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A Critical Review on Nanoparticle Synthesis: Physical, Chemical, and Biological Perspectives

Kajal Gharat, Aditi Gharat, Komal Patil, Prachi Mokal, Maryappa C Sonawale, Amod N. Thakkar
Veer Wajekar ASC College, Phunde, Uran

Abstract: *Nanoparticles (NPs) are ultra-small particles ranging from 1 to 100 nanometers, exhibiting unique physicochemical properties such as high reactivity, enhanced strength, stability, and increased surface area. These properties make nanoparticles highly valuable across diverse fields, including medicine, environmental sustainability, agriculture, industry, and pollution remediation. Nanotechnology has emerged as a pivotal multidisciplinary field, driving advancements in nanomaterial synthesis. Various synthesis methods are employed, primarily categorized into physical, chemical, and biological (green) approaches. Traditional physicochemical methods often raise environmental concerns due to toxic byproducts and the necessity of reducing and stabilizing agents. In contrast, biological synthesis methods utilizing plant extracts, bacteria, fungi, and yeast offer a more eco-friendly alternative. This review provides an in-depth comparison of physical, chemical, and biological nanoparticle synthesis techniques, highlighting their advantages, limitations, and potential applications.*

Keywords: Nanoparticles, Nanotechnology, Physical Synthesis, Chemical Synthesis, Green Synthesis

I. INTRODUCTION

Nanotechnology is an interdisciplinary field encompassing the design, fabrication, characterization, and application of nanoscale materials, devices, and systems. Nanoparticles can be classified based on their composition into inorganic, organic, ceramic, and carbon-based nanoparticles. Inorganic nanoparticles are further categorized into metal and metal oxide nanoparticles, while carbon-based nanoparticles include fullerenes, carbon nanotubes, graphene, carbon nanofibers, and carbon black nanoparticles (CBNPs). Additionally, nanoparticles can be classified based on their dimensionality as one-, two-, or three-dimensional structures.

Nanoparticles are synthesized using two primary approaches: **top-down** and **bottom-up**. The top-down approach involves breaking down bulk materials into nanoscale structures through methods such as quenching, milling, and lithography. However, these techniques often lead to inconsistencies in particle size and shape. In contrast, the bottom-up approach involves assembling nanoparticles atom by atom or molecule by molecule, allowing for better control over particle size, shape, and distribution.

II. PHYSICAL SYNTHESIS OF NANOPARTICLES

Physical methods of nanoparticle synthesis rely on mechanical, thermal, and plasma-based techniques. Some commonly used methods include:

Ball Milling: A top-down method where bulk materials are ground into nanoscale particles. However, its efficiency is limited, often yielding nanoparticles with a low production rate and wide size distribution.

Sputtering: A process in which high-energy particles bombard a target material, leading to nanoparticle formation. However, only a small fraction (6-8%) of the sputtered material results in nanoparticles smaller than 100 nm.

Pulsed Laser Ablation: Involves using a high-energy laser to vaporize a target material, forming nanoparticles in a controlled environment. Although effective, this method requires significant energy input.

Plasma-Based Techniques: Utilize plasma energy to generate nanoparticles, but these methods are costly due to high energy consumption and complex processing requirements.

While physical synthesis methods provide control over nanoparticle purity and composition, they often suffer from limitations such as high energy demands, low production rates, and waste byproducts, making them less viable for large-scale applications.

III. CHEMICAL SYNTHESIS OF NANOPARTICLES

Chemical methods employ various reactions to produce nanoparticles in aqueous or non-aqueous solvents. Some widely used chemical synthesis techniques include:

Electrochemical Deposition: A process in which metal ions are reduced at an electrode surface to form nanoparticles.

Sonochemical Synthesis: Uses ultrasonic waves to induce cavitation, leading to nanoparticle formation with controlled morphology and size.

Radiolytic Method: Involves the use of ionizing radiation to generate free radicals, which reduce metal ions to form nanoparticles.

Photochemical Synthesis: Utilizes light energy to initiate nanoparticle formation through photoreduction processes.

Despite their efficiency, chemical synthesis methods often require stabilizing agents and reducing chemicals, which may introduce toxicity and environmental hazards.

IV. GREEN SYNTHESIS OF NANOPARTICLES

Biological or green synthesis methods offer an eco-friendly alternative to conventional techniques by leveraging plant extracts, microorganisms, and biopolymers for nanoparticle production. These methods involve the reduction of metal precursors using natural biomolecules, which also act as stabilizing agents. Key approaches include:

Plant-Mediated Synthesis: Plant root, stem, and leaf extracts contain bioactive compounds that facilitate nanoparticle formation.

Microbial Synthesis: Bacteria, fungi, and yeast possess metal-reducing enzymes that aid in nanoparticle synthesis.

Biopolymer-Assisted Synthesis: Polysaccharides and proteins act as reducing and stabilizing agents, enhancing nanoparticle stability.

Green synthesis methods are cost-effective, non-toxic, and sustainable, making them highly attractive for biomedical and environmental applications. However, challenges such as reproducibility and scalability need to be addressed for commercial implementation.

V. METHODS OF SYNTHESIS OF NANOPARTICLES

Nanoparticles can be synthesized using various methods, each designed to control their size, shape, and composition. One of the most common techniques is **chemical reduction**, where metal ions in a solution are reduced to form nanoparticles under controlled conditions. Another widely used approach is the **sol-gel method**, in which precursor solutions undergo hydrolysis and condensation reactions, leading to nanoparticle formation within a gel matrix. **Physical methods** such as laser ablation and ball milling generate nanoparticles by breaking down bulk materials into nanoscale structures. Additionally, **biological or biogenic synthesis** leverages microorganisms and enzymes to produce nanoparticles, offering a more eco-friendly approach (Fig. 1).

1.1 Top-Down Synthesis

The top-down approach starts with bulk materials and applies external forces to break them down into nanoscale particles. Various physical, chemical, and thermal techniques are used to supply the necessary energy for nanoparticle formation.

Despite its effectiveness, the top-down approach has several limitations, including high costs, the requirement for specialized equipment, and challenges in achieving uniform nanoparticle size. Due to these drawbacks, it is more suitable for laboratory-scale experiments rather than large-scale production. Additionally, this method is not ideal for processing delicate or heat-sensitive materials.

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Common top-down techniques include:

- Physical Vapor Deposition (PVD)
- Chemical Vapor Deposition (CVD)
- Ion Implantation
- Electron Beam Lithography
- X-ray Lithography

1.2 Bottom-Up Synthesis

The bottom-up approach builds nanoparticles from atomic or molecular precursors through self-assembly or chemical processes. This method allows precise control over particle size, shape, and distribution.

Common bottom-up techniques include:

Sol-Gel Synthesis

Colloidal Precipitation

Hydrothermal Synthesis

Organometallic Chemical Routes

Electrodeposition

These techniques can further be categorized into three primary synthesis methods

- Physical Methods
- Chemical Methods
- Green/Herbal Methods

PHYSICAL METHODS

Physical synthesis methods involve manipulating materials at the nanoscale to produce nanoparticles with controlled properties. These methods are known for their ability to create high-purity nanoparticles but may require high energy inputs and specialized equipment.

(i) Mechanical/High-Energy Ball Milling Technique

Ball milling is a widely used solid-state processing technique that generates nanoparticles by mechanically grinding bulk materials into nanoscale dimensions. The process involves subjecting raw materials (typically smaller than a micron) to high-energy collisions inside a milling chamber.

Despite being a cost-effective and scalable technique, ball milling has certain limitations. Producing ultra-fine nanoparticles can be challenging due to mechanical constraints, and extended processing times may be required to achieve desired particle sizes. Several factors influence the final product, including:

Type of milling equipment

Milling speed

Container and grinding medium

Processing time and temperature

Process control agents and vial filling volume

Nanoparticles can also be synthesized by rapidly cooling molten metals, leading to the formation of metallic glasses or amorphous solids. For instance, TiB_2 nanoparticles can be synthesized by heating Ti and molten Cu-B alloys.

(ii) Chemical Vapor Deposition (CVD)

CVD is a widely used method for depositing thin films of nanoparticles onto a substrate through a chemical reaction between gaseous reactants and the heated substrate. This process typically occurs at temperatures ranging from 300°C to 1200°C and pressures between 100 and 105 Pa.

Various CVD techniques include:

- Plasma-Enhanced CVD (PECVD)
- Atomic Layer Deposition (ALD)

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- Vapor Phase Epitaxy (VPE)
- Metal-Organic CVD (MOCVD)

CVD offers several advantages, including the production of uniform, high-purity nanoparticles with excellent mechanical properties. However, by-products generated during the process must be efficiently removed to prevent contamination.

There are two primary heating approaches in CVD:

Hot-Wall Reactors – Heat is applied uniformly, but deposition may occur on reactor walls.

Cold-Wall Reactors – Only the substrate is heated, reducing unwanted deposition.

Key factors influencing nanoparticle formation in CVD include gas pressure, substrate temperature, and reaction kinetics. By optimizing these parameters, high-quality nanoparticles can be produced efficiently.

Methods of Nanoparticle Synthesis

Nanoparticles can be synthesized through various methods, each designed to control particle size, shape, and composition. Common synthesis approaches include chemical reduction, sol-gel methods, and physical techniques like laser ablation and ball milling. Additionally, biological synthesis, also known as biogenic synthesis, utilizes microorganisms or enzymes to produce nanoparticles.

1.1 Top-Down Synthesis

Top-down synthesis involves the reduction of larger solid materials into nanoscale particles using external forces. While effective, this approach is often costly and requires extensive installations, making it more suitable for laboratory-scale experiments rather than mass production. Moreover, it is not ideal for sensitive specimens.

Techniques in the Top-Down Approach:

Physical vapor deposition (PVD)

Chemical vapor deposition (CVD)

Ion implantation

Electron beam lithography

X-ray lithography

1.2 Bottom-Up Synthesis

Bottom-up synthesis constructs nanoparticles from smaller building blocks such as atoms and molecules. This approach leverages various chemical and biological processes to form nanoscale structures via self-assembly.

Techniques in the Bottom-Up Approach:

Sol-gel synthesis

Colloidal precipitation

Hydrothermal synthesis

Organometallic chemical routes

Electrodeposition

2.1.1 Physical Methods of Nanoparticle Synthesis

Physical methods utilize different processes to manipulate matter at the nanoscale. These techniques provide precise control over particle size, shape, and composition.

(i) Mechanical/High-Energy Ball Milling

Ball milling is a widely used solid-state technique for nanoparticle production. Raw materials undergo high-energy mechanical milling, resulting in nano-sized particles. This method is cost-effective and allows large-scale production, although achieving ultra-fine particles can be challenging due to mechanical limitations.

(ii) Chemical Vapor Deposition (CVD)

CVD involves depositing a thin layer of material onto a substrate through a chemical reaction of gaseous reactants at temperatures between 300°C and 1200°C. This process enables the fabrication of highly pure and uniform nanoparticles.

(iii) Laser Pyrolysis

In laser pyrolysis, a high-powered laser disintegrates a gaseous reactant mixture in an inert atmosphere, such as helium or argon, to form nanoparticles. Factors like gas pressure significantly influence particle size and distribution.

(iv) Ionized Cluster Beam Deposition

This method forms single-crystalline thin films. The system includes an evaporation source, a nozzle for material expansion, a cluster-accelerator, an electron beam for ionization, and a substrate for nanoparticle deposition.

(v) Pulsed Laser Ablation

A high-power pulsed laser beam focuses on a target in a vacuum chamber, generating plasma that later forms nanoparticles in a colloidal solution. Second Harmonic Generation (ND: YAG type) lasers are commonly used, with variables like laser type, pulse count, and solvent type affecting the outcome.

(vi) Mechanochemical Synthesis

This process employs mechanical energy to initiate chemical reactions, producing ultra-fine composite powders stabilized within a salt matrix. The nanoparticles are later extracted by washing with a solvent.

(vii) Pulsed Wire Discharge (PWD)

PWD generates nanoparticles by evaporating a metal wire using a pulsed current, followed by cooling the vapor with a surrounding gas. It is particularly useful for metals with high electrical conductivity.

(viii) Thermal Decomposition

This endothermic process involves heat-induced chemical breakdown of molecules, forming nanoparticles when the metal precursor reaches its decomposition temperature.

(ix) Lithographic Methods

Lithographic techniques, including photolithography, electron beam lithography, and nano-imprint lithography, enable the fabrication of patterned nanoparticles. These methods are widely used in electronics and semiconductor industries.

(x) Laser Ablation

This technique utilizes a laser beam to irradiate metal submerged in a liquid, forming nanoparticles through plasma condensation. It provides a chemical-free approach for producing metal nanoparticles.

(xi) Sputtering

Sputtering involves the ejection of particles from a solid target due to high-energy ion bombardment. The deposited nanoparticles' size and shape depend on variables such as temperature, coating thickness, and annealing time.

(xii) Spinning

Spinning disc reactors (SDRs) produce nanoparticles via hydrolysis, condensation, and calcination. Factors such as disc surface properties, rotation speed, and precursor ratios influence nanoparticle characteristics.

(xiii) Pyrolysis

Pyrolysis is a widely used commercial process where a precursor material is burned in a flame or high-temperature furnace to produce nanoparticles. Plasma or lasers may also be used for high-temperature decomposition.

(xiv) Plasma Synthesis

High-temperature plasma, generated via radio frequency (RF) heating, is used to evaporate metals. The resulting vapor condenses to form nanoparticles. Plasma methods vary based on reactor type and heating source.

(xv) Microwave Irradiation

Microwave-assisted synthesis offers a rapid and energy-efficient method for nanoparticle production. It has been widely used in organic and inorganic materials synthesis due to its advantages over conventional heating methods.

(xvi) Gamma Radiation

Gamma irradiation facilitates the formation of monodisperse metallic nanoparticles through radiolytic reduction. It is an efficient, cost-effective method that requires minimal reagents and low reaction temperatures.

By using these physical methods, researchers can tailor nanoparticle synthesis to meet specific application requirements in fields such as medicine, electronics, and environmental science.

1.2.1 Chemical Synthesis

Chemical synthesis of nanoparticles involves generating nanostructures through chemical reactions, usually in a solution phase. These methods are widely utilized due to their ability to precisely control nanoparticle size, morphology, composition, and surface characteristics. Several well-established chemical approaches include:

(i) Chemical Reduction Method The chemical reduction technique is a widely used wet-chemical method for synthesizing zero-valent metal nanoparticles. This process involves reducing metal salts, such as silver nitrate (AgNO3), using specific reducing agents that donate electrons to the metal ions, converting them into their metallic form. Common reducing agents include ascorbic acid, sodium citrate, and sodium borohydride. To stabilize the formed nanoparticles and prevent aggregation, stabilizing agents such as cetyltrimethylammonium bromide (CTAB) are used. In some cases, reducing agents like sodium citrate can also serve as stabilizers in the synthesis of silver nanoparticles.

(ii) Microemulsion Method Microemulsion-based synthesis utilizes a thermodynamically stable, isotropic mixture of oil, water, and surfactants, sometimes in combination with co-surfactants. This technique is categorized into direct microemulsions (oil dispersed in water) and reverse microemulsions (water dispersed in oil). The aqueous phase within the micelles can contain metal salts, while surfactants regulate the nanoparticle formation process. The controlled interaction between micelles allows for precise nanoparticle synthesis.

(iii) Sol-Gel Method In the sol-gel method, metal alkoxides or other metal precursors undergo hydrolysis and condensation, leading to the formation of a stable colloidal solution (sol). As the reaction progresses, viscosity increases, forming a gel-like network. By manipulating factors such as precursor concentration, temperature, and pH, nanoparticle characteristics can be fine-tuned. The removal of solvents and subsequent aging and phase transformation steps are crucial for achieving a well-defined solid-phase nanomaterial.

(iv) Sonochemical Synthesis Sonochemical methods utilize high-energy ultrasonic waves to drive chemical reactions, effectively synthesizing nanomaterials such as Pd-CuO nanohybrids. During the process, ultrasonic waves facilitate the transformation of metal salts into their respective oxides or metallic states, with palladium either appearing in its salt form or as a pure metallic element. This technique enhances reaction kinetics and promotes uniform nanoparticle formation.

(v) Co-Precipitation Method The co-precipitation method, a type of solvent displacement approach, involves the rapid mixing of polymer solutions with a non-solvent to induce nanoparticle formation. Common solvents include ethanol, acetone, and hexane, while the polymer phase can be synthetic or natural. The process exploits interfacial stress between the two phases to drive nanoparticle formation, leading to precise particle size control.

(vi) Inert Gas Condensation Method This method is employed for the large-scale production of metal nanoparticles. It involves the evaporation of a metallic source within an inert gas environment, such as argon, helium, or neon. The metal vapor condenses upon rapid cooling with an inert gas, typically aided by liquid nitrogen, leading to the formation of nanoparticles ranging from 2 to 100 nm in size. This technique is particularly useful for producing fine metal nanoparticles like copper.

(vii) Hydrothermal Synthesis Hydrothermal synthesis is one of the most commonly used chemical approaches for nanoparticle production. This method involves conducting chemical reactions in aqueous media under controlled temperature and pressure conditions. The technique allows for nanoparticle synthesis across a wide temperature range, providing benefits such as enhanced crystallinity and controlled morphology. Hydrothermal synthesis offers advantages over physical and biological methods, though high temperatures may sometimes lead to instability in the produced nanoparticles.

(viii) Polyol Method The polyol method employs nonaqueous liquid polyols, such as ethylene glycol, which serve as both the solvent and the reducing agent. This approach is advantageous because it minimizes oxidation and prevents nanoparticle aggregation. The polyol method allows precise control over nanoparticle size, shape, and texture, making it a scalable process for large-scale production.

Ethylene glycol is frequently used due to its strong reducing capability, high boiling point, and high dielectric constant. In this process, metal ions interact with ethylene glycol, forming metal glycolate intermediates that undergo further reactions to yield metal or metal oxide nanoparticles. Research indicates that these precursors can be calcined in air to retain their initial morphology while converting into their respective oxides. The polyol method has been employed in

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synthesizing various oxides, including Y2O3, VxOy, Mn3O4, ZnO, CoTiO3, SnO2, PbO, and TiO2. Additionally, it has been utilized for the preparation of core-shell nanoparticles and bimetallic alloys.

For instance, Kim et al. successfully synthesized icosahedral and cubic gold nanoparticles (100-300 nm) by precisely controlling the growth rate for different crystallographic orientations. Similarly, Xia and colleagues demonstrated that silver nitrate and polyvinylpyrrolidone (PVP) could be combined in varying ratios to produce silver nanoparticles with controlled morphologies, such as nanocubes and nanowires.

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