World Journal of Pharmaceutical Science and Research
www.wjpsronline.com
Research Article
ISSN: 2583-6579
SJIF Impact Factor: 5.111
Year - 2025
Volume: 4; Issue: 4
Page: 883-892

NEXT-GENERATION OPHTHALMIC IN-SITU GEL SYSTEMS: EMERGING TRENDS AND INNOVATIONS

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Article Received: 21 July 2025 | | Article Revised: 12 August 2025 | | Article Accepted: 02 September 2025

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17053981

How to cite this Article: Vivak Bhati, Deepak Marothia (2025) NEXT-GENERATION OPHTHALMIC IN-SITU GEL SYSTEMS: EMERGING TRENDS AND INNOVATIONS. World Journal of Pharmaceutical Science and Research, 4(4), 883-892. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17053981

ABSTRACT

Ocular drug delivery poses unique challenges due to anatomical barriers, rapid tear turnover, and poor bioavailability of conventional dosage forms. Ophthalmic in-situ gel systems have emerged as a promising approach, offering prolonged precorneal residence, controlled drug release, and improved patient compliance. Recent advances focus on smart polymers, stimuli-responsive mechanisms, nanotechnology integration, and patient-centric designs to overcome limitations of conventional gels. This review highlights the emerging trends and innovations in ophthalmic in-situ gel systems, including novel polymers, hybrid nanocarriers, clinical applications, and regulatory perspectives, providing future directions for ocular therapeutics.

KEYWORDS: Ophthalmic drug delivery, In-situ gel system, Smart polymers, Sustained ocular release, Thermosensitive gels & Emerging trends.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ocular drug delivery continues to be one of the most challenging areas in pharmaceutical research due to the unique anatomy and physiology of the eye. Factors such as tear turnover, blinking reflex, nasolacrimal drainage, and corneal epithelial barriers restrict drug absorption and significantly reduce the bioavailability of conventional ophthalmic dosage forms, which often falls below 7%. Consequently, conventional systems such as eye drops and ointments require frequent administration, leading to poor patient compliance and increased risk of systemic side effects.[1]

In recent years, ophthalmic in-situ gel systems have gained significant attention as an advanced drug delivery approach. These systems are instilled into the eye as low-viscosity liquids and undergo a sol-to-gel transition in response to

physiological stimuli, such as temperature, pH, or ionic strength. Upon gelling, the formulation prolongs the residence time in the precorneal area, facilitates sustained and controlled drug release, and reduces the frequency of dosing. This not only improves therapeutic efficacy but also enhances patient comfort and adherence.

Three major categories of in-situ gelling systems have been widely investigated: thermosensitive gels (e.g., poloxamers) that gel at ocular surface temperature, pH-sensitive gels (e.g., carbopol) that respond to the tear fluid pH, and ion-activated gels (e.g., gellan gum) triggered by the presence of divalent or monovalent cations in tear fluid. Additionally, the incorporation of mucoadhesive polymers further enhances ocular retention by promoting interaction with the mucin layer of the tear film.[3]

The emergence of next-generation ophthalmic in-situ gels reflects the integration of smart polymers, multifunctional hybrid systems, and nanotechnology. Stimuli-responsive formulations that react to multiple triggers (temperature + pH + ions) are under development to ensure greater reliability and flexibility. The embedding of nanoparticles, liposomes, and micelles within in-situ gels has demonstrated improved drug solubility, targeted delivery, and prolonged therapeutic activity. Moreover, personalized ocular therapy, patient-centric formulations, and combination drug delivery strategies are gaining ground to address chronic ocular diseases such as glaucoma, keratitis, and dry eye syndrome.[4]

Recent advances also highlight the use of natural biopolymers such as chitosan, alginate, and xanthan gum, either alone or in combination with synthetic polymers, to enhance biocompatibility, transparency, and biodegradability. Further, new research directions include nanogel-integrated systems capable of achieving zero-order release, 3D-printed ocular gels for customized therapy, and the application of artificial intelligence in formulation optimization.

Thus, ophthalmic in-situ gel systems represent a promising and rapidly evolving platform for ocular drug delivery. This review aims to highlight the next-generation trends, smart material innovations, clinical applications, and future prospects of ophthalmic in-situ gels in improving therapeutic outcomes and patient compliance.[1,5]

2. Fundamentals of In-situ Gel Systems

Ocular in-situ gels are liquid formulations that transform into gels upon administration into the eye, driven by specific physiological stimuli such as temperature, pH, or ionic composition of tear fluid. This transformation ensures enhanced precorneal residence, sustained drug release, and reduced dosing frequency compared to conventional eye drops and suspensions. The core of this system lies in the design of stimuli-responsive polymers, which undergo a reversible sol–gel phase transition in response to environmental triggers.[1,6]

2.1 Mechanism of Gelation

The in-situ gelling system consists of polymers that remain in a sol state before administration but undergo gelation once exposed to ocular physiological conditions. Gelation is primarily governed by:

- **Physical interactions** (hydrophobic interactions, hydrogen bonding, ionic cross-linking).
- **Chemical Interactions** (covalent cross-linking in certain advanced systems). The sol–gel transition allows the formulation to spread uniformly as a liquid, then transform into a viscoelastic gel that resists rapid tear clearance. Types of Ophthalmic In-situ Gel Systems and Their Mechanism shown in Table 1.[7]

Table 1: Types of Ophthalmic In-situ Gel Systems and Their Mechanism.

Type	Polymers Used	Trigger	Example Drug	Advantages
pH-sensitive	Carbopol, polyacrylic acid	Tear pH (7.4)	Timolol	Stable in bottle, gels on instillation
Thermosensitive	Poloxamer 407, poloxamer 188	Body temp (35–37°C)	Pilocarpine	Easy instillation, rapid gelation
Ion-activated	Gellan gum, sodium alginate	Tear electrolytes	Ciprofloxacin	Strong gelation in tear fluid
Enzyme-sensitive	Peptide-based polymers	Tear lysozymes	Experimental	Biodegradable, responsive

2.2 Types of In-situ Gel Systems

(a) Thermosensitive Systems

- Based on polymers such as *poloxamers (Pluronic® F127, F68)* and certain cellulose derivatives.
- These polymers are liquid at room temperature (~25 °C) but undergo gelation at ocular surface temperature (~34–37 °C).
- Gelation occurs due to micellization and packing of polymer chains as temperature rises.
- Example: Poloxamer-based formulations of timolol and pilocarpine have shown improved retention and controlled release in glaucoma therapy.

(b) pH-sensitive Systems

- Utilize polymers such as *carbopol (polyacrylic acid)*, which undergo ionization and swelling at physiological tear pH (~7.4).
- They remain liquid at acidic pH and gel upon contact with the tear film.
- Often combined with viscosity enhancers like *hydroxypropyl methylcellulose (HPMC)* to reduce irritation and optimize gel strength.
- Example: Carbopol-HPMC in-situ gels for dorzolamide hydrochloride showed improved bioavailability in glaucoma treatment.[7,8]

(c) Ion-activated (Ion-sensitive) Systems

- Polymers such as *gellan gum (Gelrite®)*, *sodium alginate*, and *xanthan gum* form gels in the presence of cations (Na^+, Ca^{2+}, Mg^{2+}) present in tear fluid.
- The ion-triggered gelation provides rapid and stable in-situ gel formation without external stimuli.
- Example: Gellan gum-based gels are used in marketed ophthalmic formulations like *Timoptic-XE® (timolol maleate)*. Mechanism of In-situ Gel Formation in Ophthalmic Delivery shown in Fig 1.

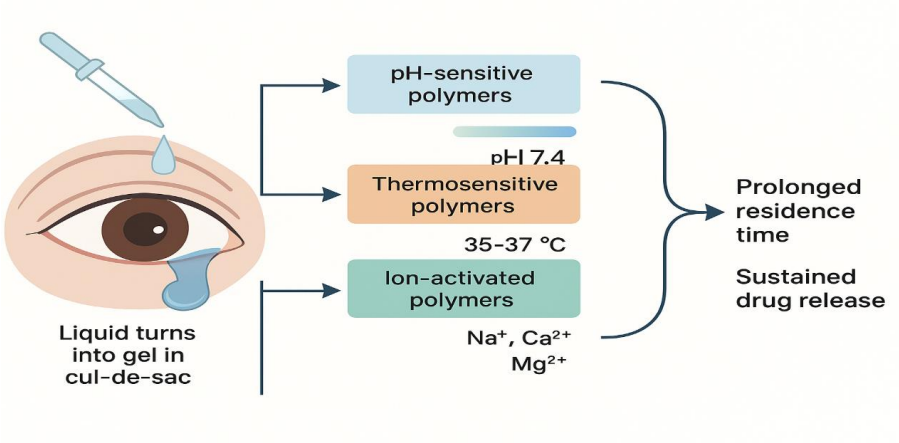

Figure 1: Mechanism of In-situ Gel Formation in Ophthalmic Delivery.

2.3 Advantages of In-situ Gels over Conventional Dosage Forms

- **Prolonged residence time**: Prevents rapid drainage and maintains drug levels at the ocular surface.
- **Controlled drug release**: Reduces fluctuations in drug concentration, leading to enhanced therapeutic efficacy.
- **Reduced dosing frequency**: Improves patient adherence, particularly for chronic conditions such as glaucoma and dry eye.
- **Enhanced bioavailability**: Better precorneal retention compared to simple eye drops.
- **Patient comfort**: Liquid instillation is less irritating compared to ointments.

2.4 Limitations and Challenges

Despite their advantages, in-situ gel systems face challenges such as:

- **Irritation potential** due to certain polymers (e.g., carbopol at higher concentrations).
- **Sterility and stability issues** during formulation and storage.
- **Reproducibility and scalability** in industrial manufacturing.
- **Regulatory hurdles** in obtaining approval for novel excipients or hybrid systems. Future Perspectives of Ophthalmic In-situ Gel Systems shown in Fig 2.[9]

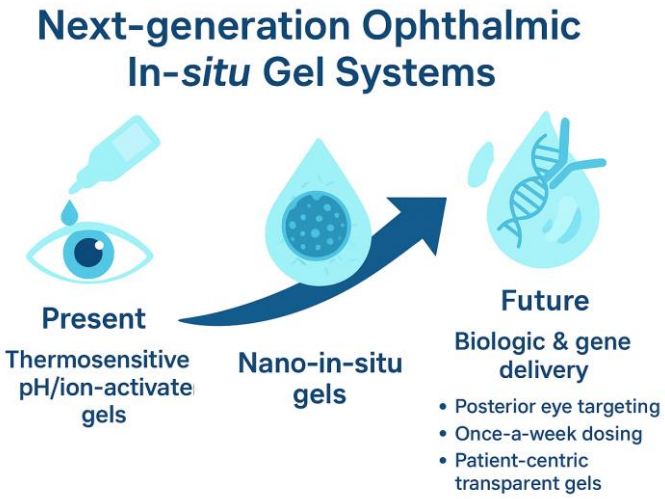

Figure 2: Future Perspectives of Ophthalmic In-situ Gel Systems.

3. Next-generation Trends in Ophthalmic In-situ Gel Systems

The last decade has seen remarkable progress in ophthalmic in-situ gel systems, shifting from conventional sol–gel formulations to *next-generation smart, multifunctional, and patient-centric systems*. These advancements are primarily driven by the development of novel polymers, nanotechnology integration, personalized therapies, and improved evaluation strategies. Collectively, these innovations aim to achieve superior bioavailability, prolonged retention, minimal irritation, and targeted ocular delivery.

3.1 Advanced Polymers and Smart Materials

The selection of polymers remains central to the success of in-situ gels. Traditional polymers such as carbopol, poloxamers, and gellan gum are being replaced or combined with **smart polymers** capable of responding to multiple stimuli.

- **Hybrid polymer systems** (e.g., poloxamer–carbopol, poloxamer–chitosan) have demonstrated enhanced gelling capacity, mucoadhesion, and sustained release.
- **Natural biopolymers** like chitosan, alginate, and xanthan gum are gaining attention due to their biocompatibility, biodegradability, and mucoadhesive properties.
- **Multi-responsive polymers** are being developed to simultaneously respond to pH, temperature, and ionic changes, providing more consistent gelation and controlled drug delivery.

3.2 Nanotechnology Integration

The incorporation of nanocarriers into in-situ gels represents a breakthrough in ophthalmic drug delivery.

- **Nano-in-situ gels** (nanoparticles, nanomicelles, or nanoliposomes dispersed in gel matrices) enhance corneal penetration, improve drug solubility, and allow sustained release.
- Example: Chitosan nanoparticle-loaded in-situ gels for anti-glaucoma drugs demonstrated prolonged intraocular pressure control with reduced dosing frequency.
- **Hybrid nanogels** are being explored for zero-order release, increased stability, and improved patient tolerance.
- This trend is particularly valuable for poorly water-soluble drugs and for posterior eye diseases where deeper penetration is required.[10]

3.3 Personalized and Patient-Centric Approaches

Next-generation in-situ gels are increasingly focusing on **patient comfort and adherence**.

- Formulations are optimized to remain transparent, non-irritant, and comfortable upon instillation.
- Personalized ocular therapy is being explored using **3D printing** and **tailored polymer concentrations**, enabling specific drug release profiles depending on the disease condition (e.g., glaucoma vs. dry eye syndrome).
- Multi-dose preservative-free packaging is being adopted to minimize ocular toxicity.

3.4 Combination Therapies

Delivering multiple drugs in a single in-situ gel formulation is an emerging strategy.

- **Anti-infective + anti-inflammatory combinations** are designed for post-surgical care.
- **Anti-glaucoma dual therapies** (e.g., timolol + brimonidine) reduce dosing frequency and enhance patient compliance.
- Dual-release systems are being investigated to provide both immediate relief and sustained long-term therapy.

3.5 Novel Evaluation Techniques

Traditional in-vitro methods are being supplemented with advanced evaluation tools:

- **Rheological studies** to characterize sol–gel transition dynamics.
- **Mucoadhesion assays** to assess polymer–mucin interaction.
- **Ex vivo corneal permeation studies** for predicting drug absorption.
- **In vivo ocular imaging (OCT, confocal microscopy)** for real-time tracking of residence time.
- These advanced evaluation techniques provide a better understanding of formulation behavior and clinical potential.[11]

3.6 Regulatory and Industrial Outlook

The growing global demand for ophthalmic therapies has increased industrial and regulatory interest in in-situ gel systems.

- **Marketed products** such as *Timoptic-XE® (timolol maleate in gellan gum-based gel)* provide clinical validation for this technology.
- Regulatory authorities (FDA, EMA) emphasize biocompatibility, sterility, reproducibility, and patient safety as critical approval parameters.
- Industrial research is shifting toward **scalable manufacturing methods** and **preservative-free designs** to meet patient needs.

4. Clinical Applications and Case Studies of Ophthalmic In-situ Gel Systems

The clinical utility of ophthalmic in-situ gel systems has expanded significantly in recent years, transitioning from proof-of-concept formulations to approved products and clinical trials. Their ability to undergo *sol-to-gel transition upon instillation*, combined with sustained release and enhanced ocular bioavailability, makes them highly suitable for managing both anterior and posterior segment ocular diseases.

4.1 Glaucoma Management

Glaucoma, a chronic condition requiring lifelong therapy, is one of the most extensively studied areas for ophthalmic in-situ gels.

- **Timolol maleate gels (Timoptic-XE®)** are among the first commercial examples, showing prolonged reduction of intraocular pressure (IOP) with once-daily dosing.
- In clinical evaluations, **poloxamer–carbopol-based gels of brimonidine** demonstrated prolonged IOP-lowering effects with reduced side effects compared to conventional eye drops.
- **Nanoparticle-loaded in-situ gels of dorzolamide** improved patient adherence by reducing the frequency of instillation.

4.2 Post-operative and Infection Control

Ocular infections and post-surgical inflammation require sustained antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory drug release.

- Clinical studies of **ciprofloxacin-loaded gellan gum gels** reported effective antibacterial activity and enhanced patient comfort.
- **Ofloxacin and dexamethasone dual-loaded gels** have been investigated for post-cataract surgery, showing faster recovery and reduced recurrence.
- Combination therapy gels reduce the burden of multiple instillations, a major compliance issue in post-operative care.[12]

4.3 Dry Eye Syndrome (DES)

In-situ gels are emerging as promising candidates for treating DES, a highly prevalent condition.

- **Cyclosporine A-loaded in-situ gels** improved tear film stability and patient-reported comfort in small-scale clinical studies.
- **Carboxymethylcellulose-based thermo-sensitive gels** provided long-lasting ocular surface hydration with fewer instillations than artificial tears.
- These gels act as both lubricants and controlled drug carriers, addressing the multifactorial pathology of DES.[13]

4.4 Posterior Segment Disorders

Although most marketed in-situ gels target anterior diseases, research is progressing towards posterior segment delivery (retinitis, macular degeneration).

- **Triamcinolone acetonide nano-in-situ gels** showed promise in preclinical models for sustained posterior delivery.
- Clinical translation remains challenging due to barriers in drug penetration, but hybrid nanocarrier-in-situ gels are being developed for intravitreal use.[14]

4.5 Case Studies of Marketed and Clinical Products

- **Timoptic-XE® (Merck)**: A gellan gum-based timolol maleate gel, FDA-approved, widely prescribed for glaucoma management.
- **Nyxol® (ocubrex gel)**: A pilocarpine hydrochloride-based in-situ gel, tested in Phase III trials for presbyopia, showed significant pupil modulation with minimal side effects.
- **Cyclosporine in-situ gels** are under clinical evaluation for keratoconjunctivitis sicca, demonstrating improved ocular surface stability.
- **Experimental trials** with levofloxacin and moxifloxacin gels show superior antimicrobial retention compared to standard drops. Commercial and Investigational Ophthalmic In-situ Gel Products shown in Tablet 2.[15]

Table 2: Commercial and Investigational Ophthalmic In-situ Gel Products.

Product Name	Drug	Polymer/Mechanism	Indication	Status
Timoptic-XE®	Timolol maleate	Gelrite (ion-activated)	Glaucoma	Marketed
Azopt® Gel	Brinzolamide	pH-sensitive gel	Ocular hypertension	Marketed
Pilopine HS® Gel	Pilocarpine	Carbopol gel	Glaucoma	Marketed
Travoprost ISG	Travoprost	Thermosensitive gel	Glaucoma	Clinical trials
Dexamethasone ISG	Dexamethasone	Nano-in-situ gel	Post-op inflammation	Experimental

4.6 Patient Compliance and Acceptance

Clinical outcomes consistently emphasize the role of in-situ gels in enhancing patient compliance:

- **Reduced dosing frequency** (once or twice daily vs. 4–6 times/day with conventional drops).
- **Less systemic absorption** due to reduced nasolacrimal drainage.
- **Improved comfort and vision clarity** compared to ointments.
- Studies indicate higher patient preference for gel formulations in chronic therapies like glaucoma.[16]

5. Challenges and Future Perspectives of Ophthalmic In-situ Gel Systems

Ophthalmic in-situ gel systems have transformed ocular drug delivery by improving residence time, reducing dosing frequency, and enhancing patient compliance. However, despite significant progress, several challenges hinder their *wider clinical adoption* and translation into advanced therapies. Addressing these barriers will shape the **next generation of ophthalmic in-situ gel formulations**.

5.1 Challenges

5.1.1 Formulation and Polymer-Related Limitations

- Many **stimuli-responsive polymers** (e.g., poloxamers, gellan gum) have issues like low mechanical strength, burst drug release, and instability under storage conditions.

- Some polymers may cause **ocular irritation, blurred vision, or discomfort**, which limits patient acceptance.
- Ensuring **reproducibility and scalability** of complex polymer blends for industrial production remains a bottleneck.

5.1.2 Sterility and Stability Concerns

- Since ophthalmic gels are **aqueous formulations**, maintaining sterility is crucial. Autoclaving, filtration, or irradiation may degrade sensitive polymers or drugs.
- Long-term stability, particularly for biologics and peptides, is still a major issue.

5.1.3 Patient-Related Barriers

- Patients may experience **blurred vision immediately after instillation** due to gel opacity or viscosity.
- Some may have difficulty with dosing consistency, especially elderly patients with glaucoma or arthritis.[17]

5.1.4 Limited Penetration to Posterior Segment

- Most in-situ gels target **anterior eye diseases** (e.g., glaucoma, infections).
- Delivering drugs effectively to the **posterior segment (retina, choroid, macula)** is still a challenge due to barriers like corneal epithelium, sclera, and vitreous humor.

5.1.5 Regulatory and Translational Hurdles

- Regulatory pathways for ophthalmic in-situ gels are complex, as they involve **drug–device–polymer combinations**.
- Lack of harmonized guidelines for **clinical evaluation** and **bioequivalence testing** creates delays in product approval.[18]

5.2 Future Perspectives

5.2.1 Smart and Stimuli-Responsive Systems

- Future in-situ gels will integrate **multi-stimuli responsiveness** (pH, temperature, ions, enzymes) for *precision-controlled release*.
- Research is shifting towards **biodegradable polymers and hybrid hydrogels** that combine mechanical strength with patient comfort.

5.2.2 Nanotechnology Integration

- **Nano-in-situ gels** are emerging as a breakthrough, combining nanoparticles (liposomes, niosomes, dendrimers) with in-situ gels for **sustained, targeted delivery**.
- Such systems show promise for delivering drugs to the **posterior eye segment**.

5.2.3 Gene and Biologic Delivery

- In-situ gels could act as carriers for **gene therapy vectors (siRNA, CRISPR-Cas systems)** and **biologics (antibodies, peptides, growth factors)**.
- This could revolutionize treatment for diseases like **age-related macular degeneration, retinitis pigmentosa, and diabetic retinopathy**.

5.2.4 Patient-Centric Designs

- Advances in **clear, transparent gels** that do not blur vision will improve acceptance.
- **Once-a-week or once-a-month formulations** could drastically improve compliance in chronic eye diseases.

5.2.5 Regulatory Advancements

- Establishing **standardized testing protocols** for in-situ gels (viscosity, gelation time, residence time, patient comfort) will accelerate clinical translation.
- Collaborative efforts between academia, industry, and regulatory bodies are essential.[19]

6. Future Directions and Opportunities

- Exploration of multi-responsive "intelligent gels."
- Integration with **3D printing** for customized ocular gels.
- Combination of **gene therapy or biologics** with in-situ gel matrices.
- Use of **AI-driven formulation design** and predictive models.
- Personalized ocular medicine for chronic patients.[20]

7. CONCLUSION

Ophthalmic in-situ gel systems represent a paradigm shift in ocular drug delivery. Emerging innovations—ranging from smart polymers and nanotechnology integration to patient-tailored formulations—are paving the way for more effective, sustained, and comfortable ocular therapies. Despite regulatory and formulation challenges, the next generation of ophthalmic in-situ gels holds immense potential to transform ocular pharmacotherapy and enhance patient quality of life.

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