EXCIPIENT DESIGN IN BIOLOGICAL FORMULATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF IL-11. AND LITERATURE REVIEW OF IL-2

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By

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DECLARATION

I, Eshaa Basumatary 23/MSCBIO/20 hereby certify that the work which is being presented in the thesis entitled **"Excipient design in biological formulations: A case study of IL-11 and Literature review of IL-2"** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Master of Science, submitted in the Department of Biotechnology, Delhi Technological University is an authentic record of my own work carried out during the period from 2023 to 2025 under the supervision of Prof. Smita Rastogi Verma

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Excipient Design in Biologic Formulations: A Case Study of IL-11 and Literature Review of IL-2

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ABSTRACT

The pharmaceutical sector has undergone a significant shift, now recognizing excipients as essential, active components in biopharmaceutical formulations, rather than just inactive substances. Biologics inherently encounter complex stability challenges, including physical degradation like aggregation and denaturation, and chemical degradation such as oxidation and hydrolysis. These issues are often exacerbated by manufacturing processes and the necessity for high-concentration formulations. Effective excipient design leverages specific molecular mechanisms, including preferential exclusion [1]/hydration, vitrification [2], water replacement, and interfacial adsorption [3]. This requires the deliberate selection of excipient categories such as sugars, polyols, amino acids, and surfactants, customized to the protein's particular degradation pathways. A case study on Interleukin-11 (IL-11 [5]) showcased the utility of molecular docking [4] as a predictive tool. This study indicated that disaccharides (lactose, sucrose, trehalose) demonstrate superior stabilizing interactions with IL-11 due to their capacity to form extensive hydrogen bonding networks. This supports the use of computational methods for guiding early-stage formulation development. A literature review concerning Interleukin-2 (IL-2 [6]) revealed a more intricate set of challenges, including specific vulnerabilities to oxidation (especially methionine 104 [7]), a very short in vivo half-life, and dose-dependent pleiotropic effects leading to toxicity. These complexities have led to the creation of highly specialized excipient strategies, integrating specific antioxidants and carrier proteins, and notably, incorporating protein engineering to enhance inherent stability and modify pharmacological profiles.

This comparative analysis demonstrates that excipient design is a dynamic and evolving approach that adapts to the unique biophysical, chemical, and pharmacological characteristics of each biologic. The field is rapidly moving towards more predictive, cost-effective, and rational methods for excipient selection, with computational techniques like molecular docking [4] and machine learning becoming fundamental to the initial stages of formulation development. This approach reduces reliance on expensive and time-consuming empirical screening. Furthermore, excipient design is broadening its scope beyond simply maintaining protein structure to actively addressing complex pharmacological limitations, such as influencing receptor binding specificity or prolonging in vivo half-life, thereby ultimately enhancing the therapeutic index of biologics. A crucial emerging consideration is the stability of the excipients themselves and the potential harmful impact of their degradation byproducts on protein integrity, necessitating comprehensive stability assessments of the entire formulation matrix. The trajectory of excipient design in biopharmaceuticals is moving towards a highly integrated, data-driven, and multidisciplinary methodology. Future progress in biopharmaceutical formulation will be marked by a synergistic

combination of advanced computational modeling with rigorous experimental validation. This comprehensive outlook, facilitated by advanced computational tools and a deeper understanding of protein-excipient dynamics, will be vital in accelerating the development of next-generation, highly stable, and therapeutically optimized biologic formulations, ultimately enhancing patient outcomes and broadening access to life-saving therapies.

Key Words: Interleukin-11 (IL-11), Interleukin-2 (IL-2), Therapeutic proteins, Biologics, Cytokines, Protein stability, Protein degradation, Biopharmaceutical formulations

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Eshaa Basumatary

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CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

ABBREVIATIONS

IL-11	Interleukin-11
IL-2	Interleukin-2
API	Active Pharmaceutical Ingredient
CTLs	Cytotoxic T Lymphocytes
NK	Natural Killer
FDA	Food and Drug Administration
Treg	Regulatory T (cells)
rhIL-11	recombinant human IL-11
rhIL-2	recombinant human IL-2
BSA	Bovine Serum Albumin
DSC	Differential Scanning Calorimetry
ITC	Isothermal Titration Calorimetry
FTIR	Fourier-transform infrared
CD	Circular Dichroism
NMR	Nuclear Magnetic Resonance
ML	Machine Learning
ExPreSo	Excipient Predictor for Soluble Proteins
IL-2R	IL-2 Receptor
MAPK	Mitogen-Activated Protein Kinase
PI3K-AKT	Phosphoinositide 3-Kinase/AKT
gp130	Glycoprotein 130
IL-11Rα	IL-11 Receptor Alpha
MHC	Major Histocompatibility Complex

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1.Overview of Therapeutic Proteins and Their Inherent Stability Challenges

Therapeutic proteins represent a rapidly growing and critically important category of highly active pharmaceutical molecules, profoundly influencing modern medicine by treating a wide range of conditions, including chronic pain, inflammation, and various cancers. The significant therapeutic effectiveness of these biologics is intrinsically linked to their precise and complex three-dimensional structures, which are essential for determining their specific biological interactions and functions. However, the progression of these macromolecules from discovery to market is challenging, primarily due to their inherent fragility and susceptibility to degradation. Unlike the relatively stable nature of small molecule drugs, proteins are highly prone to both physical and chemical instabilities. Physical degradation pathways include a variety of structural changes such as misfolding, unfolding, and denaturation, often leading to irreversible aggregation. These physical alterations inevitably result in the loss of the protein's higher-order structure[19], which is crucial for its biological activity. Simultaneously, chemical degradation involves changes to the protein's covalent bonds, including processes like deamidation [20], isomerization[21] hydrolysis, and oxidation. Any compromise to a therapeutic protein's structural integrity, whether physical or chemical, can lead to a significant loss of function, reduced therapeutic efficacy, and, critically, the potential for immunogenicity. This poses substantial risks to patient safety and therapeutic outcomes. The intrinsic complexity and delicate nature of protein structures fundamentally determine the significant challenges encountered in their formulation. This means that biopharmaceutical formulation development goes beyond simply dissolving an active ingredient; it requires the careful preservation of a delicate, dynamic macromolecular structure against numerous environmental and intrinsic stressors. This profound and multifaceted challenge inherently demands a sophisticated, multi-faceted approach to stabilization, with excipients playing a central and essential role[1][23] in ensuring the integrity, safety, and efficacy of the final drug product. Furthermore, the economic consequences of protein instability are considerable, potentially leading to product loss, increased manufacturing costs, and delays in market entry. From a regulatory standpoint, maintaining protein stability is crucial for meeting stringent requirements for safety and efficacy, emphasizing the vital role of excipients in enabling regulatory approval and commercial viability.

1.2.Fundamental Functions and Importance of Excipients in Biopharmaceutical Development

Excipients, previously considered inert substances, are now definitively recognized as vital and active components within biopharmaceutical formulations. Their role has

evolved significantly beyond merely providing bulk or assisting manufacturing processes; they are integral to ensuring the overall quality, safety, and efficacy of the final drug product. The primary functions of excipients include enhancing the stability of active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) by actively preventing aggregation[23], oxidation[22], and other degradation pathways, which in turn prolongs shelf life and maintains biological activity. Beyond stability, excipients are crucial in modulating drug solubility, improving bioavailability, ensuring dose homogeneity, and maintaining critical physiological parameters like pH and osmolarity in liquid formulations. Additionally, excipients are indispensable in the manufacturing process, facilitating drug dissolution, aiding in tablet compression, and even offering intellectual property protection for novel formulations. Their quantitative presence in the final product is substantial, often comprising 80-90% of the finished product by weight. The paradigm shift from viewing excipients as "inert" to acknowledging them as "active" components signifies a significant maturation in biopharmaceutical science. This fundamental change in understanding implies that excipient selection has moved from a secondary, empirical process to a primary, rational design parameter. This directly influences not only the drug's stability and efficacy but also its manufacturability, cost-effectiveness, and even market differentiation through the enablement of novel drug delivery platforms. This highlights the increasing sophistication and scientific rigor now required in modern formulation development.

1.3.Common Degradation Pathways Affecting Protein Stability

Protein degradation can broadly be categorized into physical and chemical instabilities, both presenting significant obstacles in biopharmaceutical development. Physical degradation encompasses processes such as misfolding, unfolding, denaturation[19], and non-covalent aggregation[23], all of which compromise the protein's higher-order structure and can lead to a loss of function. Chemical degradation, conversely, involves the breaking or formation of covalent bonds within the protein, including deamidation, isomerization, hydrolysis, and oxidation. Hydrolysis, defined as the breaking of chemical bonds by water molecules, is a pervasive phenomenon that can be particularly detrimental to protein drugs, especially when stored in aqueous solutions. This process can result in protein deformation and, in some cases, severe allergic reactions. A critical consideration is that the hydrolysis of certain excipients themselves, such as sucrose, can generate byproducts that actively induce protein aggregation. This highlights a crucial complexity: formulators must not only select excipients that stabilize the protein but also ensure the stability of the excipient itself within the formulation matrix over the product's shelf life. This necessitates comprehensive stability studies of the entire formulation system, including excipient-excipient and excipient-degradation product interactions. Oxidation, a common chemical degradation pathway, often targets specific amino acid residues like methionine, tryptophan, histidine, and tyrosine. In proteins such as Interleukin-2 (IL-2), methionine at position 104 is notably susceptible to oxidation[7], particularly during long-term storage or in the presence of reducing agents, further

compromising protein integrity and function. Furthermore, biopharmaceutical manufacturing processes, especially lyophilization (freeze-drying), introduce significant stresses like freezing, temperature ramps, vacuum, and dehydration, all of which can disrupt the fragile protein structure. Interfacial interactions, occurring at the air/liquid, liquid/packaging, or solution/ice interfaces, are particularly problematic. Proteins can adsorb to these interfaces, leading to conformational changes, unfolding, and irreversible aggregation[23], which ultimately results in loss of activity and potential immunogenicity. Another significant challenge arises with high protein concentrations, often required for subcutaneous administration to reduce injection volume. Such concentrated solutions can lead to substantially increased viscosity, severely impacting syringeability, ease of administration, and ultimately, patient compliance.

CHAPTER 2

Mechanisms of Protein Stabilization by Pharmaceutical Excipients

2.1.Detailed Exploration of Key Stabilization Mechanisms

The Stabilization of therapeutic proteins by pharmaceutical excipients is achieved through various intricate molecular mechanisms, often exploited in combination to ensure robust product integrity. One cornerstone thermodynamic mechanism is preferential exclusion[1], also known as preferential hydration or the excluded volume effect. This mechanism is particularly relevant for sugars, polyols, and certain amino acids. According to this theory, these excipients are thermodynamically unfavourable to interact directly with the protein surface and are thus preferentially excluded from the immediate hydration shell of the protein. This exclusion effectively strengthens the existing hydration layer around the protein, shifting the equilibrium towards the natively folded state and consequently enhancing its stability. For solid-state formulations, especially those prepared via lyophilisation or spray drying, vitrification[2] and water replacement[2] are critical Stabilization mechanisms. In the vitrification hypothesis, excipients like sugars (e.g., sucrose, trehalose) and polyols (e.g., sorbitol, mannitol) form a rigid, amorphous glassy matrix upon drying. This glass physically immobilizes the protein, thereby kinetically inhibiting molecular mobility and the various degradation reactions that would otherwise occur. Concurrently, the water replacement hypothesis posits that during the drying process, these excipients form hydrogen bonds directly with the protein, effectively substituting for the removed water molecules. This hydrogen bonding helps to maintain the protein's native conformation even in the dehydrated state. Interfacial adsorption[3] is a primary mechanism by which surfactants stabilize proteins. Proteins, due to their amphiphilic nature, are prone to adsorbing at various interfaces, such as the air/liquid interface, the interface with primary packaging, or the solution/ice interface. This adsorption can lead to conformational changes, unfolding, and subsequent aggregation. Surfactants, such as polysorbates[24][25], stabilize proteins by preferentially adsorbing to these interfaces themselves, forming a protective layer that prevents the protein from interacting with and unfolding at the surface. A secondary mechanism involves the formation of protein-surfactant complexes, which can further minimize protein-protein interactions. Finally, some excipients can achieve stabilization through preferential binding to unfolded states[1]. In this mechanism, the excipient selectively binds to partially unfolded or misfolded protein intermediates. This interaction prevents the aggregation of these susceptible intermediates, allowing them to potentially refold back to their native state or be kinetically trapped in a non-aggregating form, thereby preventing irreversible degradation. The existence of multiple, distinct stabilization mechanisms highlights that excipient function is not monolithic but highly context-dependent. This implies that rational excipient design necessitates a profound understanding of the specific degradation pathways and physical states (e.g., solution

versus solid, presence of interfaces) relevant to a given biologic, enabling the selection of excipients whose mechanisms precisely align with the primary stabilization requirements.

2.2.Classification and Examples of Excipient Types Based on Their Stabilization Roles

Excipients are broadly classified based on their chemical nature and primary functional roles in biopharmaceutical formulations. Sugars, particularly disaccharides such as lactose, sucrose, and trehalose, are widely used. They serve as potent cryo- and lyoprotectants, primarily operating through preferential exclusion [1] in aqueous solutions and by vitrification [2] and water replacement in dry formulations. Non-reducing sugars like trehalose and sucrose are often favored due to their enhanced compatibility with amino acids and proteins, and their resistance to hydrolysis, which can otherwise lead to detrimental byproducts. Sugar alcohols (polyols), including mannitol and sorbitol, are also common. While they contribute to protein stabilization, they often exhibit less favorable direct binding interactions with proteins compared to disaccharides. They are frequently incorporated as bulking agents in lyophilized formulations, forming a rigid glass matrix in conjunction with sugars to enhance kinetic stability. Amino acids, such as glycine, arginine, histidine, and methionine, offer diverse stabilizing properties. They can directly stabilize proteins, function as buffering agents (e.g., histidine), or act as antioxidants (e.g., methionine) to mitigate oxidative degradation. Arginine, in particular, is known for its ability to solubilize target proteins and reduce the viscosity of highly concentrated formulations. Surfactants, with polysorbates (e.g., Polysorbate 80) being a ubiquitous example, are crucial for stabilizing protein biotherapeutics. Their primary mechanism involves preferential adsorption to interfaces, preventing protein unfolding and subsequent aggregation at these critical boundaries. Beyond these major classes, a wide
array of other functional excipients exists. These include buffering agents (e.g., citric acid, phosphate buffers) essential for maintaining optimal pH, antioxidants (e.g., sodium bisulphate, ascorbic acid) to inhibit oxidative degradation, as well as wetting agents, thickening agents, humectants, binders, fillers, disintegrants, lubricants, solvents, and cosolvents. A notable trend in contemporary formulation science is the development and utilization of "multifunctional excipients". These are single excipients capable of performing multiple tasks within a formulation, thereby enhancing overall pharmacological efficacy, stability, and affordability. This emphasis on high-functionality and multifunctional excipients signifies a strategic evolution in formulation science. This approach aims to optimize formulations with fewer components that collectively achieve multiple technical objectives, potentially simplifying manufacturing processes, reducing costs, and streamlining regulatory approval pathways. This trend reflects a sophisticated approach to excipient design, where efficiency and versatility are highly valued attributes.

Table 2: Overview of Excipient Classes and Their Primary Stabilization Mechanisms in Biologics

Excipient Class	Primary Stabilization Mechanism(s)	Specific Examples	Key Benefits/Considerations
Sugars	Preferential Exclusion/Hydration, Vitrification, Water Replacement	Lactose, Sucrose, Trehalose	Cryo/Lyoprotection, maintain protein structure in dry state, non-reducing sugars preferred
Polyols	Preferential Exclusion/Hydration, Vitrification (as bulking agents)	Mannitol, Sorbitol	Cryo/Lyoprotection, provide bulk in solid formulations
Amino Acids	Preferential Exclusion/Hydration, Preferential Binding to Unfolded States, Antioxidant, Buffer	Glycine, Arginine, Histidine, Methionine	Protein solubility, viscosity reduction, pH control, oxidation inhibition
Surfactants	Interfacial Adsorption, Protein-Surfactant Complex Formation	Polysorbate 80	Prevent aggregation at interfaces (air/liquid, container/liquid)
Buffering Agents	pH Control	Citric acid, Phosphate buffers, Acetate buffers	Maintain optimal pH for protein stability
Antioxidants	Oxidation Inhibition	Sodium bisulphate, Ascorbic acid, Methionine	Prevent oxidative degradation of protein residues

CHAPTER 3

CASE STUDY

InSilico Excipient Design for Interleukin-11 (IL-11) Stabilization

3.1.Therapeutic Relevance and Formulation Challenges Specific to IL-11

Interleukin-11 (IL-11 [5]) is a pleiotropic cytokine belonging to the IL-6 family, recognized for its significant therapeutic potential across various medical domains, including hematopoiesis, immune modulation, and tissue protection. Recombinant human IL-11 (rhIL-11) has found extensive clinical application, particularly in preventing chemotherapy-induced thrombocytopenia and managing a range of immune disorders. Despite its considerable therapeutic promise, IL-11, much like many other protein-based biopharmaceuticals, encounters substantial challenges related to its stability and aggregation during both formulation and subsequent storage. The inherent physical and chemical interactions between IL-11 and the excipients incorporated into its formulation can profoundly impact its stability and, consequently, its bioactivity. This susceptibility to degradation necessitates a meticulous and rational approach to excipient selection to ensure the long-term integrity, efficacy, and safety of IL-11 drug products. The explicit statement that IL-11's "stability and bioactivity... are affected by their physical and chemical interaction with excipients" underscores a critical aspect of excipient design: excipients are not merely passive additives but active molecular partners. This understanding implies that a deep comprehension of these specific protein-excipient interaction profiles is paramount for successful formulation, moving beyond generic stabilization strategies to tailored molecular interventions.

3.2.Methodology of Molecular Docking for Predicting Protein-Excipient Interactions

Recognizing the inherent limitations of conventional experimental techniques for analyzing protein-excipient interactions—which are typically time-consuming and costly— in silico methods, particularly molecular docking [4], have emerged as a valuable and economically viable alternative. These computational tools offer the distinct advantage of predicting binding affinity and identifying precise contact sites between proteins and excipients with a high degree of accuracy. The specific study on IL-11 [5] utilized AutoDock Vina [8], accessed through the PyRx tool, for its molecular docking simulations. A key methodological choice was the employment of a blind docking approach. This involved covering the entire surface of the IL-11 protein with the grid box, a strategy critical because excipients are expected to interact broadly with surface

residues rather than binding to a single, specific active site. This comprehensive coverage allowed for the exploration of all potential binding regions across the protein's surface. The 3D structure of therapeutic IL-11 was meticulously retrieved from the AlphaFold [9] Protein Structure Database, with careful attention paid to removing regions of low prediction confidence to ensure the reliability of the docking results. Similarly, the 3D structures of the selected excipients—lactose, sucrose, trehalose, mannitol, and sorbitol—were obtained from PubChem [10] and prepared appropriately for docking. Following the docking simulations, post-docking analysis and visualization of the molecular interactions, including hydrogen bonding and van der Waals forces, were performed using BIOVIA Discovery Studio [11] Visualizer. The strategic adoption of molecular docking for excipient screening represents a significant advancement in biopharmaceutical formulation, ushering in a shift from empirical trial-and-error to a predictive, rational design paradigm. This development implies that computational tools are not merely supplementary but are becoming foundational for accelerating the initial stages of formulation development, enabling a more efficient exploration of the vast excipient landscape and substantially reducing reliance on expensive wet-lab experimentation.

3.3.Analysis of IL-11 Interactions with Specific Sugars and Sugar Alcohols

The molecular docking [4] study meticulously investigated the binding interactions of IL-11 [5] with five commonly used pharmaceutical excipients: the disaccharides lactose, sucrose, and trehalose, and the sugar alcohols mannitol and sorbitol. A clear and significant finding emerged from the study: sugars (lactose, sucrose, trehalose) consistently exhibited stronger, more favorable binding interactions with IL-11 compared to the sugar alcohols (mannitol, sorbitol). This quantitative difference in binding strength is summarized by their respective binding affinities:

Table 1: Binding Energies of IL-11 with Selected Excipients

Excipient	Binding Energy (kcal/mol)
Lactose	-6.1
Sucrose	-6.0

Excipient	Binding Energy (kcal/mol)
Trehalose	-5.8
Mannitol	-5.1
Sorbitol	-4.5

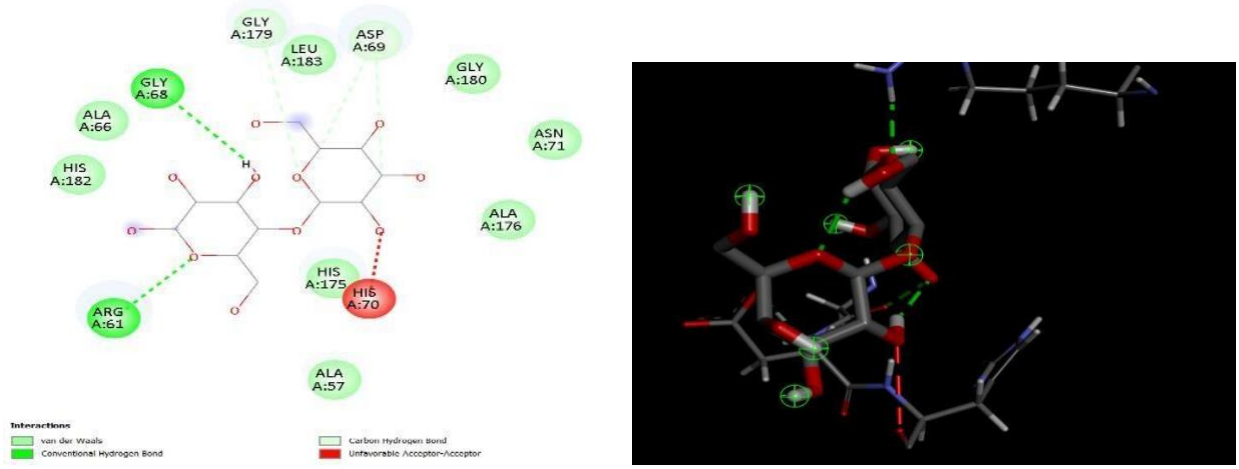


Fig1.a: 2D and 3D representations of IL–11–lactose complex. Lactose binds to IL-11 via multiple hydrogen bonds (ARG61, GLY68, HIS182) and carbon-hydrogen bonds (ASP69, LEU183), indicating strong surface interaction. One unfavorable interaction with HIS70 is present but does not significantly affect overall binding stability.

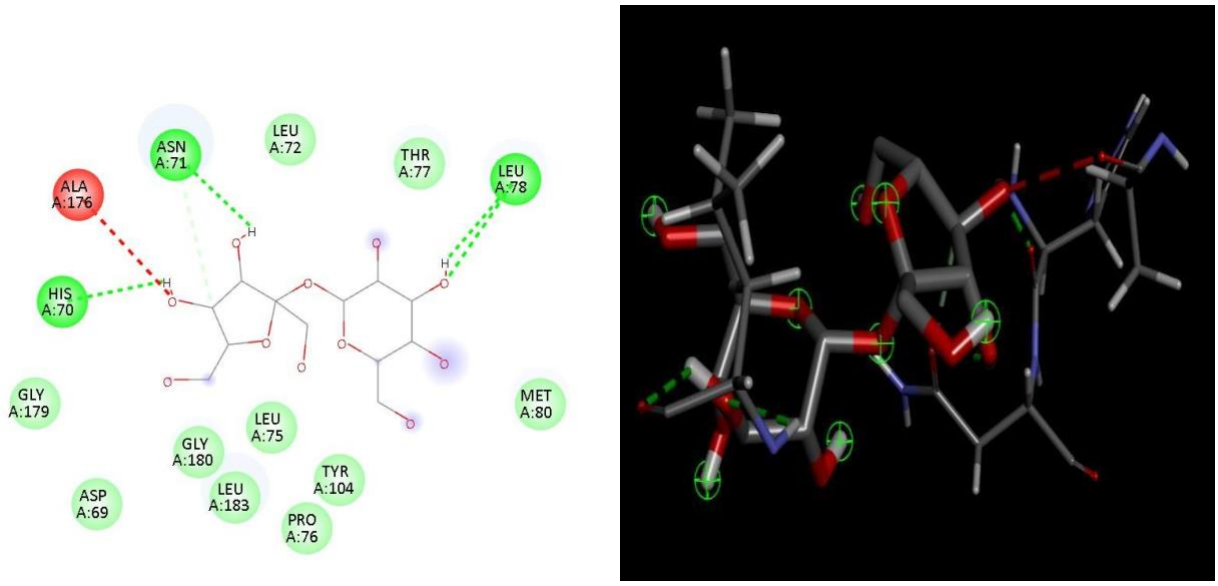


Fig 1.b: 2D and 3D representations of IL-11–sucrose complex Sucrose interacts with IL-11 through hydrogen bonds with ASN71, HIS70, and LEU78, and van der Waals interaction with ASN71 suggesting stable surface binding

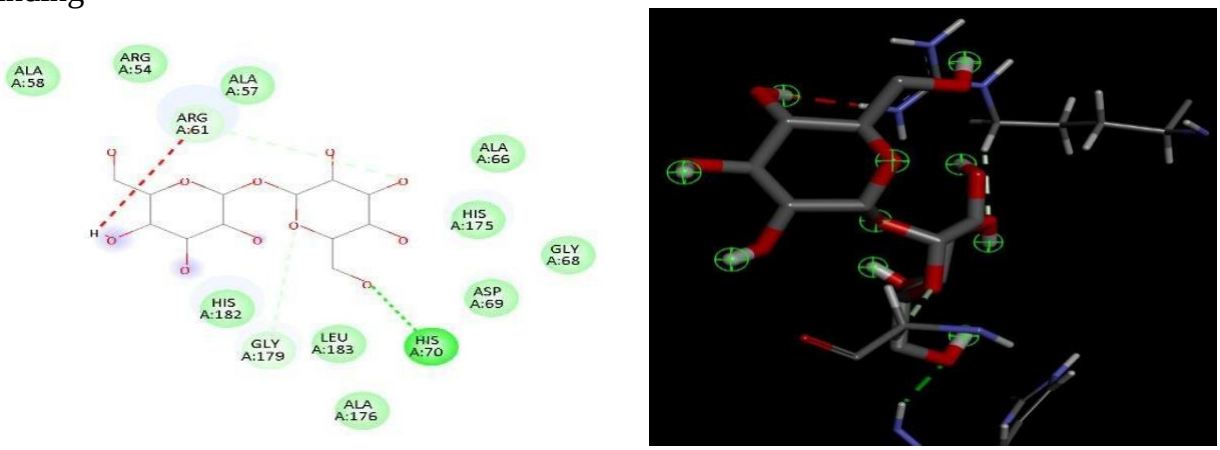


Fig 1.c: 2D and 3D representations of the IL-11–trehalose complex. Trehalose forms a strong hydrogen bond with HIS70, and GLY179 shows van der Waals interaction indicating potential surface stabilization

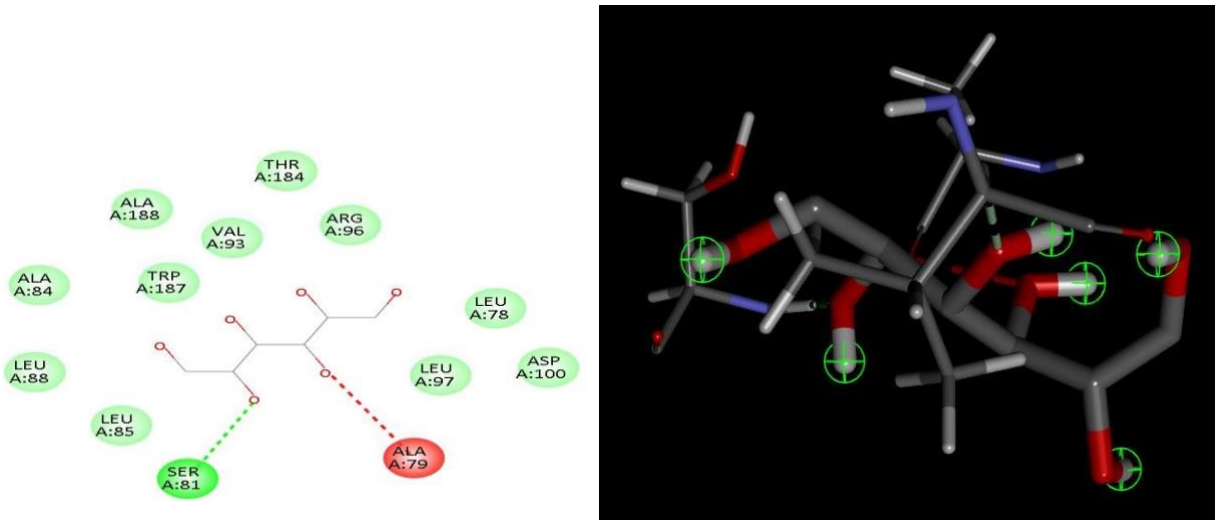
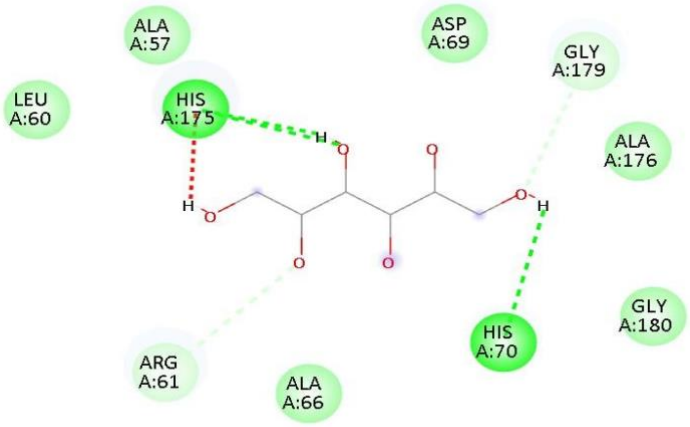


Fig 2.a: 2D and 3D representations of the IL-11–mannitol complex Mannitol forms a conventional hydrogen bond with SER81, suggesting moderate surface interactio



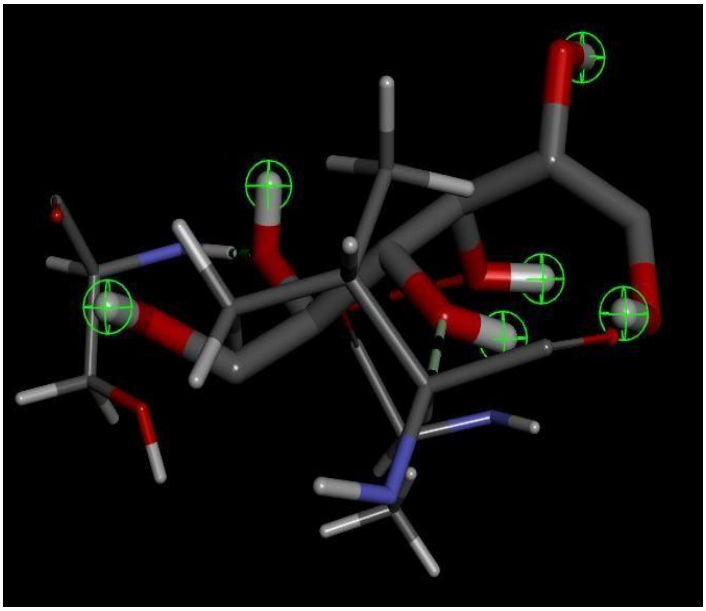


Fig 2.b: 2D and 3D representations of the IL–11–sorbitol complex showing [Sorbitol forms strong conventional hydrogen bonds with HIS70 and HIS175, van der Waals interaction with ARG61

The more favorable binding energies observed for the disaccharides were primarily attributed to their superior capacity to form multiple hydrogen bonds with the polar and charged residues present on the protein's surface. For instance, lactose formed numerous hydrogen bonds with residues such as ARG61, GLY68, and HIS182, in addition to carbon-hydrogen bonds with ASP69 and LEU183. Sucrose demonstrated interactions through hydrogen bonds with ASN71, HIS70, and LEU78. Similarly, trehalose formed a strong hydrogen bond with HIS70. In stark contrast, while mannitol and sorbitol did form some hydrogen bonds, they showed a comparatively poorer capacity to establish extensive hydrogen-bonding networks with the protein surface, which directly explains their relatively lower binding affinities. The direct correlation observed between the number and strength of hydrogen bonds (a specific molecular interaction) and the measured binding affinity (a thermodynamic property) provides a clear mechanistic basis for understanding excipient efficacy. This finding implies that rational excipient design can be effectively guided by predicting specific intermolecular interactions, allowing formulators to select molecules that are geometrically and chemically predisposed to form robust stabilizing contacts with the protein surface, rather than relying solely on empirical testing.

3.4.Discussion of the Implications of Computational Findings for Rational IL-11 Formulation Design

The computational findings from the molecular docking [4] study offer compelling evidence that disaccharides, including lactose, sucrose, and trehalose, are more viable and efficient stabilizers for IL-11 [5] in pharmaceutical formulations when compared to sugar alcohols. This insight provides a direct, data-driven foundation for the rational selection of excipients during the development of IL-11 formulations. The study's computational strategy is presented as a valuable tool for informing future formulation design for cytokines, underpinning a more rational and predictive approach to excipient choice. Crucially, the congruence between these molecular docking predictions and existing experimental data serves to validate the reliability of this in silico screening method. For example, previous experimental work by Shao et al. [12] demonstrated that disaccharides effectively inhibit IL-11 aggregation and maintain its secondary structure. Furthermore, these sugars have been incorporated into patented IL-11 formulations (e.g., U.S. Patent US6270757B1 [13]), which further supports their stabilizing role. This corroboration between computational models and empirical evidence is a critical step towards establishing in silico methods as reliable tools in biopharmaceutical development. This implies a future where computational screening can significantly de-risk and accelerate the early phases of formulation, allowing resources to be focused on promising candidates and complex experimental validations, thereby streamlining the overall drug development pipeline. The methodology demonstrated for IL-11 is transferable and can be readily applied to other biologics, thereby becoming a valuable addition to the broader field of biopharmaceutical formulation design. However, it is important to acknowledge that experimental methods such as differential scanning calorimetry (DSC), isothermal titration calorimetry (ITC), and various spectroscopy techniques remain essential to confirm and supplement these computational results, ensuring the robustness and accuracy of the final formulation.

CHAPTER 4

Literature Review

Excipient Strategies for Interleukin-2 (IL-2) Biopharmaceutical Formulations

4.1.Therapeutic Applications and Inherent Stability Challenges of IL-2

Interleukin-2 (IL-2 [6]) stands as a foundational and continually relevant cytokine within the dynamic field of cancer immunotherapy. Its profound significance stems from its crucial role in orchestrating and amplifying the body's intrinsic immune responses to effectively target and eliminate malignant cells. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approvals for its use in treating metastatic renal cell carcinoma and metastatic melanoma serve as powerful testaments to its established clinical efficacy and its capacity to elicit durable responses in these aggressive cancers. The therapeutic action of IL-2 is multifaceted and intricate, primarily revolving around its ability to profoundly stimulate various populations of white blood cells, the critical soldiers of the immune system. Specifically, IL-2 acts as a potent growth factor and differentiation signal for T lymphocytes, including cytotoxic T lymphocytes (CTLs) and natural killer (NK) cells. CTLs are paramount in directly recognizing and destroying cancer cells that display specific tumor antigens, while NK cells provide a rapid, non-MHC-restricted mechanism of killing tumor cells and virally infected cells. By promoting the proliferation and activation of these effector cells, IL-2 effectively expands the anti-tumor immune repertoire. Beyond mere proliferation, IL-2 also enhances the cytolytic activity of these immune cells, empowering them with increased capacity to directly kill cancer cells. Furthermore, IL-2 plays a significant role in inhibiting cancer cell proliferation indirectly by augmenting the immune attack, and directly in some contexts, by influencing cell cycle progression in certain cancer cell lines. Crucially, IL-2 also functions as a chemoattractant, actively recruiting additional immune cells from the bloodstream to the tumor microenvironment. This influx of immune effectors, including T cells and NK cells, intensifies the immune assault on the tumor, creating a more robust and sustained anti-cancer response that is vital for achieving clinical benefits in challenging malignancies.

Despite its significant therapeutic potential, IL-2 [6] formulations face several complex and interconnected challenges that limit its clinical utility:

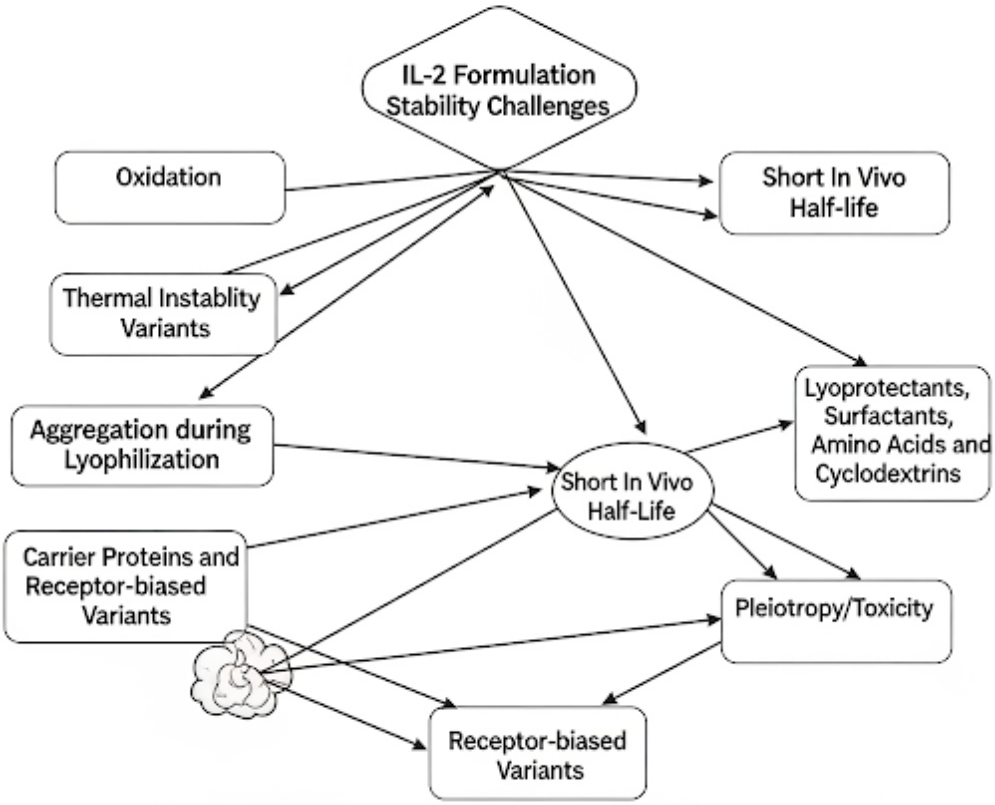
- **Toxicity and Pleiotropy:** High-dose IL-2 [6] therapy is associated with considerable adverse side effects, most notably vascular leak syndrome. Furthermore, IL-2 exhibits pleiotropy, meaning it can stimulate both effector immune cells (which are desired for anti-cancer activity) and immunosuppressive regulatory T (Treg) cells, which can dampen anti-tumor responses. Low doses of

IL-2 preferentially bind to high-affinity receptors predominantly expressed on Tregs, complicating the desired dose-response relationship and potentially limiting its anti-tumor efficacy.

- **Short In Vivo Half-life:** IL-2 [6] possesses a very short half-life in vivo, typically lasting only minutes. This necessitates frequent and high-dose administrations, which, in turn, exacerbates the inherent toxicity concerns.
- **Thermal and pH Instability:** Standard IL-2 [6] formulations, such as Aldesleukin, exhibit poor intrinsic stability. They can lose significant bioactivity when exposed to elevated temperatures (e.g., a >14-fold loss of activity after 10 minutes at 95^{\circ}C) or during extended durations in cell culture media at physiological temperatures (e.g., >3-fold loss after 10 days at 37^{\circ}C). This highlights its pronounced susceptibility to thermal and pH-induced degradation.
- **Oxidation:** IL-2 [6] contains several oxidation-sensitive amino acid residues, with methionine at position 104 being particularly vulnerable. This methionine residue can undergo oxidation in the presence of reducing chemicals or during long-term storage, compromising the protein's integrity and function.

The multifaceted challenges associated with IL-2 [6], encompassing not only its inherent stability issues but also its toxicity, short half-life, and pleiotropy, illustrate that excipient design for biologics often extends beyond mere structural stabilization. For IL-2, formulation strategies must implicitly or explicitly aim to modulate its pharmacological profile (e.g., receptor bias, half-life extension) in addition to preserving its physical and chemical integrity. This implies a higher level of formulation design where excipients or comprehensive formulation approaches actively contribute to improving the therapeutic index and overall clinical utility, rather than simply extending shelf-life.

Table 3: Key Stability Challenges and Excipient Solutions Solutions for IL-2 Formulations



4.2.Review of Various Excipients and Their Efficacy in Stabilizing IL-2

To mitigate the inherent instabilities and therapeutic limitations of IL-2 [6], a variety of excipients and sophisticated formulation strategies have been explored. To combat oxidation, particularly of the susceptible methionine 104 [7] residue, antioxidants such as EDTA [14] and methionine itself have been demonstrated to effectively preserve IL-2 stability in aqueous solutions. Beyond their antioxidant role, various amino acids like histidine and glycine have shown efficacy in improving IL-2 stability in aqueous buffers. These amino acids are also commonly employed as amorphous excipients in lyophilized IL-2 formulations, contributing to solid-state stability. Non-ionic surfactants, specifically Polysorbate 80, have been identified as essential for the preservation of recombinant human IL-2 (rhIL-2) during the lyophilization process. Their mechanism likely involves mitigating interfacial stress, preventing protein unfolding and aggregation at the air-liquid or ice-liquid interfaces during freezing and drying. Cyclodextrins, such as hydroxypropyl-beta-cyclodextrin, have also been successfully utilized as stabilizers for

lyophilized rhIL-2 formulations. The addition of carrier proteins, such as Bovine Serum Albumin (BSA), can significantly enhance the stability and extend the shelf-life of recombinant proteins like IL-2, enabling storage at more dilute concentrations while maintaining activity. While not explicitly detailed for IL-2 in the provided information, the general principles of vitrification [2] and water replacement by sugars (e.g., sucrose, trehalose) and polyols (e.g., mannitol, sorbitol) during lyophilization are highly relevant. Lyophilization is a well-established strategy for IL-2 formulation, and these excipients would function by forming a rigid glassy matrix that kinetically stabilizes the protein in the dry state. Beyond external excipients, a crucial advancement in IL-2 formulation has been the development of protein engineering approaches to enhance its intrinsic stability. For example, a "Heat Stable Agonist" IL-2 (BT-002HS) has been engineered with a synthetic core designed to strengthen the protein's structure. This modification allows the protein to withstand high temperatures and extended culture durations while maintaining its bioactivity. This represents a synergistic approach that combines targeted protein design with sophisticated formulation science. The use of both external excipients (e.g., antioxidants, surfactants) and intrinsic protein engineering (e.g., the synthetic core in heat-stable IL-2 [16]) to achieve stability for IL-2 highlights a multi-pronged approach in modern biopharmaceutical development. This integrated strategy implies that optimal stability and therapeutic performance often require a combination of sophisticated formulation science with targeted protein modifications, moving beyond a sole reliance on excipients.

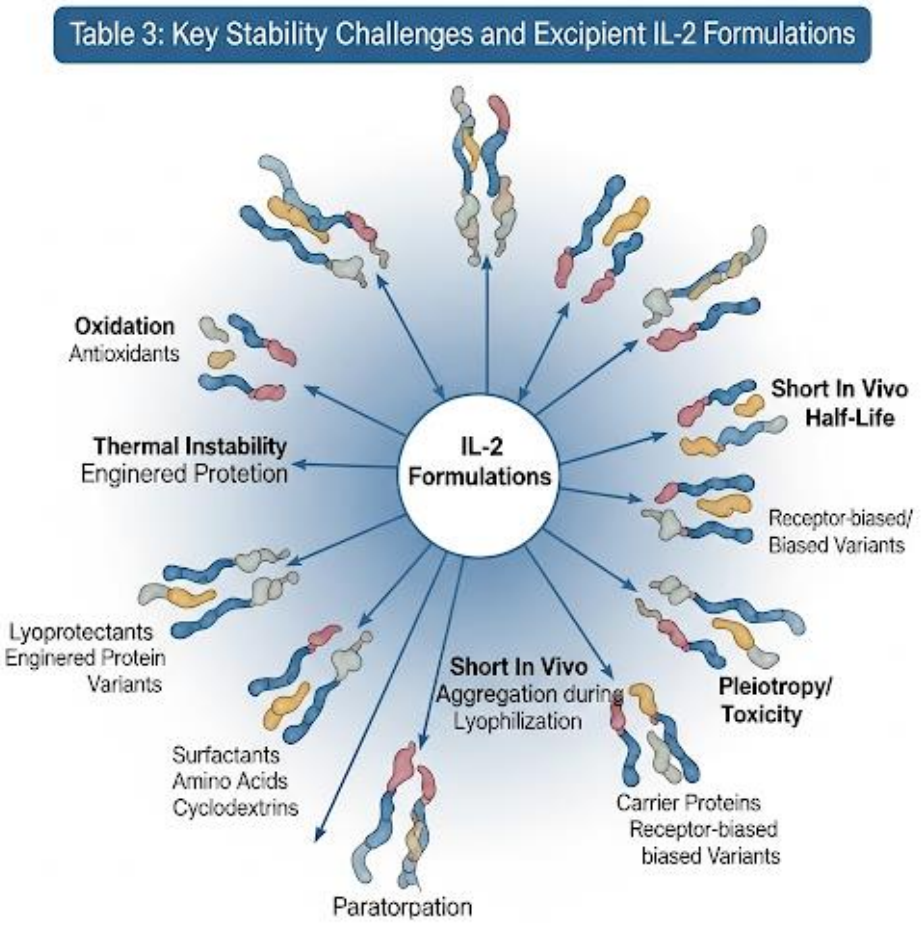


Table 3: Key Stability Challenges and Excipient Solutions for IL-2 Formulations

Stability Challenge	Specific Degradation Pathway/Mechanism	Corresponding Excipient/Formulation Strategy
Oxidation	Methionine oxidation, general oxidative stress	Antioxidants (EDTA, Methionine)
Thermal Instability	Unfolding at elevated temperatures	Engineered Protein Variants (e.g., heat-stable IL-2)
Aggregation during Lyophilization	Interfacial stress, freeze concentration	Lyoprotectants (Sugars, Polyols), Surfactants (Polysorbate 80), Amino Acids, Cyclodextrins
Short In Vivo Half-life	Rapid clearance, non-selective receptor binding	Carrier Proteins (BSA), Receptor-biased variants (protein engineering)

Stability Challenge	Specific Degradation Pathway/Mechanism	Corresponding Excipient/Formulation Strategy
Pleiotropy/Toxicity	Non-selective receptor binding (Treg stimulation)	Receptor-biased variants (protein engineering)

CHAPTER 5

Comparative Analysis and Future Directions in Rational Excipient Design

5.1.Synthesis and Comparison of Excipient Design Principles and Challenges for IL-11 and IL-2

Both Interleukin-11 (IL-11 [5]) and Interleukin-2 (IL-2 [6]), as therapeutic proteins, share fundamental stability challenges inherent to large biological molecules. These commonalities include a susceptibility to aggregation, denaturation, and the critical need to maintain their inherent bioactivity throughout their intended shelf life. For both cytokines, excipients are recognized as indispensable components for mitigating these degradation pathways. Furthermore, lyophilization, a widely adopted strategy for enhancing long-term stability by removing water, has been successfully applied to formulations of both IL-11 (as referenced in a U.S. patent) and IL-2. Despite these shared challenges, the specificities in their degradation profiles and the resulting excipient design approaches exhibit notable differences. For IL-11, the case study primarily focused on general physical stability and the prevention of aggregation. Molecular docking studies were instrumental in revealing the strong stabilizing potential of disaccharides through their ability to form extensive hydrogen bonding interactions with the protein surface. The design approach for IL-11, therefore, largely centers on optimizing these direct protein-excipient physical interactions. In contrast, the challenges for IL-2 extend significantly beyond general physical stability. These include specific chemical degradation pathways such as oxidation (particularly of methionine 104 [7]), a critically short in vivo half-life, and dose-dependent pleiotropic effects that contribute to significant toxicity. This multifaceted instability necessitates a more diverse array of excipient solutions, including specific antioxidants like EDTA [14] and methionine, carrier proteins, and surfactants. Crucially, the development of IL-2 formulations has also integrated advanced protein engineering techniques to enhance intrinsic stability and to modulate receptor binding, thereby addressing pharmacological limitations.

Both examples, however, consistently underscore the ongoing shift towards rational excipient selection in biopharmaceutical development. For IL-11 [5], this is exemplified by the effective use of predictive computational methods like molecular docking [4]. For IL-2 [6], the rational design is evident in the targeted application of antioxidants for specific chemical instabilities and the development of engineered variants to overcome pharmacological hurdles. The comparative analysis reveals that excipient design is not a monolithic concept but a dynamic, evolving strategy that adapts to the specific biophysical, chemical, and pharmacological profiles of each biologic. While ensuring basic structural integrity remains a universal goal, the depth and breadth of excipient design expand significantly when a biologic's therapeutic utility is hampered by issues

beyond simple degradation, such as in vivo half-life or receptor promiscuity. This implies that future excipient design will increasingly integrate with protein engineering and pharmacodynamics to optimize the entire therapeutic profile of a biologic.

5.2.Emerging Trends and Computational Approaches in Rational Excipient Selection for Biologics

The escalating complexity and cost associated with developing stable biopharmaceutical formulations, coupled with the inherent limitations of traditional, empirical wet lab screening—such as its considerable time consumption, high operational costs, and the often-prohibitive constraints on valuable drug substance supply—are actively catalyzing a fundamental shift within the pharmaceutical industry. This paradigm change involves a robust move towards the widespread adoption of more efficient and intelligent in silico (computational) tools for excipient selection, marking a significant evolution in how modern drug formulations are conceived, designed, and optimized. Among the pioneering computational approaches, molecular docking [4] has proven to be an exceptionally powerful predictive tool. As compellingly demonstrated with the IL-11 [5] case study (Interleukin-11, a cytokine that requires careful formulation), molecular docking offers granular, atomic-level insights into the intricate interaction mechanisms between a protein and various excipients. By simulating how excipient molecules fit into and bind to specific sites on the protein surface, it can quantify binding affinities. These quantitative measures of interaction strength directly inform rational excipient choice, allowing formulators to proactively identify excipients that are likely to stabilize the protein by minimizing undesirable interactions, preventing aggregation, or enhancing solubility, thereby moving away from purely trial-and-error experimentation. Beyond the mechanistic insights provided by molecular docking, machine learning (ML) algorithms are rapidly emerging as a truly transformative trend in the field of rational excipient selection. Advanced computational tools, such as "ExPreSo [17]" (Excipient Predictor for Soluble Proteins), are at the forefront of this revolution. These algorithms leverage vast datasets compiled from previously approved and well-characterized stable biopharmaceutical formulations, identifying complex patterns and relationships between protein characteristics, excipient profiles, and formulation stability outcomes. By learning from this wealth of historical data, these ML models demonstrate remarkable predictive capabilities. Critically, they can achieve significant accuracy even when relying solely on protein-based input features, such as amino acid sequence, hydrophobicity, charge distribution, or predicted structural characteristics, without requiring explicit excipient structural information in the initial prediction phase. This allows them to accurately identify the likely presence of prevalent excipients (e.g., specific sugars, salts, or surfactants) that are commonly associated with stable formulations, thereby dramatically accelerating the initial screening process and narrowing down the vast chemical space of potential excipients to a manageable subset. The overarching and unifying objective of integrating these cutting-edge computational methods into excipient design is multifold:

primarily, to refine the pool of candidate excipients with unprecedented efficiency, significantly reduce the reliance on extensive and resource-intensive high-throughput experimental screening, and consequently, expedite the overall formulation development timeline. This acceleration is not merely a convenience but a critical imperative, especially given the rapidly increasing number of approved protein and peptide drug formulations in recent years, which demands faster and more efficient development pipelines. The integration of machine learning into excipient selection represents a profound paradigm shift: it moves from a purely mechanistic understanding, as inherently provided by molecular docking, towards a powerful, data-driven prediction. This implies that the future of excipient design will likely involve a sophisticated hybrid approach: machine learning algorithms will be deployed for rapid initial screening, broad hypothesis generation across immense chemical spaces, and identification of promising excipient classes or combinations. This will then be followed by more granular, mechanistic molecular modeling techniques like docking for detailed validation, understanding the precise modes of interaction, and fine-tuning the selection of specific excipient molecules. This synergistic approach promises to revolutionize the speed, efficiency, and rationality of biopharmaceutical formulation development, ultimately bringing more stable and effective biologic drugs to patients faster.

Table 4: General Differentiate between Therapeutic IL-11 and therapeutic IL-2

Feature	Therapeutic IL-2 (Aldesleukin/Proleukin)	Therapeutic IL-11 (Oprelvekin)
Primary Function	Immune activation (T cell, NK cell proliferation/differentiation), immune tolerance (Tregs)	Hematopoiesis (megakaryopoiesis/platelet production), tissue remodeling
Mechanism of Action	Binds to IL-2R (\alpha\beta\gamma chains), activates JAK-STAT, MAPK, PI3K-AKT pathways.	Binds to IL-11Rα, then associates with gp130, activates JAK-STAT, MAPK, PI3K-AKT pathways.
Key Target Cells	T cells (CD8+, CD4+, Tregs), NK cells, B cells.	Hematopoietic stem cells, megakaryocytes, fibroblasts, epithelial cells.
Main Clinical Use	Metastatic melanoma, metastatic renal cell carcinoma (cancer immunotherapy).	Chemotherapy-induced thrombocytopenia.
Emerging Uses	Low-dose for autoimmune diseases, transplant tolerance (Treg expansion).	Anti-fibrotic therapy, targeting IL-11 in certain cancers.
Role in Disease	Can be pro-inflammatory (anti-tumor) or immunosuppressive (Tregs).	Often pro-fibrotic, pro-inflammatory in pathological contexts.

Feature	Therapeutic IL-2 (Aldesleukin/Proleukin)	Therapeutic IL-11 (Oprelvekin)
Major Side Effects	Capillary leak syndrome, hypotension, multi-organ toxicity.	Fluid retention, cardiovascular effects.
Therapeutic Goal	Augment immune response (in cancer); modulate immune response (Tregs).	Augment platelet production; inhibit pro-fibrotic/pro-inflammatory actions.
Molecular Docking Role	Designing IL-2 muteins with altered receptor binding specificity (e.g., Treg selectivity), identifying small molecule modulators.	Designing inhibitors (peptides, small molecules, antibodies) to block IL-11 signaling, targeting IL-11, IL-11Rα, or gp130.

CHAPTER 6

PROSPECTS

Recommendations for Future Research, Including the Necessity of Experimental Validation

Despite the remarkable strides and immense potential heralded by computational methods in the intricate field of excipient design for biopharmaceuticals, it is unequivocally clear that the bedrock of robust experimental validation remains paramount. While in silico tools offer unprecedented speed and efficiency in screening vast numbers of potential excipients and predicting their interactions, their predictions are, at present, hypotheses that require empirical confirmation. Techniques such as differential scanning calorimetry (DSC), which precisely measures thermal transitions and protein stability; isothermal titration calorimetry (ITC), offering quantitative insights into binding affinities and thermodynamics of molecular interactions; and a diverse array of spectroscopic methods (e.g., Fourier-transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy, circular dichroism (CD), nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy) which provide detailed structural and conformational information, are not merely supplementary but indispensable for confirming, refining, and validating computational predictions. Future research must aggressively pursue a deeper and more seamless integration, systematically bridging the gap between sophisticated computational models and rigorous empirical data. This synergistic approach is essential to build greater confidence, enhance accuracy, and ultimately elevate the predictive power of these computational tools, moving towards a truly predictive and prescriptive capability in excipient selection. The explicit and persistent call for continued experimental validation, even amidst the accelerating advancements in computational methodologies, underscores a fundamental truth: in silico tools, while powerful predictive and screening instruments, are not yet standalone confirmatory ones in the highly complex biological and chemical landscape of protein formulations. This implies that the future of excipient design will not be characterized by one approach superseding the other, but rather by a sophisticated and synergistic integration, where each method complements the other to accelerate and profoundly optimize the development of stable, effective, and safe biologic formulations. Furthermore, a critical and often overlooked area demanding intensive future investigation is the long-term stability of the excipients themselves within complex biopharmaceutical formulations. The traditional view of excipients as inert substances has obscured the reality that they, too, are susceptible to degradation, and their degradation products can have profoundly detrimental consequences for the therapeutic protein. The striking instance of sucrose hydrolysis leading to protein aggregation, as highlighted in existing literature, serves as a stark reminder of this vulnerability. Sucrose, a widely used stabilizer, can hydrolyze into glucose and fructose over time, especially

under certain storage conditions. These monosaccharides, particularly reducing sugars like glucose, can participate in Maillard reactions [18] with amino groups on proteins, leading to glycosylation, aggregation, and loss of biological activity. This necessitates a paradigm shift towards detailed and exhaustive studies focusing not only on excipient-protein interactions but also on complex excipient-excipient interactions and, crucially, the comprehensive stability of the entire formulation matrix over extended periods. Understanding the degradation pathways of individual excipients, the potential for interactions between different excipients, and the cumulative impact of these processes on the overall stability of the drug product is vital for designing truly robust and long-lasting formulations.

Beyond these foundational stability concerns, addressing persistent and significant unmet needs within the biopharmaceutical landscape remains a critical area for future research. One such prominent challenge is the prediction and effective reduction of the exceptionally high viscosity often encountered in ultra-high concentration biologic solutions. As antibody therapeutics move towards higher concentrations to enable subcutaneous self-administration, viscosity becomes a major hurdle, impacting injectability, manufacturing feasibility, and ultimately, patient compliance. The current empirical approaches to mitigate high viscosity are often laborious and inefficient. Innovative excipient strategies, potentially involving novel classes of excipients with unique physicochemical properties, or the development of entirely novel delivery platforms, are urgently required to overcome these complex rheological challenges. Successfully tackling high viscosity would not only improve patient comfort and adherence, particularly for chronic conditions requiring frequent self-administered therapies, but also unlock new possibilities for drug delivery and enhance the overall market viability of next-generation biologic therapies. This underscores that future excipient research must be driven by both fundamental scientific understanding and practical clinical needs, pushing the boundaries of formulation science to deliver more patient-centric and effective biopharmaceutical products.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The landscape of biopharmaceutical formulation has undergone a profound transformation, moving beyond the conventional view of excipients as inert substances to recognizing them as active, indispensable components critical for the stability, efficacy, and manufacturability of therapeutic proteins. Biologics inherently face complex stability challenges, encompassing diverse physical (e.g., aggregation, denaturation) and chemical (e.g., oxidation, hydrolysis) degradation pathways, often exacerbated by manufacturing stresses and the demands for high concentration formulations. Rational excipient design leverages specific molecular mechanisms, including preferential exclusion [1]/hydration, vitrification [2], water replacement, and interfacial adsorption [3]. This necessitates the strategic selection of excipient classes such as sugars, polyols, amino acids, and surfactants, tailored to the specific degradation pathways of the protein. The case study of Interleukin-11 (IL-11 [5]) demonstrated the significant utility of molecular docking [4] as a predictive tool, revealing that disaccharides (lactose, sucrose, trehalose) exhibit superior stabilizing interactions with IL-11 due to their ability to form extensive hydrogen bonding networks. This validates the effectiveness of in silico approaches for guiding early-stage formulation design. The literature review on Interleukin-2 (IL-2 [6]) highlighted a more intricate set of challenges, including specific oxidation vulnerabilities, a critically short in vivo half-life, and dose-dependent pleiotropic effects leading to toxicity. These complexities have driven the development of highly tailored excipient strategies, incorporating specific antioxidants and carrier proteins, and, notably, the integration of protein engineering to enhance intrinsic stability and modulate pharmacological profiles.

This comparative analysis reveals that excipient design is not a static concept but a dynamic, evolving strategy that adapts to the unique biophysical, chemical, and pharmacological characteristics of each biologic. The field is rapidly transitioning towards more predictive, economical, and rational means of excipient selection, with computational methods like molecular docking [4] and machine learning becoming integral to the initial stages of formulation development. This minimizes reliance on costly and time-consuming empirical screening. Excipient design is also expanding its scope beyond merely preserving protein structure to actively addressing complex pharmacological limitations, such as influencing receptor binding specificity or extending in vivo half-life, ultimately enhancing the therapeutic index of biologics. A critical emerging consideration is the stability of the excipients themselves and the potential detrimental impact of their degradation byproducts on protein integrity, necessitating comprehensive stability assessments of the entire formulation matrix. The trajectory of excipient design in biopharmaceuticals is towards a highly integrated, data-driven, and

multidisciplinary approach. Future advancements in biopharmaceutical formulation will be characterized by a synergistic integration of cutting-edge computational modeling with robust experimental validation. This holistic perspective, enabled by advanced computational tools and a deeper understanding of protein-excipient dynamics, will be pivotal in accelerating the development of next-generation, highly stable, and therapeutically optimized biologic formulations, ultimately improving patient outcomes and expanding access to life-changing therapies.

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