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Review Article

From Crystallization to Clinical Care: A Review of the Modern Perspectives on Urolithiasis Management

Sumit Kumar Nagar [1], Nidhi Khatri [2*], Bhanu Pratap Singh [3], Umang Yadav [4], Mohit Meena [5]
[1,3,4,5] University Institute of Pharmaceutical Education and Research (UIPER), University of Kota, Kota, Rajasthan, India
[2] Assistant Professor, Pharmacology, University Institute of Pharmaceutical Education and Research (UIPER), University of Kota, Kota, Rajasthan, India

Corresponding Author: * Nidhi Khatri

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Abstract

Urolithiasis, commonly referred to as kidney stone disease, remains a significant global health burden with rising incidence across diverse populations. The condition is characterized by the formation of calculi within the urinary tract, primarily composed of calcium oxalate, uric acid, struvite, or cystine. The underlying pathophysiology involves urinary supersaturation, nucleation, crystal growth, and aggregation, influenced by metabolic, dietary, genetic, and environmental factors. Recent research has highlighted the role of oxidative stress, altered urinary inhibitors and promoters, and genetic predisposition in stone formation, providing deeper mechanistic insights into disease progression. Advances in diagnostic modalities, including high-resolution imaging (CT, ultrasound) and biochemical markers, have improved early detection and risk stratification. Conventional management strategies encompass pharmacological interventions such as thiazide diuretics, citrate therapy, and allopurinol, alongside surgical techniques like extracorporeal shock wave lithotripsy (ESWL), ureteroscopy, and percutaneous nephrolithotomy (PCNL). However, recurrence rates remain high, necessitating preventive approaches and long-term management strategies. Emerging therapeutic perspectives emphasize the role of phytochemicals and herbal formulations, with plants such as Tribulus terrestris, Crataeva nurvala, and Sphaeranthus indicus demonstrating promising anti-urolithiatic activity through mechanisms including crystallization inhibition, antioxidant effects, and modulation of urinary biochemistry. Novel drug delivery systems, nanomedicine, and targeted inhibitors of crystallization are being explored to enhance efficacy and reduce recurrence. This review consolidates current knowledge on the pathophysiology, risk factors, diagnostic advances, conventional therapies, and novel strategies for urolithiasis. By bridging mechanistic insights with clinical care, it underscores the importance of multidisciplinary approaches in reducing disease burden and improving patient outcomes. Future directions should focus on translational research, clinical validation of phytochemicals, and development of personalized therapeutic regimens to address the persistent challenge of recurrence and enhance long term management.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Urolithiasis refers to the formation of calculi (stones) within the urinary tract, including the kidneys, ureters, bladder, or urethra. The term derives from the Greek words *ouron* (urine) and *lithos* (stone). It is recognized as one of the most prevalent disorders of the urinary system and represents a complex multifactorial disease (1, 2). Recurrence rates are notably higher in men compared to women, largely due to hormonal influences—testosterone enhances stone formation, whereas estrogens exert inhibitory effects. Additionally, imbalances between promoters and inhibitors of crystallization contribute to disease persistence and recurrence (3, 4). The global prevalence of kidney stone disease has shown a steady increase over recent decades, affecting individuals across age groups, sexes, and ethnicities. Epidemiological data indicate that men between 20–49 years are more frequently affected than women (5, 6). Approximately 12% of the world's population experiences urolithiasis at some stage in life, with an estimated prevalence of 12% in men and 6% in women. The condition has demonstrated a rising trend since the latter part of the 20th century across diverse populations, including both Caucasian and African-American groups (7, 8). Regional studies further highlight variations in prevalence. In Japan, increasing incidence has been documented, while in Germany, similar upward trends have been reported. Among demographic groups, older Caucasian males exhibit the highest prevalence (~10%), whereas younger African-American females show the lowest (~1%). Rates among Asian and Hispanic populations fall between these extremes. Such geographic and demographic differences underscore the influence of genetic, dietary, and environmental factors in disease occurrence (9, 10). Overall, urolithiasis remains a major global health concern with significant recurrence rates and demographic variability. Understanding its distribution and risk factors is essential for developing targeted preventive and therapeutic strategies.

2. Types of Stones and their Causes

Kidney stones are classified according to their chemical composition. Majority of the stones are calcium-containing stones, especially calcium oxalate monohydrate (COM) (Whewellite), calcium oxalate dehydrates (COD) (Weddellite) and basic calcium phosphate (CaP) (Apatite), occurring to an extent of 75-90% followed by magnesium ammonium phosphate (Struvite) to an extent of 10-15%, Uric acid 3-10% and cystine 0.5-1% (11, 12).

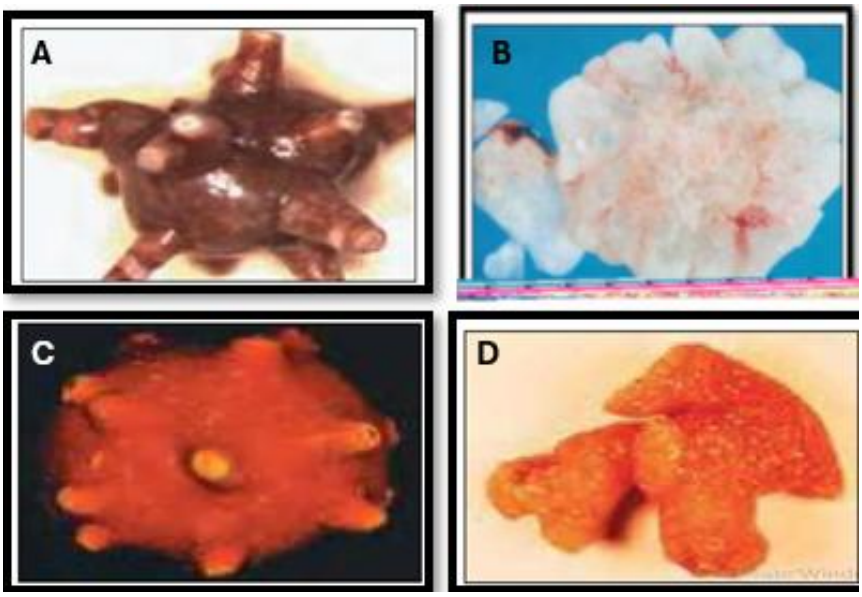

Figure 1: Types of stones: [A] Calcium oxalate stone [B] Struvite stone [C] Uric acid stone [D] Cystine stone.

2.1 Calcium Stones (Calcium Oxalate and Calcium Phosphate):

These are the most common stones, accounting for nearly 70–80% of cases. They form due to metabolic imbalances such as hypercalciuria (excess calcium in urine), hyperoxaluria (high oxalate levels from diet or intestinal disorders), and hypocitraturia (low citrate levels, reducing inhibition of crystallization). Calcium phosphate stones are often associated with renal tubular acidosis and alkaline urine. Risk factors include high salt intake, vitamin D excess, hyperparathyroidism, and dehydration.

2.2 Struvite Stones (Magnesium Ammonium Phosphate):

Struvite stones are typically linked to urinary tract infections caused by urease-producing bacteria such as *Proteus* and Klebsiella. The bacterial enzyme urease hydrolyzes urea into ammonia, raising urinary pH and promoting precipitation of magnesium ammonium phosphate. These stones are often large, recurrent, and more common in women due to higher UTI prevalence. Risk factors include chronic UTIs, long-term catheterization, and neurogenic bladder.

2.3 Uric Acid Stones:

Uric acid stones account for about 10% of cases and form in acidic urine (pH < 5.5). They are associated with hyperuricosuria, which results from high purine intake (red meat, organ meats, seafood) or metabolic disorders such as gout, obesity, and diabetes. Risk factors include dehydration, chronic diarrhea, and chemotherapy. These stones are common in individuals with gout and those consuming high-protein diets.

2.4 Cystine Stones:

Cystine stones are rare, representing 1–2% of cases, and arise from cystinuria, an inherited autosomal recessive disorder. This condition causes defective renal tubular reabsorption of cystine and other dibasic amino acids, leading to high urinary cystine concentrations. Because cystine is poorly soluble, it precipitates to form stones. Risk factors are primarily genetic, and recurrence is frequent, making management challenging.

3. Pathogenesis of Stone Formation

Urolithiasis, or urinary stone disease, is a multifactorial condition resulting from complex interactions between physicochemical, biochemical, and physiological processes within the urinary tract (13, 14). The pathogenesis of stone formation can be broadly divided into four interrelated stages: supersaturation, nucleation, crystal growth and aggregation, and retention. Genetic predisposition, urinary tract infections (especially with urease-producing bacteria leading to struvite stones), and metabolic abnormalities further contribute to stone formation. Alterations in urinary proteins, oxidative stress, and inflammation exacerbate the process, while lifestyle factors such as low fluid intake and high dietary oxalate or protein intake increase risk (15, 16). The pathogenesis of urolithiasis reflects a delicate imbalance between promoters and inhibitors of crystallization. Supersaturation, nucleation, growth, aggregation, and retention form the core mechanism, influenced by metabolic, dietary, genetic, and environmental factors. Understanding these processes is essential for developing preventive and therapeutic strategies to reduce recurrence and improve patient outcomes (17, 18).

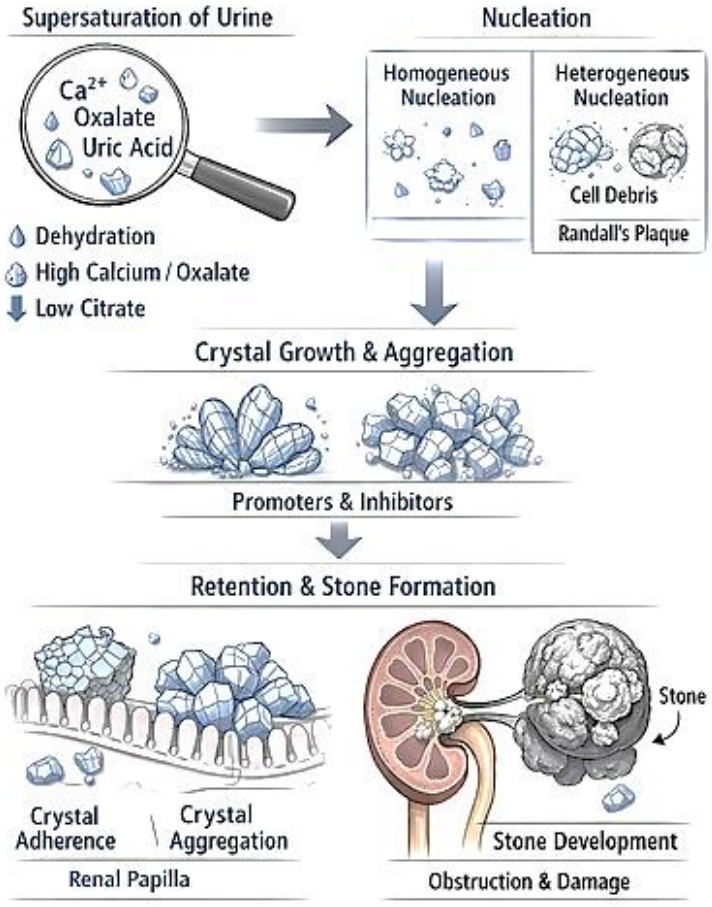

Figure 2: Pathogenesis of Stone Formation

3.1. Supersaturation of Urine:

The initial step involves urinary supersaturation with stone-forming substances such as calcium, oxalate, phosphate, uric acid, or cystine. When their concentration exceeds solubility limits, crystals begin to form. Normally, urine contains inhibitors like citrate, magnesium, and

glycosaminoglycans that prevent crystallization. Deficiency of these inhibitors or excess promoters (e.g., high calcium or oxalate) creates a favorable environment for stone formation. Contributing factors include dehydration, dietary imbalances, metabolic disorders (hypercalciuria, hyperoxaluria, hyperuricosuria), and systemic diseases.

3.2. Nucleation of Crystals:
Once supersaturation occurs, microscopic nuclei form through either homogeneous nucleation (spontaneous crystallization in solution) or heterogeneous nucleation (crystals forming on surfaces such as renal epithelial cells, cellular debris, or foreign particles). Heterogeneous nucleation is more common in vivo, as renal tubular injury from oxidative stress or infection exposes membrane phospholipids and proteins that act as nucleation sites.

3.3. Crystal Growth and Aggregation:
After nucleation, crystals enlarge by deposition of ions from supersaturated urine. They may aggregate into larger particles, influenced by urinary pH, ionic strength, and the presence of inhibitors or promoters. Acidic urine favors uric acid crystallization, while alkaline urine promotes calcium phosphate precipitation. Absence of citrate, which binds calcium and prevents its interaction with oxalate, accelerates growth. Proteins such as osteopontin and Tamm-Horsfall protein can either inhibit or promote aggregation depending on their structural modifications.

3.4. Retention and Stone Maturation:
Small crystals are usually flushed out with urine. However, when they adhere to renal tubular cells or become trapped in renal papillae, they serve as niduses for further stone development. Randall's plaques—subepithelial deposits of calcium phosphate in renal papillae—are recognized precursors for calcium oxalate stones. Once crystals attach to these plaques, they grow into clinically significant calculi.

4. Management of Urolithiasis
The medical management of urolithiasis primarily involves drug therapy and surgical interventions, chosen according to the stone's size, location, type, and associated pathology. Preventive pharmacological agents such as thiazide diuretics and alkali-citrate are used to reduce hypercalciuria and hyperoxaluria, which are key contributors to stone formation, though evidence for their long-term efficacy remains limited (19). Once stones are confirmed, pain relief becomes the immediate priority. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like diclofenac and ibuprofen are widely prescribed, but they carry risks of gastrointestinal and renal side effects. Opioid analgesics are also used, especially in severe cases, though they are associated with nausea, vomiting, constipation, urinary retention, respiratory depression, and the risk of addiction with prolonged use (20). For facilitating stone passage, medical expulsive therapy (MET) is employed, particularly for moderately sized distal ureteral stones. Alpha-adrenergic blockers such as tamsulosin, doxazosin, and terazosin, as well as calcium channel blockers like nifedipine, relax ureteral smooth muscle, reduce spasm, and elevate hydrostatic pressure near the stone, thereby promoting expulsion while also providing symptomatic relief from renal colic (21). Tamsulosin is considered the drug of choice due to its superior tolerability, although other alpha blockers are equally effective. The addition of corticosteroids to tamsulosin has shown enhanced efficacy, as corticosteroids act as antiedema agents and further alleviate renal colic (22). Overall, medical management of urolithiasis integrates pain control, facilitation of stone passage, and preventive pharmacotherapy, while surgical intervention is reserved for larger or resistant stones. This combined approach aims not only to treat existing calculi but also to minimize recurrence and improve patient outcomes.

- **Medical Management:** The first line of treatment focuses on conservative and pharmacological approaches. Adequate hydration is essential to maintain urine output above 2–2.5 liters per day, which helps dilute stone-forming solutes and promotes spontaneous passage of small calculi (<5 mm). Analgesics such as diclofenac or ibuprofen relieve renal colic, while antispasmodics like hyoscine butylbromide reduce ureteral spasms. Medical expulsive therapy using alpha-blockers (tamsulosin) or calcium channel blockers (nifedipine) facilitates stone passage. Urinary alkalinization with potassium citrate or sodium bicarbonate is effective for uric acid and cystine stones. Thiazide diuretics decrease urinary calcium excretion, and allopurinol reduces uric acid levels in hyperuricosuria. Antibiotics are indicated for infection-related (struvite) stones.
- **Surgical and Minimally Invasive Procedures:** When stones are large (>6 mm), obstructive, or resistant to medical therapy, surgical intervention becomes necessary. Extracorporeal Shock Wave Lithotripsy (ESWL) is a non-invasive method that uses shock waves to fragment renal stones smaller than 2 cm. Ureteroscopy (URS) allows direct visualization and laser fragmentation of ureteral stones. Percutaneous Nephrolithotomy (PCNL) is preferred for large or complex renal calculi (>2 cm), providing direct access to the kidney through a small incision. Retrograde Intrarenal Surgery (RIRS) is used for small intrarenal stones with flexible ureteroscopes. Open or laparoscopic surgery is reserved for very large or anatomically complicated stones when minimally invasive techniques fail.
- **Preventive and Lifestyle Measures:** Long-term management emphasizes prevention of recurrence through dietary and lifestyle modifications. Patients are advised to reduce intake of oxalate-rich foods (spinach, nuts, tea) and animal protein, while increasing consumption of citrate-rich fruits such as lemon and orange. Salt restriction and adequate hydration are crucial preventive measures. Regular metabolic evaluation of urinary calcium, oxalate, uric acid, and citrate levels helps tailor individualized therapy.
- **Phytotherapeutic and Supportive Approaches:** Herbal formulations like *Cystone* and extracts of *Tribulus*

terrestris, *Boerhaavia diffusa*, and *Sphaeranthus indicus* have demonstrated anti-urolithiatic properties by inhibiting crystal aggregation, promoting diuresis, and reducing oxidative stress. These natural agents complement conventional therapy and support long-term prevention.

5. CONCLUSION

Urolithiasis continues to be a major global health challenge, characterized by high prevalence, significant recurrence rates, and considerable impact on patient quality of life. The disease results from a complex interplay of metabolic, dietary, genetic, and environmental factors that disrupt the delicate balance between promoters and inhibitors of crystallization in the urinary tract. Supersaturation of urine with stone-forming solutes, nucleation of crystals, their growth and aggregation, and eventual retention within the renal papillae or urinary tract form the cornerstone of its pathogenesis. These processes are further influenced by urinary pH, oxidative stress, infections, and genetic predispositions, making urolithiasis a multifactorial disorder requiring multifaceted management. Current therapeutic strategies emphasize both medical and surgical interventions. Medical management includes hydration therapy, analgesics, medical expulsive therapy, and pharmacological agents such as thiazide diuretics, potassium citrate, and allopurinol, tailored to the stone type and underlying metabolic abnormality. Surgical approaches, ranging from minimally invasive techniques like extracorporeal shock wave lithotripsy (ESWL), ureteroscopy (URS), and percutaneous nephrolithotomy (PCNL) to open or laparoscopic procedures, are reserved for larger, obstructive, or recurrent stones. Despite advances in technology, recurrence remains a persistent problem, underscoring the need for preventive strategies. Preventive measures play a pivotal role in long-term management. Lifestyle modifications such as adequate hydration, reduced intake of oxalate-rich foods and animal protein, and increased consumption of citrate-rich fruits are essential. Regular metabolic evaluation helps identify risk factors and guide individualized therapy. In addition, phytotherapeutic agents derived from plants like Tribulus terrestris, Boerhaavia diffusa, and Sphaeranthus indicus have shown promising anti-urolithiatic effects, offering complementary approaches to conventional treatment. These herbal remedies act by inhibiting crystal aggregation, promoting diuresis, and reducing oxidative stress, thereby supporting both prevention and recurrence control. Looking ahead, emerging therapies such as nanomedicine, targeted crystallization inhibitors, and personalized medicine approaches hold promise for more effective and sustainable management. Integration of omics technologies and artificial intelligence-based predictive models may further enhance risk assessment and individualized treatment planning. Ultimately, successful management of urolithiasis requires a holistic approach that combines modern pharmacological and surgical techniques with preventive lifestyle measures and complementary therapies. By addressing both the immediate burden of stones and the underlying risk factors, healthcare providers can significantly reduce recurrence, improve patient outcomes, and enhance quality of life for those affected by this complex disease.

6. Conflict of Interest: None

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About the Corresponding Author

Nidhi Khatri is an Assistant Professor of Pharmacology at the University Institute of Pharmaceutical Education and Research (UIPER), University of Kota, Kota, Rajasthan, India. She is engaged in teaching, research, and academic activities in pharmacology and pharmaceutical sciences, contributing to the advancement of knowledge through scholarly work and professional education.
Email ID: nidhikhatri9@gmail.com