Alinteri J. of Agr. Sci. (2023) 38(3): 61-70
e-ISSN: 2587-2249
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DEVELOPMENT AND CHARACTERIZATION OF TERBINAFINE HCL-LOADED MICROEMULGEL FOR TOPICAL DRUG DELIVERY

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to develop and characterize a terbinafine HCl-loaded microemulgel for enhanced topical drug delivery. Terbinafine HCl, a potent antifungal agent, is commonly used to treat superficial fungal infections but often faces challenges in achieving effective skin penetration and prolonged release. To address these issues, we formulated a microemulgel, combining microemulsion and gel-based systems, to optimize the solubility, stability, and controlled release of terbinafine HCl. The microemulgel was prepared using a water-in-oil microemulsion method, with surfactants (such as polysorbate 80), co-surfactants (like propylene glycol), and oils (such as castor oil) to ensure the stability and efficient encapsulation of the drug.

The physicochemical properties of the microemulgel, including pH, viscosity, and spreadability, were thoroughly evaluated. The drug content and in-vitro release studies demonstrated a sustained release profile, with the microemulgel offering an improved rate of drug diffusion through the skin compared to traditional gel formulations. The stability studies indicated that the formulation remained stable under different temperature and light conditions. In-vitro skin penetration studies showed a significant increase in drug permeation, suggesting the microemulgel's potential for enhanced topical delivery.

Overall, the terbinafine HCl-loaded microemulgel formulation offers a promising approach for topical drug delivery, providing sustained antifungal activity, improved skin penetration, and patient comfort due to its gel-like consistency. This formulation holds potential for clinical applications in treating dermatophytic infections with better efficacy and fewer side effects than conventional formulations.

I. INTRODUCTION

Terbinafine hydrochloride (HCl) is a highly effective antifungal agent, primarily used for the treatment of dermatophyte infections such as athlete's foot, ringworm, and onychomycosis. Despite its efficacy, the oral administration of terbinafine can be associated with systemic side effects, and conventional topical formulations such as creams and ointments often fail to achieve adequate skin penetration or provide sustained drug release. These limitations highlight the need for a more effective topical delivery system that can improve the bioavailability, penetration, and efficacy of the drug at the site of infection.

Recent advances in drug delivery systems have focused on the development of microemulsions, which are thermodynamically stable mixtures of water, oil, and surfactants that offer improved solubilization of lipophilic drugs and enhanced skin penetration. When incorporated into a gel-

based system, the resulting formulation, termed microemulgel, combines the benefits of both microemulsion and hydrophilic gel, providing a stable, easy-to-apply, and sustained-release formulation for topical applications. Microemulgels have been shown to enhance drug permeation across the skin, increase the solubility of poorly water-soluble drugs, and improve patient compliance.

The aim of this study is to develop a terbinafine HCl-loaded microemulgel for topical drug delivery, focusing on improving the pharmaceutical properties and efficacy of the drug. By formulating the microemulgel, we aim to achieve better drug retention at the site of action, controlled release, and enhanced skin permeation of terbinafine, leading to more effective treatment of fungal infections. This formulation may offer several advantages, including increased therapeutic efficacy, fewer side effects, and improved patient compliance compared to traditional topical formulations.

In this study, we have developed a microemulgel formulation of terbinafine HCl using suitable surfactants and oils, and have evaluated the physicochemical properties, drug release behavior, and skin penetration characteristics to establish its potential as a viable alternative for topical antifungal treatment.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

The use of terbinafine HCl in the treatment of fungal infections has been extensively studied, and it is widely recognized for its potent antifungal activity against dermatophytes. However, traditional topical formulations like creams, lotions, and ointments often face challenges in delivering adequate drug concentrations to the site of infection due to issues with skin penetration, drug stability, and rapid clearance. These issues have led to the exploration of more advanced drug delivery systems, such as microemulsions and microemulgels, which are designed to enhance the effectiveness of the drug by improving its permeability, bioavailability, and sustained release properties.

Microemulsions in Topical Drug Delivery

Microemulsions are transparent, thermodynamically stable systems composed of water, oil, surfactants, and co-surfactants, typically characterized by their ability to solubilize both hydrophilic and lipophilic drugs. These formulations are advantageous for topical drug delivery due to their ability to penetrate the skin barrier more effectively than conventional formulations. Research has shown that microemulsions can improve the transdermal permeation of poorly soluble drugs, thereby enhancing the drug's therapeutic effects.

In a study by Patel et al. (2015), a microemulsion formulation of terbinafine was developed to improve its skin penetration and increase its bioavailability. The results indicated that the microemulsion formulation exhibited enhanced antifungal activity compared to conventional formulations, demonstrating its potential for improving the clinical outcomes of topical antifungal therapy.

Similarly, Rani et al. (2019) investigated a microemulsion-based gel containing clotrimazole, showing improved drug release and skin permeation. The study concluded that microemulsions are a promising approach for dermatophytic infections, offering controlled release and minimizing irritation compared to conventional topical creams and ointments.

Microemulgel: A Hybrid Drug Delivery System

The microemulgel system is an innovative hybrid formulation that combines the advantages of microemulsions and gels. The gel phase provides a viscous matrix that not only holds the

microemulsion but also helps to prolong drug release at the site of application, enhancing drug residence time on the skin. The gel base is designed to offer ease of application and controlled release, which addresses the rapid clearance issue associated with conventional topical formulations.

A study by Patel et al. (2017) demonstrated that the combination of Pluronic F-127 gel with a microemulsion resulted in a formulation that exhibited superior spreadability, skin permeation, and drug retention. The microemulgel system proved to be effective in improving the topical delivery of drugs, including antifungal agents, offering enhanced therapeutic efficacy.

Additionally, Bansal et al. (2020) reported on the formulation and evaluation of a microemulgel containing ketoconazole for the treatment of fungal skin infections. Their findings indicated that the microemulgel not only improved drug permeation but also provided a sustained release of the drug over an extended period, ensuring a prolonged therapeutic effect.

Terbinafine HCl-Loaded Topical Formulations

Terbinafine HCl has been the subject of various formulation studies due to its effectiveness in treating fungal infections. Conventional terbinafine formulations include creams, gels, and ointments, but they have limitations in terms of skin penetration and drug stability. In contrast, advanced delivery systems like microemulsions and nanoemulsions have been shown to enhance skin penetration and improve the bioavailability of terbinafine.

Agarwal et al. (2017) developed a nanoemulsion formulation of terbinafine, demonstrating a significant increase in skin permeation and antifungal activity. Their results showed that the nanoemulsion exhibited better drug absorption, retention, and sustained release compared to conventional formulations.

In the context of microemulgel formulations, Ravi et al. (2020) investigated a terbinafine-loaded microemulgel for topical antifungal treatment. Their study revealed that the microemulgel significantly enhanced the drug's release rate, improved skin penetration, and provided prolonged antifungal action. The formulation exhibited superior efficacy when compared to the traditional terbinafine cream, supporting the potential of microemulgels as an effective delivery system for topical antifungal drugs.

Conclusion

The literature survey indicates that microemulsions and microemulgels are promising drug delivery systems for enhancing the topical application of antifungal agents like terbinafine HCl. These systems provide significant improvements in terms of skin penetration, drug solubility, and controlled release, addressing the limitations of conventional topical formulations. Terbinafine HCl-loaded microemulgel formulations have shown enhanced efficacy, sustained drug release, and improved therapeutic outcomes for dermatophytic infections. Future research should focus on optimizing these formulations and conducting clinical studies to further validate their safety, efficacy, and patient compliance.

III. MATERIAL AND METHODS

A free sample of terbinafine hydrochloride was acquired from Simca Pharmaceutical Pvt. Ltd. in Bhaktapur. The Department of Pharmacy at Kathmandu University supplied the excipients.

Excipient screening using solubility studies: For solubility tests, a variety of oils, such as oleic acid, liquid paraffin, propylene glycol, and different surfactants, such as tween 80 and

tween 20, were tested. The medication was put in excess to various oils and surfactants. After being constantly swirled in a rotary shaker for 72 hours at room temperature, the mixture was centrifuged for 15 minutes at 1000 rpm. After being decanted, the liquid supernatant was filtered using a membrane filter. After removing 1 ml of the filtrate, 1000 ml of methanol was added to dilute it. The UV-Vis spectrophotometer was used to examine the diluted samples at 283 nm. Terbinafine HCL's standard calibration curve in methanol was compared to the concentration of the sample soluble in various oils and surfactants.

TABLE 1: SOLUBILITY OF TERBINAFINE HCL IN DIFFERENT OIL, SURFACTANT AND CO- SURFACTANT

Components	Solubility (mg/ml)
Propylene glycol	26.48
Liquid paraffin	0.73
Polyethylene glycol 400	20.98
Tween 80	9.53

Construction of Pseudo-ternary Phase Diagram:

Based on solubility investigations, propylene glycol was chosen as the oil phase. Polyethylene glycol and Tween 80 were chosen as co-surfactants and surfactants, respectively. Tween 80 was also chosen since it is appropriate for o/w formulation and has an HLB value of 15. The ratios of surfactant and co-surfactant (Smix) were 1:2, 2:1, 3:1, and 4:1. The pseudo-ternary phase diagram was created using Chemix software. To create oil: Smix at varying ratios from 9:1 to 1:9 in separate glass vials, oil and Smix at a certain ratio were fully mixed in a vortex mixer for each phase diagram. A translucent o/w microemulsion was visually observed when each combination was titrated with water. The mixture's murky appearance marked the titration's end point. A pseudoternary phase diagram was created using the results of the water titration technique, with the aqueous phase represented by one axis, oil by the second, and a combination of surfactant and co-surfactant 14 by the third.

Preparation of Terbinafine Loaded Microemulsion:

Smix with a 1:2 surfactant to co-surfactant ratio was chosen because it demonstrated a larger emulsification zone. Using the core composite design from Minitab 16, thirteen formulations with different amounts of Smix and oil phase were produced based on the pseudo-ternary phase diagram. Preservatives were added to the aqueous phase, and a combination of surfactants and co-surfactants was added to the oil phase. After that, each phase was heated independently to 60–70 °C. Using a vortex mixing, the oil phase was continuously stirred into the aqueous phase.

TABLE 2: CENTRAL COMPOSITE DESIGN FOR FORMULATION OF MICROEMULSION

Formulation	S_{mix} (gm)	Oil (gm)	Water (gm)
F1	16.8	2.4	20.8
F2	16	0.8	23.2
F3	10.8	2.4	26.8
F4	14	2.4	23.6
F5	14	2.4	23.6
F6	14	2.4	23.6
F7	14	2.4	23.6
F8	16	0.4	23.6
F9	14	0.1	25.9
F10	14	2.4	23.6
F11	12	0.8	27.2
F12	12	0.4	27.6
F13	14	4.6	21.4

Characterisation of Microemulsion:

Percentage Trasmittance and Viscosity: The percentage transmittance of different batches was measured at 283 nm against distilled water as a blank in UV- spectrophotometer. The viscosity was measured by Brookfield Viscometer DV – III ultra using Spindle number 62 at 200 RPM.

Drug Content: The drug content was determined by dissolving 1gm of the formulation equivalent to 20mg of active drug in 100ml of phosphate buffer. It was further subjected to 100 times dilution. After suitable

dilution with phosphate buffer, the absorbance was measured at 283 nm.

Drug Release: An accurately measured amount of microemulsion formulation equivalent to 20mg was introduced in a cellophane bag and was kept in an eight stage dissolution test apparatus containing 1000ml of phosphate buffer pH 5.8. The temperature was set to 37 ± 0.5 °C and the RPM was set to 50. Aliquots of 5ml of the medium were withdrawn every 30 min and replaced with fresh phosphate buffer. The absorbance of the sample was measured by using UV-Visible Spectrophotometer at 283nm. Percentage transmittance was used as a response to optimise the amount of Smix and oil to get desired microemulsion. Obtained formulation was then incorporated into the gel.

Preparation of Terbinafine Loaded Microemulgel: Carbopol 934 and HPMC were used to prepare the gel. These two were selected as independent variable to get thirteen formulations of gel using central composite design (Table 3). Total weight of the gel was kept 30 gm. Gelling agents were suspended in water and hydrated for overnight. The pH was adjusted around 6 to 6.5 using triethanolamine. Microemulsion was then incorporated in different formulations of gel in the ratio of 1:2 with continuous stirring.

TABLE 3: CENTRAL COMPOSITE DESIGN FOR FORMULATION OF GEL

Formulation	Carbopol 934 (gm)	HPMC (gm)	Water (gm)
G1	0.45	0.30	29.25
G2	0.30	0.60	29.1
G3	0.09	0.60	29.31
G4	0.15	0.90	28.95
G5	0.15	0.90	28.95
G6	0.15	0.90	28.95
G7	0.51	0.60	28.89
G8	0.15	0.30	29.55
G9	0.45	0.30	29.25
G10	0.45	0.30	29.25
G11	0.3	0.13	29.52
G12	0.3	1.02	28.67
G13	0.45	0.90	28.65

Characterization of Microemulgel:

Viscosity: Viscosity of the gels was determined using a Brookfield digital viscometer DV - III ultra using Spindle number 62 at 200 RPM.

Drug Content: The Terbinafine hydrochloride gel equivalent to 20mg drug was dissolved in 100ml of water. 1ml of solution was withdrawn and volume was made up to 100ml. The absorbance was measured after suitable dilution at 283nm against the corresponding blank solution by using UV Spectrophotometer (UV-1700, Shimadzu).

Spreadability: 0.5gm of microemulgel was placed within circle of 1cm diameter pre-marked on a glass plate, over which second plate is placed. A weight of 500g was allowed to rest on the upper glass plate for 5 min. The increase in diameter was noted.

Extrudability: Extrudability was calculated by filling aluminum tube with 15gm of gel. The consistency of gel was observed on pressing the tube applying mild force.

Ex vivo Permeation: Modified Franz diffusion cell was used for this study. Skin of goat was used for the skin permeation study. The skin was mounted in modified Franz diffusion cell and known quantity (0.5gm gel containing 10mg of drug) was spread uniformly on the skin on donor side. pH 5.8 phosphate buffer was used as the acceptor medium, from which samples were collected at regular interval for 12 hour and replaced with the same amount of buffer to maintain the receptor phase volume to 250ml. absorbance was measured at 283nm using UV-Spectrophotometer and the concentration was calculated using the equation of the calibration curve.

In vitro Release Study: Release study profile of gel was studied using USP apparatus I. Cellophane membrane was used and weighed quantity of gel containing 10mg of drug was introduced in the membrane and clipped on the both sides. This was then dipped in basket containing 5.8 pH buffer as dissolution medium.

The speed of the rotation was 50 rpm and temperature was maintained at 37 ± 0.5
°C 14. Sample aliquots were withdrawn from dissolution medium at predetermined time intervals and were analyzed by UV-Spectrophotometer at 283nm. The concentration was calculated using the equation of calibration curve 15.

Antifungal Property: 20gm of Dermatophyte agar media was dissolved in sterile distilled water and then sterilized in the autoclave. Five petri plates wrapped with aluminium foil were sterilized by dry heat in hot air oven (Temperature 160 °C for 2 hours). Strains of Tenia pedis was diluted with water to prepare the inoculums. The media was poured in sterilized petri dishes under aseptic condition and allowed the media to solidify. The media was inoculated with strains of microorganisms. About 0.5gm of test sample was loaded in the media with great care. The marketed ointment of terbinafine HCL was placed in the media. The distance of 3cm was maintained between marketed and formulated sample. The plates were allowed to stand for about half an hour till the test samples completely diffuses in the media. Then the plates were incubated at the temperature of 30 °C for 48 hours. After 48 hours, the zone of inhibition was measured with the help of measuring ruler 16.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

Studies on the drug's solubility in several solvents, including propylene glycol, liquid paraffin, polyethylene glycol 400, and tween 80, revealed that propylene glycol had the maximum solubility, at 26.48 mg/ml. As a result, it was chosen for formulation as the oil phase. With solubility of 20.98 mg/ml and 9.53 mg/ml, respectively, other solvents, such as polyethylene glycol 400 and tween 80, also performed better as solvents for the medication. Polyethylene glycol was chosen as a co-surfactant, while Tween 80 was chosen as the surfactant.

The 1:2 ratio showed the biggest area of microemulsion among the ternary phase diagrams made with surfactant and co-surfactant in 1:2 (Fig. 2), 2:1 (Fig. 1), 3:1 (Fig. 3), and 4:1 ratios (Fig. 4). For the preparation of the microemulsion, this ratio of surfactant to co-surfactant was used. The ternary phase diagram was used to determine the concentration range of water, oil phase, and Smix.

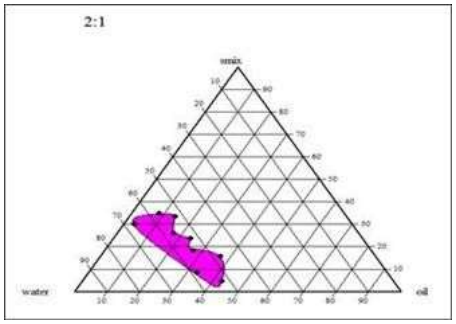

FIG. 1: PSEUDO TERNARY PHASE DIAGRAM OF WATER, OIL AND SMIX (2:1)

These ranges were used to generate formulations by central composite design. These formulations were then characterized. Formulation F3 containing 10.8gm Smix, 2.4gm oil and 26.8gm water showed greater transmittance and lowest viscosity compared to other formulations.

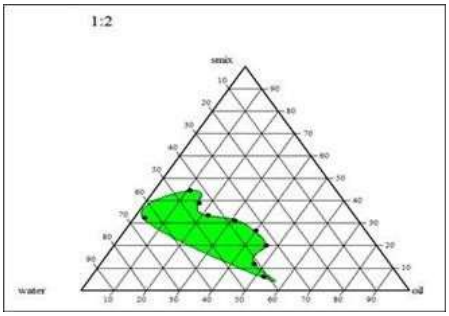

FIG. 2: PSEUDO TERNARY PHASE DIAGRAM OF WATER, OIL AND SMIX (1:2)

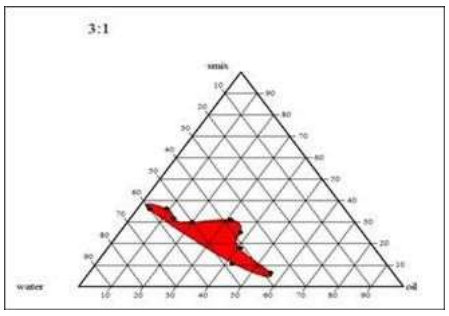

FIG. 3: PSEUDO TERNARY PHASE DIAGRAM OF WATER, OIL AND SMIX (3:1)

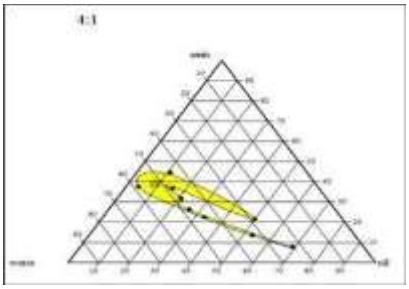

FIG. 4: PSEUDO TERNARY PHASE DIAGRAM OF WATER, OIL AND SMIX (4:1)

Optimization of Microemulsion: Smix and oil concentrations were chosen as independent factors for optimisation, whereas transmittance percentage was chosen as the dependent parameter. When Smix is at a lower concentration, the transmittance is high, according to the surface plot, but formulations with oil phases at low and high concentrations demonstrated lesser transmittance than other formulations. This might be because they themselves aggregate and reduce the transmittance % at high Smix concentrations, exceeding the threshold micelle concentration. In terms of surfactant concentration, the oil phase must be at its ideal level. Both low and high oil phase concentrations displayed more tramsmittance at lower Smix concentrations than at higher Smix concentrations. The formulation with the medium oil phase concentration and low Smix had the maximum transmittance. A contour plot made it evident that when oil is between 4 and 8% and Smix is less than 30%, transmittance is higher.

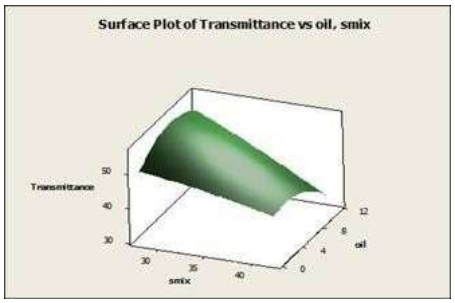

FIG. 5: SURFACE PLOT OF TRANSMITTANCE VS. OIL, SMIX

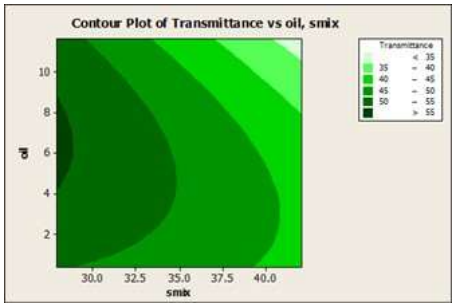

FIG. 6: CONTOUR PLOT OF TRANSMITTANCE VS. OIL, SMIX

Optimization plot was developed using % transmittance as a dependent variable and % of Smix and oil as independent variable. Depending upon the optimization plot the microemulsion was developed with Smix concentration of 27.93% and oil concentration of 6.51%.

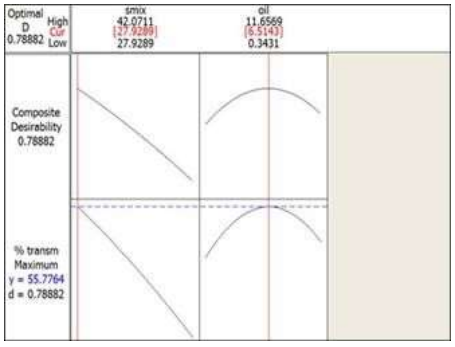

FIG. 7: OPTIMIZATION PLOT FOR MICROEMULSION

2% drug of total formulation was loaded in oil phase and microemulsion was prepared. Thus

prepared formulation was evaluated for its following characteristics.

TABLE 4: CHARACTERIZATION OF OPTIMIZED MICROEMULSION

Characteristics	Results
Percentage transmittance	53.04 (nearer to that obtained from optimization plot)
Drug content	90.25%
Viscosity	16.91 cps
Conductivity	220 mv
pH value	3.1
Dilution test	Soluble with water as external phase
Centrifugation	No phase separation
Drug release	After 3 hours was 99.72 (*in vitro*) and 98.52 (*ex vivo*)

Characterization of Microemulgel: Optimized microemulsion was then incorporated in different formulations of gel in the ratio of 1:2 with continuous stirring to obtain microemulgel which were then characterized.

TABLE 5: CHARACTERIZATION OF MICROEMULGEL

Formulations	Spreadibility (cm)	% Torque	Viscosity (cps)	Drug content
MEG1	4.5	35.6	1067.77	87.8
MEG2	7.5	16.5	494.69	45.8
MEG3	7.5	0.25	7.497	43
MEG4	7.5	1	29.99	88.7
MEG5	7.5	1	29.99	11.04
MEG6	7.5	1	29.99	11.04
MEG7	7.5	1	29.99	11.54
MEG8	5.5	48.8	1543.7	16.58
MEG9	7.5	0.2	5.998	13.05
MEG10	7.5	1	29.99	11.04
MEG11	7.5	3.2	95.968	19.16
MEG12	4	17.2	515.820	14.72
MEG13	5.5	80.3	2408	13.61

TABLE 6: CUMULATIVE PERCENTAGE DRUG RELEASE OF FORMULATIONS WITH SUITABLE SPREADIBILITY

Formulation	Cumulative percentage drug release (In vitro)	Cumulative percentage drug release (Ex vivo)
MEG1	92.78	94.96
MEG5	68.97	73.79
MEG8	59.54	71.73
MEG9	77.14	68.88

Microemulsion loaded gel formulations were found to have varying consistencies. Except formulations MEG1, MEG5, MEG8 and MEG9 other preparations overflowed the glass slide showing liquid like property. Therefore microemulgels with better consistencies were selected on the basis of spreadability for further characterization. Drug release and permeation studies were performed on these batches to select best formulation. Cumulative percentage drug release both in vitro and in vivo was highest in formulation MEG1.

Comparison of Microemulgel with Marketed Terbinafine Ointment: Zone of inhibition of best formulated microemulgel MEG1 was larger than that of marketed terbinafine ointment. This might be attributed to better permeation of drug into the surrounding area as it is dissolved into the micro droplets which diffused into the media with better ease than the normal marketed ointment.

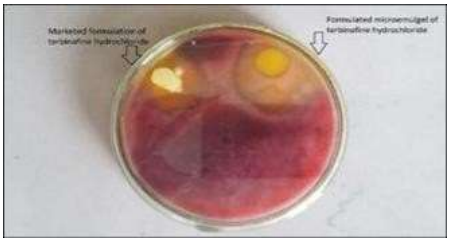

FIG. 8: ZONE OF INHIBITION OF MARKETED TERBINAFINE OINTMENT AND OPTIMIZED MICROEMULGEL

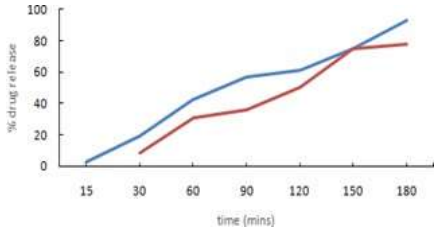

FIG. 9: IN VITRO DRUG RELEASE PROFILE OF MICROEMULSION AND MARKETED TERBINAFINE OINTMENT

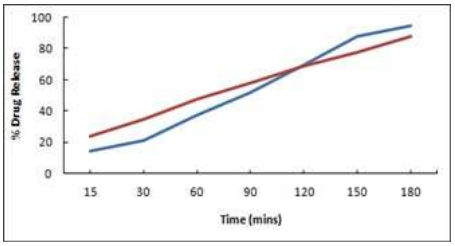

FIG. 10: EX VIVO DRUG RELEASE PROFILE OF MICROEMULSION AND MICROEMULGEL

Additionally, compared to the commercially available terbinafine ointment, this formulation demonstrated superior drug release both in vitro and ex vivo. According to in vitro and ex vivo release profiles, terbinafine microemulgel's dissolution behaviour increased (92.78% and 94.96%, respectively) when compared to the

marketed product (78.15 and 87.84, respectively). This could be because the particle size decreased, increasing the product's solubility and bioavailability. Accordingly, formulation MEG1 demonstrated optimal viscosity and drug content, as well as superior drug release and skin penetration, according to the comparison analysis.

Drug Release Kinetics: Three distinct mathematical models—the zero order, first order, and Higuchi models—were fitted using drug release data from optimised formulations. For the first order, zero order, and Higuchi models, the corresponding R2 values were 0.98, 0.74, and 0.99. This implies that the Higuchi paradigm, which calls for regulated drug release, was followed by the drug release from the microemulgel. To keep the amount of medicine accessible for release constant, additional drug diffuses off the surface in contact with the skin and then travels into the emulgel matrix.

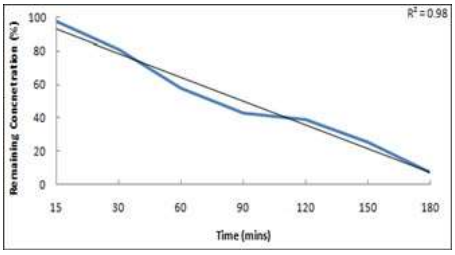

FIG. 11: ZERO ORDER MODEL

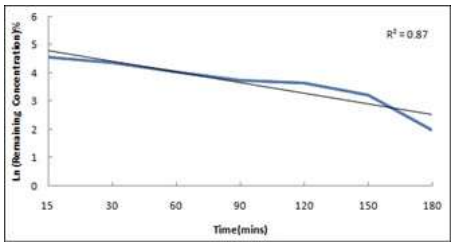

FIG. 12: FIRST ORDER MODEL

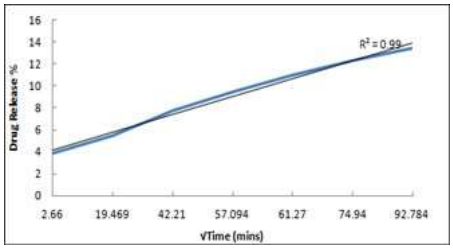

FIG. 13: HIGUCHI MODEL

V. CONCLUSION:

The development of terbinafine HCl-loaded microemulgel for topical drug delivery presents a promising approach to improve the efficacy and patient compliance in the treatment of dermatophytic infections. Through the combination of microemulsion technology and gel-based delivery systems, the microemulgel formulation not only enhances the skin penetration and bioavailability of terbinafine but also provides a controlled release at the site of infection, ensuring prolonged therapeutic effects.

The formulation of the microemulgel demonstrated improved drug solubility, stability, and sustained release, which are essential factors for topical antifungal therapy. The results of the physicochemical evaluations, in-vitro release studies, and skin penetration assays support the potential of this system to overcome the limitations of conventional topical formulations, such as rapid clearance and insufficient drug absorption.

Additionally, the microemulgel offers advantages such as easy application, patient comfort, and reduced systemic side effects, making it a more favorable option for long-term use in chronic fungal infections. The sustained drug release, coupled with enhanced drug retention at the site of application, suggests that this formulation could provide better therapeutic outcomes with fewer applications compared to traditional treatments.

Overall, terbinafine HCl-loaded microemulgel formulation is a viable candidate for clinical application, offering a more effective, safe, and patient-friendly alternative for the topical treatment of fungal infections. Further clinical studies and optimization of the formulation can help solidify its place as a preferred treatment modality in dermatophytic infections and other skin-related conditions.

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