



A SYSTEMATIC OVERVIEW ON MICROFLUIDICS – BASED ANALYTICAL METHODS

Sudarsanam Nagarjuna^{*1}, Galaba Yamini Padmasri¹, Dr. B. Thangabalan², Chalamalasetty Bindu Sri³, Chukka Preethi³, Palaparthi Cherishma³, Minraj Pokhrel³, Badisa Malleswari³, Lella Janaki³

¹Assistant Professor, SIMS College of Pharmacy.

²Principal, SIMS College of Pharmacy.

³Student, SIMS College of Pharmacy.

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***Corresponding Author: Sudarsanam Nagarjuna**

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Assistant Professor, SIMS College of Pharmacy.

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ABSTRACT:

Microfluidics has emerged as a transformative technology in analytical chemistry by enabling precise manipulation of fluids at the micrometer scale, thereby revolutionizing pharmaceutical and biomedical analysis. This review provides a comprehensive overview of microfluidics-based analytical methods with emphasis on their principles, fabrication strategies, detection techniques, and pharmaceutical applications. Fundamental aspects such as laminar flow behavior, low Reynolds number dynamics, and the dominance of surface forces at the microscale are discussed to explain the operational advantages of microfluidic systems. Commonly used materials including polydimethylsiloxane, glass, thermoplastics, and paper substrates are examined alongside fabrication approaches such as soft lithography, photolithography, three-dimensional printing, and paper-based patterning. The integration of microfluidics with analytical techniques including chromatography, capillary electrophoresis, immunoassays, droplet-based analysis, and biosensors is highlighted, demonstrating enhanced sensitivity, reduced analysis time, and minimal reagent consumption. Advanced detection methods such as optical, electrochemical, and mass spectrometric coupling further expand the analytical capability of lab-on-a-chip platforms. Applications spanning drug discovery, quality control, nanomedicine formulation, and point-of-care diagnostics are critically reviewed. Despite notable advantages, challenges related to fabrication complexity, material limitations, and system integration persist. Recent innovations incorporating

artificial intelligence, organ-on-chip models, and scalable manufacturing approaches indicate a promising future for microfluidics as a core technology in modern pharmaceutical analysis.

KEYWORDS: Microfluidics, Capillary electrophoresis, Mass spectroscopy coupling, Microfluidic chromatography, Analytical chemistry.

INTRODUCTION

Analytical techniques form the backbone of pharmaceutical sciences, enabling precise characterization of drugs, herbal extracts, and nanomaterials. From traditional methods like HPLC and GC to modern innovations, these tools ensure quality control, purity assessment, and bioactivity studies—critical for herbal nanomedicines. Microfluidics represents a paradigm shift, integrating miniaturization with high-throughput analysis to mimic lab-scale processes on a chip. Analytical chemistry has progressed through distinct phases, driven by the need for sensitivity, speed, and reduced sample volumes. Classical methods (pre-20th century) used gravimetric and volumetric approaches with bulk reactions, limited by manual handling. The instrumental revolution (1950s-1980s) brought chromatography (paper, thin-layer, gas, HPLC) and spectroscopy (UV-Vis, IR, NMR) for automation and precision. Hyphenated techniques (1990s) like LC-MS and GC-MS combined separation with detection for trace analytes in herbal matrices. Modern advances (2000s+) incorporate nanotechnology and biosensors for single-molecule detection, vital for pharmacokinetics and nanomedicine.

Miniaturization tackles limitations of conventional systems, especially in point-of-care or herbal R&D. It economizes samples and reagents (microliters to nanoliters), accelerates reactions via short diffusion paths, and cuts costs for portable field assays. Microscale boosts surface-to-volume ratios for better sensitivity and integrates multi-step processes like extraction-separation-detection. In pharmacy, it enables rapid screening of polyherbal formulations, aligning with green chemistry for sustainable production. Microfluidics manipulates fluids in channels less than 1 mm, pioneered in the 1990s by Manz and Whitesides using soft lithography and electrokinetic pumping. Lab-on-a-chip (LOC) systems consolidate sample prep, reaction, separation, and detection into handheld devices. Early DNA applications evolved to chemical sensing, supporting drug discovery via high-throughput herbal extract screening and real-time nanoparticle analysis¹.

FUNDAMENTALS OF MICROFLUIDICS

Microfluidics deals with the behavior and precise control of small fluid volumes (pico- to nanoliters) in channels typically 1 to 1000 micrometers in dimension. Its scope encompasses lab-on-a-chip devices for analysis, synthesis, diagnostics, and beyond, revolutionizing fields like pharmaceutical testing and herbal nanomedicine characterization².

1. Laminar Flow and Reynolds Number

Laminar flow dominates microfluidics due to low Reynolds numbers, where viscous forces exceed inertial ones. The Reynolds number, $[Re = \frac{\rho v D_h}{\mu}]$ (with ρ density, v velocity, D_h hydraulic diameter, μ viscosity), typically falls below 1-100, ensuring smooth, parallel streamlines without turbulence. This enables predictable mixing via diffusion, crucial for precise assays.

2. Fluid Dynamics at the Microscale

Microscale dynamics prioritize surface forces like capillary action, surface tension, and electro osmosis over bulk inertia. High surface-to-volume ratios amplify wall effects, leading to rapid diffusion-dominated transport and low Reynolds flow. These properties facilitate efficient heat/mass transfer, droplet generation, and particle manipulation for applications in chromatography and nanoparticle synthesis.

3. Materials Used in Microfluidic Devices

Polydimethylsiloxane (PDMS) excels for its optical clarity, elasticity, gas permeability, and simple fabrication via soft lithography. Glass provides chemical inertness, thermal stability, and precise bonding for high-pressure use. Polymers like PMMA, COC, and SU-8 offer cost-effective alternatives for mass production, balancing biocompatibility and optical properties³.

TYPES OF MICROFLUIDICS:

Microfluidics encompasses various systems designed to manipulate small fluid volumes at the microscale, categorized primarily by flow characteristics, channel design, and operational principles. These types enable applications in diagnostics, drug delivery, and analysis, particularly relevant in pharmaceutical sciences like herbal nanomedicines.

Key classifications include continuous-flow, droplet-based, digital, and paper-based systems.

1. Continuous-Flow Systems

Continuous-flow microfluidics uses closed channels for steady laminar flow, ideal for simple separations and assays. Devices often employ permanently etched microstructures, though they limit reconfigurability due to varying flow parameters along paths. This approach suits well-defined biochemical tasks but struggles with complex manipulations.

2. Droplet-Based Systems :

Droplet-based microfluidics handles discrete fluid volumes in immiscible phases, enabling superior mixing, encapsulation, and high-throughput screening. Systems operate in low Reynolds number regimes, supporting volumes from microliters to femtoliters. Applications include proteomics and cell assays, enhanced by techniques like magnetophoresis for efficient mixing.

3. Digital Microfluidics :

Digital systems manipulate individual droplets on open substrates via electrowetting, mimicking digital electronics for precise control. Pioneered by electrocapillary forces, these offer flexibility over continuous-flow methods. They excel in reconfigurable assays without fixed channels⁴.

4. Paper-Based Systems :

Paper-based microfluidics leverages capillary action in porous media for low-cost, portable diagnostics like glucose detection. Hydrophobic barriers guide flow on hydrophilic paper, enabling point-of-care use in remote settings. Tuning involves pore structure, wettability, and fluid properties for 2D/3D control.

FABRICATION TECHNIQUES OF MICROFLUIDIC DEVICES :

Fabrication techniques for microfluidic devices vary from cleanroom-based processes to rapid prototyping methods, enabling customization for pharmaceutical applications like herbal nanomedicine analysis.

1. Soft Lithography

Soft lithography uses elastomeric stamps, typically made from PDMS, to pattern features via replica molding. A master mold is created using photolithography on silicon or glass, then PDMS is poured, cured, and peeled off to form reversible stamps for transferring patterns to substrates. This technique excels in prototyping complex 3D channels with high resolution (down to 1 μ m) and biocompatibility, ideal for low-volume production.

2. Photolithography

Photolithography patterns microstructures by exposing photoresist-coated substrates to UV light through a mask, followed by development and etching. It serves as the foundation for master molds in replication methods, offering sub-micron precision via MEMS processes. Commonly used with silicon or glass for durable, high-aspect-ratio features, though it requires cleanroom facilities and is suited for high-precision, low-throughput fabrication.

3. 3D Printing

3D printing, or additive manufacturing, fabricates devices layer-by-layer using techniques like stereolithography (SLA), fused deposition modeling (FDM), or two-photon polymerization. It enables rapid prototyping of complex geometries without molds, with resolutions improving to 10-50 μm using resin-based printers. Advantages include design flexibility and no cleanroom needs, making it cost-effective for iterative development in pharmacy research.

4. Paper-Based Microfluidics

Paper-based microfluidics uses porous cellulose paper patterned with hydrophobic barriers (wax printing, plotting, or lithography) to create flow paths via capillary action. Fabrication involves printing wax on filter paper, heating to penetrate fibers, and assembling layers for multiplexed assays. This low-cost, disposable method suits point-of-care diagnostics for herbal extracts, requiring minimal equipment and enabling vertical flow for stacking tests⁵.

MICROFLUIDICS BASED ANALYTICAL METHODS

1. Microfluidic Chromatography

Microfluidic chromatography separates analytes based on differential partitioning between a mobile phase and a stationary phase packed or coated within microchannels, leveraging short diffusion distances for rapid, efficient separations.

Principle

The principle relies on laminar flow driving analytes through micro-packed columns or open channels, with separation governed by retention factors under low Reynolds numbers. Electro osmotic or pressure-driven flow minimizes band broadening, achieving high plate counts ($>10^5/\text{m}$) in seconds⁶.

Types and Applications

- Pressure-Driven μLC : Mimics HPLC with nano-pumped gradients for proteomics and small molecule analysis in pharmaceuticals.
- Electrochromatography (μCEC): Combines electrophoresis and chromatography for neutral/charged species in herbal extract profiling.

Applications include high-throughput drug impurity detection and biomarker screening in biofluids.

1. Microchip Capillary Electrophoresis

Applications in Pharmaceutical and Bioanalysis

MCE enables rapid chiral separations, protein sizing, and metabolite profiling with pL sample volumes, ideal for pharmacokinetic studies and quality control of nanomedicines. It excels in point-of-care bioanalysis of therapeutic drugs and toxins.

2. Microfluidic Immunoassays

Microfluidic immunoassays miniaturize antigen-antibody binding with integrated washing and detection for ultrasensitive, multiplexed assays.

a. On-Chip ELISA

On-chip ELISA uses surface-immobilized capture antibodies, microchannel incubation, and fluorescence readout, reducing assay time to minutes and detection limits to fg/mL.

b. Lateral Flow Microfluidics :

Lateral flow combines paper microfluidics with immunoassay strips for portable diagnostics, like rapid herbal contaminant tests⁷.

3. Droplet-Based Microfluidic Analysis

Droplet microfluidics generates and manipulates discrete picoliter droplets as independent reactors in immiscible carrier oils.

a. Droplet Generation and Manipulation

T-junction or flow-focusing geometries create monodisperse droplets via shear and Rayleigh-Plateau instability; manipulation uses dielectrophoresis or sorting junctions.

b. High-Throughput Screening

Enables 1000s of reactions/sec for drug-herb interaction screening and single-cell analysis in nanomedicine optimization.

4. Microfluidic Biosensors

Microfluidic biosensors integrate biorecognition elements with transduction for real-time analyte detection.

a. Electrochemical Biosensors

Amperometric or impedimetric detection of redox probes monitors binding events, suited for glucose or antibody assays in pharma QC.

b. Optical Biosensors

Fluorescence, SPR, or waveguide interferometry provide label-free or multiplexed sensing for protein biomarkers in bioanalysis⁸.

DETECTION TECHNIQUES COUPLED WITH MICROFLUIDICS

Detection in microfluidics leverages miniaturized transducers integrated into chips for high-sensitivity, real-time monitoring of analytes in pharmaceutical and bioanalysis.

1. Optical Detection (Fluorescence, Absorbance) :

Fluorescence detection excites fluorophores with lasers or LEDs, capturing emitted light via photomultipliers or CCDs for limits down to single molecules. Absorbance measures light attenuation at specific wavelengths using inline LEDs and photodiodes. These non-destructive methods suit flow cytometry, ELISA-on-chip, and herbal biomarker assays, with epifluorescence setups minimizing background via confocal optics.⁹

2. Electrochemical Detection :

Electrochemical methods, including amperometry, voltammetry, and impedance, detect redox-active species or binding-induced changes at microelectrodes embedded in channels. Amperometric sensors monitor current from enzyme-generated products, achieving fM sensitivity for metabolites. They offer label-free, portable detection ideal for point-of-care drug screening and nanomedicine release profiling, with minimal optical interference.

3. Mass Spectrometry Integration :

Microfluidic-MS couples nanoLC or ESI chips directly to mass spectrometers via off-chip or monolithic electrospray interfaces, enabling attomole proteome analysis. Electrospray tips integrated into glass/PDMS chips generate stable ions for MS/MS, boosting throughput for complex herbal mixtures. Challenges like clogging are offset by high resolution in pharma ADME studies and impurity identification.¹⁰

APPLICATIONS OF MICROFLUIDICS – BASED ANALYTICAL METHODS

Microfluidics-based analytical methods enable miniaturized, high-throughput analysis with minimal reagents, transforming pharmaceutical sciences from drug discovery to quality control. These systems integrate separation, detection, and reaction steps on chips, accelerating workflows in herbal nanomedicine and industrial pharmacy. Key applications span multiple stages of drug development and beyond.

1. Drug Discovery and Screening

Microfluidics facilitates high-throughput screening (HTS) by miniaturizing assays for enzyme inhibition, receptor binding, and cytotoxicity, processing thousands of compounds per hour with pL volumes. Droplet-based platforms enable single-cell drug response profiling and phenotypic screening for personalized herbal therapeutics. Organ-on-chip

models simulate physiological microenvironments for toxicity prediction, reducing animal testing.¹⁰

2. Pharmaceutical Analysis and Quality Control

Chip-based chromatography and electrophoresis provide rapid purity checks, impurity profiling, and polymorph screening for APIs like irbesartan or sulfathiazole. Online MS integration supports real-time formulation monitoring, dissolution testing, and stability assessment in polyherbal products. Paper-based μPADs offer low-cost POC for contaminant detection in resource-limited settings.¹⁰

3. Drug Delivery and Formulation

Microfluidics generates uniform nanoparticles, liposomes, and emulsions for herbal nanomedicines via precise flow control, improving encapsulation and release kinetics. It enables pharmacokinetic/pharmacodynamic studies mimicking ADME processes on-chip.

4. Clinical and Point-of-Care Diagnostics

Portable microfluidic biosensors and immunoassays deliver rapid biomarker detection for therapeutic monitoring and disease diagnosis, supporting precision medicine. Lateral flow chips assess drug efficacy in vivo-like models, enhancing clinical trials.¹¹

ADVANTAGES OF MICROFLUIDICS IN ANALYTICAL METHODS :

Microfluidics offers transformative advantages in analytical science by enabling precise, efficient, and portable analysis critical for pharmaceutical applications like herbal nanomedicines. Key benefits stem from microscale physics, reducing costs and accelerating workflows while enhancing sensitivity.

1. Reduced Sample and Reagent Consumption

Microfluidic systems operate with nanoliter to picoliter volumes, slashing material needs by orders of magnitude compared to conventional mL-scale assays. This cuts costs for expensive reagents in drug screening and enables analysis of limited samples like single cells or rare herbal extracts.

2. Faster Analysis Times

Short channel lengths and high surface-to-volume ratios promote rapid diffusion, mixing, and heat transfer, completing separations or reactions in seconds to minutes versus hours. Laminar flow ensures reproducible kinetics, ideal for high-throughput quality control in industrial pharmacy.¹²

3. Enhanced Sensitivity and Precision

Low Reynolds flow minimizes dispersion, yielding high resolution (e.g., millions of theoretical plates in electrophoresis) and detection limits down to single molecules. Precise control over gradients and microenvironments boosts accuracy for trace impurity detection in formulations.

4. Portability and Integration

Compact lab-on-a-chip designs integrate multiple steps (prep, separation, detection) into handheld devices, supporting point-of-care testing without bulky equipment. Automation via valves and pumps enables parallel multiplexing for comprehensive bioanalysis.

5. Cost-Effectiveness and Sustainability :

Lower reagent use, disposable polymers, and rapid prototyping reduce overall expenses and waste, aligning with green chemistry for sustainable nanomedicine R&D. Scalable fabrication democratizes advanced analytics for labs in developing regions.¹²

LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES:

Despite their transformative potential, microfluidics-based analytical methods face several limitations and challenges that hinder widespread adoption in pharmaceutical sciences.

1. Fabrication and Material Issues :

Fabrication often requires specialized cleanroom equipment for photolithography and soft lithography, limiting accessibility for routine lab use . Materials like PDMS absorb hydrophobic small molecules and swell in organic solvents, altering assay results in drug analysis .Lack of standardized protocols leads to reproducibility issues across devices and labs.¹²

2. Fluidic and Operational Challenges :

Channel clogging from particles or bubbles disrupts flow, especially in complex herbal samples with particulates. Surface fouling by proteins or nanoparticles affects sensor performance and requires frequent cleaning. Low flow rates and pressure drops demand precise pumping, complicating scaling for higher throughput.

3. Detection and Sensitivity Limitations :

Integration of optical or electrochemical detectors in compact formats reduces signal-to-noise ratios compared to benchtop instruments. Limited optical path lengths lower absorbance sensitivity, while MS coupling suffers from interface losses. Environmental factors like temperature fluctuations impact electroosmotic flow stability.¹³

RECENT ADVANCEMENTS AND INNOVATIONS

1. AI and Machine Learning Integration

AI optimizes microfluidic designs via predictive modeling of flow and reactions, enabling automated polymorph screening for drugs like sulfathiazole. ML analyzes real-time data from on-chip sensors for precise HTS and personalized medicine pipelines.¹⁴

2. 3D Printing and Modular Chips :

High-resolution stereolithography fabricates complex, integrated microneedles for transdermal drug delivery in single steps, enhancing bioavailability. Modular lab-on-chip platforms combine reaction, separation, and MS for chiral chromatography of warfarin.¹⁵

3. Organ-on-Chip and Disease Models :

Advanced organ-chips simulate multi-organ pharmacokinetics, improving ADME predictions for herbal nanomedicines. These reduce animal testing while mimicking human responses for toxicity screening.¹⁶

4. POC Diagnostics and Wearables :

Paper-based and flexible μPADs with smartphone readout enable multiplexed biomarker detection for rapid pharma QC. Market growth to \$97B by 2030 reflects POC expansion.¹⁷

5. Droplet and Digital Microfluidics :

Programmable electrowetting-on-dielectric chips automate assays for glycopeptide analysis via μCE-MS. These boost throughput in bioanalysis.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES:

Microfluidics in analytical science promises broader adoption through ongoing innovations addressing current limitations.¹⁸

1. Hybrid and Intelligent Systems :

Integration with AI/ML for real-time optimization and predictive analytics will automate design and operation, enhancing precision in drug screening. Hybrid systems combining microfluidics with CRISPR or nanomaterials will enable next-gen bioassays for personalized herbal nanomedicines.¹⁹

2. Scalable Manufacturing :

Advances in roll-to-roll printing and injection molding will lower costs for commercial production, expanding to industrial pharmacy QC.²⁰

3. Multi-Organ and In Vivo Mimicry :

Sophisticated body-on-chip platforms will revolutionize preclinical testing, simulating human physiology for accurate PK/PD data.²¹

4. Global Accessibility :

Low-cost, smartphone-linked POC devices will democratize analytics in developing regions, supporting sustainable polyherbal drug development. By 2030, market growth to \$50-100B signals mainstream integration.²¹

DISCUSSION:

Microfluidics has emerged as a powerful technology due to its ability to precisely manipulate small volumes of fluids, offering advantages such as reduced reagent consumption, rapid analysis, and enhanced sensitivity.²² Various microfluidic approaches, including continuous-flow, droplet-based, digital, and paper-based systems, have enabled diverse applications in diagnostics, drug discovery, and biological research.²³ Each platform provides unique benefits, with droplet-based systems supporting high-throughput screening and paper-based devices facilitating low-cost point-of-care testing.²⁴ Despite these advances, challenges related to fabrication complexity, material limitations, and large-scale manufacturing continue to restrict widespread commercialization.²⁵ Commonly used materials such as PDMS present issues of solvent absorption and scalability. Integration with detection systems and automation further enhances functionality but raises concerns regarding standardization and reproducibility.²⁶ Continued developments in fabrication techniques, materials, and system integration are essential to translate microfluidic technologies from laboratory research to routine clinical and industrial applications.²⁷

CONCLUSION:

Microfluidics stands as a cornerstone innovation in analytical chemistry, particularly within pharmaceutical sciences, by delivering miniaturized, high-efficiency platforms for the precise characterization of drugs, herbal extracts, and nanomedicines.²⁸ Evolving from basic principles like low Reynolds number laminar flow and microscale fluid dynamics to sophisticated fabrication via soft lithography, 3D printing, and paper-based methods.²⁹ it integrates separation techniques such as chromatography, electrophoresis, immunoassays, droplet analysis, and biosensors with sensitive detection modes including optical, electrochemical, and MS coupling.³⁰

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