compared to base extract. Data are presented as mean  $\pm$  SD (n=3). (\* p < 0.0001 vs. base extract).

## Nanoliposomal formulation of *Agrostemma githago*



**Figure 5.** Frame assay of cytotoxic activity of nanoliposomal extract of *A. githago* on AGS cell line after 24 h compared to extract. Data are presented as mean  $\pm$  SD (n=3). (\*  $p < 0.0002$  vs. base extract).

This value is assumed satisfactory when compared to previously published data on liposomal drug delivery systems of compounds from herbal origin (35).

### Cytotoxic study

The results of viability studies are shown in figures 3-5. The results demonstrate that encapsulated *A. githago* extract shows significant cytotoxic effect in comparison with the base extract. It could be concluded that the cytotoxic effect of liposomal form of *A. githago* extract on AGS cell line was 3 to 4 times more than the free extract. During the experiments the liposomes without extract were used as control. Table 1 shows the IC<sub>50</sub> values calculated from MTT, neutral red and frame methods after 24 h incubation.

By comparing the IC<sub>50</sub> values for extract and encapsulated extract, it seems that the prepared nanoliposomes are efficient for delivering the active ingredients of the extract to AGS cell line. The two most important compounds of *A. githago* that have cytotoxic effect are agrostin and agrostemma saponin 1 (githagenin). It is known that when these two compounds are used in combination, the toxicity effect enhances by 10,000 fold over that of each (5). The role of saponin is to facilitate the penetration of the non-permeable agrostin through the cell membrane (36). From this point of view, it could be postulated that liposomal encapsulation boosts saponin ability in enhancing the agrostin entrance into the target cells.

**Table 1.** IC<sub>50</sub> values of base and nanoliposomal extract of *A. githago* on gastric cancer cell line after 24 h.

| Samples                | MTT assay (µg/ml) | Neutral Red assay (µg/ml) | Frame assay (µg/ml) | Total IC <sub>50</sub> (µg/ml) |
|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| Base extract (control) | 13.26 $\pm$ 1.31  | 15.29 $\pm$ 0.94          | 10.53 $\pm$ 0.61    | 13.02 $\pm$ 0.95               |
| Loaded nanoliposomes   | 4.3 $\pm$ 0.64*   | 5.6 $\pm$ 0.59**          | 3.41 $\pm$ 0.79***  | 4.43 $\pm$ 1.49                |

Data are presented as mean  $\pm$  S. D. (n=3).

\* $p < 0.0002$  vs. control \*\* $p < 0.0003$  vs. control \*\*\* $p < 0.0003$  vs. control

On the other hand, investigations confirmed that encapsulation of bioactive ingredients in nanoliposomes may enhance their cellular uptake and offer some

advantages such as high metabolic stability, high membrane permeability, improved bioavailability, and longer duration of action (37).

## Conclusion

Nanoliposomal form of lyophilized extract of *A. githago* was prepared and characterized by photon correlation spectroscopy and scanning electron microscopy. Results showed that the liposomes were in nanosized scale with good stability and dispersion. Cytotoxic effect of liposomes on AGS cell line which was determined by MTT, Neutral Red and Frame assays was significantly more than the extract.

## Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the Pasteur Institute, Tehran, Iran for providing the zeta analysis and Ardabil University of Medical Sciences for financial support.

## References

1. Koz O, Bedir E, Masullo M, Alankus-Caliskan O, Piacente S. Triterpene glycosides from *Agrostemma gracilis*. *Phytochemistry*. 2010;71(5-6): 663-668.
2. Malcherek K, Breuer J, Schuphan I, Schmidt B. Metabolism of 4-nitrophenol in aseptically cultivated plants of the species wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.), soybean (*Glycine max* L.), wild oat (*Avena fatua* L.) and corn cockle (*Agrostemma githago* L.). *J Plant Physiol*. 1998; 153(1-2): 192-199.
3. Kollmann J, Bassin S. Effects of management on seed predation in wildflower strips in northern Switzerland. *Agric Ecosyst Environ*. 2001; 83(3): 285-296.
4. Siepman C, Bader G, Hiller K, Wray V, Domke T, Nimtz M. New saponins from the seeds of *Agrostemma githago* var. *githago*. *Planta Medica*. 1998; 64(2): 159-164.
5. Hebestreit P, Melzig MF. Cytotoxic activity of the seeds from *Agrostemma githago* var. *githago*. *Planta Medica*. 2003; 69(10): 921-925.
6. Heisler I, Sutherland M, Bachran C, Hebestreit P, Schnitger A, Melzig MF, et al. Combined application of saponin and chimeric toxins drastically enhances the targeted cytotoxicity on tumor cells. *J Control Release*. 2005; 106(1-2): 123-137.
7. Hebestreit P, Weng A, Bachran C, Fuchs H, Melzig MF. Enhancement of cytotoxicity of lectins by Saponinum album. *Toxicon*. 2006; 47(3): 330-335.
8. Ueda S, Nakamura H, Masutani H, Sasada T, Takabayashi A, Yamaoka Y, et al. Baicalin induces apoptosis via mitochondrial pathway as prooxidant. *Mol Immunol*. 2002; 38(10): 781-791.
9. Heim KE, Tagliaferro AR, Bobilya DJ. Flavonoid antioxidants: chemistry, metabolism and structure-activity relationships. *J Nutr Biochem*. 2002; 13(10): 572-584.
10. Ismail N, Alam M. A novel cytotoxic flavonoid glycoside from *Physalis angulata*. *Fitoterapia*. 2001; 72(6): 676-679.
11. Hodek P, Trefil P, Stiborová M. Flavonoids-potent and versatile biologically active compounds interacting with cytochromes P450. *Chem Biol Interact*. 2002; 139(1): 1-21.
12. Agati G, Azzarello E, Pollastri S, Tattini M. Flavonoids as antioxidants in plants: Location and functional significance. *Plant Sci*. 2012; 196: 67-76.
13. Williams RJ, Spencer JPE, Rice-Evans C. Flavonoids: Antioxidants or signalling molecules? *Free Radic Biol Med*. 2004; 36(7): 838-849.
14. Mozafari MR. Nanoliposomes: preparation and analysis. *Methods Mol Biol*. 2010; 605: 29-50.
15. Sharma A, Sharma US. Liposomes in drug delivery: Progress and limitations. *Int J Pharm*. 1997; 154(2): 123-140.
16. Gabizon AA. Liposome circulation time and tumor targeting: Implications for cancer chemotherapy. *Adv Drug Deliver Rev*. 1995; 16(2-3): 285-294.
17. Sun NF, Meng QY, Tian AL, Hu SY, Wang RH, Liu ZX, et al. Nanoliposome-mediated FL/TRAIL double-gene therapy for colon cancer: In vitro and in vivo evaluation. *Cancer Lett*. 2012; 315(1): 69-77.
18. Huang FYJ, Lee TW, Kao CHK, Chang CH, Zhang X, Lee WY, et al. Imaging, autoradiography, and biodistribution of <sup>188</sup>Re-labeled PEGylated nanoliposome in orthotopic glioma bearing rat model. *Cancer Biother Radiopharm*. 2011; 26(6): 717-725.
19. Zhang LJ, Xing B, Wu J, Xu B, Fang XL. Biodistribution in mice and severity of damage in rat lungs following pulmonary delivery of 9-nitrocamptothecin liposomes. *Pulm Pharmacol Ther*. 2008; 21(1): 239-246.
20. Ma J, Guan R, Shen H, Lu F, Xiao C, Liu M, et al. Comparison of anticancer activity between lactoferrin nanoliposome and

## Nanoliposomal formulation of *Agrostemma githago*

- lactoferrin in Caco-2 cells in vitro. *Food Chem Toxicol.* 2013; 59: 72-77.
21. Chen C, Han D, Cai C, Tang X. An overview of liposome lyophilization and its future potential. *J Control Release.* 2010; 142(3): 299-311.
  22. Bisht S, Feldmann G, Soni S, Ravi R, Karikar C, Maitra A. Polymeric nanoparticle-encapsulated curcumin ("nanocurcumin"): A novel strategy for human cancer therapy. *J Nanobiotechnology.* 2007; 5. doi:10.1186/1477-3155-5-3.
  23. Kong B, Zhang H, Xiong YL. Antioxidant activity of spice extracts in a liposome system and in cooked pork patties and the possible mode of action. *Meat Sci.* 2010; 85(4): 772-778.
  24. Basomba A, Tabar AI, De Rojas DHF, García BE, Alamar R, Olaguibel JM, et al. Allergen vaccination with a liposome-encapsulated extract of *Dermatophagoides pteronyssinus*: A randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial in asthmatic patients. *J Allergy Clin Immunol.* 2002; 109(6): 943-948.
  25. Avci G, Kupeli E, Eryavuz A, Yesilada E, Kucukkurt I. Antihypercholesterolaemic and antioxidant activity assessment of some plants used as remedy in Turkish folk medicine. *J Ethnopharmacol.* 2006; 107(3): 418-423.
  26. Yoshie M, Masayuki N, Tsuneji N. Surface potential of liposomes with entrapped insulin. *Int J Pharm.* 1990; 64(2-3): 89-98.
  27. Muramatsu K, Maitani Y, Machida Y, Nagai T. Effect of soybean-derived sterol and its glucoside mixtures on the stability of dipalmitoylphosphatidylcholine and dipalmitoylphosphatidylcholine/cholesterol liposomes. *Int J Pharm.* 1994; 107(1): 1-8.
  28. Park SN, Lee MH, Kim SJ, Yu ER. Preparation of quercetin and rutin-loaded ceramide liposomes and drug-releasing effect in liposome-in-hydrogel complex system. *Biochem Biophys Res Commun.* 2013; 435(3): 361-366.
  29. Kumaran A, Joel Karunakaran R. In vitro antioxidant activities of methanol extracts of five *Phyllanthus* species from India. *LWT-Food Sci Technol.* 2007; 40(2): 344-352.
  30. Bohlooli S, Jafari N, Jahed S. Cytotoxic effect of freeze-dried extract of *Ecballium elaterium* fruit on gastric adenocarcinoma (AGS) and esophageal squamous cell carcinoma (KYSE30) cell lines. *J Gastrointest Cancer.* 2012; 43(4): 579-583.
  31. Jafari N, Bohlooli S, Mohammadi S, Mazani M. Cytotoxicity of methylsulfonylmethane on gastrointestinal (AGS, HepG2, and KEYSE-30) cancer cell lines. *J Gastrointest Cancer.* 2012; 43(3): 420-425.
  32. Chen Y, Wu Q, Zhang Z, Yuan L, Liu X, Zhou L. Preparation of curcumin-loaded liposomes and evaluation of their skin permeation and pharmacodynamics. *Molecules.* 2012; 17(5): 5972-5987.
  33. Sou K. Electrostatics of carboxylated anionic vesicles for improving entrapment capacity. *Chem Phys Lipids.* 2011; 164(3): 211-215.
  34. Vert M, Doi Y, Hellwich K-H, Hess M, Hodge P, Kubisa P, et al. Terminology for biorelated polymers and applications. *Pure Appl Chem.* 2012; 84(2): 377-410.
  35. Munin A, Edwards-Levy F. Encapsulation of natural polyphenolic compounds; a review. *Pharmaceutics.* 2011; 3(4): 793-829.
  36. M.A. L-D, Wagner H. Saponins. In: Rahman A-U-, editor. *Studies in Natural Products Chemistry Series.* Netherland: Elsevier; 2000. p. 633-687.
  37. Onoue S, Yamada S, Chan HK. Nanodrugs: pharmacokinetics and safety. *Int J Nanomedicine.* 2014; 9: 1025-1037.