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Nitrosamines: A Review on Its Effect in the Field of Pharmaceuticals

Ms. Yamuna V*, Dr. Saraswathy T[1], Mr. Yogesh Chhippa R[2], Mr. Gunasekaran P[3], Mr. Guhan G[4]

*,2,3,4 Post Graduate Student, Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry.

[1]Assistant Professor, College of Pharmacy, Madras Medical College, Chennai. India.

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of nitrosamines particularly N-nitrosamines in the pharmaceutical industry has raised significant concerns due to their potential carcinogenic properties. Following the detection of N-nitrosodimethylamine in widely used medications like valsartan in 2018, regulatory bodies such as the FDA and EMA have mandated comprehensive reviews of drug products for nitrosamine contamination. This situation has led to widespread recalls and heightened scrutiny of manufacturing practices. Nitrosamines can form through various pathways, primarily involving the reaction of nitrites with secondary or tertiary amines, which are common in many active pharmaceutical ingredients. The complexity of nitrosamine drug-substance-related impurities poses challenges for manufacturers as these impurities can arise from multiple sources during drug production and storage. Mitigation strategies have become essential including conducting risk assessments, implementing advanced analytical testing and modifying manufacturing processes to minimize contamination risks. As the understanding of nitrosamine formation evolves ongoing collaboration between industry stakeholders and regulatory agencies is crucial to ensure patient safety and maintain the integrity of pharmaceutical products.

KEYWORDS: Nitrosamines, Pharmaceutical industry, Contamination, Health risks.

INTRODUCTION

Nitrosamines, particularly N-nitrosamines have emerged as significant contaminants in pharmaceuticals, raising concerns due to their potential carcinogenic effects and the challenges they pose in drug manufacturing and regulation. The scrutiny surrounding these compounds intensified following the detection of N-nitrosodimethylamine (NDMA) in various medications, notably valsartan in 2018. This event triggered widespread recalls and led to increased regulatory oversight across the pharmaceutical industry [1].

Nitrosamines are a class of compounds that contain a nitroso group (–N=O) bonded to an amine. Their structures can vary significantly based on the specific amine and substituents involved. Here are some common visual representations of nitrosamine structures:

General Structure of N- Nitrosamines:

The general structure of a nitrosamine can be represented as follows:

$$R_1\,R_2\,N–N=O$$

where R_1 and R_2 can be hydrogen or organic substituents leading to various types of nitrosamines including dialkyl, monoalkyl and aryl nitrosamines.

Example Structures:

N-Nitrosodimethylamine (NDMA):

$$(CH_3)_2\,N\text{-}N=O$$

This structure features two methyl groups attached to the nitrogen atom.

N-Nitrosodiethylamine (NDEA):

$$(C_2H_5)_2\,N\text{-}N{=}O$$

In this case, the nitrogen is bonded to two ethyl groups.

N-Nitroso-N-methyl-4-aminobutanoicacid (NMBA):
This compound has a more complex structure with a carboxylic acid group and varying substituent [2].

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND REGULATORY RESPONSE

The issue of nitrosamine contamination gained prominence in June 2018 when the FDA identified **N-nitrosodimethylamine (NDMA)** in valsartan, a widely used angiotensin receptor blocker. This finding prompted a cascade of recalls across numerous medications including ranitidine and metformin as regulators demanded comprehensive reviews of manufacturing processes to identify and mitigate nitrosamine risks [3].

As a response to these incidents, regulatory agencies like the FDA and EMA established acceptable daily intake limits for nitrosamines, requiring manufacturers to ensure that all human medicinal products are free from unacceptable levels of these impurities. If nitrosamines are detected above these limits, manufacturers are mandated to recall affected products [3] [4].

FORMATION AND IMPLICATIONS

Nitrosamines can form through various pathways during the drug manufacturing process. Common sources include:

- Chemical reactions involving nitrites and secondary or tertiary amines under acidic conditions.
- Contaminated starting materials or intermediates.
- Cross-contamination from equipment or processes.
- Degradation of drug substances during formulation

These formation pathways highlight the complexity of controlling nitrosamine levels, as even minor changes in manufacturing conditions can lead to unexpected contamination [3] [5].

SOURCES OF NITROSAMINE CONTAMINATION

Nitrosamines can form during the synthesis of active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) when secondary or tertiary amines react with nitrosating agents often present as impurities like nitrites. The risk is particularly pronounced in drugs that contain amine functional groups which are common in many therapeutic agents. This has been a critical concern for manufacturers and regulators alike [1] [6].

HEALTH RISKS

The presence of nitrosamines in medications poses potential health risks as many of these compounds are classified as probable or possible human carcinogens. This classification has prompted regulatory bodies to implement stringent guidelines for monitoring and controlling nitrosamine levels in pharmaceuticals [3] [7].

REGULATORY RESPONSE AND INDUSTRY ACTIONS

Guidelines and Mitigation Strategies

In response to the nitrosamine crisis, regulatory agencies such as the FDA have established comprehensive guidelines for manufacturers. These include:

- Conducting risk assessments to evaluate potential nitrosamine formation based on chemical structure and manufacturing processes.

- Implementing advanced analytical testing methods to detect nitrosamines at trace levels.

- Enhancing manufacturing processes to minimize contamination risks through process optimization and selecting safer reagents [7] [8].

Regulatory guidance encourages manufacturers to prioritize the evaluation of at-risk APIs based on factors such as maximum daily dose and duration of treatment. This proactive approach aims to safeguard public health while maintaining the integrity of pharmaceutical products.

Collaboration Across Sectors

The complexity of the nitrosamine issue necessitates collaboration among various stakeholders including manufacturers, regulatory agencies and pharmacopoeias. Efforts are underway to improve understanding and control of nitrosamine impurities through shared resources and training initiatives aimed at enhancing global pharmaceutical safety [6] [8].

CASE STUDIES

This section will present case studies of specific drugs affected by nitrosamine contamination detailing the regulatory responses, recall processes and lessons learned from each incident.

1. Case Study : Valsartan and N-Nitrosodimethylamine (NDMA)

In June 2018, the FDA announced the detection of NDMA in valsartan, a medication used to treat high blood pressure and heart failure. NDMA is classified as a probable human carcinogen, prompting immediate action from regulatory agencies.

- **Formation Mechanism**: Investigations revealed that NDMA could form during the manufacturing process due to reactions between dimethylamine and nitrites present in the raw materials or excipients under acidic conditions. The presence of these precursors was a critical factor in the contamination.

- **Regulatory Response**: Following the discovery, the FDA and EMA mandated recalls of affected batches and required manufacturers to review their processes to eliminate nitrosamine impurities. Companies were instructed to implement stringent testing protocols to ensure compliance with acceptable daily intake limits.

- **Impact**: The incident led to significant financial losses for manufacturers and raised public awareness about the safety of pharmaceuticals. It also prompted a reevaluation of manufacturing practices across the industry [9].

2. Case Study : Ranitidine (Zantac)

Ranitidine, commonly known by its brand name Zantac, faced scrutiny after NDMA was detected in various formulations.

- **Formation Mechanism**: Studies indicated that NDMA could form from the degradation of ranitidine itself over time particularly under certain storage conditions. This degradation raised concerns about the long-term safety of the drug.

- **Regulatory Response**: In September 2019, the FDA requested that manufacturers withdraw all prescription and over-the-counter ranitidine products from the market due to unacceptable levels of NDMA. The agency recommended alternative treatments for patients relying on ranitidine for acid-related conditions.

- **Impact**: The withdrawal of ranitidine caused significant disruption in treatment options for patients with gastric acid disorders leading to increased demand for alternative medications. The incident highlighted the need for ongoing monitoring of drug stability and safety [10].

3. Case Study : Metformin

Metformin, a widely used medication for type 2 diabetes was also found to contain nitrosamine impurities.

- **Formation Mechanism**: Investigations revealed that metformin could be contaminated with NMBA (N-nitroso-N-methyl-4-aminobutyric acid) during manufacturing processes involving nitrites or through degradation pathways.

- **Regulatory Response**: The FDA issued guidelines requiring manufacturers to test metformin products for nitrosamine levels and established acceptable intake limits. Companies were directed to implement risk mitigation strategies to prevent contamination.

- **Impact**: Although metformin remains on the market this incident underscored the importance of rigorous testing and quality control measures in pharmaceutical manufacturing. It also prompted discussions about the safety of other medications containing similar chemical structures [9].

4. Case Study : Sartan Medications

Sartan medications, including losartan and irbesartan were implicated in nitrosamine contamination following the valsartan incident.

- **Formation Mechanism**: Similar to valsartan, these medications were found to contain NDMA and NDEA (N-nitrosodiethylamine) due to manufacturing processes involving secondary amines and nitrite impurities.

- **Regulatory Response**: The EMA recommended that manufacturers review their processes and implement strict limits on nitrosamine levels in sartan products. Companies were required to demonstrate that their products contained no quantifiable levels of these impurities before re-entering the market.

- **Impact**: The scrutiny surrounding sartan medications led to recalls and increased regulatory oversight across multiple drug classes. It emphasized the need for manufacturers to prioritize safety in their production processes [11].

5. Lessons Learned

The case studies of nitrosamines in pharmaceuticals reveal several key lessons:

- **Importance of Risk Assessment**: Manufacturers must conduct thorough risk assessments to identify potential sources of nitrosamine contamination during both active pharmaceutical ingredient (API) production and final drug formulation.

- **Need for Robust Testing Protocols**: Implementing sensitive analytical methods for detecting nitrosamines is crucial for ensuring compliance with regulatory standards and safeguarding patient health.

- **Collaboration Among Stakeholders**: Ongoing collaboration between regulatory agencies, manufacturers and researchers is essential for sharing knowledge about nitrosamine formation mechanisms and developing effective mitigation strategies.

- **Public Awareness and Communication**: Transparency regarding safety concerns is vital for maintaining public trust in pharmaceuticals. Effective communication strategies can help manage patient concerns during product recalls or withdrawals [9-11].

IMPACT ON DRUG SUPPLY

The widespread recalls associated with nitrosamine contamination have had a significant impact on drug supply chains. For instance, the withdrawal of valsartan and other affect medications led to shortages that put patients at risk of not receiving necessary treatments for conditions such as hypertension and diabetes. The FDA has prioritized the review and approval of alternative formulations to alleviate these shortages.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of nitrosamines as a significant concern in the pharmaceutical field underscores the need for rigorous quality control measures. Ongoing research and regulatory vigilance are essential to ensure that medications remain safe for patients while maintaining effective therapeutic outcomes. As technology advances, the ability to detect and mitigate these impurities will continue to improve in helping to safeguard public health against potential risks associated with nitrosamine contamination.

The discovery of nitrosamine impurities in various medications has led to heightened scrutiny and regulatory actions aimed at ensuring patient safety.

The impact of nitrosamines on the pharmaceutical industry is profound necessitating ongoing vigilance from manufacturers and regulators alike. As understanding of these impurities evolves, continuous improvement in detection methods and risk management strategies will be crucial in ensuring that medications remain safe for patients while minimizing potential health risks associated with nitrosamine exposure.

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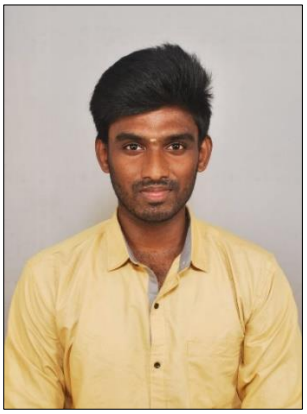
Author Name – **YAMUNA V**

Author Affiliation – POST GRADUATE STUDENT

Author Address/Institute Address - DEPARTMENT OF PHARMACEUTICAL CHEMISTRY, COLLEGE OF PHARMACY, MADRAS MEDICAL COLLEGE, CHENNAI-600003, INDIA.

	Author Name - **Dr. SARASWATHY T** Author Affiliation – ASSISTANT PROFESSOR Author Address/Institute Address - DEPARTMENT OF PHARMACEUTICAL CHEMISTRY, COLLEGE OF PHARMACY, MADRAS MEDICAL COLLEGE, CHENNAI-600003, INDIA.
	Author Name – **YOGESH CHHIPPA R** Author Affiliation – POST GRADUATE STUDENT Author Address/Institute Address - DEPARTMENT OF PHARMACEUTICAL CHEMISTRY, COLLEGE OF PHARMACY, MADRAS MEDICAL COLLEGE, CHENNAI-600003, INDIA.
	Author Name – **GUNASEKARAN P** Author Affiliation – POST GRADUATE STUDENT Author Address/Institute Address - DEPARTMENT OF PHARMACEUTICAL CHEMISTRY, COLLEGE OF PHARMACY, MADRAS MEDICAL COLLEGE, CHENNAI-600003, INDIA.



Author Name – **GUHAN G**

Author Affiliation – POST GRADUATE STUDENT

Author Address/Institute Address - DEPARTMENT OF PHARMACEUTICAL CHEMISTRY, COLLEGE OF PHARMACY, MADRAS MEDICAL COLLEGE, CHENNAI-600003, INDIA.