Review Article

"Innovations in HIV treatment: The role of long-acting antiretrovirals examining the advancements in HIV therapy, particularly long-acting injectable antiretrovirals"

Neha Dubey

Department of Pharmacology, Bhagwan College of Pharmacy, Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India

Correspondence:
Neha Dubey, Department of Pharmacology, Bhagwan College of Pharmacy, Aurangabad - 431 001, Maharashtra, India.
E-mail: neha.debey2000@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The landscape of HIV treatment is undergoing a significant transformation with the introduction of long-acting antiretrovirals (LA-ARVs), offering a promising alternative to traditional daily oral regimens. This review examines the current advancements in LA-ARVs, focusing on their mechanisms, clinical efficacy, and potential to improve patient outcomes. LA-ARVs, such as cabotegravir and rilpivirine, delivered through injectable formulations, have demonstrated effective viral suppression with less frequent dosing, addressing challenges such as adherence and pill fatigue commonly associated with daily antiretroviral therapy. Clinical trials, including ATLAS and FLAIR, highlight their efficacy across diverse patient populations, with favorable safety profiles. Key advantages of LA-ARVs include enhanced adherence, reduced risk of drug resistance, and improved quality of life, particularly for individuals facing barriers to daily oral therapy. However, limitations such as high costs, the need for regular healthcare access, and long-term safety concerns present challenges to widespread adoption. Future developments in LA-ARVs, including next-generation drugs and expanded applications in preexposure prophylaxis, are poised to revolutionize personalized HIV care. As research progresses, LA-ARVs hold the potential to reshape the treatment paradigm, offering a more convenient and sustainable approach to managing HIV.

Keywords: Antiretroviral therapy adherence, cabotegravir, drug resistance, HIV treatment, injectable acting antiretrovirals, long-acting antiretrovirals, viral suppression

Introduction

HIV/AIDS remains a significant global health crisis, with approximately 40 million people living with HIV in 2023. The epidemic is particularly severe in sub-Saharan Africa, which accounts for about two-thirds of all HIV cases worldwide. In this region, the adult prevalence rate is around 6.2%, reflecting the ongoing challenges in combating the virus. Despite advances in treatment, about 1.3 million new infections were reported in 2023, highlighting the persistent nature of the epidemic. Continuous therapy is critical for managing HIV effectively; it helps control viral load, thereby reducing the risk of transmission and preventing the development of drug resistance. Effective antiretroviral therapy (ART) has significantly decreased AIDS-related mortality, with approximately 630,000 deaths attributed to AIDS in 2023, a notable decline from previous years. This underscores the necessity for sustained treatment strategies to maintain health and prevent further spread of HIV.

Traditional ART regimens typically require daily oral medication, which poses significant adherence challenges for many patients. Issues such as pill fatigue, where individuals become overwhelmed by the necessity of taking multiple pills every day, can lead to inconsistent medication adherence. Studies indicate that about one in seven people living with HIV are unaware of their status, complicating adherence efforts further. In addition, social determinants such as poverty, stigma, and limited access to healthcare services exacerbate adherence issues. These factors highlight the urgent need for innovative treatment options that simplify care and improve patient outcomes.

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In response to the challenges associated with traditional ART, long-acting antiretrovirals (LA-ARVs) have emerged as a promising alternative. These therapies are designed to provide sustained therapeutic effects over extended periods, allowing for administration less frequently than daily ranging from monthly to bi-monthly injections. This innovation addresses adherence issues by reducing the burden of daily pill-taking and offering greater convenience for patients. LA-ARVs not only enhance adherence but also aim to improve overall health outcomes by ensuring consistent viral suppression. The development and integration of LA-ARVs into HIV care represent a significant advancement in treatment strategies, aligning with global efforts to control the epidemic effectively.[1]

Overview of LA-ARV Pharmacology

How LA-ARVs differ from daily oral regimens

LA-ARVs provide a significant advancement over traditional daily oral regimens by allowing for less frequent dosing, which can enhance adherence and reduce the psychological burden associated with daily medication. Unlike daily oral ART, which often faces challenges such as forgetfulness and pill fatigue, LA-ARVs can be administered every four to 8 weeks, thereby minimizing the stigma and routine reminders of HIV status that accompany daily treatment. This shift in administration frequency can help address barriers to adherence, particularly in populations that experience stigma or have complex daily routines.[2]

Overview of pharmacokinetics and drug delivery systems

LA-ARVs utilize advanced pharmacokinetic profiles that allow for sustained drug release into the bloodstream over extended periods. These formulations typically involve intramuscular or subcutaneous injections, leading to gradual drug absorption and prolonged therapeutic effects. For instance, cabotegravir (CAB) and rilpivirine (RPV) are delivered through intramuscular injections, achieving peak plasma concentrations that remain effective over an extended duration. The pharmacokinetics of these agents demonstrate that they maintain effective drug levels long enough to ensure viral suppression while reducing the frequency of administration compared to standard oral regimens.

Current approved long-acting injectable ARVs

Introduction of cabotegravir and rilpivirine

CAB and RPV are two key components of the first approved long-acting injectable regimen for HIV treatment. This combination has been shown to be effective in maintaining viral suppression in individuals who have achieved virologic control on oral ART. The regimen typically begins with a 4-week oral lead-in phase to assess tolerability before transitioning to intramuscular injections.[3]

Mechanisms of action and pharmacodynamics

CAB is an integrase strand transfer inhibitor that blocks the integration of viral DNA into the host genome, while RPV is a nonnucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor that prevents reverse transcription of viral RNA into DNA. Together, they work synergistically to suppress HIV replication effectively. The pharmacodynamics of this combination indicates that it achieves high levels of drug exposure, significantly above the concentrations required for efficacy against wild-type HIV strains.

Clinical significance of long-acting formulations in maintaining viral suppression

The clinical significance of LA-ARVs, such as CAB and RPV lies in their ability to maintain viral suppression with less frequent dosing than traditional regimens. Studies such as ATLAS and FLAIR have demonstrated that these long-acting formulations can achieve comparable efficacy to daily oral regimens, with over 90% of participants maintaining viral suppression at 48 weeks. This effectiveness, combined with improved adherence rates due to reduced dosing frequency, positions LA-ARVs as a promising option for individuals seeking alternatives to daily therapy, particularly those facing challenges related to adherence or stigma associated with HIV treatment.[4]

Key Clinical Trials and Efficacy

Study overview

Major clinical trials that have evaluated the efficacy of long-acting injectable antiretrovirals include ATLAS, FLAIR, and LATITUDE. The ATLAS trial (NCT02951052) and FLAIR trial (NCT02938520) are phase 3 studies that compared the long-acting injectable combination of CAB and RPV administered every 4 weeks with continuing current oral ART (CAR) in virologically suppressed individuals. Both trials demonstrated non-inferiority in maintaining viral suppression at week 48, with participants receiving the injectable regimen showing similar rates of HIV-1 RNA <50 copies/mL compared to those on oral therapy. The LATITUDE study focuses on the impact of long-acting therapy on treatment success in daily life, further exploring patient adherence and quality of life.

Outcomes and efficacy

The viral suppression rates in the ATLAS and FLAIR trials were remarkably high, with over 90% of participants maintaining viral suppression at week 48. Specifically, the pooled analysis from these trials indicated a non-inferiority margin of 4% for the long-acting regimen compared to daily oral therapy. Patient adherence was significantly improved due to the reduced frequency of dosing; participants reported greater satisfaction with the injectable treatment compared to their previous oral regimens. Furthermore, efficacy was observed across various patient populations, including both treatment-naïve and experienced individuals, with similar outcomes in maintaining viral suppression regardless of prior treatment history.[5]

Safety and tolerability

Common side effects associated with CAB and RPV include injection site reactions (ISRs), which were generally mild to moderate. Other side effects reported included headache, fatigue, and gastrointestinal symptoms. In terms of safety profiles, the long-acting injectable formulations were well tolerated over the study periods, showing

comparable adverse effects to traditional oral antiretroviral therapies. Notably, participants in the long-acting group experienced fewer gastrointestinal side effects than those on daily oral regimens, suggesting a favorable tolerability profile for LA-ARVs. Overall, these studies underscore the potential for long-acting injectables to enhance adherence while maintaining safety and efficacy comparable to conventional ART.

Advantages of Long-acting ARVs

Improved adherence and convenience

LA-ARV regimens offer significant advantages in terms of improved adherence and convenience compared to daily oral therapies. The reduced dosing frequency, typically every 4–8 weeks, minimizes the burden associated with remembering to take daily pills and reduces the stigma related to frequent medication intake. This shift to infrequent injections can help address common barriers to adherence, such as forgetfulness and pill fatigue, which are often encountered with daily oral regimens. Studies have shown that participants prefer long-acting therapy over daily oral dosing, with high acceptance of ISRs and a strong preference for the Q8W dosing regimen over Q4W or daily oral therapy.

Reduced risk of drug resistance

LA-ARVs maintain consistent drug levels in the body, which helps mitigate the risk of developing HIV drug resistance. Suboptimal adherence to daily oral therapy can lead to fluctuating drug concentrations, increasing the likelihood of viral replication and the emergence of resistant strains. In contrast, the pharmacokinetic profiles of LA-ARVs, such as CAB and RPV, ensure that effective drug levels are maintained for extended periods, even with missed or delayed injections. This sustained drug exposure helps suppress viral replication and reduces the potential for resistance development, a key advantage of long-acting formulations over daily oral therapy.[6]

Potential impact on quality of life

LA-ARVs have the potential to significantly improve the quality of life for people living with HIV. The reduced dosing frequency and associated convenience can alleviate the psychological burden of daily medication, leading to improved treatment satisfaction and adherence. Studies have shown that participants receiving LA-ARVs report high levels of treatment satisfaction, with the majority preferring the long-acting regimen over their previous daily oral therapy. In addition, the reduced pill burden and stigma associated with infrequent injections can have a positive impact on social well-being and overall quality of life. These psychological and social benefits, combined with the clinical advantages of LA-ARVs, make them a promising option for individuals seeking alternatives to daily oral therapy.[7]

Challenges and Limitations

Cost and accessibility

Financial barriers significantly hinder the widespread adoption of LA-ARVs. The annual cost of LA-ART ranges from approximately $40,000 to $70,000, which is substantially higher than the cost of first-line oral ART, typically around $60 per year in low-and middle-income countries for generic options. In the United States, the costs for CAB and RPV injections can reach about $6000 for the initial loading dose and $4000 for subsequent maintenance doses, excluding the costs associated with healthcare visits for administration. This disparity in cost presents a significant challenge for healthcare systems aiming to provide equitable access to HIV treatment, particularly in resource-limited settings where financial resources are already strained.[8]

Need for healthcare access

The administration of LA-ARVs necessitates regular clinic visits for injections, which can be a logistical hurdle in resource-limited settings. Patients must attend healthcare facilities every 4 to 8 weeks, creating barriers for those living in remote areas or lacking reliable transportation. This requirement can also strain healthcare systems that may already be under-resourced. In addition, ensuring that patients adhere to this schedule requires robust healthcare infrastructure and support systems that may not be available in all regions.

Potential for drug resistance

Missed doses of LA-ARVs can lead to suboptimal drug levels in the body, increasing the risk of HIV resistance development. While LA-ARVs are designed to maintain effective drug concentrations over extended periods, any significant delays or missed injections can allow the virus to replicate unchecked. This situation is particularly concerning for individuals with high viral loads or those who have previously experienced treatment failures. Consequently, adherence counseling and monitoring are essential components of managing patients on LA-ARVs to prevent resistance emergence.[9]

Long-term safety concerns

There are limited long-term safety data available for LA-ARVs, raising concerns about their prolonged use. Potential issues include tissue accumulation of the drug formulations and their effects on immune response over time. The long half-life of these medications means that adverse effects could persist long after discontinuation. Ongoing monitoring and research are necessary to fully understand the long-term implications of using LA-ARVs and to ensure that their benefits outweigh any potential risks.

Future Directions in Long-acting HIV Treatment

Next-generation LA-ARVs in development

Researchers are actively exploring new drugs and delivery systems to further advance LA-ARV therapy. Novel approaches include the use of nanotechnology to create even longer-acting formulations and implantable devices that can provide sustained drug release over extended periods. These next-generation LA-ARVs have the potential to reduce dosing frequency to once every 6 months or even annually, which could significantly improve adherence and convenience for people living with HIV.

Potential combinations of LA-ARVs with other HIV treatments or preexposure prophylaxis (PrEP) agents are also being investigated. Combining LA-ARVs with long-acting PrEP drugs could provide a comprehensive approach to both treatment and prevention, potentially reducing the risk of HIV transmission within serodiscordant couples or among high-risk populations. These combination strategies may offer more options for personalized HIV care tailored to individual needs and preferences.[10]

Expansion to PrEP

The application of long-acting treatments for HIV prevention is a promising area of research. Studies are underway to evaluate the use of Long-Acting Antiretrovirals (LA-ARVs), such as Cabotegravir (CAB), for Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) in high-risk populations. The HIV Prevention Trials Network (HPTN) 083 and HPTN 084 trials have demonstrated the efficacy of long-acting CAB for PrEP in cisgender men and transgender women who have sex with men, as well as cisgender women, respectively. These studies have shown that long-acting CAB is superior to daily oral Tenofovir Disoproxil Fumarate/Emtricitabine (TDF/FTC) for HIV prevention, with a favorable safety profile and high acceptability among participants.[11]

Personalized HIV care and the role of LA-ARVs

As the field of HIV treatment continues to evolve, the integration of LA-ARVs into personalized care strategies is becoming increasingly important. By considering individual patient factors, such as adherence challenges, comorbidities, and preferences, healthcare providers can tailor treatment plans that optimize outcomes. LA-ARVs offer a valuable tool in this personalized approach, providing an alternative for patients who may struggle with daily oral therapy or prefer the convenience of less frequent dosing. As more LA-ARV options become available, clinicians will have greater flexibility in designing regimens that meet the unique needs of each patient, ultimately leading to improved engagement in care and better long-term health outcomes.[12]

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