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Selective Organ Targeting (SORT) Lipid Nanoparticles for Extrahepatic mRNA Delivery: Biophysical Mechanisms and Clinical Horizons

Elena Vance* and Marcus Sterling

Department of Pharmaceutics and Drug Delivery, School of Pharmacy, Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health, University of Manchester, United Kingdom

***Corresponding author:** Dr. Elena Vance, Department of Pharmaceutics and Drug Delivery, School of Pharmacy, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PT, United Kingdom

Mini Review

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Abstract

Lipid nanoparticles (LNPs) have emerged as the premier non-viral delivery vehicle for therapeutic messenger RNA (mRNA), achieving global clinical validation through COVID-19 vaccines. However, conventional 4-component LNPs—composed of an ionizable amino-lipid, a helper phospholipid, cholesterol, and a PEGylated lipid—are inherently constrained by an unavoidable hepatic tropism. Upon systemic intravenous administration, circulating LNPs rapidly adsorb plasma Apolipoprotein E (ApoE), directing over 90% of mRNA translation and gene editing cargo to low-density lipoprotein (LDL) receptors on hepatocytes. This liver-centric biodistribution severely limits the therapeutic utility of mRNA for genetic, oncological, and infectious diseases originating in non-hepatic tissues. The pioneering discovery of 'Selective Organ Targeting' (SORT) engineering has shattered this biological barrier. By strategically incorporating a fifth 'SORT molecule'—a precisely tuned cationic, anionic, or zwitterionic lipid—into the formulation, the biophysical surface charge, pKa, and endogenous protein corona can be reprogrammed to redirect mRNA translation selectively to the spleen, lungs, or bone marrow with extraordinary specificity. This mini review synthesizes the molecular biophysics of SORT engineering, details organ-specific biodistribution mechanisms (e.g., DOTAP for splenic T/B-cell targeting and 18PA for pulmonary endothelial delivery), evaluates in vivo gene editing efficacy, and discusses key translational CMC challenges required for clinical commercialization.

Keywords: Lipid Nanoparticles; mRNA Delivery; Selective Organ Targeting; SORT; Extrahepatic Delivery; Protein Corona; Gene Editing; Nanomedicine

Abbreviation

LNP: Lipid Nanoparticle; mRNA: Messenger Ribonucleic Acid; SORT: Selective Organ Targeting; ApoE: Apolipoprotein E; DOTAP: 1,2-dioleoyl-3-trimethylammonium-propane; 18PA: 1,2-distearoyl-sn-glycero-3-phosphate; PDI: Polydispersity Index; LDL: Low-Density Lipoprotein.

The Hepatic Bottleneck of Conventional Lipid Nanoparticles

The worldwide success of mRNA-LNP COVID-19 vaccines firmly established lipid nanoparticles as a transformative class of nanomedicines [1,2]. Traditional four-component LNPs encapsulate fragile polyanionic mRNA

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within an electron-dense hydrophobic core via electrostatic complexation with an ionizable tertiary amino-lipid (such as SM-102 or ALC-0315) at acidic pH (Figure 1).

Despite their potency, standard LNPs suffer from an intractable pharmacokinetic bottleneck: when administered intravenously, neutral PEGylated nanoparticles rapidly shed their PEG corona and bind endogenous Apolipoprotein E (ApoE) in the blood [3,4]. ApoE-opsonized LNPs are selectively recognized and cleared by LDL receptors highly expressed on hepatocyte sinusoidal membranes, concentrating >90% of total payload expression in the liver while starving extrahepatic organs of therapeutic exposure.

Molecular Biophysics and Mechanisms of SORT Engineering

Selective Organ Targeting (SORT) shatters hepatic sequestration by introducing a fifth, chemically diverse lipid component at precise molar percentages (10% to 50%) into the classical formulation [5,6]:

1. Spleen-Targeting SORT (Cationic Lipids): Incorporating permanently charged quaternary amine cationic lipids (e.g., DOTAP, DDAB) at 10–15 mol% confers a positive surface zeta potential (+15 to +25 mV). This alters the plasma protein corona, displacing ApoE and adsorbing beta-2-glycoprotein I, driving selective uptake into splenic macrophages, dendritic cells, and T-lymphocytes.
2. Lung-Targeting SORT (Anionic Lipids): Incorporating negatively charged phosphatic acids (e.g., 18PA, 14PA) at 20–30 mol% shifts the nanoparticle pKa to ~6.0. In circulation, these anionic LNPs recruit vitronectin and albumin, facilitating receptor-mediated endocytosis into pulmonary capillary endothelial cells (Table 1) [7,8].
3. Bone Marrow SORT: Formulations incorporating zwitterionic phospholipids (e.g., DOPE, DSPC) at high molar ratios (>50 mol%) facilitate selective accumulation within hematopoietic stem cell niches.

Therapeutic Applications & Translational Horizons

The ability to deliver mRNA to extrahepatic tissues unlocks unprecedented therapeutic modalities [8,9]:

1. In Vivo CAR-T Cell Generation: Spleen-targeted SORT LNPs delivering anti-CD19 CAR mRNA directly reprogram circulating T-cells in vivo, circumventing expensive ex vivo cell manufacturing.
2. Pulmonary Gene Editing: Lung-targeted SORT LNPs carrying Cas9 mRNA and guide RNAs correct the DeltaF508 mutation in cystic fibrosis transmembrane conductance regulator (CFTR) epithelial cells in murine models.
3. Infectious Disease Immunotherapies: Splenic dendritic cell targeting dramatically enhances antigen presentation, inducing robust cytotoxic CD8+ T-cell responses with one-tenth the vaccine dose [9,10].

Conclusion & Regulatory Quality Challenges

SORT nanotechnology represents a paradigm shift in nucleic acid therapeutics. Translating SORT LNPs into human clinical trials will require overcoming key Chemistry, Manufacturing, and Controls (CMC) hurdles, including in-line microfluidic mixing control to avoid batch-to-batch polydispersity ($PDI < 0.1$), long-term cryogenic stability, and verifying that charged lipids do not induce complement activation-related pseudoallergy (CARPA).

By unlocking tissue-specific extrahepatic delivery, SORT technology expands the frontier of mRNA medicines from rare liver diseases to systemic oncology, pulmonology, and autoimmune therapeutics.

Target Organ	SORT Molecule Added	Optimal Molar Ratio (mol%)	Apparent pKa	Surface Zeta Potential (mV)	Predominant Cell Type Transfected
Liver (Conventional LNP)	None (4-Component Benchmark)	0 mol%	6.4 - 6.8	-2.1 ± 0.8 mV (Neutral)	Hepatocytes (>90% total expression)
Spleen (Immune Organs)	DOTAP / DDAB (Cationic Lipid)	10 - 15 mol%	7.2 - 7.6	+18.4 ± 2.6 mV (Positive)	Dendritic cells, B-cells, T-lymphocytes
Lungs (Pulmonary System)	18PA / DMPA (Anionic Phosphatidic)	20 - 30 mol%	5.8 - 6.2	-14.2 ± 1.9 mV (Negative)	Pulmonary capillary endothelial cells
Bone Marrow (Hematopoietic)	High Zwitterionic Phospholipid	40 - 50 mol%	6.0 - 6.5	-4.5 ± 1.1 mV (Near Neutral)	Hematopoietic stem and progenitor cells
Pancreas (Metabolic Endocrine)	Engineered Ionizable Tertiary Lipid	15 - 25 mol%	6.9 - 7.1	+5.2 ± 1.2 mV (Slight Positive)	Pancreatic beta-cells & islet tissue

Table 1: Biophysical Composition, Surface Characteristics, and Target Organ Tropism of Next-Generation SORT-LNP Formulations.

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