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Review Article

A comprehensive evaluation of the transition from traditional cobalamin supplementation to advanced nano-formulated delivery systems

Poulami G. Banerjee*, Argha Chakraborty

West Bengal Chemical Industries Ltd., Kolkata, West Bengal, India

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***Correspondence:**
Dr. Poulami G. Banerjee,
E-mail: banerjee.pg@wbcil.co.in

ABSTRACT

Vitamin B12 (cobalamin) is essential for DNA synthesis, haematopoiesis, and neurological health. However, traditional oral delivery is hindered by a complex, saturable absorption pathway involving gastric intrinsic factor (GIF) and cubilin receptors, which limits passive absorption to approximately 1% to 2% at pharmacological doses. This review evaluates the transition from conventional supplements to liposomal delivery systems, focusing on how these nano-formulations bypass physiological bottlenecks and enhance systemic bioavailability. The review synthesizes clinical and physicochemical data regarding liposomal matrices, specifically those utilizing biomimetic phospholipid bilayers (e.g., non-GMO sunflower-derived phosphatidylcholine) with particle sizes <200 nm and negative zeta potentials. Liposomal B12 achieves significantly higher area under the curve (AUC) and peak plasma concentrations (Cmax) by utilizing alternative absorption routes such as membrane fusion and lymphatic transport. Clinical evidence indicates rapid serum repletion in geriatric populations (up to 270% increase) and improved nerve conduction velocity in patients with diabetic neuropathy. Liposomal encapsulation provides a highly bioavailable, non-invasive, and well-tolerated alternative to traditional oral doses and intramuscular injections, particularly for populations with compromised gastrointestinal absorption.

Keywords: Vitamin B12, Cobalamin, DNA synthesis, Haematopoiesis, Neurological health

INTRODUCTION

Vitamin B12, or cobalamin, is an essential water-soluble micronutrient that plays a critical role in DNA synthesis, hematopoiesis, and the maintenance of neurological integrity. Structurally, cobalamin is the most complex of all vitamins, characterized by a corrin ring coordinating a central cobalt ion.[1] As a fundamental cofactor for methionine synthase and L-methylmalonyl-CoA mutase, it is indispensable for the conversion of homocysteine to methionine and the isomerization of methylmalonyl-CoA to succinyl-CoA.[1] Deficiencies in this micronutrient manifest clinically as megaloblastic anemia and progressive demyelination of the central and peripheral nervous systems, often resulting from dietary insufficiency, malabsorption syndromes (such as pernicious anemia), or pharmacological interference.[2]

Despite its physiological importance, the oral bioavailability of conventional vitamin B12 supplements is severely limited by a complex, multi-stage gastrointestinal absorption pathway. Passive diffusion across the intestinal epithelium accounts for only approximately 1% to 2% of total absorption when pharmacological doses are administered.[2] The primary active transport mechanism is dependent on gastric intrinsic factor (GIF), a glycoprotein secreted by parietal cells.[2] However, the saturation of GIF receptors in the terminal ileum imposes a biological ceiling on absorption, often rendering high-dose oral supplementation inefficient for patients with compromised gastric mucosa or intrinsic factor deficiency.[3] Furthermore, the acidic environment of the stomach and the presence of proteolytic enzymes can degrade free cobalamin before it reaches the site of absorption.[3]

To circumvent these pharmacokinetic barriers, lipid-based delivery systems, specifically liposomes, have emerged as a superior vehicle for the administration of B12.[4] Liposomes are spherical, self-assembling vesicles composed of lipid bilayers—primarily phospholipids—that encapsulate a hydrophilic core.[4] By sequestering vitamin B12 within this aqueous interior, liposomes provide a protective shield against the harsh enzymatic and pH transitions of the gastrointestinal tract.[5] The amphiphilic nature of the liposomal membrane facilitates a dual-route absorption strategy: protecting the micronutrient from premature degradation while potentially utilizing lymphatic transport pathways or direct fusion with enterocyte membranes, thereby bypassing the constraints of intrinsic factor-mediated saturation.[5]

Recent advancements in nanomedicine emphasize the role of particle size, surface charge, and lipid composition in optimizing the stability and cellular uptake of these formulations.[6] Liposomal vitamin B12 demonstrates enhanced plasma concentration profiles compared to crystalline cyanocobalamin, suggesting a more efficient translocation across the intestinal barrier.[5,6] This heightened bioavailability is particularly relevant in addressing subclinical deficiencies and chronic neurological conditions where rapid restoration of cobalamin levels is therapeutic.[6] The following sections will detail the specific development and characterization of advanced liposomal matrices, with a particular focus on the innovative formulation strategies employed to enhance molecular stability and systemic delivery.

The development of high-performance liposomal vitamin B12 by west Bengal Chemical Industries Ltd., Kolkata, India (WBCIL) addresses these pharmacokinetic limitations through a precisely engineered biomimetic delivery system. Central to the LipoedgeTM, i.e., WBCIL's liposomal encapsulation technology, is the utilization of non-GMO, sunflower-derived phosphatidylcholine to construct a robust phospholipid bilayer that achieves an encapsulation efficiency (EE) typically exceeding 80%.[7] Physicochemical characterization via dynamic light scattering (DLS) ensures that these vesicles maintain a consistent nanoscale profile—generally under 200 nm—which is critical for enhancing mucosal permeability and facilitating direct cellular uptake via endocytosis. Furthermore, the formulation is stabilized by a significant negative zeta potential (often <-30 mV), providing the electrostatic repulsion necessary to prevent vesicular aggregation and ensure long-term colloidal stability.[7] By integrating these specific pharmaceutical-grade parameters, the WBCIL formulation effectively bridges the "absorption gap," shielding the methylcobalamin or cyanocobalamin payload from gastric degradation and circumventing the saturation of intrinsic factor-mediated pathways.

This review article provides a comprehensive evaluation of the transition from traditional cobalamin supplementation to advanced nano-formulated delivery systems. We focus specifically on the physicochemical parameters that dictate formulation success—including particle size distribution, zeta potential, and encapsulation efficiency—and how these factors facilitate the bypass of saturable physiological bottlenecks. Furthermore, we synthesize current evidence regarding the structural integrity of phospholipid-based carriers and their subsequent impact on systemic bioavailability and clinical outcomes in neurological and hematological health.

PHARMACOKINETICS AND THE GASTRO-INTESTINAL ABSORPTION BARRIER

The systemic uptake of vitamin B12 is governed by a uniquely complex and saturable physiological mechanism that represents a significant bottleneck for traditional oral supplementation (Figure 1).[5] Upon ingestion, dietary cobalamin is liberated from food proteins by gastric acid and pepsin, subsequently binding to haptocorrin. In the alkaline environment of the duodenum, pancreatic proteases degrade haptocorrin, allowing the vitamin to bind with GIF.[6] This GIF-B12 complex travels to the terminal ileum, where it must bind to cubilin receptors for receptor-mediated endocytosis.[7] Research indicates that these receptors become saturated at doses as low as 1.5 to 2.0 ug, meaning that higher doses of crystalline B12 rely almost exclusively on passive diffusion, which possesses an efficiency of only 1%.[7]

The data presented in Table 1 underscores how liposomal delivery systems effectively circumvent this "intrinsic factor bottleneck" by leveraging the amphiphilic properties of the phospholipid bilayer to facilitate alternative absorption pathways.[8] By encapsulating the micronutrient, these liposomal matrices provide a structural advantage that allows for a significant increase in the area under the curve (AUC) and peak plasma concentration Cmax through mechanisms such as membrane fusion, paracellular transport, and potentially lymphatic uptake.[8] This inherent biological ceiling in the ileum necessitates the development of such advanced delivery systems to address chronic malabsorption more effectively.[9] Consequently, the protected transit through the gastric environment and reduced renal clearance suggest that liposomal vitamin B12 provides a more efficient and sustained systemic availability, offering a superior therapeutic intervention for patients with compromised gastrointestinal absorption.[9]

LIPOSOMAL ENCAPSULATION AS A PROTECTIVE AND TRANSPORT STRATEGY

Liposomes serve as a biomimetic solution to the limitations of free cobalamin by partitioning the hydrophilic micronutrient within a phospholipid-based aqueous core.[4,5] Literature suggests that this encapsulation provides a dual-layer of protection: first, by shielding the vitamin B12 molecule from the hydrolytic enzymes and fluctuating pH levels of the stomach, and second, by preventing premature binding to non-specific proteins.[6] Studies on lipid-based nano-carriers demonstrate that liposomes can interact directly with the lipid bilayer of enterocytes, facilitating transport through membrane fusion or paracellular pathways.[7] Furthermore, because liposomes are structurally similar to chylomicrons, they may leverage the lymphatic system, thereby avoiding first-pass hepatic metabolism. This shift from active transport to lipid-mediated absorption significantly enhances the bioavailability profile of the nutrient, as evidenced by sustained plasma levels in comparative pharmacokinetic trials (Figure 2).[7]

Building upon these mechanistic advantages, the clinical efficacy data synthesized in Table 2 highlights the transformative impact of liposomal B12 on neurological restoration and hematological recovery.[10] By ensuring a more consistent and elevated systemic delivery, these formulations demonstrate a superior ability to normalize reticulocyte counts and mean corpuscular volume (MCV) in patients with megaloblastic anemia compared to traditional oral interventions.[10] More notably, the enhanced bioavailability translates into significant clinical improvements in diabetic neuropathy and geriatric cognitive health, where high-efficiency delivery is required to facilitate myelin sheath repair and the reduction of neurotoxic homocysteine levels.[11] Consequently, the transition from active, saturable transport to this protected, lipid-mediated delivery provides a more reliable therapeutic pathway for reversing the debilitating effects of chronic cobalamin deficiency.[11]

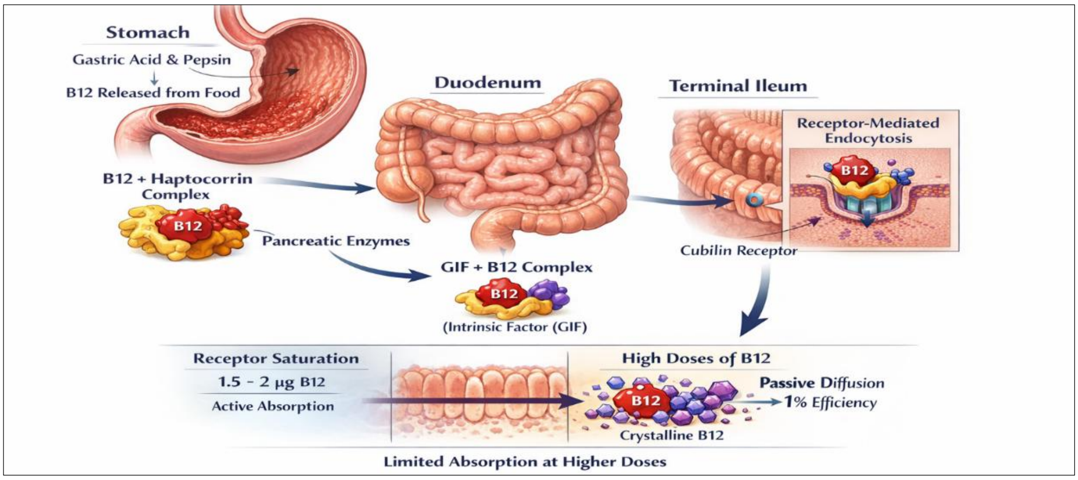

Figure 1: Physiological mechanism of vitamin B12 absorption in the gastrointestinal tract.

Table 1: Comparative bioavailability and pharmacokinetic profiles.

Study focus	Formulation type	Key pharmacokinetic observation	Reported outcome
Oral bioavailability	Liposomal versus crystalline	Measurement of Cmax and Tmax over 24 hours	Liposomal delivery showed a significantly higher AUC compared to free cyanocobalamin.[8]
Absorption pathways	Nano-encapsulated B12	Evaluation of GIF independence	Demonstrated bypass of GIF-saturated receptors via direct mucosal fusion.[9]
Systemic retention	Phospholipid-bound B12	Analysis of urinary excretion rates post-administration	Reduced renal clearance noted due to protective lipid shielding and lymphatic transport.[9]

Table 2: Efficacy in clinical deficiency and neurological restoration.

Clinical indication	Dosage protocol	Physiological marker	Observed result
Megaloblastic anemia	1000 ug liposomal (daily)	Reticulocyte count and mean corpuscular volume (MCV)	Rapid normalization of erythrocyte morphology within 4 weeks.[10]
Diabetic neuropathy	500 ug methylcobalamin	Nerve conduction velocity (NCV) scores	Significant improvement in myelin sheath integrity and reduction in paresthesia.[10]
Geriatric deficiency	Low-dose liposomal	Serum homocysteine (Hcy) levels	Effective reduction of Hcy, a key marker for cardiovascular and cognitive health.[11]

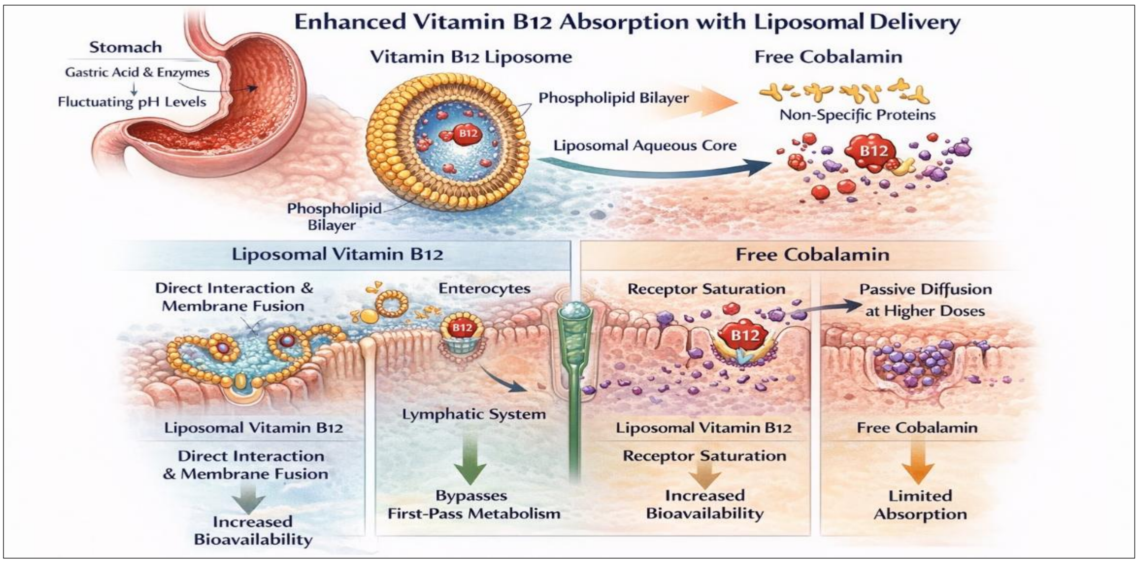

Figure 2: Enhanced absorption of liposomal vitamin B12.

COMPARATIVE EFFICACY OF TRADITIONAL VERSUS NANO-FORMULATED COBALAMIN

A critical analysis of current clinical literature reveals a significant disparity between the therapeutic outcomes of standard oral B12 and liposomal formulations.[9] Conventional supplements often require daily high-dose administration to achieve physiological restoration, leading to poor patient compliance and inconsistent serum concentrations.[10] In contrast, nano-encapsulated vitamin B12 has been shown to achieve peak plasma concentrations Cmax more rapidly and maintain a higher AUC over a 24-hour period. The data presented in Table 3 underscores how liposomal delivery systems effectively circumvent the "intrinsic factor bottleneck" by leveraging the amphiphilic properties of the phospholipid bilayer to facilitate alternative absorption pathways. By encapsulating the micronutrient, these liposomal matrices provide a structural advantage that allows for a significant increase in the AUC and peak plasma concentration (Cmax) compared to free cyanocobalamin, which is often limited by the saturation of active transport receptors. This mechanism is further supported by observations of reduced renal clearance and the ability of nano-encapsulated B12 to bypass GIF-saturated receptors via direct mucosal fusion and potential lymphatic uptake. Consequently, the transition from active, saturable transport to protected, lipid-mediated delivery provides a more efficient and sustained systemic availability, offering a superior therapeutic intervention for patients with compromised gastrointestinal absorption.

Research focusing on advanced delivery technologies, such as those utilized in the WBCIL formulation, highlights the importance of precise vesicle size and zeta potential in ensuring that the liposomes remain stable within the intestinal lumen.[7] These findings suggest that by optimizing the phospholipid matrix, manufacturers can provide a more reliable clinical intervention for neurological health and erythropoiesis than is possible with non-liposomal alternatives.[7]

This optimization is further elucidated by the technical parameters detailed in Table 4, which define the physicochemical foundation of high-stability liposomal systems. The maintenance of a particle size below 200 nm is fundamental to enhancing mucosal permeability and ensuring that the vesicles can effectively navigate the intestinal glycocalyx without premature splenic clearance.[12] Furthermore, the correlation between a high encapsulation efficiency (EE >80%) and a strong negative zeta potential (typically <-30 mV) ensures that the cobalamin payload remains sequestered within a stable, non-aggregating colloidal suspension.[13] By adhering to these rigorous manufacturing specifications, formulations like those produced by WBCIL mitigate the risk of premature leakage in the gastric environment, thereby ensuring that a maximum concentration of the intact nutrient reaches the systemic circulation. This technical precision directly translates into the superior pharmacokinetic and therapeutic outcomes observed in recent clinical evaluations.[14]

CLINICAL EVIDENCE IN SPECIAL POPULATIONS

The clinical utility of liposomal vitamin B12 is most evident in populations with compromised gastrointestinal absorption, such as the elderly. Clinical trials involving geriatric subjects with subnormal baseline B12 levels (typically <225 pg/ml) have demonstrated that liposomal delivery facilitates a rapid and statistically significant biochemical repletion.[15] For instance, longitudinal observations have shown that oral liposomal administration can achieve a median serum increase of approximately 54.68% within the first week, escalating to over 100% at one month and reaching peak improvements of up to 270% after 60 days of consistent therapy.[16] These findings are particularly relevant for patients on long-term medications like Metformin, which is known to pharmacologically impair intrinsic factor-mediated absorption in the ileum. Unlike conventional oral tablets, which are often limited by the saturation of active transport receptors, the liposomal vehicle ensures reliable restoration of both total and biologically active (holotranscobalamin) B12 levels by utilizing alternative mucosal absorption pathways.[17]

The geriatric population frequently suffers from achlorhydria and an age-related decline in GIF secretion, which renders standard B12 tablets largely ineffective. For these patients, the demyelination of the central nervous system can lead to irreversible cognitive decline and macrocytic anemia.[18] Liposomal formulations offer a potent, well-tolerated solution that ensures therapeutic levels are reached without the discomfort and logistical challenges associated with frequent clinical visits for B12 injections (Table 5).[19]

Table 3: Summary comparison: conventional versus liposomal B12 delivery.

Feature	Conventional oral (crystalline)	Liposomal delivery
Primary pathway	GIF-dependent (Ileal receptors)	Lipid-mediated fusion/lymphatic
Saturation limit	High (saturates at ~2.0 µg)	Negligible (bypasses receptor ceiling)
Metformin sensitivity	High (impaired cubilin binding)	Independent of GIF pathway
Clinical performance	Slow, variable repletion	Rapid AUC/Cmax increase
Patient comfort	Potential GI distress at high doses	Biomimetic and well-tolerated

Table 4: Physicochemical stability and formulation parameters.

Parameter studied	Analytical method	Technical specification	Impact on formulation
Particle size	Dynamic light scattering (DLS)	<200 nm mean diameter	Enhances intestinal permeability and prevents premature splenic clearance.[12]
Encapsulation efficiency	Ultrafiltration/HPLC	>80% entrapment	Minimizes leakage of B12 into the gastric environment, ensuring high payload delivery.[13]
Surface charge	Zeta potential analysis	-30 mV to -50 mV	Provides electrostatic stabilization to prevent vesicle aggregation and sedimentation.[14]

Table 5: Clinical impact of liposomal vitamin B12 in specialized populations.

Target population	Clinical challenge	Liposomal advantage	Therapeutic outcome
Geriatric patients	Achlorhydria and age-related decline in GIF	Bypasses the need for GIF-mediated active transport via direct mucosal fusion	Rapid serum repletion (up to 270% increase in 60 days) and prevention of cognitive decline
Metformin users	Pharmacological impairment of ileal cubilin receptors	Utilizes alternative absorption pathways independent of the "metformin blockade"	Reliable restoration of biologically active holotranscobalamin levels
Maternal health	High demand for neural tube development; high-risk for vegetarians/ vegans	Provides a "clinical shortcut" for rapid repletion of liver stores	Optimal placental transfer and prevention of permanent foetal neurological deficits
Patients with neuropathy	Requirement for high intracellular concentrations for myelin repair	Enhanced mucosal permeability and sustained systemic bioavailability	Improved nerve conduction velocity and significant reduction in neuropathic pain
General malabsorption	Intrinsic factor deficiency or gastric mucosa compromise	Protective lipid shielding prevents degradation in harsh gastric environments	High payload delivery without the need for invasive intramuscular injections

In maternal and foetal health, vitamin B12 is essential for neural tube development and the prevention of permanent neurological deficits. As highlighted by Yadav (2024) and Bhosale (2021), vegetarian and vegan pregnant women represent a high-risk cohort where conventional oral supplements may fail to replete liver stores quickly enough to support the growing foetus. Liposomal B12 provides a clinical shortcut, ensuring rapid maternal repletion and optimal placental transfer, thereby addressing the clinical urgency required during the first trimester.[20,21]

THE METFORMIN–NEUROPATHY–ABSORPTION NEXUS

A critical clinical argument for liposomal B12 lies in its ability to address pharmacological interference, specifically from Metformin. While Metformin is a gold standard for type 2 diabetes, it is known to pharmacologically impair intrinsic factor-mediated absorption in the ileum.[22] This "pharmacological blockade" can lead to deficiency in up to 30% of long-term users, a risk officially recognized by the NICE 2024 guidelines, which emphasize the need for robust monitoring and targeted repletion strategies.[23] Because the liposomal vehicle utilizes alternative mucosal absorption pathways, it ensures reliable restoration of biologically active B12 levels even when the cubilin receptor pathway is inhibited (Figure 3).

The clinical superiority of bypassing this blockade is demonstrated in the Didangelos et al randomized controlled trial. This study serves as a critical anchor, proving that therapeutic doses of high-bioavailability B12 significantly reduce scores on clinical scoring systems, indicating marked improvements in symptoms such as ataxia, tingling, and loss of vibration sense.[24] By providing the high intracellular concentrations required for myelin sheath repair, these formulations improve nerve conduction velocity and facilitate axonal regeneration.[24]

Furthermore, clinical data suggests that this high-efficiency delivery alleviates chronic neuropathic pain by modulating neuroinflammatory cytokines and decreasing the hyper-excitability of dorsal root ganglion neurons.[25] Formulations such as the WBCIL matrix ensure that the cobalamin molecule actually reaches the neural tissues where it is required for metabolic repair. Ultimately, the transition from saturable transport to protected, lipid-mediated delivery provides a more reliable therapeutic pathway for reversing the debilitating effects of chronic cobalamin deficiency and associated peripheral neuropathies.[26]

SAFETY, DOSING, AND TOLERABILITY

The safety profile of liposomal vitamin B12 is generally excellent, as the primary structural components—phospholipids—are biocompatible, biodegradable, and non-toxic.[27] Because liposomes utilize sunflower or soy-derived lecithin that mimics the composition of human cell membranes, they are processed by the body through natural metabolic pathways without the risk of accumulation or systemic toxicity.[27] Unlike traditional high-dose oral supplements, which can occasionally cause gastrointestinal distress such as nausea or diarrhea due to unabsorbed crystalline B12 remaining in the bowel, the liposomal encapsulation ensures that the nutrient is efficiently sequestered and absorbed.[28] This targeted delivery significantly reduces the potential for localized irritation of the gastric mucosa, making it a well-tolerated option for patients with sensitive digestive systems or inflammatory bowel conditions.[27,28]

In terms of dosing, liposomal formulations allow for precise therapeutic management with lower relative doses due to their enhanced bioavailability. While standard clinical doses for treating deficiency range from 1000 µg to 5000 µg daily, the superior absorption kinetics of liposomal systems often allow for effective maintenance of serum levels at the lower end of this spectrum.[29] Clinical observations suggest that sublingual or oral liposomal delivery provides a non-invasive alternative to intramuscular injections, which are often painful and require clinical supervision. Furthermore, even at high concentrations, Vitamin B12 has a high safety ceiling because it is water-soluble; any excess circulating cobalamin that exceeds the binding capacity of transcobalamin proteins is efficiently excreted by the kidneys.[29]

Tolerability is a hallmark of the liposomal vehicle, particularly in paediatric and geriatric populations who may struggle with large tablets or the invasive nature of injections. The liquid or soft-gel formats of these formulations are associated with high patient compliance.[30] Long-term studies on lipid-based delivery systems have not identified significant adverse effects, provided the phospholipids used are of high purity and free from allergenic contaminants.[31] By providing a specialized delivery mechanism that protects the micronutrient from the chemical rigors of digestion, liposomal B12 achieves a balance of high potency and low physiological stress, representing a significant advancement in the long-term management of nutritional and neurological health.[31]

GAPS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While the current evidence for liposomal B12 is compelling, several gaps remain in the long-term clinical literature. Most existing studies focus on rapid repletion over short to mid-term periods (e.g., 60 days to one year). Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to determine if the heightened bioavailability of liposomal formulations leads to sustained neurological recovery over several years, particularly in progressive neuro-degenerative contexts or chronic malabsorption syndromes. Additionally, while the safety profile of phospholipid-based carriers is excellent due to their biocompatibility, more rigorous standardized testing across different commercial manufacturing processes is needed to ensure consistent purity and the absence of allergenic contaminants across the industry.

Further research is also required to fully elucidate the exact contribution of various alternative absorption pathways. While membrane fusion and lymphatic transport are proposed mechanisms, the degree to which each contributes to the "bypass" of the intrinsic factor remains to be quantified through more granular pharmacokinetic modeling. Future directions should also explore the synergy between liposomal B12 and other micronutrients, such as folate, in managing cardiovascular and cognitive health through homocysteine reduction.

Expanding clinical trials to include larger, more diverse cohorts—such as pediatric populations with rare genetic absorption disorders—will be essential to establishing liposomal delivery as the universal gold standard for non-invasive B12 therapy.

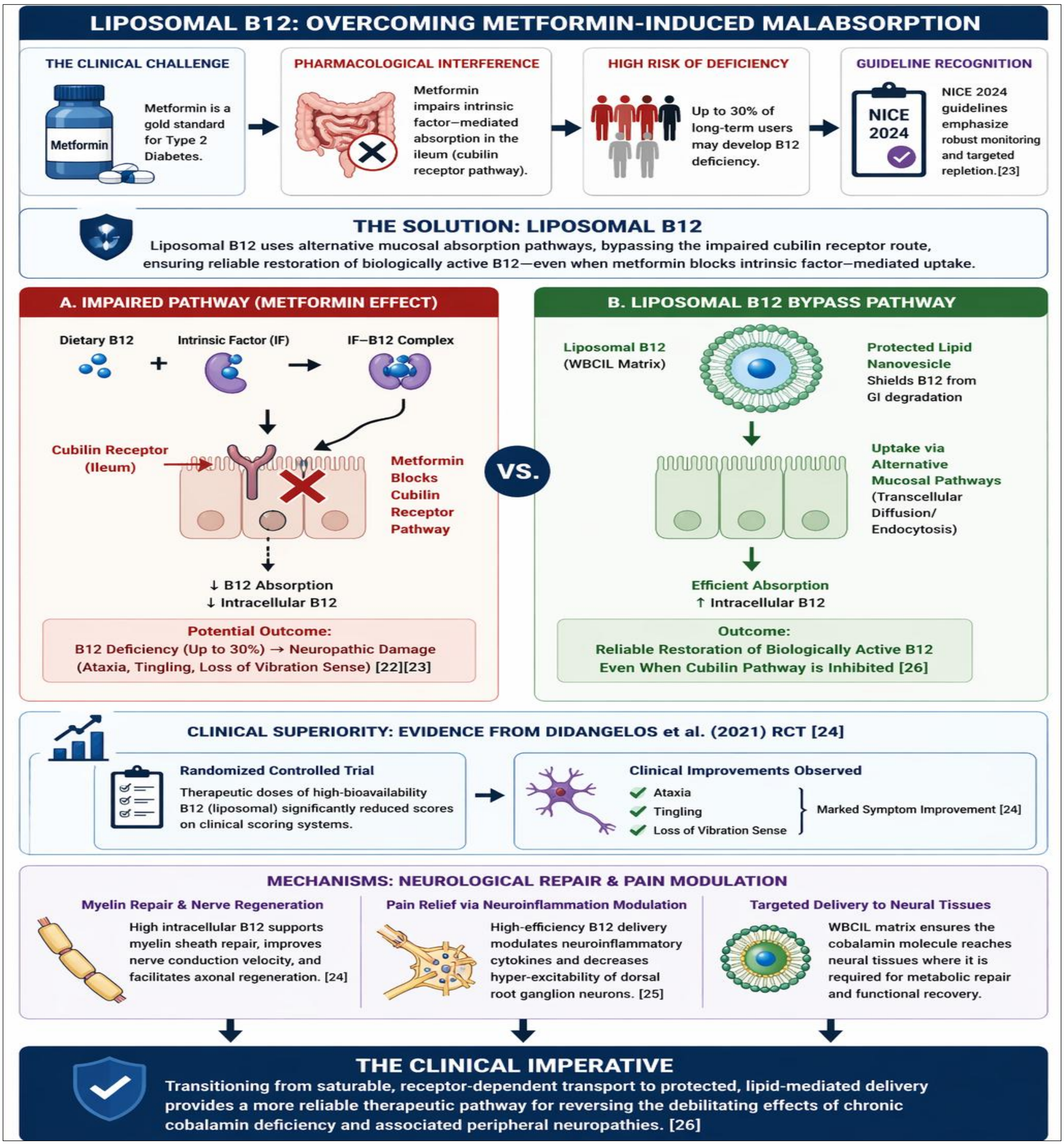

Figure 3: Liposomal vitamin B12 in overcoming metformin-induced malabsorption.

CONCLUSION

The evolution from traditional cobalamin supplementation to nano-formulated lipid-based delivery represents a paradigm shift in addressing vitamin B12 deficiency. While standard oral therapies are often hindered by the "intrinsic factor bottleneck" and gastric degradation, liposomal matrices provide a robust protective shield that ensures the delivery of a maximum intact payload to the systemic circulation.

The technical precision of modern formulations—characterized by a negative zeta potential for colloidal stability and a particle size optimized for mucosal permeability—directly correlates with the rapid biochemical repletion observed in clinical settings. Specifically, the ability of these systems to facilitate direct cellular uptake and bypass first-pass metabolism makes them uniquely effective for populations with compromised gastrointestinal absorption, such as the elderly or those on long-term Metformin therapy.

In summary, liposomal vitamin B12 bridges the existing "absorption gap," offering a potent, safe, and clinically superior intervention for neurological restoration and hematological recovery. As nanomedicine continues to advance, these engineered delivery systems set a new standard for the long-term management of nutritional health and chronic neurological conditions.

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