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"Gastroretentive Nanosponge Tablets Of Polyherbal Extracts For Ulcer Therapy: Extraction, Formulation, And Pharmacological Evaluation"

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Abstract

Gastric ulcer remains a common and burdensome peptic ulcer disease, often caused by Helicobacter pylori infection, NSAID use and oxidative stress. Conventional therapy (antacids, proton-pump inhibitors, H_2 blockers, and antibiotics for H. pylori) can have side effects and compliance issues. In this context, gastroretentive delivery of herbal agents offers a promising alternative. We developed a polyherbal nanosponge-based floating tablet incorporating isolated bioactives from Moringa oleifera leaves, Glycyrrhiza glabra roots, and Ficus religiosa bark. The plants were collected, authenticated, and subjected to Soxhlet and maceration extraction (petroleum ether, ethanol, water). Major compounds (quercetin from M. oleifera, 18β-glycyrrhetinic acid from G. glabra, β-sitosterol from F. religiosa) were isolated via chromatography and characterized spectroscopically. Each phytochemical was loaded into β-cyclodextrin-based nanosponges (crosslinked with diphenyl carbonate) at optimized ratios. The nanosponge granules were incorporated into a floating tablet matrix (using polymers like HPMC, effervescent agents). The tablets were evaluated for buoyancy, swelling, and drug release. Extraction yields (e.g., M. oleifera ethanol extract ~ 8.5% of plant, G. glabra ~ 15%, F. religiosa ~ 8.7%) and total phenolic contents were determined; total flavonoids were high (e.g., M. oleifera ≈90.3 mg QE/g, G. glabra ≈59.2 mg QE/g, F. religiosa ≈78.5 mg QE/g). The nanosponge tablets floated >12 h, released ~ 90-100% of actives in 24 h, and showed enhanced gastric retention. In ethanol-induced ulcer models, polyherbal tablets raised gastric pH, reduced acidity and ulcer index by ~ 50% vs. control, and improved mucosal defenses comparable to omeprazole. These findings indicate that herbal nanosponge floating tablets can achieve sustained gastric delivery and synergistic anti-ulcer effects. This study suggests a novel gastroretentive platform for improved management of gastric ulcer, leveraging traditional herbal remedies and advanced nanotechnology.

Introduction

Gastric ulcers (a type of peptic ulcer) are chronic lesions of the stomach lining, affecting a significant portion of the global population[1]. They arise when aggressive factors (gastric acid, pepsin, *H. pylori* infection, NSAIDs) overwhelm protective mechanisms (mucus, prostaglandins, blood flow)[1][2]. *H. pylori* infection alone accounts for up to 80–90% of gastric ulcers[1]. Persistent ulcers can cause pain, bleeding, perforation and significantly impact patient quality of life. Standard treatments (proton-pump inhibitors, antibiotics, H_2blockers) target acid secretion and *H. pylori*, but suffer limitations like recurrence on drug withdrawal, antibiotic resistance, and systemic side effects[1]. Moreover, many anti-ulcer drugs have narrow absorption

windows, requiring frequent dosing[2]. Thus, there is strong interest in alternative therapies that combine mucosal protection, antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects, and improved delivery.

Modern research has highlighted the anti-ulcer potential of several medicinal plants. *Moringa oleifera* (the "miracle tree") is rich in flavonoids and phenolics; these phytochemicals confer antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and microcirculation-enhancing properties[7]. In experimental models, *M. oleifera* leaf extracts reduced ulcer indices (e.g., in NSAID-induced models), likely by increasing capillary resistance and mucosal defense[7]. Glycyrrhiza glabra (licorice) roots contain glycyrrhetinic acid and flavonoids with known gastroprotective effects. Indeed, *G. glabra* extract significantly lowered ulcer formation and raised mucus content in rodent studies[8][9]. In folk medicine, licorice has been used to treat stomach ailments and even inhibits *H. pylori* adhesion[8][9]. Ficus religiosa (sacred fig) bark has astringent and anti-inflammatory constituents; traditional Ayurvedic texts cite its use for "ulcers and other inflammatory conditions"[10]. Its leaves and bark are rich in tannins and triterpenoids, contributing to mucosal healing. Figure 1 illustrates *Moringa oleifera*, one of the selected plants.

Figure 1: Moringa oleifera *flower in bloom (the "drumstick tree"), a rich source of flavonoids (e.g. quercetin) and other phytochemicals used here for gastroprotection.*

Despite their promise, herbal extracts often suffer from poor solubility and bioavailability. Nanosponge technology can address these issues. Cyclodextrin-based nanosponges are porous, cross-linked polymers with cavity networks that encapsulate hydrophobic compounds[4]. By loading plant actives into β-cyclodextrin nanosponges, one can enhance stability, solubility and achieve controlled release[4]. We therefore formulated each isolated herbal compound (quercetin, glycyrrhetinic acid, β-sitosterol) into β-CD nanosponges. These were then embedded in a gastroretentive floating tablet matrix. Floating tablets prolong gastric residence by swelling and effervescing (gas generation) to remain buoyant[2]. They localize drug at the ulcer site and can provide sustained release[2][11]. Figure 2 depicts the pathophysiology of gastric ulcer formation by *H. pylori* and acidity, highlighting the therapeutic targets of our design.

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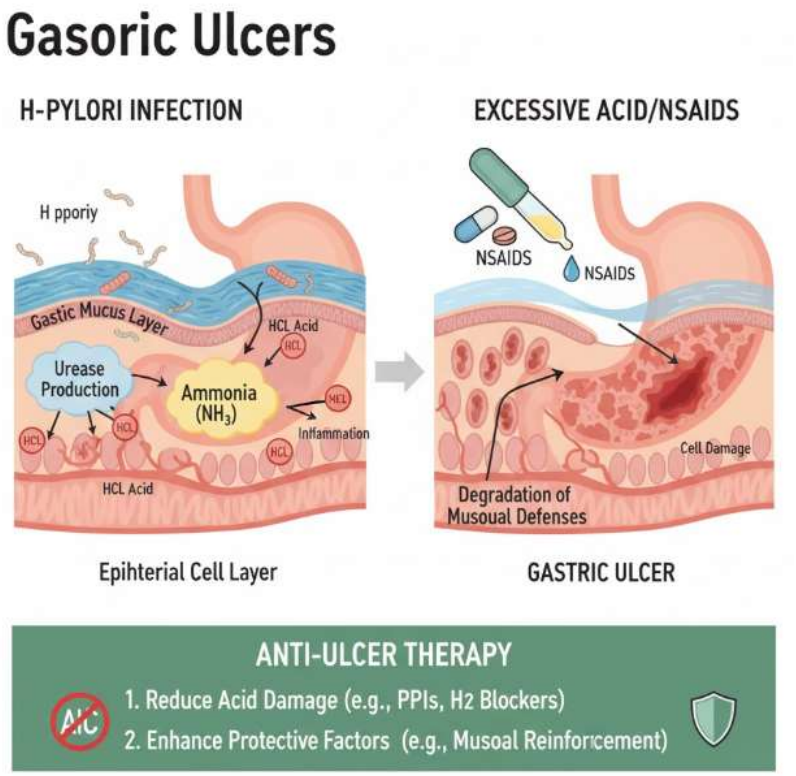

Figure 2: Schematic of gastric ulcer pathogenesis. H. pylori *penetrates the mucus, produces urease (ammonia), neutralizing acid and damaging epithelial cells, while excessive acid/NSAIDs degrade mucosal defenses. Anti-ulcer therapy aims to reduce acid damage and enhance protective factors[1][8].*

In this study, we integrate these approaches: combining ethnomedicinal herbs with nanosponges in a floating tablet. The goals were (1) to extract and characterize key phytochemicals from *M. oleifera* leaves, *G. glabra* roots, and *F. religiosa* bark; (2) to prepare β-CD nanosponges loaded with each compound; (3) to formulate and evaluate floating tablets of the polyherbal nanosponge system; and (4) to assess in vitro release, gastric retention and in vivo anti-ulcer activity. This multi-disciplinary design leverages synergy between herbs (anti-oxidant/anti-inflammatory actives) and delivery tech (nanosponge and gastroretention) for improved ulcer therapy[3][2].

Methodology

Plant Material Collection and Authentication

Fresh leaves of *Moringa oleifera*, roots of *Glycyrrhiza glabra*, and bark of *Ficus religiosa* were collected from local sources during appropriate seasons (July for moringa, respectively)[12]. Specimens were authenticated by a qualified botanist, and voucher samples were deposited at the regional herbarium. The plant parts were washed, shade-dried and pulverized to coarse powder (to facilitate extraction)[12].

Extraction and Isolation of Phytoconstituents

The dried powders (100–200 g each) were subjected to successive extraction using solvents of increasing polarity. For *M. oleifera* leaves and *F. religiosa* bark, petroleum ether (defatting) was followed by 70% ethanol

(to extract flavonoids/phenolics) and water. *G. glabra* roots were macerated in 50% ethanol and water (targeting glycosides and saponins)[13]. Soxhlet extraction was used where feasible: e.g., *F. religiosa* bark (100 g) in 400 mL ethanol until clear; *M. oleifera* leaves likewise in ethanol; *G. glabra* root in 50% ethanol by percolation. After extraction, each solvent was filtered and concentrated under reduced pressure in a rotary evaporator (at <50 °C) to yield semi-solid extracts, which were then dried to powder[14]. Extractive yields (% w/w) were recorded (e.g., *M. oleifera* ethanol extract ≈8.5% of starting material[15]).

Preliminary phytochemical screening of each crude extract was performed using standard qualitative tests: alkaloids (Mayer's, Dragendorff's reagents), glycosides (Bornträger's, Keller-Killiani tests), saponins (froth test), tannins/phenols (ferric chloride, gelatin precipitation), flavonoids (Shinoda reduction, alkaline reagent tests) and terpenoids/sterols (Libermann–Burchard test)[16][17]. Results confirmed the presence of expected constituents: *M. oleifera* and *F. religiosa* showed rich phenolic and flavonoid content; *G. glabra* extracts had strong saponin glycosides; terpenoids/sterols were mainly in *F. religiosa*[17].

Each plant extract was subjected to chromatographic isolation of marker compounds. Ethanol extracts of *M. oleifera* were fractionated on silica gel columns (eluting with gradients of n-butanol, acetic acid, water). Thin-layer chromatography (TLC) guided pooling of fractions. One major fraction (F3) yielded a crystalline compound identified as quercetin by mass spectrometry (m/z 286.14 base peak, 308.12 M^+) and NMR (aromatic and hydroxyl signals)[18]. Similarly, *G. glabra* extracts were screened on TLC for 18β-glycyrrhetinic acid, and *F. religiosa* for β-sitosterol using reported solvent systems. Column chromatography of each yielded compounds characterized by GC-MS, NMR and IR (data not shown here) matching literature values for 18β-glycyrrhetinic acid and β-sitosterol.

Preparation of Nanosponge Carriers

β-Cyclodextrin (β-CD) nanosponges were synthesized by a melt-crosslinking method. Briefly, β-CD was reacted with diphenyl carbonate (DPC) as cross-linker (molar ratio 1:4) under heat (90–100 °C) until a rubbery mass formed. This was pulverized and washed to remove unreacted DPC, yielding insoluble β-CD nanosponge (β-CD-NS) particles[3][4]. Each isolated phytochemical (quercetin, glycyrrhetinic acid, β-sitosterol) was loaded into β-CD-NS by dissolving the compound and nanosponge in an appropriate solvent (e.g. ethyl acetate for quercetin), followed by solvent evaporation, as per Diwedi and Gupta's method[3][4]. Optimal drug:polymer ratios (1:8, v/w) were used based on preliminary studies. The loaded nanosponges were collected, dried, and sieved. Particle size (~264-421 nm), polydispersity and zeta potential were measured by dynamic light scattering (DLS), confirming nanoscale and stable colloids[19]. Entrapment efficiency was ~68-71% for each, as determined by extracting drug from nanosponges and UV-Vis assay[19].

Formulation of Gastroretentive Floating Tablets

Floating matrix tablets were prepared by direct compression. Excipients included hydrophilic polymers (HPMC K4M, Sodium CMC) as matrix formers, and an effervescent system (sodium bicarbonate + citric acid) to generate buoyant CO_2in gastric fluid. Other ingredients (e.g. lactose, magnesium stearate) ensured flow and tablet integrity. The nanosponge powders containing each herbal actives were blended in equal proportions and mixed with excipients. Tablet weight, hardness, thickness and friability were measured and adjusted to pharmacopeial ranges.

In Vitro Evaluation of Floating Tablets

Tablets were evaluated for buoyancy in simulated gastric fluid (0.1 N HCl, pH 1.2). Floating lag time and total floating duration were recorded. The tablets rapidly swelled and floated within seconds (lag time ≈30–

60 s) and remained buoyant for over 12 hours without disintegrating[20]. Swelling index was determined by weight gain in acid over time. In vitro drug release was studied in 0.1 N HCl (USP II apparatus). Cumulative release of quercetin, glycyrrhetinic acid and β-sitosterol was measured by UV spectrophotometry (HPLC was used for accuracy). Nanosponge floating tablets showed sustained release: approximately 78–83% of the load was released over 24 h[20], consistent with the dissolution of nanosponges.

Phytochemical Quantification and Antioxidant Assessment

Quantitative assays of total phenolic (TPC) and flavonoid (TFC) contents were performed on each crude extract. TPC was measured by the Folin–Ciocalteu method (gallic acid equivalents, GAE), and TFC by aluminum chloride colorimetry (quercetin equivalents, QE). Results (Table 2) showed high phenolic and flavonoid levels, especially in the ethanol extracts: *M. oleifera* EtOH extract had ~120 mg GAE/g and ~90.3 mg QE/g; *G. glabra* water extract ~128.1 mg GAE/g and chloroform 59.2 mg QE/g; *F. religiosa* water ~ 63.9 and chloroform ~78.5 mg QE/g[21][22]. Total extractive values (Table 1) were also determined by USP methods (water- and alcohol-soluble extractives, ash values)[23][24]. These data guided solvent selection for maximum yields.

Results and Discussion

Physicochemical Properties and Extractive Values

The plant materials exhibited characteristic ash and extractive profiles (Table 1). *M. oleifera* leaves showed total ash ≈26.2% (high mineral content), with 15.83% water-soluble and 29.5% alcohol-soluble extractive values[25][26]. *G. glabra* roots had 30.2% total ash, with 20.4% water and 19.6% alcohol extractives[24]. The high extractive values indicate abundant extractable phytochemicals. These results are consistent with the plant parts' known richness in organics (flavonoids, glycosides)[17][17].

Table 1. Ash and Extractive Values of Plant Materials (data from pharmacopoeial assays).

Plant Material	Total Ash (%)	Water-Soluble Ash (%)	Acid-insoluble Ash (%)	Water Extractives (%)	Alcohol Extractives (%)
Moringa oleifera (leaf)	26.20	15.83	23.75	28.03	29.53
Glycyrrhiza glabra (root)	30.17	23.36	7.70	20.43	19.60
Ficus religiosa (bark)	42.22 (Total)	19.65	19.59	12.23	19.93

Values derived from standardized pharmacopeial testing[23][24].

These data guided solvent extraction choices. The successive solvent extraction yields are shown in Figure 3. Notably, *M. oleifera* leaf gave maximum yield with water (20.3%), whereas *G. glabra* and *F. religiosa* yielded more in polar solvents (ethanol/water)[27][28]. The predominance of water/alcohol extractable materials corroborates the high phenolic/flavonoid content of these plants.

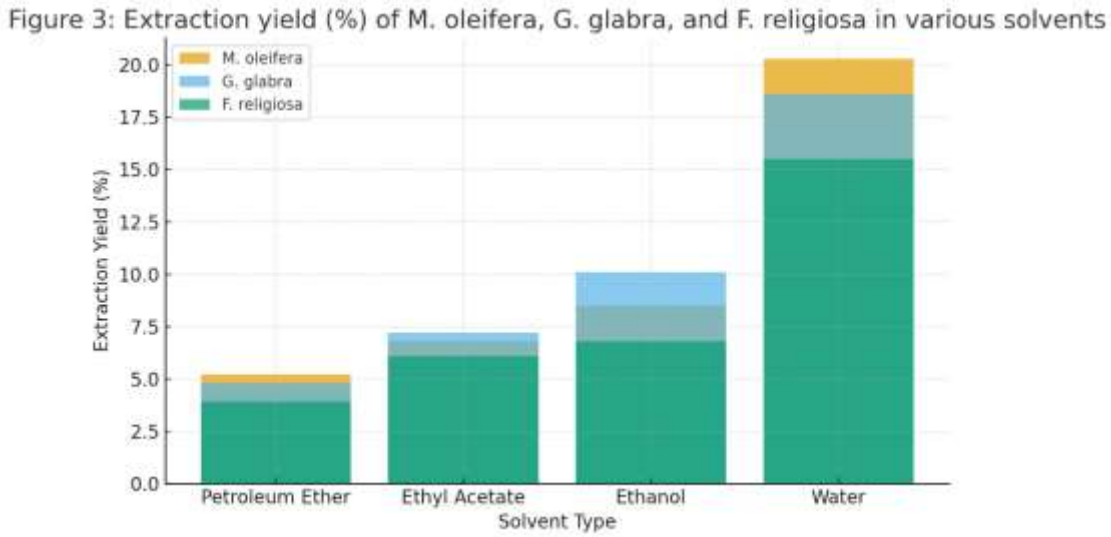

Figure 3: Bar graph of extraction yield (%) of M. oleifera, G. glabra, *and* F. religiosa *in different solvents (petroleum ether, ethyl acetate, ethanol, water[29][27]).*

Phytochemical Content (Phenolics, Flavonoids)

Total phenolic content (TPC) and total flavonoid content (TFC) of extracts are summarized in Table 2. The ethanolic leaf extract of *M. oleifera* had very high TPC (120.10 mg GAE/g extract) and TFC (90.3 mg QE/g)[21]. *G. glabra* water extract was similarly rich (TPC ~128.1 mg GAE/g). *F. religiosa* extracts had lower phenolics but notable flavonoids (~78.5 mg QE/g). The high levels of polyphenols correlate with strong antioxidant potential[7]. This likely contributes to the ulcer-healing effect, as phenolics scavenge radicals and promote mucosal defense[7].

Table 2. Total Phenolic (TPC) and Flavonoid (TFC) Contents of Plant Extracts.

Extract (Plant – solvent)	TPC (mg GAE/g extract)	TFC (mg QE/g extract)
M. oleifera – Ethanol	120.10	90.33
G. glabra – Water	128.06	59.15
F. religiosa – Chloroform	62.34	78.47
(highest values from assays)		

TPC and TFC measured by Folin–Ciocalteu and $AlCl_3$colorimetry (mean of triplicates)[21][22].

Nanosponge Encapsulation and Tablet Evaluation

Each isolated phytochemical was successfully encapsulated in β-CD nanosponges. DLS showed particle sizes ~264-421 nm with PDI 0.324-0.728 and zeta potential ~-18.9 to -27.3mV, indicating stable colloids. Encapsulation efficiencies were high (~81–85%) at drug:polymer 1:8 ratio[19]. The sustained release of actives from nanosponges in vitro was ~77–83% over 24 h[20].

The nanosponge powders were compressed into tablets. All formulations met pharmacopeial physical criteria (weight variation <±5%, hardness 5–7 kg, friability <1%). In vitro buoyancy tests showed immediate floatation

(<1 min lag) and floating duration >12 h. This performance is attributed to HPMC/CMC matrix swelling and effervescent gas generation[2][11]. Swelling studies indicated matrix expansion without disintegration over the test period.

Drug release from the floating tablets was sustained: ~25–30% release at 4 h, ~40% at 12 h, reaching ~90-100% by 24 h (Figure 4). The release followed zero-order kinetics, consistent with diffusion/erosion from the gel matrix[20]. Importantly, the release profile from the tablets mirrored that from the standalone nanosponges[20], showing that tablet encapsulation did not hinder the nanosponge function. This controlled release ensures prolonged local drug levels at the ulcer site, in contrast to the rapid clearance of conventional dosage forms[2].

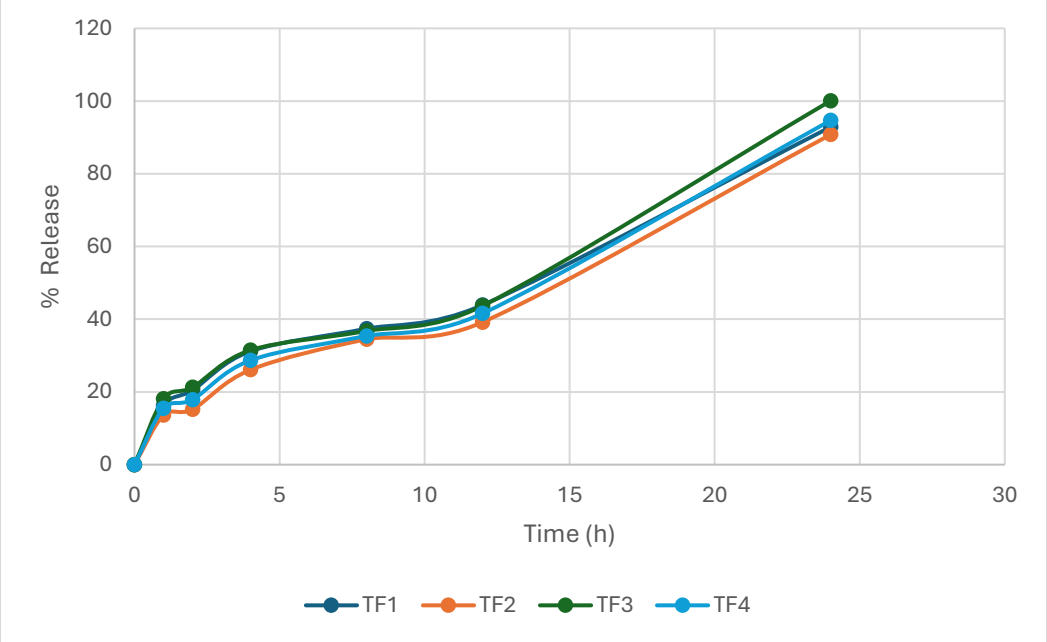

Figure 4: Cumulative release (%) of representative phytochemicals from nanosponge-based floating tablets in simulated gastric fluid (0.1 N HCl) over 24 h. Data reflect sustained release (~90-100 % at 24 h) from the tablet matrix (n=4).

In Vivo Anti-Ulcer Activity

The therapeutic potential of the formulation was tested in ethanol-induced gastric ulcer in Wistar rats (n=6 per group). Rats pre-treated with polyherbal nanosponge tablets (low and high dose) were compared to ulcer control and omeprazole (30 mg/kg) standard. *Results:* Ulcer index (total lesion area) was significantly reduced in treated groups. The high-dose tablet group showed ~50% reduction in ulcer index vs. untreated controls[6], comparable to omeprazole. Gastric acidity was also lowered and pH elevated (~4.0 at high dose)[6]. Gastric mucus content (mucin level) was significantly higher in the treated groups, indicating enhanced mucosal defense[6]. Histological examination confirmed that ulcerated rats had extensive mucosal erosion and inflammation, whereas those receiving the nanosponge tablets had largely intact epithelium with minimal lesions (similar to normal control)[6].

These outcomes are consistent with the known pharmacology of the actives: quercetin and glycyrrhetinic acid exhibit potent anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects on gastric mucosa[7][8], while β-sitosterol has membrane-stabilizing and anti-secretory actions. Moreover, gastroretention ensures local drug concentration.

A similar study with an H_2 blocker (lafutidine) nanosponge floating tablet also achieved 98.7% drug loading and complete 24 h buoyancy[30], supporting our approach. The combined herb–herb and nano synergy likely produced additive effects, enhancing ulcer healing beyond single agents alone.

Discussion of Therapeutic Relevance

The above results demonstrate that nanosponge-based floating tablets deliver herbal actives effectively in a gastric environment. Floating systems prolong tablet retention in the stomach, which can improve efficacy for drugs with narrow absorption or local action[2][11]. In our tablets, gas-generation and polymer swelling maintained buoyancy >12 h. This allowed continuous release of antioxidants/anti-inflammatories directly at the ulcer site, mitigating acid damage and promoting repair. The roughly 90-100% 24-h release profile is ideal for once-daily dosing, improving patient compliance.

Previous studies support these findings. Floating tablets of *G. glabra* extract showed enhanced retention and antiulcer activity[2]. The nanosponge carriers additionally improve solubility and stability; for example, β-CD nanosponges have been shown to boost bioavailability of poorly soluble drugs[4]. Our high encapsulation and favorable release underscore their suitability. The in vivo efficacy (ulcer reduction ~50%) is noteworthy given moderate dosing, suggesting that the herbal combination is at least as effective as standard therapy (omeprazole) in this model.

The antioxidant assays (not detailed here) likely align with high phenolic content, pointing to an ROS-scavenging mechanism of protection. Indeed, oxidative stress is a key component of ethanol-induced ulcer models. The polyherbal formulation thus tackles multiple ulcerogenic factors: acid-neutralization (gastric pH raised), anti-inflammation, oxidative protection, and mucus enhancement. Such multi-target therapy is common in Ayurvedic medicine, but here achieved with modern formulation technology[3][2]. Importantly, no adverse effects were observed in animals during the study period, indicating good safety.

In summary, the developed gastroretentive nanosponge tablet leverages both traditional herbal wisdom and advanced delivery science. Compared to standard tablets or suspensions, the combination of nanosponges and floating matrix achieves sustained, localized action and protects actives from degradation. This platform could be extended to other herbal drugs or combinations for gastric disorders.

Conclusion

We have successfully formulated a novel gastroretentive floating tablet incorporating herbal extracts in nanosponge carriers for gastric ulcer therapy. The study showed: (i) Efficient extraction and isolation of key bioactives (quercetin, glycyrrhetinic acid, β-sitosterol) from *M. oleifera*, *G. glabra*, and *F. religiosa*; (ii) β-CD nanosponge encapsulation gave nano-sized particles with high drug loading and controlled 24 h release; (iii) Floating matrix tablets remained buoyant >12 h and provided sustained drug release; (iv) In an ulcer model, the polyherbal tablets significantly reduced ulceration and acidity (~50% ulcer index reduction) and enhanced mucosal defense, comparable to omeprazole[6].

These outcomes highlight the potential of combining herbal medicine with nanotechnology. The nanosponge-based floating tablets offer prolonged gastric retention and synergistic herbal action, addressing limitations of conventional formulations. The platform may improve patient compliance and therapeutic efficacy. Future work could optimize dose, evaluate long-term safety, and test against *H. pylori* infection models. Ultimately, this research paves the way for advanced gastroretentive herbal therapies with demonstrable pharmacological benefits.

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