Research paper

Quantitative risk assessment via uncertainty analysis in combination with error propagation for the determination of the dynamic Design Space of the primary drying step during freeze-drying

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\begin{abstract}
Traditional pharmaceutical freeze-drying is an inefficient batch process often applied to improve the stability of biopharmaceutical drug products. The freeze-drying process is regulated by the (dynamic) settings of the adaptable process parameters shelf temperature $T_s$ and chamber pressure $P_c$. Mechanistic modelling of the primary drying step allows the computation of the optimal combination of $T_s$ and $P_c$ in function of the primary drying time. In this study, an uncertainty analysis was performed on the mechanistic primary drying model to construct the dynamic Design Space for the primary drying step of a freeze-drying process, allowing to quantitatively estimate and control the risk of cake collapse (i.e., the Risk of Failure (RoF)). The propagation of the error on the estimation of the thickness of the dried layer $L_{\text{dried}}$ as function of primary drying time was included in the uncertainty analysis. The constructed dynamic Design Space and the predicted primary drying endpoint were experimentally verified for different RoF acceptance levels (1%, 25%, 50% and 99% RoF), defined as the chance of macroscopic cake collapse in one or more vials. An acceptable cake structure was only obtained for the verification runs with a preset RoF of 1% and 25%. The run with the nominal values for the input variables (RoF of 50%) led to collapse in a significant number of vials. For each RoF acceptance level, the experimentally determined primary drying endpoint was situated below the computed endpoint, with a certainty of 99%, ensuring sublimation was finished before secondary drying was started. The uncertainty on the model input parameters demonstrates the need of the uncertainty analysis for the determination of the dynamic Design Space to quantitatively estimate the risk of batch rejection due to cake collapse.
\end{abstract}

1. Introduction

Pharmaceutical freeze-drying is a process often used to improve the stability of biopharmaceutical drug products with a limited stability when formulated as an aqueous solution [1]. Traditionally, freeze-drying is a batch-wise process during which all vials of each batch are processed through a sequence of consecutive steps (i.e., freezing, primary drying and secondary drying) until the dried end product is obtained [2]. Glass vials containing the aqueous drug formulation (i.e., unit doses) are loaded onto temperature-controlled shelves in the drying chamber. At the start of the freezing stage, these shelves are gradually cooled until approximately $-45^\circ\text{C}$, depending on the formulation characteristics. The temperature of the aqueous drug formulation decreases until ice nucleation takes place and part of the water is converted into ice. While ice crystal growth proceeds upon further cooling, the solutes gradually concentrate between these crystals (freeze-concentration) [3]. At the end of the freezing step, the shelf temperature reaches a value well below the eutectic temperature $T_{\text{e}}$ or the glass transition temperature of the maximum freeze-concentrated formulation $T_{\text{g}}$ for crystalline or amorphous products, respectively, resulting in complete solidification of the product. To allow full crystallization of crystalline components or to enhance the batch uniformity of

\begin{itemize}
  \item Freeze-drying
  \item Mathematical modelling
  \item Dynamic Design Space
  \item Quantitative risk assessment
  \item Error propagation
  \item Risk of failure control
\end{itemize}
One of the Critical Quality Attributes (CQAs) of lyophilized biopharmaceutical products, defined as product properties or characteristics that should meet defined standards to ensure the desired quality (ICH Q8), is the cake appearance [7]. Loss of cake structure (collapse) should be avoided throughout the lyophilization process to ensure reconstitution of the drug product within an appropriate timing and for aesthetic purposes [1]. For this reason, the product temperature at the sublimation front should be maintained below the critical product temperature during the entire primary drying step. The collapse is characteristic for each formulation and identified as the collapse temperature, or for amorphous and crystalline products, respectively. In general, lies a few degrees above because the viscosity near is sufficiently high to limit viscous flow [3]. During secondary drying, the product temperature should be kept below the glass transition temperature of the dried product to avoid molecular motion and loss of cake structure. The value of is much higher compared to because the freeze-concentrate and is highly influenced by the residual moisture content, due to the plasticizing effect of water [1]. In general, the shelf temperature ramp during the transition of the primary to secondary drying step is rather conservative, due to the potential high residual moisture content immediately after primary drying. However, several approaches have been developed to optimize this transition phase [8,9].

The freeze-drying process is characterized by two adaptable process variables, i.e., the shelf fluid inlet temperature and chamber pressure . Combinations of both parameters are set in function of time, specific for each process step. During primary drying, the settings of and should result in a value for associated with maximum sublimation efficiency, while maintaining an appropriate cake structure. Mechanistic models based on the fundamental understanding of the underlying physical mechanisms of the sublimation process, allow the determination of the optimal combination of and during primary drying and their calibration for a formulation to be freeze-dried [10,11]. The development of these mechanistic models only requires a limited amount of experiments, compared to data-driven empirical models associated with a high experimental load. Mechanistic modelling assists in cycle development and optimization by computing for different combinations of and , eventually leading to the construction of the Design Space for primary drying [12-14]. The Design Space is defined as the multidimensional combination and interaction of input variables and process parameters leading to an acceptable product quality with a controlled probability (ICH Q8) [7]. For primary drying, the Design Space is demarcated by the equipment limitations, the sublimation efficiency and the specific CQA for the lyophilized biopharmaceutical product, in this case the dried cake appearance [15-17]. All combinations of and within these limits lead to a lyophilized product with an appropriate cake appearance that is achieved within an acceptable time-frame. Model input variables can change with the progress of primary drying, such as the thickness of the dried product layer . Upon an increase in , the path of the water vapour originating from the sublimation interface through the pores of the above dried product layer becomes longer, associated with an increase in the dried product mass transfer resistance . Therefore, the heat transfer to the product should be gradually lowered, to avoid an increase in . As a consequence, the optimal combination of and changes in time to maintain below , leading to a dynamic Design Space [12,13].

The mechanistic models are a mathematical approximation of the sublimation process during the primary drying stage. Inherent to model development, a few assumptions and simplifications are included in these primary drying models (e.g., a planar sublimation front and steady-state system are assumed). In addition, the model input variables and process parameters are in some cases an estimation of the real
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