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From Traditional Anti-Obesity Remedies to Nanotherapeutics: Translational Advances in Phytochemical Nanomedicine

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ABSTRACT

Traditional anti-obesity remedies derived from medicinal plants have long been used to curb appetite, improve digestion, reduce "fatty" foods' effects, and restore metabolic balance. Modern pharmacology has validated several plant phytochemicals as modulators of adipogenesis, lipolysis, thermogenesis, insulin sensitivity, inflammation, and gut–brain–liver signaling. Yet translation from ethnomedicine to clinically reliable obesity therapeutics remains constrained by poor aqueous solubility, chemical instability, extensive first-pass metabolism, efflux transport, variable botanical composition, and microbiome-driven inter-individual variability. Phytochemical nanomedicine addresses these barriers by improving dissolution and protection in the gastrointestinal tract, enhancing mucosal residence, enabling lymphatic uptake, and providing controlled or region-specific release. Lipid-based systems, biodegradable polymer nanoparticles, biopolymer matrices, micelles, and nanocrystals can convert weakly bioavailable phytochemicals into more consistent exposures and more interpretable PK–PD relationships. Beyond bioavailability, nanotherapeutics enable mechanism-driven targeting of the gut–liver axis, inflamed adipose tissue immune niches, and metabolic organs implicated in obesity comorbidity such as NAFLD. However, obesity is a chronic-use indication, so long-term safety, scalable manufacturing, reproducible characterization, and regulatory clarity for complex botanicals are decisive. This review traces the translational pathway from traditional anti-obesity remedies to nano-enabled phytochemical therapeutics, highlighting advances, persistent bottlenecks, and pragmatic strategies to deliver clinically meaningful, affordable nanotherapeutics.

Keywords: phytochemicals; nanomedicine; obesity; translation; bioavailability

INTRODUCTION

Traditional medical systems across Africa, Asia, and the Americas have long applied plant-based preparations to address excessive weight and its associated symptoms[1]. These remedies were often framed in terms of restoring balance in digestion, reducing cravings, improving elimination, increasing "heat" or vitality, or correcting bodily humors. While such concepts differ from modern metabolic science, many traditional interventions converge on biological processes now known to influence obesity: appetite regulation, nutrient absorption, adipose tissue expansion, inflammation, oxidative stress, and the gut microbiota[2–5]. The modern resurgence of interest in natural products for obesity reflects both the limitations of current therapies for some patients and the appeal of multi-target, potentially safer adjuncts that can be integrated with lifestyle interventions[1, 6, 7].

Obesity is not simply an excess of stored energy; it is a chronic, relapsing disease characterized by adipose tissue dysfunction, endocrine disruption, and systemic low-grade inflammation[8]. Adipocytes expand and become stressed, immune cells infiltrate adipose depots, adipokine profiles shift, and ectopic lipid deposition occurs in liver and muscle, driving insulin resistance and cardiometabolic risk[9, 10]. This biological complexity helps explain why interventions aimed at a single pathway can produce incomplete results, and why pleiotropic compounds—common among phytochemicals are attractive. Plant-derived bioactives frequently influence multiple nodes, including adipogenesis, lipolysis, mitochondrial function, thermogenesis, inflammatory signaling, and gut–brain–liver communication[11, 12].

In parallel, the therapeutic landscape has evolved. Pharmacotherapy for obesity has advanced, particularly with agents that target appetite and energy intake through incretin pathways. Yet real-world barriers persist: cost, access, tolerability, contraindications, and the need for long-term adherence[11, 13]. Moreover, not all obesity-related morbidity is explained by weight alone; adipose inflammation and hepatic steatosis can remain significant even with moderate weight reduction. These gaps create space for adjunctive strategies that improve metabolic quality of adipose tissue and reduce inflammation and oxidative stress. Phytochemicals could play such a role if they can be delivered reliably and safely at effective exposures[14–16].

The central translational problem is that traditional botanical efficacy rarely maps cleanly into modern clinical performance. Several phytochemicals demonstrate anti-obesity mechanisms in vitro and in animal models, yet their effects in humans can be modest or inconsistent[17]. Multiple factors contribute, but the most recurring are pharmacokinetic and quality related. Many phytochemicals are poorly soluble in water, unstable in gastrointestinal conditions, rapidly metabolized, and subject to efflux transporters, leading to low systemic exposure. Even when metabolites circulate, it is often uncertain whether the parent compound or its metabolites are the true active species[17]. Botanical variability further complicates translation: plant species, harvesting conditions, processing methods, and storage can shift phytochemical profiles, making dose standardization and reproducibility difficult[18]. The gut microbiome adds another layer by transforming phytochemicals into diverse metabolites that vary between individuals and can change over time with diet and repeated dosing[18].

Phytochemical nanomedicine nano-enabled delivery systems for plant-derived compounds has emerged as a translational bridge between traditional remedies and modern therapeutics[19]. The goal is not to replace ethnomedical knowledge, but to convert promising natural bioactives into clinically tractable dosage forms. Nanocarriers can increase apparent solubility and dissolution, protect labile compounds from degradation, and reduce dependence on meal composition by generating more consistent absorption[20]. Some lipid-based systems may promote lymphatic transport, partially bypassing first-pass hepatic metabolism[21, 22]. Polymeric and biopolymer systems can provide sustained release, which may be especially useful for chronic metabolic modulation where steady exposure is preferable to sharp peaks. Region-specific delivery, such as distal intestinal or colon targeting, can align with gut-focused mechanisms including microbiota modulation and bile acid signaling[23]. Importantly, nanomedicine can also reshape tissue distribution, potentially increasing exposure in metabolically relevant compartments such as liver or inflamed adipose immune niches, although such targeting claims must be supported by biodistribution evidence.

The "nanotherapeutic" framing also changes the evidentiary standard. If a phytochemical is delivered as a nanosystem intended for therapeutic claims, it must meet expectations for consistent manufacturing, defined critical quality attributes, validated stability, and robust safety, especially because obesity requires chronic treatment[7, 24]. Therefore, translation is not only a scientific challenge but also a manufacturing and regulatory challenge. A successful program must demonstrate that nanotechnology adds clinically meaningful value beyond what can be achieved with conventional formulations, and that this value is achieved with minimal complexity, acceptable cost, and long-term safety. This review explores translational advances in phytochemical nanomedicine for obesity, tracing a pathway from traditional anti-obesity remedies to nano-enabled therapeutics. We focus on the major obstacles that historically limited phytochemical translation, how nanomedicine addresses these obstacles, what therapeutic innovations are emerging, and what translational bottlenecks remain for chronic obesity management.

2. Traditional Remedies and Modern Mechanistic Convergence

Traditional anti-obesity preparations were commonly administered as teas, decoctions, powders, or fermented mixtures and often aimed to regulate appetite, improve digestion, and reduce perceived heaviness or fluid retention[25]. When viewed through modern biology, several categories of effects appear plausible. Some plant preparations likely reduced energy intake by influencing satiety and taste preferences, while others may have altered nutrient absorption by affecting digestive enzymes and bile-mediated lipid handling[25]. Many botanicals used traditionally also contain antioxidant and anti-inflammatory constituents that could mitigate adipose tissue stress and systemic inflammation, two hallmarks of obesity-related metabolic dysfunction.

Modern mechanistic studies increasingly link phytochemicals to pathways central to obesity. Suppression of adipogenesis, enhancement of fatty acid oxidation, modulation of AMPK-related signaling, improvement of insulin sensitivity, and reduction of inflammatory cytokine production have been reported for multiple plant bioactives[26]. Equally important, a significant fraction of anti-obesity action may be mediated through the gut ecosystem. Phytochemicals can alter microbial composition and function, affecting short-chain fatty acids, bile acid pools, and endotoxin translocation, which can influence appetite signaling, inflammation, and hepatic lipid metabolism[26]. This gut-centered lens creates a conceptual continuity between "digestive" framing in traditional practice and measurable gut–metabolic endpoints in modern science.

However, ethnomedical convergence with modern mechanisms does not guarantee clinical reliability. Traditional preparations are chemically complex and variable, and the biological activity may reflect synergy among multiple constituents rather than a single molecule[27]. Translational strategies therefore require a choice: pursue standardized extracts with controlled fingerprints or isolate specific lead phytochemicals with defined pharmacology. Nanomedicine can support both approaches, but complexity increases when the payload is a multi-component extract[27]. The translational opportunity lies in preserving the multi-target character

of traditional remedies while imposing the reproducibility and pharmacokinetic control required for clinical therapeutics.

3. Why Phytochemical Translation to Obesity Therapy Often Fails

The most persistent translational barrier is low and variable exposure. Many phytochemicals are hydrophobic, leading to dissolution-limited absorption. Even when dissolved, they may be unstable in gastrointestinal environments or rapidly transformed[28]. Intestinal and hepatic first-pass metabolism frequently produces conjugated metabolites, and the parent compound may be barely detectable in systemic circulation. Efflux transporters further reduce net absorption[28]. These factors contribute to high dose requirements and inconsistent effects, especially in long-term obesity management where adherence and tolerability matter.

A second barrier is biological heterogeneity. Obesity phenotypes differ in insulin resistance severity, hepatic steatosis, inflammation, and gut microbiome composition. A phytochemical that works through microbiota modulation may show strong effects in one subgroup and minimal effects in another[29]. Meal composition and dietary patterns also influence absorption and microbiome responses, increasing variability. Without measuring exposure and relevant mechanistic biomarkers, trials can be underpowered to detect subgroup-specific effects and may conclude that an intervention is ineffective when the real issue is inconsistent delivery[29].

A third barrier is quality and standardization. Botanical source variability, processing differences, and contamination risks complicate reproducibility. If the phytochemical profile changes across batches, clinical outcomes become difficult to interpret[30]. This is especially problematic when claims are made for therapeutic efficacy rather than general wellness.

These limitations set the stage for phytochemical nanomedicine: improving exposure consistency, reducing dose burden, enabling mechanism-aligned delivery, and supporting reproducible product quality.

4. Nanotherapeutic Platforms Transforming Phytochemicals into Clinically Tractable Agents

Phytochemical nanomedicine uses nanoscale carriers to improve solubility, stability, absorption, and release behavior. Lipid-based systems are widely used for hydrophobic phytochemicals because they enhance dispersion in intestinal fluids and may leverage physiological lipid absorption pathways[7, 31, 32]. Nanoemulsions and self-emulsifying systems improve dissolution and reduce precipitation, supporting more consistent exposure. Solid lipid nanoparticles and nanostructured lipid carriers provide greater protection and can sustain release, potentially smoothing exposure profiles in chronic dosing[33].

Polymeric nanoparticles, particularly biodegradable polymers, enable controlled release and protection from chemical degradation[34–36]. Biopolymer matrices such as alginate, pectin, and related polysaccharides can provide pH-dependent protection and region-specific delivery, which is attractive when gut mechanisms dominate. Polymeric micelles offer efficient solubilization and small particle size, while nanocrystals provide a carrier-minimal approach that improves dissolution rate with limited excipient burden, an advantage when chronic safety and cost are major constraints.

The translational value of these platforms is highest when matched to the dominant barrier. Dissolution-limited phytochemicals benefit from lipid systems or nanocrystals. Instability and rapid metabolism favor protective matrices and, where appropriate, lymphatic uptake-promoting designs[37]. If gut-local effects are primary, colon-targeted release or prolonged mucosal residence can be more relevant than maximizing systemic bioavailability. The key is to avoid "nano for nano's sake" and to select the simplest system that yields consistent, mechanism-relevant exposure[37].

5. Translational Advances: Targeting the Gut–Liver–Adipose Axis and Enabling Combination Therapy

The most meaningful translational advances are those that align nanodelivery with obesity biology. Gut-directed nanotherapeutics aim to modulate nutrient absorption, bile acid signaling, and microbiota-derived metabolites that influence appetite and inflammation[38]. Region-specific release in distal intestine or colon can amplify microbiome-related effects while limiting systemic exposure, potentially improving long-term tolerability. Liver-directed approaches are relevant for obesity-associated NAFLD, where improving hepatic lipid handling and reducing inflammation can yield cardiometabolic benefit even when weight loss is moderate. Adipose-directed strategies, particularly those influencing macrophage-driven inflammation in white adipose tissue, offer a pathway to improve insulin sensitivity and reduce systemic inflammatory tone[38].

Nanomedicine also enables rational co-delivery. Traditional remedies often rely on multi-constituent synergy; nanocarriers can formalize this by co-encapsulating complementary phytochemicals to reduce pill burden and stabilize ratios[39]. Co-delivery of phytochemicals with low-dose conventional anti-obesity drugs could, in principle, improve efficacy or tolerability, but it introduces interaction risks and regulatory complexity. Translational success requires demonstrating that co-delivery produces additive or synergistic benefits with measurable PK–PD improvements rather than simply combining ingredients[39].

Across these advances, the strongest programs treat biodistribution and mechanism engagement as primary endpoints, not secondary hypotheses. Demonstrating that a nanotherapeutic increases exposure at a target site, changes relevant biomarkers, and then drives clinical outcomes is the most credible translational arc.

6. Remaining Bottlenecks: Chronic Safety, Manufacturing, Regulation, and Trial Design

Obesity therapy requires long-term use, making chronic safety decisive. Nanocarriers must avoid cumulative toxicity, immune activation, and chronic gastrointestinal irritation. For orally delivered systems, maintaining gut barrier integrity and avoiding unintended dysbiosis are particularly important, since microbiome

perturbations can produce unpredictable metabolic effects.[40, 41] Materials that are biodegradable and widely used in pharmaceutical or food contexts are generally more favorable, but chronic dosing still demands careful evaluation of excipient load and degradation products.

Manufacturing and quality control are equally limiting. Particle size distribution, encapsulation efficiency, stability, and release behavior must be reproducible at scale[42-47]. Small shifts in formulation can change absorption and biodistribution, undermining clinical reproducibility. For botanical payloads, consistent chemical fingerprinting and contamination control are mandatory, and the complexity of multi-component extracts can make standardization challenging[42,48-54].

Regulatory pathways can be ambiguous. A nanoformulated phytochemical positioned as a therapeutic product must meet drug-like standards, particularly when claims relate to obesity treatment rather than general wellness. This elevates requirements for characterization, safety, and clinical efficacy evidence[43,55-56]. Clinical trial design must also account for heterogeneity in obesity phenotypes, background therapies, and lifestyle patterns. Without measuring exposure, diet context, and relevant biomarkers, trials risk underestimating benefit in responsive subgroups or misattributing variability to lack of efficacy.

7. A Pragmatic Translational Roadmap from Traditional Use to Nanotherapeutic Adoption

A practical pathway begins with selecting phytochemicals or standardized extracts with strong mechanistic rationale and acceptable safety history, then explicitly defining the intended locus of action as gut-local or systemic[44]. This choice guides nanodesign: gut-local mechanisms favor region-specific release and mucosal residence, while systemic mechanisms favor absorption enhancement and controlled release to stabilize exposure. Early development should map parent compound and metabolites, determine which species correlates with biomarker changes, and use biorelevant assays to predict in vivo performance[44].

Nanoplatform selection should prioritize minimal complexity and scalable manufacturing, using excipients with established safety profiles. Proof of value should be staged: first show improved stability and dissolution; then demonstrate improved and less variable exposure; then show engagement of mechanistic biomarkers relevant to obesity, including adipokines, inflammatory markers, insulin sensitivity indices, and gut-related signals when appropriate[45]. Only after this should pivotal efficacy trials be pursued, focusing on clinically meaningful endpoints such as fat mass reduction, waist circumference, lipid profile improvement, and metabolic risk marker changes rather than short-term weight changes alone. Stratification by phenotype, baseline inflammation, NAFLD markers, and microbiome signatures where feasible can clarify who benefits most[45].

If this roadmap is followed, phytochemical nanomedicine can evolve from a technological promise into a reliable therapeutic bridge between traditional remedies and modern obesity care.

CONCLUSION

The transition from traditional anti-obesity remedies to nanotherapeutics reflects a shift from empirically useful but variable botanical preparations toward reproducible, mechanism-driven interventions. Phytochemical nanomedicine addresses key barriers that have historically limited translation, particularly poor solubility, instability, rapid metabolism, and exposure variability, while enabling controlled or region-specific delivery aligned with gut–liver–adipose biology. The most compelling advances are those that demonstrate not only improved pharmacokinetics but also targeted biomarker engagement and clinically meaningful outcomes with reduced dose burden. However, obesity is a chronic-use indication, so long-term safety, microbiome stability, scalable manufacturing, rigorous quality control, and regulatory clarity are essential. A minimal-complexity, evidence-led translational pathway that standardizes botanical inputs, validates PK–PD linkage, and designs phenotype-aware clinical trials offers the most credible route for phytochemical nanomedicine to move from traditional practice into routine obesity therapy.

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