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Drug and Personal Care Product Breakdown Dynamics in Surface Waters: Photolysis versus Biodegradation

Biswajeet Jana*

Department of science and environmental study, Nagpur University, India

Introduction

Surface waters serve as critical ecosystems supporting diverse forms of life, including aquatic organisms and humans alike. However, the widespread use of pharmaceuticals and personal care products (PPCPs) has led to their ubiquitous presence in these aquatic environments. PPCPs encompass a broad range of substances, including medications, cosmetics, and household cleaning agents, which often find their way into surface waters through various pathways such as wastewater treatment plant effluents, agricultural runoff, and direct discharge.

The presence of PPCPs in surface waters raises concerns due to their potential impacts on aquatic ecosystems and human health. While these compounds are designed to provide therapeutic benefits or enhance personal hygiene, their persistent release into the environment can result in unintended consequences. Understanding the breakdown dynamics of PPCPs in surface waters is crucial for assessing their environmental fate and developing effective mitigation strategies [1-3].

Photolysis vs. Biodegradation

Two primary processes govern the breakdown of PPCPs in surface waters: photolysis and biodegradation. Photolysis involves the degradation of compounds induced by exposure to sunlight, particularly through direct or indirect photoreactions. On the other hand, biodegradation refers to the enzymatic breakdown of PPCPs by microorganisms present in aquatic environments.

Photolysis: Sunlight-mediated photolysis plays a significant role in the degradation of certain PPCPs, especially those containing chromophores or functional groups susceptible to photoreaction. Ultraviolet (UV) radiation can initiate various photochemical pathways, such as direct photolysis, where compounds undergo direct decomposition upon absorption of photons, or indirect photolysis, involving reactions with photo chemically generated reactive intermediates like hydroxyl radicals (•OH) or singlet oxygen (1O2).

The efficiency of photolysis depends on several factors, including the chemical structure of PPCPs, water composition, and environmental conditions such as sunlight intensity and water depth. Compounds with aromatic rings, conjugated double bonds, or photosensitive functional groups are more prone to photolytic degradation. However, some PPCPs may undergo partial photo degradation, leading to the formation of transformation products with potentially different environmental properties and toxicity profiles.

Biodegradation: Biodegradation represents a crucial mechanism for the removal of PPCPs from surface waters, facilitated by the diverse microbial communities present in aquatic ecosystems. Microorganisms such as bacteria, fungi, and algae possess metabolic pathways capable of transforming PPCPs into simpler, often less toxic metabolites through enzymatic reactions.

The biodegradability of PPCPs varies widely depending on their chemical structure, molecular size, and biotic factors such as microbial diversity and activity. Easily biodegradable compounds are typically those with readily accessible carbon sources or functional groups susceptible to microbial attack. However, certain PPCPs may exhibit recalcitrance to biodegradation due to complex structures, presence of antimicrobial agents, or lack of suitable microbial consortia capable of metabolizing them effectively [4-7].

Comparative Analysis

The relative contributions of photolysis and biodegradation to the overall breakdown of PPCPs in surface waters vary depending on multiple factors, including compound-specific properties, environmental conditions, and microbial activity. While photolysis can rapidly degrade certain PPCPs exposed to sunlight, its efficacy may be limited by factors such as water turbidity, dissolved organic matter content, and depth-dependent light attenuation.

In contrast, biodegradation operates continuously, provided suitable microbial communities are present, and can occur under a broader range of environmental conditions. However, the rate and extent of biodegradation may be influenced by factors like nutrient availability, temperature, pH, and the presence of inhibitory substances or competing substrates.

Conclusion

The breakdown dynamics of PPCPs in surface waters involve complex interactions between photolysis and biodegradation processes, influenced by a multitude of factors. While photolysis can initiate rapid degradation of certain PPCPs under favorable conditions, biodegradation represents a sustainable and potentially more robust mechanism for long-term removal Efforts to mitigate the environmental impact of PPCPs should focus on enhancing our understanding of their fate and transformation pathways in aquatic ecosystems. This necessitates interdisciplinary research combining environmental chemistry, microbiology, and ecological modeling to develop comprehensive strategies for monitoring, risk assessment, and management of PPCP contamination in surface waters. By elucidating the relative contributions of photolysis and biodegradation, we can better safeguard the health and integrity of aquatic environments for current and future generations.

***Corresponding author:** Biswajeet Jana, Department of science and environmental study, Nagpur University, India, E-mail: b.jena667@gmail.com

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Conflict of Interest

None

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