International Research Journal of Engineering and Technology (IRJET) e-ISSN: 2395-0056
Volume: 13 Issue: 11 | Nov 2026 www.irjet.net p-ISSN: 2395-0072

Preparing a Baicalin-Loaded Microemulsion-Based Gel for Transdermal Delivery and Evaluating Its Anti-Gout Effect

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Abstract - *Baicalin is a flavonoid glycoside obtained mainly from the roots of Scutellaria baicalensis. It has documented anti-inflammatory and antioxidant activities and has been investigated in gout-related inflammatory models. Its pharmaceutical development is constrained by physicochemical and pharmacokinetic limitations, including poor aqueous solubility and extensive metabolism after oral administration. Microemulsion-based microemulsions with gels combine the solubilization and penetration-enhancing properties of the residence time and handling advantages of a gel matrix. The most directly relevant evidence is the 2024 study by Wang et al., which developed and optimized a baicalin-loaded microemulsion-based gel using design-of-experiments approaches, Franz diffusion testing, skin-irritation studies, and mouse gout models. The optimized system contained phosphate buffer, ethyl oleate, Tween 80, glycerin, borneol, clove oil and xanthan gum. The reported particle size was approximately 15.7 nm, and cumulative permeation after 12 h was approximately 672 μg/cm². Topical treatment reduced inflammatory and edema-related outcomes in acute gout models without significant observed skin irritation. [1] This review places that formulation study in the wider context of transdermal delivery and then connects formulation development to analytical quality control. Green Analytical Chemistry (GAC) aims to reduce solvent hazard, sample size, waste, energy demand and unnecessary analytical operations while retaining fit-for-purpose analytical performance. Current tools include NEMI, Analytical Eco-Scale, GAPI, AGREE and AGREEprep. Recent literature increasingly emphasizes green liquid chromatography, miniaturization, alternative solvents, automation, digitalization and lifecycle thinking. [12–17]*

Key Words: Baicalin; gouty arthritis; microemulsion; microemulsion-based gel; transdermal drug delivery; Franz diffusion cell; anti-inflammatory activity; HPLC; green analytical chemistry; AGREE; GAPI; pharmaceutical analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Gout is an inflammatory arthritis associated with deposition of monosodium urate (MSU) crystals in joints and surrounding tissues. Acute attacks are characterized by intense inflammation, swelling, warmth and pain. Inflammatory signaling involving innate immune pathways, including NLRP3-associated mechanisms and downstream cytokines such as interleukin-1β, contributes to the acute response. The local nature of an acute gout flare makes topical or transdermal approaches conceptually attractive for localized anti-inflammatory therapy, although tissue penetration and target-site exposure must be demonstrated rather than assumed.

Conventional pharmacotherapy for gout commonly includes anti-inflammatory medicines and urate-lowering strategies. Oral administration can be effective but may be limited by gastrointestinal exposure, systemic adverse effects, variable absorption and first-pass metabolism for suitable compounds.

The literature on transdermal systems for gout includes nanostructured lipid carriers, microemulsion-based systems and other topical approaches, demonstrating continuing interest in localized delivery. [7–9]

Baicalin is particularly interesting because it combines anti-inflammatory activity with a natural-product origin. However, natural origin does not automatically mean superior safety or bioavailability. Formulation science is therefore necessary to address solubility, partitioning, skin permeability, dose uniformity and stability.

The central question for a modern formulation project is not simply whether baicalin has biological activity, but whether a reproducible formulation can deliver a sufficient and controlled amount of baicalin to relevant tissue while remaining stable, non-irritant, analytically measurable and manufacturable.

2. Baicalin: Source, Chemistry and Pharmacological Ratinol:

Baicalin is a flavone glycoside and a major bioactive constituent associated with Scutellaria baicalensis. Reviews describe anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, antimicrobial and other pharmacological activities. Its structure contains multiple hydroxyl groups and a glucuronic-acid-associated sugar moiety, contributing to polarity and influencing membrane partitioning. [3–6] From a formulation perspective, the same structural features that support aqueous interactions can limit passive passage across the

highly lipophilic stratum corneum. Baicalin also undergoes gastrointestinal hydrolysis and metabolic transformation, which can complicate oral exposure. Nanocarriers and lipid-based systems have consequently been investigated to improve apparent solubilization, absorption and delivery. [3,4]

The transdermal route presents a different set of constraints. A candidate should have adequate potency, stability, suitable molecular properties and a formulation capable of maintaining thermodynamic activity without damaging the skin barrier. Microemulsio skin surface, while a gel matrix can improve residence time and application characteristics.:

3.Gouty Arthritis and Anti-Gout Mechanisms Relevant to Baicalin:

MSU crystals activate innate immune responses in susceptible tissues. The NLRP3 inflammasome is an important inflammatory platform associated with processing of IL-1β and IL-18. Experimental work cited by the B-MEG study links baicalin with suppression of MSU-associated inflammatory signaling. In RAW264.7 macrophage experiments, baicalin was investigated for effects on NLRP3 and inflammatory cytokines. [20] The 2024 B-MEG study used acute gout models and reported reductions in paw inflammation, swelling and inflammatory-cell infiltration. The authors suggested that suppression of NLRP3 inflammasome activation and IL-1β production could contribute to the observed activity. [1] Mechanistic interpretation should nevertheless remain appropriately cautious. Reduction of swelling or histological inflammation demonstrates pharmacological activity in the model, but it does not establish the complete molecular mechanism in humans. Follow-up studies should measure validated biomarkers directly, use appropriate positive controls and distinguish anti-inflammatory activity from general analgesic or nonspecific effects.

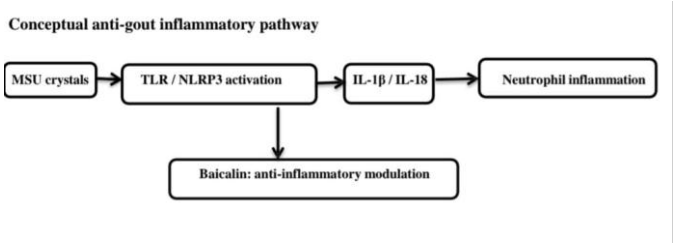


Figure1: Conceptual anti-gout inflammatory pathway

Figure 1. Simplified conceptual pathway linking MSU-triggered inflammation with possible baicalin-mediated modulation. Schematic is original; concepts supported by refs. [1,20].

Potential endpoints: paw/ear edema; inflammatory score; IL-1β; IL-18; TNF-α; NLRP3; caspase-1; oxidative-stress markers; histopathology; tissue baicalin concentration.

4. Transdermal Drug Delivery: Opportunities and Barriers:

The stratum corneum is the principal barrier to transdermal transport. Drug movement depends on diffusion, partitioning into and across skin domains, formulation thermodynamics, molecular properties, vehicle composition and skin condition. Transdermal delivery can avoid gastrointestinal exposure and first-pass metabolism, but it cannot overcome the barrier without appropriate molecular and formulation design. [10,11]

Microemulsion systems are particularly useful when a drug has poor solubility or requires a vehicle that can interact with both aqueous and lipid domains. Their small dispersed domains, large interfacial area and surfactant/co-surfactant environment can improve apparent solubilization and facilitate skin contact. However, high surfactant concentrations can potentially irritate skin, so formulation optimization must balance delivery with tolerability.

The gel component can increase viscosity, reduce run-off and improve residence at the application site. It may also alter release kinetics. The B-MEG study showed this trade-off experimentally: the microemulsion without gel had higher cumulative permeation, while the gel improved skin retention; penetration enhancers improved the permeation of the gelled system. [1]

B-MEGSchematic skin barrier and transdermal pathway

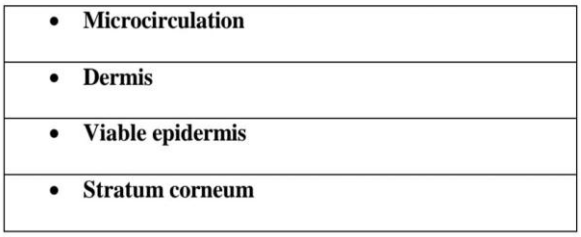


Figure2: B-MEGSchematic skin barrier and transdermal pathway

5. Microemulsion-Based Gel: Components and Function

Table -1: Components and Function

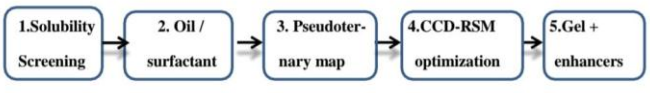
	Role	Rlevant consideration
Baicalin	Active phytochemical	Solubility, stability, assay, dose uniformity
Ethyl oleate	Oil phase	Drug solubilization and interfacial behavior
Tween 80	Surfactant	Interfacial stabilization; concentration must be optimized
Glycerin	Co-surfactant/humectant role	Influences phase behavior and skin hydration May modify skin barrier and sensory properties
Borneol	Permeantion enhancer	May modify skin barrier and sensory properties
Clove oil	Permeantion enhancer /functional excipient	Potential irritation and variability require control
Xanthan gum	Gel-forming polymer	Viscosity, retention and release control
Phosphate buffer	Aqueous phase /pH control	pH, compatibility and stability

The published B-MEG formulation used 50% pH 7.4 phosphate-buffered saline, 4.48% ethyl oleate, 31.64% Tween 80, 13.88% glycerin, 2% borneol, 0.5% clove oil and 0.5% xanthan gum. Its reported baicalin content was 10.42 ± 0.08 mg/g and particle size was 15.71 ± 0.41 nm. [1]

These values are literature benchmarks, not automatically optimal values for every laboratory. Any replication should independently confirm raw-material grades, analytical purity, phase behavior, process conditions and critical quality attributes.

6. Formulation Development and Optimization:

A rational development strategy begins with preformulation. Baicalin solubility should be screened in candidate oils, surfactants and co-surfactants. Compatibility studies can identify excipients that cause precipitation, phase separation or loss of assay response. Pseudo-ternary phase diagrams can then be used to identify microemulsion regions. [1,2]



Outputs: size • PDI • pH • viscosity • drug content • permeation

Figure no 3: Suggested formulation-development workflow

The 2024 study used central composite design-response surface methodology (CCD-RSM) to optimize key formulation factors and a split-plot design to screen gel matrices and permeation enhancers. This is important because formulation variables interact: changing surfactant concentration may alter droplet size, drug loading, viscosity and skin flux simultaneously. [1] A future study can strengthen this approach by defining critical quality attributes (CQAs) before optimization. Suggested CQAs include particle size, polydispersity index, pH, viscosity, drug content, physical stability, release rate, cumulative permeation, skin retention and irritation score.

7. Physicochemical Characterization:

A comprehensive characterization package is essential for a microemulsion-based gel. Particle size and PDI provide information about dispersion characteristics. pH should be compatible with the intended skin application. Viscosity influences spreadability, residence time and release. Drug content and content uniformity demonstrate dose consistency. FTIR can be used to investigate major functional-group changes and potential drug–excipient interactions. The 2024 B-MEG study compared baicalin, blank microemulsion gel and B-MEG spectra. [1] Additional techniques such as DSC, XRD, rheology, microscopy and zeta potential may be useful depending on the formulation and research question.

8. In Vitro and Ex Vivo Drug Release / Skin Permeation:

Franz diffusion cells are widely used to evaluate topical and transdermal formulations. A formulation is placed in the donor compartment, skin or a membrane separates the donor and receptor phases, and receptor samples are collected at defined intervals for quantitative analysis. [10,11]

The 2024 B-MEG study evaluated permeation over 12 h. The optimized B-MEG with enhancers achieved approximately 672.14 ± 44.11 μg/cm² cumulative permeation, compared with approximately 252.26 ± 56.73 μg/cm² for B-MEG without enhancers; the microemulsion without gel showed higher permeation but lower skin retention. [1]

Important parameters include receptor temperature, membrane/skin type, exposed area, donor dose, receptor composition, sink conditions, sampling schedule and analytical method. Recent literature also highlights the need to optimize in vitro permeation studies and to consider human skin equivalents and advanced models as complementary tools. [10,11].

9. Skin Retention, Irritation and Safety:

For a localized gout application, the amount retained in skin and relevant tissue may be as important as the amount appearing in the receptor compartment. The B-MEG study reported increased skin retention after gel incorporation. This illustrates that a formulation can be designed to favor local residence rather than maximal systemic passage. [1]

Skin irritation should be assessed using predefined scoring criteria. In the published study, single and multiple applications to intact and damaged guinea-pig skin did not produce significant observed irritation, and irritation scores were reported as zero at assessed time points. [1]

For future development, safety assessment should be expanded beyond short-term gross irritation. Depending on the stage of development, repeated-dose dermal tolerance, sensitization potential, excipient exposure, phototoxicity where relevant, microbial quality and preservative effectiveness may be considered. Human translation also requires attention to variability in skin thickness, hydration, age, disease state and application behavior

Key principle: improved permeation is not automatically an improvement. The desired exposure profile must be defined first local skin retention, periarticular exposure, or systemic delivery and the formulation optimized accordingly

10. In Vivo Anti-Gout Evaluation:

The B-MEG study evaluated anti-inflammatory and analgesic effects using mouse models and an acute gout model. It reported significant reductions in ear swelling and writhing responses in general inflammatory/analgesic assays, and reductions in paw inflammation and swelling after MSU-induced gout. Histological assessment showed reduced inflammatory-cell infiltration compared with the model group. [1]

A robust future study should predefine experimental groups: normal control, disease/model control, vehicle control, reference treatment, low-dose B-MEG and high-dose B-MEG. Randomization and blinded outcome assessment should be used where practical. Sample-size justification and appropriate statistical models are important for reproducibility.

Mechanistic evaluation can include IL-1β, IL-18, TNF-α, NLRP3, caspase-1 and oxidative-stress endpoints. Tissue drug concentration measurements can connect formulation performance with pharmacological exposure. Network pharmacology or molecular docking may be useful hypothesis-generating tools, but experimental validation remains necessary. Interpretive limitation: animal efficacy demonstrates proof of concept, not clinical effectiveness. The route, dose, disease model, skin characteristics and pharmacokinetics may differ substantially from human gout.

11. Analytical Requirements for Baicalin-Loaded B-MEG:

Analytical testing is central to every stage of formulation development. A suitable assay should quantify baicalin accurately in raw material, formulation, release samples, receptor fluid and where needed skin extracts. Specificity becomes particularly important when surfactants, oils, plant-related impurities, degradation products and biological matrices are present. HPLC is a common choice because it can provide selectivity and quantitative performance. However, conventional HPLC methods can consume substantial volumes of organic solvent. This creates an opportunity to redesign the analytical procedure according to green analytical chemistry principles without compromising validation requirements. ICH Q2(R2) provides a current framework for analytical procedure validation, covering characteristics such as accuracy, precision, specificity, detection/quantitation limits where applicable, linearity and range. ICH Q14 complements this by describing science- and risk-based analytical procedure development.

12. Conclusion:

Baicalin is a scientifically interesting natural flavonoid for anti-inflammatory and gout-related research, but its pharmaceutical limitations make delivery-system design important. Microemulsion-based gels provide a rational platform because they can combine solubilization, interfacial contact, skin permeation enhancement and prolonged residence. The strongest direct evidence currently available is the 2024 B-MEG study, which reported an optimized baicalin-loaded microemulsion gel with nanoscale particle size, measurable transdermal permeation, increased skin retention, no significant observed irritation in its model and significant anti-inflammatory effects in acute mouse gout models. [1] The existence of this publication means that a new academic project should avoid presenting the basic B-MEG concept as entirely unreported. A stronger contribution is to reproduce and critically extend the system, especially through greener analytical method development, systematic sustainability assessment, improved mechanistic endpoints, advanced permeation models and stronger stability/scale-up evaluation. Green Analytical Chemistry offers a practical framework for reducing the environmental burden of pharmaceutical analysis. NEMI, Analytical Eco-Scale, GAPI, AGREE and AGREEprep provide complementary ways to identify weaknesses and document improvements. However, greenness must remain coupled to analytical fitness, validation and regulatory expectations. [13–19] Overall, the literature supports a multidisciplinary development pathway in which formulation science, transdermal biopharmaceutics, anti-inflammatory pharmacology and

sustainable analytical chemistry are designed together rather than as separate activities.

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BIOGRAPHIES



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