# Smart Nanocarriers in Cosmetics: Innovations in Targeted Skin Delivery

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**Abstract:**

The cosmetic industry has undergone a paradigm shift with the advent of nanotechnology, particularly through smart nanocarriers for targeted skin delivery. Conventional cosmetic formulations often face challenges such as poor solubility, low bioavailability, rapid degradation, and non-specific action, limiting their efficacy. Smart nanocarriers, including liposomes, solid lipid nanoparticles, nanoemulsions, polymeric nanoparticles, dendrimers, and metallic nanoparticles, enable precise delivery of bioactive compounds to specific skin layers, such as the epidermis, dermis, and hair follicles. These carriers offer controlled and stimuli-responsive release, enhance stability of sensitive ingredients, improve skin penetration, and reduce adverse effects. Mechanisms such as follicular targeting, intercellular lipid penetration, ligand-mediated delivery, and enhanced retention contribute to their superior performance. Dermatological applications include anti-aging, skin rejuvenation, pigmentation control, photoprotection, acne management, and barrier repair. Despite these advantages, safety, environmental impact, and regulatory compliance remain critical considerations. The convergence of material science, pharmacology, and cosmetic technology underscores the potential of smart nanocarriers to revolutionize personalized and sustainable skincare. Future trends emphasize multifunctional, biodegradable, and stimuli-responsive systems for highly effective cosmetic interventions.

**Keywords:** Smart nanocarriers, targeted delivery, cosmetic formulations, skin penetration, controlled release

## Introduction

Cosmetics have long been used not only for aesthetic enhancement but also for dermatological care. However, conventional cosmetic products frequently encounter limitations such as poor solubility of active ingredients, insufficient skin penetration, rapid degradation, and non-specific action, which reduce their therapeutic and cosmetic efficacy (Bozzuto & Molinari, 2015; Shakeel et al., 2014). In recent years, nanotechnology has emerged as a transformative approach, enabling precise control over particle size, surface properties, and encapsulation strategies (Moghassemi & Hadjizadeh, 2014). Among these, smart nanocarriers represent the next frontier, offering targeted and controlled delivery of bioactive compounds to desired skin compartments, including the epidermis, dermis, and hair

Published: 24 June 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70558/IJST.2026.v3.i2.241288

follicles (Khurana et al., 2020).

The term “smart nanocarriers” refers to nanostructured delivery systems capable of responding to intrinsic or extrinsic stimuli such as pH, temperature, or enzymatic activity, thereby releasing encapsulated actives in a controlled manner (Sharma et al., 2019). These carriers not only enhance the stability and bioavailability of cosmetic ingredients but also allow for sustained action, reduced systemic absorption, and improved user compliance (Tran et al., 2020). The convergence of nanotechnology with cosmetic science has led to innovative formulations for anti-aging, hydration, pigmentation control, photoprotection, and acne management, establishing a new paradigm in dermatological care (Agarwal et al., 2021; Jaiswal et al., 2015).

**Background and Rationale**

The human skin is a highly complex organ comprising multiple layers with distinct barrier functions. The stratum corneum, the outermost layer, acts as a formidable barrier to penetration, limiting the effectiveness of topical formulations (Williams & Barry, 2012). Conventional cosmetic delivery often results in superficial deposition of active ingredients, necessitating frequent application and higher concentrations, which may lead to irritation or unwanted side effects (Danaei et al., 2018).

Smart nanocarriers overcome these limitations by enhancing percutaneous absorption through nanoscale manipulation, surface functionalization, and targeted release (Patel et al., 2021). Their small size allows interaction with cellular membranes, follicular reservoirs, and intercellular lipid matrices, enabling deeper penetration. Moreover, encapsulating sensitive ingredients such as vitamins, antioxidants, peptides, and botanical extracts protects them from environmental degradation and oxidation, improving shelf life and bioactivity (Bozzuto & Molinari, 2015; Agarwal et al., 2021). The rationale for adopting smart nanocarriers in cosmetics includes:

1. **Enhanced Penetration:** Nanocarriers facilitate passage through the stratum corneum and reach deeper layers (Moghassemi & Hadjizadeh, 2014).
2. **Controlled Release:** Stimuli-responsive systems enable precise temporal and spatial delivery (Sharma et al., 2019).
3. **Reduced Side Effects:** Targeted delivery minimizes non-specific skin reactions (Khurana et al., 2020).
4. **Stability of Active Ingredients:** Encapsulation prevents degradation from light, heat, or oxygen (Tran et al., 2020).
5. **Synergistic Effects:** Co-delivery of multiple actives in a single nanocarrier enhances efficacy (Jaiswal et al., 2015).

**Types of Smart Nanocarriers in Cosmetics**

Several nanocarrier systems have been explored in cosmetic formulations, each with distinct physicochemical characteristics, encapsulation efficiencies, and mechanisms for targeted delivery. These smart nanocarriers not only improve the stability and bioavailability of active compounds but also enable controlled and site-specific release, enhancing the overall efficacy of cosmetic products (Moghassemi & Hadjizadeh, 2014; Khurana et al., 2020).

**Liposomes:** Liposomes are spherical vesicles composed of one or more phospholipid bilayers surrounding an aqueous core, which allows encapsulation of both hydrophilic and lipophilic molecules (Bozzuto & Molinari, 2015). In cosmetic applications, liposomes are widely employed to enhance skin hydration, reduce transepidermal water loss, and facilitate targeted delivery of vitamins, peptides, and anti-aging agents (Agarwal et al., 2021). Surface modification with ligands or polymers can improve skin retention, prolong circulation on the skin surface, and even allow selective targeting of specific skin cells. Moreover, liposomal encapsulation protects sensitive actives such as retinol and vitamin C from oxidation and degradation, increasing the product's shelf life and efficacy (Sharma et al., 2019).

**Solid Lipid Nanoparticles (SLNs) and Nanostructured Lipid Carriers (NLCs):** Solid lipid nanoparticles (SLNs) are colloidal carriers composed of physiologically compatible solid lipids, whereas nanostructured lipid carriers (NLCs) incorporate a mixture of solid and liquid lipids to improve drug loading and reduce crystallinity (Müller et al., 2011). Both systems provide high encapsulation efficiency, protect labile ingredients, and allow controlled release, making them ideal for topical cosmetic formulations. Their inherent occlusive properties enhance skin hydration by forming a thin film on the skin surface, which reduces water loss and improves penetration of active ingredients. SLNs and NLCs have been successfully applied for delivering antioxidants, sunscreens, and anti-aging compounds, demonstrating improved skin bioavailability compared to conventional formulations (Tran et al., 2020).

**Nanoemulsions:** Nanoemulsions are thermodynamically or kinetically stable dispersions of oil and water with droplet sizes in the nanometer range (10–200 nm) (Jaiswal et al., 2015). They improve the solubility of poorly water-soluble compounds, enhance dermal penetration, and provide rapid absorption. Nanoemulsions are extensively used in cosmetic formulations such as moisturizers, sunscreens, anti-inflammatory creams, and essential oil-based products. The small droplet size increases surface area and contact with the skin, enhancing the bioavailability of encapsulated actives. Additionally, nanoemulsions offer the advantage of transparency and non-greasy texture, which improves user acceptability (Shakeel et al., 2014).

**Polymeric Nanoparticles:** Polymeric nanoparticles are constructed from biodegradable and biocompatible polymers such as chitosan, poly-lactic-co-glycolic acid (PLGA), alginate, and polycaprolactone (Danaei et al., 2018). These carriers are capable of encapsulating sensitive cosmetic actives, including antioxidants, vitamins, and peptides. They offer stimuli-responsive release mechanisms, allowing actives to be delivered in response to environmental cues such as pH, temperature, or enzymatic activity. Polymeric nanoparticles also improve dermal penetration and prolong the release of encapsulated compounds, enhancing therapeutic and cosmetic effects over extended periods (Kaur & Garg, 2020).

**Dendrimers:** Dendrimers are highly branched, tree-like macromolecules with a defined size, molecular weight, and functional end-groups, which allow precise drug loading and controlled release (Chauhan et al., 2020). In cosmetic applications, dendrimers are utilized to deliver antioxidants, peptides, retinoids, and other anti-aging actives with enhanced stability and targeted penetration. The unique architecture of dendrimers facilitates both surface modification and encapsulation of multiple active molecules simultaneously, which can improve synergistic effects in multifunctional cosmetic formulations.

**Gold and Silver Nanoparticles:** Metallic nanoparticles, particularly gold and silver nanoparticles, are employed in cosmetics for their photoprotective, antioxidant, antimicrobial, and anti-aging properties (Dreaden et al., 2012). Functionalized gold nanoparticles can penetrate deeper skin layers, stimulate collagen synthesis, and reduce oxidative stress in dermal cells, making them ideal for anti-aging formulations. Silver nanoparticles are widely used for their antimicrobial properties in acne treatment and wound-healing cosmetic products. Careful surface modification ensures safety and reduces the risk of cytotoxicity while enhancing targeted delivery (Khlebtsov & Dykman, 2011).

**Mechanisms of Targeted Skin Delivery**

The effectiveness of smart nanocarriers in cosmetics is primarily determined by their ability to traverse the skin's complex barrier system and release active ingredients at precise sites. The stratum corneum, being the outermost layer, serves as the main barrier to penetration, while hair follicles, sweat glands, and intercellular lipids provide alternative pathways for delivery. Smart nanocarriers employ multiple complementary mechanisms to enhance dermal absorption and efficacy while minimizing systemic exposure (Khurana et al., 2020; Patra et al., 2018):

**Follicular Targeting:** Hair follicles serve as natural reservoirs for nanoparticles, allowing sustained release of encapsulated actives directly into deeper skin layers (Lademann et al., 2014). This approach is particularly effective for anti-aging, acne, and hair care products, as the follicles facilitate localized delivery with reduced irritation to surrounding skin. Nanoparticles ranging from 10 to 200 nm can penetrate follicular openings and remain trapped for extended periods, providing controlled and prolonged action.

**Intercellular Lipid Penetration:** Lipophilic nanocarriers can integrate into the lipid matrix of the stratum corneum, enhancing passive diffusion of actives into deeper skin layers (Williams & Barry, 2012). By mimicking the skin's natural lipid organization, these carriers reduce the barrier function locally, improve solubilization of hydrophobic compounds, and allow gradual release of active ingredients over time. This mechanism is particularly beneficial for moisturizing, antioxidant, and photoprotective formulations.

**Stimuli-Responsive Release:** Advanced nanocarriers can respond to environmental or physiological stimuli such as pH changes, temperature fluctuations, or enzymatic activity (Sharma et al., 2019). For instance, pH-sensitive polymeric nanoparticles release actives in response to acidic microenvironments typical of acne-affected skin, while thermoresponsive liposomes release ingredients in response to localized temperature changes. This ensures precise, site-specific delivery, enhancing efficacy and minimizing off-target effects.

**Ligand-Mediated Targeting:** Surface functionalization of nanocarriers with specific ligands enables selective binding to receptors on skin cells (Patel et al., 2021). This strategy improves cellular uptake, enhances bioavailability of active compounds, and allows for targeted intervention in melanocytes, fibroblasts, or sebaceous glands. Ligand-mediated targeting is particularly advantageous in pigmentation control, anti-aging treatments, and acne therapy.

**Enhanced Retention:** Nanocarrier systems increase the residence time of active ingredients on the skin surface and within target layers (Moghassemi & Hadjizadeh, 2014). Enhanced retention reduces the need for frequent reapplication, provides sustained cosmetic effects, and minimizes systemic absorption, thereby reducing the risk of irritation or adverse reactions. Collectively, these mechanisms address critical limitations of conventional topical formulations, improving bioavailability, efficacy, and user compliance while maintaining safety and skin compatibility.

**Dermatological Applications**

Smart nanocarriers have been successfully applied in a wide range of dermatological and cosmetic interventions due to their ability to deliver actives effectively and safely. These applications include:

**Anti-Aging and Skin Rejuvenation:** Nanocarriers facilitate the delivery of collagen-stimulating peptides, antioxidants such as vitamins C and E, and coenzyme Q10 deep into the dermis (Bozzuto & Molinari, 2015). By targeting fibroblasts and enhancing cellular regeneration, these formulations help reduce wrinkles, improve skin elasticity, and restore a youthful appearance. Sustained release formulations also minimize degradation of sensitive actives and maintain long-term efficacy.

**Skin Whitening and Pigmentation Control:** Encapsulation of depigmenting agents, including kojic acid, arbutin, and niacinamide, in nanocarriers improves their chemical stability and ensures targeted delivery to melanocytes (Agarwal et al., 2021). This controlled release results in effective melanin modulation, reducing hyperpigmentation while limiting systemic exposure and skin irritation. Follicular targeting and ligand-mediated delivery further enhance the precision of depigmenting treatments.

**Photoprotection:** Nano-sized titanium dioxide and zinc oxide particles provide enhanced UV-blocking efficiency while maintaining transparency and desirable skin feel compared to conventional formulations (Shakeel et al., 2014). Nanocarrier encapsulation improves dispersibility, reduces photocatalytic activity, and ensures uniform coverage, offering both UVA and UVB protection without leaving a white residue on the skin.

**Acne and Anti-Inflammatory Care:** Nanocarriers enable controlled and localized delivery of antibacterial and anti-inflammatory agents directly to sebaceous glands, improving treatment efficacy while reducing irritation (Danaei et al., 2018). Polymeric nanoparticles and lipid-based carriers can encapsulate retinoids, benzoyl peroxide, or natural antimicrobial extracts, allowing sustained action and minimizing systemic absorption.

**Moisturization and Barrier Repair:** Solid lipid nanoparticles (SLNs) and nanostructured lipid carriers (NLCs) act as occlusive agents, enhancing hydration by reducing transepidermal water loss and facilitating delivery of ceramides, fatty acids, and humectants (Müller et al., 2011). These formulations support skin barrier restoration, improve elasticity, and provide long-lasting moisturization, making them ideal for dry and sensitive skin types.

**Safety and Regulatory Considerations**

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Smart nanocarriers enhance cosmetic efficacy, controlled release, and skin penetration but pose safety, toxicity, and environmental concerns due to their small size, high surface area, and cellular uptake potential (Khurana et al., 2020; Fadeel et al., 2018).

**Dermal Toxicity:** Nanoparticles can penetrate beyond the stratum corneum, occasionally reaching systemic circulation. Metallic or cationic nanoparticles may induce cytotoxicity, oxidative stress, or inflammation, necessitating thorough in vitro and in vivo toxicity evaluations (Khlebtsov & Dykman, 2011; Rancan et al., 2012).

**Environmental Concerns:** Metallic and polymeric nanoparticles may persist in ecosystems, accumulating in water, soil, and aquatic life. Use of biodegradable carriers and proper waste management are critical to reduce environmental impact (Nowack et al., 2011).

**Regulatory Oversight:** Agencies such as the FDA, EMA, and SCCS require evaluation of particle characteristics, stability, dermal penetration, and toxicology for nano-enabled cosmetics (Labouta et al., 2019). Compliance with standards like ISO/TR 21995:2021 ensures safety and quality.

**Best Practices:** Safe formulation strategies include using biocompatible materials, surface functionalization to reduce cytotoxicity, controlled dosage and release, comprehensive testing, and environmental risk management. These measures enable safe utilization of smart nanocarriers while maintaining efficacy and sustainability.

**Conclusion**

Smart nanocarriers represent a transformative approach in cosmetic science, enabling targeted, controlled, and efficient delivery of active ingredients to specific skin layers. By overcoming limitations of conventional formulations, they enhance therapeutic and aesthetic outcomes in anti-aging, photoprotection, pigmentation control, and acne management. While challenges related to safety, manufacturing, and regulation remain, ongoing research in stimuli-responsive, biodegradable, and multifunctional nanocarriers promises a future of highly personalized and effective cosmetic interventions. The integration of nanotechnology with dermatological science not only revolutionizes topical formulations but also paves the way for innovative, sustainable, and intelligent skincare solutions.

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