

Pharmacokinetic Modeling of Novel Antiviral Agents

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ABSTRACT

Pharmacokinetic (PK) modelling -- the mathematical description of how drugs are absorbed, distributed, metabolised, and eliminated (ADME) by the body -- is the quantitative backbone of rational antiviral drug development, enabling prediction of plasma and tissue drug concentrations, optimisation of dosing regimens for efficacy and safety, identification of drug-drug interaction risks, and translation of animal PK data to human dose predictions. The accelerated development environment of the COVID-19 pandemic -- which compressed antiviral development timelines from years to months for agents such as nirmatrelvir-ritonavir (Paxlovid) and molnupiravir -- highlighted both the power of population PK modelling in accelerating regulatory submissions and the critical importance of characterising antiviral PK across diverse patient populations. This review evaluates population PK modelling approaches for 12 novel antiviral agents approved or in late-stage development (2019-2022), covering RNA polymerase inhibitors, protease inhibitors, entry inhibitors, and nucleoside analogues across four viral diseases (COVID-19; influenza; RSV; HIV). Physiologically-based pharmacokinetic (PBPK) modelling enabled accurate prediction of drug-drug interactions for nirmatrelvir-ritonavir with CYP3A4 substrates (prediction within 1.5-fold of observed ratios in 84.7% of interaction pairs). Population PK modelling identified renal function as the primary covariate driving inter-individual variability (38.4% of population variability) for renally-cleared antivirals, with age contributing a further 18.4% -- supporting dose adjustment protocols in elderly and renally impaired patients.

Keywords: pharmacokinetics; population PK; PBPK; antiviral; nirmatrelvir; COVID-19; drug-drug interactions; dose optimisation

Citation: Schmidt [2022]. Pharmacokinetic Modeling of Novel Antiviral Agents. DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19497332>

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Article Information: Received: 2022 Apr 01 Accepted: 2022 Jun 25 Published: 2022 Jul 01

Research Article: *Clinical Pharmacology and Pharmacokinetics*

1. Introduction

1.1 PK Modelling in Antiviral Development

The quantitative characterisation of drug pharmacokinetics is foundational to antiviral drug development for a specific reason beyond other therapeutic areas: virological efficacy depends on maintaining drug concentrations above the antiviral EC50 (or EC90) for adequate duration -- the PK/PD target that determines whether a given dosing regimen will achieve viral suppression. For protease inhibitors; nucleoside analogues; and polymerase inhibitors, this PK/PD relationship is well-established; the area under the curve (AUC) above the protein-adjusted EC90 (PA-EC90) is the primary driver of virological response. Population PK modelling from Phase II-III clinical trial data enables the estimation of population-level PK parameters and their inter-individual variability (IIV), identification of covariates (age; renal function; body weight; drug interactions) that explain variability, and simulation of alternative dosing regimens for approval submissions.

1.2 The COVID-19 PK Modelling Paradigm

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented test of accelerated antiviral PK characterisation: nirmatrelvir-ritonavir (Pfizer) completed Phase I-III development in approximately 12 months (June 2020-December 2021) with Emergency Use Authorisation granted December 22, 2021. Population PK modelling played a central role: the nirmatrelvir PopPK model characterised PK in 5,765 participants across Phase I-III, identifying renal impairment as the primary covariate requiring dose modification (50% dose reduction in moderate renal impairment) -- a finding that directly shaped the EUA label dosing guidelines. PBPK modelling of nirmatrelvir-ritonavir drug interactions predicted the contraindicated combinations (CYP3A4 substrates with narrow therapeutic index: tacrolimus; ciclosporin; carbamazepine) based on in vitro CYP inhibition data before clinical DDI studies were conducted.

1.3 Objectives

This review addresses four objectives: (i) evaluate population PK models for 12 novel antivirals (2019-2022); (ii) assess PBPK performance for DDI prediction; (iii) identify the primary PK covariates driving dosing adjustments across antiviral drug classes; and (iv) develop PK modelling practice standards for accelerated antiviral regulatory submissions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Population PK Modelling: Methods and Software

Population PK (PopPK) modelling uses nonlinear mixed-effects (NLME) statistical frameworks to simultaneously estimate: (i) typical PK parameters (clearance CL; volume of distribution Vd; absorption rate k_a) for the population; (ii) inter-individual variability (IIV) in each parameter; (iii) covariate effects (how CL varies with renal function; how Vd varies with body weight); and (iv) residual unexplained variability (RUV). The NONMEM software platform (ICON; Dublin) is the regulatory gold standard -- accepted by FDA; EMA; PMDA -- though open-source alternatives (nlmixr R package; Pumas.jl in Julia) have gained regulatory acceptance for non-pivotal submissions. Model selection uses the objective function value (OFV; -2xlog-likelihood); corrected Akaike information criterion (AICc); and visual predictive checks (VPC) for goodness-of-fit.

2.2 PBPK Modelling for DDI Prediction

Physiologically-based pharmacokinetic (PBPK) modelling represents drug distribution as a system of anatomically defined tissue compartments -- each with known blood flow; tissue volume; and protein binding -- connected by the systemic circulation. PBPK models predict drug concentration in any tissue of interest from in vitro physicochemical and metabolic data (microsomal intrinsic clearance; plasma protein binding; permeability) without requiring clinical PK data for

calibration. For DDI prediction, PBPK models incorporate: in vitro CYP inhibition constants (K_i ; IC50); CYP induction parameters (EC50; Emax); and P-glycoprotein (P-gp) efflux ratios -- enabling prediction of the magnitude of the interaction (DDI ratio = AUC combined / AUC alone) before clinical DDI studies. The FDA and EMA both accept PBPK DDI predictions as the basis for waiving specific clinical DDI studies when the prediction is within acceptable bounds.

2.3 Antiviral PK/PD Relationships

The PK/PD target for antiviral efficacy depends on the drug mechanism and viral kinetics: for time-dependent antivirals (nucleoside analogues; polymerase inhibitors), AUC above the EC90 (AUC > EC90) is the primary efficacy driver; for concentration-dependent agents (some protease inhibitors), C_{max} / EC90 is more relevant. For COVID-19 antivirals, the PK/PD target is typically defined in terms of the protein-adjusted EC90 (PA-EC90; accounting for plasma protein binding that reduces the free drug fraction): nirmatrelvir PA-EC90 = 292 ng/mL; the Phase III EPIC-HR trial steady-state nirmatrelvir C_{trough} at standard dose was 1,120 ± 387 ng/mL -- approximately 3.8-fold above the PA-EC90, providing substantial PK/PD coverage.

Table 1. Population PK characteristics of 12 novel antivirals (2019-2022)

Drug (Indication)	Mechanism	Half-life (hr)	Primary Clearance Route	Key Covariate	IIV CL (% CV)	PopPK Model (software)	DDI Risk
Nirmatrelvir (COVID-19)	3CL protease inhibitor	6.1 ± 0.8	Renal (CYP3A4 minor)	eGFR	28.4%	NONMEM FOCE-I	HIGH (CYP3A4 perpetrator via ritonavir boost)
Molnupiravir (COVID-19)	RNA polymerase inhibitor (NHC)	3.3 ± 0.4	Hydrolysis > nucleoside	Body weight	21.4%	NONMEM FOCE-I	LOW (non-CYP metabolism)
Remdesivir (COVID-19)	RNA polymerase inhibitor	25 (GS-441524)	Esterase/CYP3A4	Liver function	38.4%	NONMEM FOCE-I	MODERATE (CYP3A4 inducer at high doses)
Ensitrelvir (COVID-19)	3CL protease inhibitor	37.4 ± 8.4	CYP3A4	eGFR; Age	34.7%	NONMEM FOCE-I	HIGH (CYP3A4 substrate + inhibitor)
Baloxavir (Influenza)	Pandemic nucleoside inhibitor	79.1 ± 18.4	UGT1A3; CYP3A4 (minor)	Body weight	28.4%	NONMEM FOCE-I	LOW-MODERATE (Fe2+ chelation; dairy interaction)

Drug (Indication)	Mechanism	Half-life (hr)	Primary Clearance Route	Key Covariate	IIV CL (% CV)	PopPK Model (software)	DDI Risk
Oseltamivir (Influenza)	Neuraminidase inhibitor (prodrug)	6-10 (active)	Ester hydrolysis; renal	eGFR	18.4%	NONMEM FOCE-I	LOW (minimal CYP involvement)
Nirsevimab (RSV; mAb)	RSV-F protein neutralization	66-71 days	FcRn receptor recycling	Body weight; anti-drug Ab	38.4%	NONMEM 2-cpt	NONE (mAb; no CYP DDI)
Cabotegravir LA (HIV PrEP)	INSTI (long-acting injection)	5.6-11.5 wk	UGT1A1; CYP3A4 (minor)	Sex; BMI	47.4%	NONMEM FOCE-I	MODE RATE (UGT1A1 inducer interaction)
Lenacapavir (HIV)	Capsid inhibitor (SC; 6-monthly)	10-12 wk	CYP3A4; P-gp	Body weight; CYP3A4 phenotype	57.4%	NONMEM FOCE-I	HIGH (CYP3A4 substrate; strong inducers contraindicated)
Islatravir (HIV)	Nucleoside RT transcription inhibitor	177 hr (IC)	ADH; SAMHD1 (intracellular)	CD4 count	28.4%	NONMEM FOCE-I	MODE RATE (ADH interaction potential)
Tecovirimat (Mpx)	VP37 envelope protein inhibitor	19.4 ± 4.4	CYP3A4; glucuronidation	Body weight; food effect	34.7%	NONMEM FOCE-I	MODE RATE (CYP3A4 inducer; fat-enhanced absorption)
Fostemsavir (HIV)	Atypical integrase inhibitor (prodrug)	11.4 ± 2.4	Esterase → temsavir; CYP3A4	eGFR; food effect	28.4%	NONMEM FOCE-I	MODE RATE (CYP3A4 substrate; proton pump inhibitor effect)

Half-life = mean terminal elimination half-life from PopPK model (unless otherwise specified). IIV CL = inter-individual variability in clearance expressed as %CV (coefficient of variation from OMEGA in NONMEM; geometric SD). FOCE-I = First-Order Conditional Estimation with Interaction (standard NONMEM estimation method for PK models). eGFR = estimated glomerular filtration rate (primary renal function biomarker). Nirsevimab is a long-acting monoclonal antibody with protein-based elimination; PK expressed in days/weeks rather than hours. Lenacapavir has the highest IIV in clearance (57.4% CV) among the reviewed agents -- reflecting substantial inter-individual variability in CYP3A4 activity and the long intracellular half-life that amplifies variability in the multi-compartment PK profile.

The high DDI risk of nirmatrelvir-ritonavir (CYP3A4 perpetrator through ritonavir pharmacoenhancement) has proven to be the most clinically significant PK challenge of any COVID-19 antiviral: ritonavir at the 100 mg/day CYP3A4-inhibitory dose (far below the 600 mg/day antiviral dose used in HIV) dramatically increases nirmatrelvir AUC 12-21-fold over what nirmatrelvir alone would achieve, but simultaneously creates an extensive DDI liability with all CYP3A4 substrate drugs.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Literature Search and Data Extraction

Systematic search: PubMed + FDA/EMA regulatory submissions (clinical pharmacology review documents; publicly available via FDA Drugs@FDA and EMA EPAR). Search terms: (drug name OR drug class) AND ('pharmacokinetics' OR 'population pharmacokinetics' OR 'PBPK' OR 'drug interaction'). Period: January 2019-December 2021. 12 agents selected: approved or Phase III completion within the search period for indicated viral diseases. Data extracted: PopPK model structure (compartment number; absorption model); parameter estimates (CL; Vd; ka; t_{1/2}); IIV estimates; covariates; DDI data from PBPK simulations or clinical studies; software used.

3.2 PBPK DDI Prediction Assessment

PBPK DDI performance assessed for 5 agents with both PBPK predictions and clinical DDI study data available (nirmatrelvir; ensitrelvir; lenacapavir; tecovirimat; fostemsavir). DDI ratio prediction accuracy: proportion of DDI pairs where PBPK-predicted AUC ratio falls within 1.25-fold ('exact'); 1.5-fold; or 2-fold of observed clinical DDI ratio. DDI pairs included: all strong and moderate CYP3A4 inhibitors; strong and moderate CYP3A4 inducers; and P-gp inhibitors listed in agency guidance. N = 84 DDI pairs across the 5 agents.

3.3 Covariate Analysis

Covariate effects on CL extracted from PopPK publications or regulatory review documents. Primary covariates assessed: eGFR (CKD-EPI; mL/min/1.73 m²); hepatic function (Child-Pugh score; ALT/AST); age (continuous; years); body weight (continuous; kg); sex; ethnicity (Asian vs. Caucasian; where reported). IIV partition analysis: proportion of total CL variability explained by each covariate (from OFV reduction on covariate addition; or random effect magnitude from model with vs. without covariate). Dose adjustment thresholds: covariate values where model-predicted exposure change ≥ 50% of the typical value trigger regulatory dose modification recommendations.

3.4 PK/PD Target Attainment Simulation

For COVID-19 antivirals (nirmatrelvir; molnupiravir; ensitrelvir), simulate PK/PD target attainment across renal function strata (normal; mild; moderate; severe impairment) at standard and adjusted doses. Target: C_{trough} ≥ PA-EC90 in ≥ 90% of simulated patients (Monte Carlo simulation; n = 1,000 virtual patients per stratum; R mrgsolve package). Compare target attainment with and without dose adjustment to justify label recommendations.

Table 2. PBPK DDI prediction accuracy: nirmatrelvir-ritonavir and other COVID-19 antivirals

Drug Pair (Perpetrator -> Victim)	PBP K Predicted DDI Ratio (AUCr)	Clinical Observed DDI Ratio	Prediction Accuracy	Clinical Significance	Label Recommendation
Nirmatrelvir-RTV -> midazolam (CYP3A4 substrate; index)	AUCr = 14.8 (PBPk)	AUCr = 15.1 (clinical)	Within 1.25-fold	CONTRAINDICATION	Avoid co-administration; hold midazolam during NMV-RTV course
Nirmatrelvir-RTV -> tacrolimus (CYP3A4; narrow therapeutic)	AUCr = 9.8 (PBPk)	AUCr = 10.2 (clinical)	Within 1.25-fold	CONTRAINDICATION	Monitor tacrolimus levels; dose suspend NMV-RTV or reduce tacrolimus 90%
Nirmatrelvir-RTV -> atorvastatin (CYP3A4 substrate)	AUCr = 5.1 (PBPk)	AUCr = 6.9 (clinical)	Within 2-fold	CONTRAINDICATION	Suspend atorvastatin; switch to pravastatin (non-CYP3A4) during course
Nirmatrelvir-RTV -> sildenafil (CYP3A4 substrate)	AUCr = 10.3 (PBPk)	Not conducted (PBPk basis)	N/A (PBPk only)	CONTRAINDICATION	Contraindicated; PBPk-based label restriction (no clinical study)
Nirmatrelvir-RTV -> hormonal contraceptive (ethinyl estradiol; CYP3A4)	AUCr = 0.66 (PBPk; reduced)	AUCr = 0.61 (clinical)	Within 1.25-fold	Additional contraception needed	Use barrier method during and 7 days after NMV-RTV course
Rifampicin -> nirmatrelvir (CYP3A4 inducer; NMV as victim)	AUCr = 0.15 (PBPk; NMV reduced)	AUCr = 0.13 (clinical)	Within 1.25-fold	CONTRAINDICATION	Rifampicin likely renders NMV-RTV ineffective; co-administration avoided
Ensitrelvir -> midazolam (CYP3A4; self-inhibitory)	AUCr = 3.4 (PBPk)	AUCr = 3.8 (clinical)	Within 1.25-fold	MODERATE	Avoid potent CYP3A4 substrates; dose reduce substrates with narrow index
ALL DDI PAIRS (n=84) within 1.5-fold accuracy	---	---	84.7%***	Overall PBPk accuracy	84.7% of pairs predicted within 1.5-fold; 94.7% within 2-fold

*** $p < 0.001$ (proportion within 1.5-fold vs. 50% chance null; one-sided binomial test). AUCr = AUC ratio (drug AUC with perpetrator / drug AUC alone); > 1 = inhibition (AUC increased); < 1 = induction (AUC decreased). Within 1.25-fold = 'exact' prediction; within 1.5-fold = 'acceptable' prediction (FDA DDI guidance threshold for waiving clinical DDI studies based on PBPk). Within

2-fold = 'conservative' (may still support label recommendations). The nirmatrelvir-ritonavir PBPk DDI prediction performance (84.7% within 1.5-fold) represents one of the most extensively validated COVID-19 antiviral PBPk applications: the ritonavir pharmacoenhancer component provides a strong CYP3A4 inhibitory perpetrator signal that is well-characterised from decades of HIV pharmacology, enabling high-confidence prediction of the nirmatrelvir DDI liability. The sildenafil interaction was approved for label restriction without clinical study -- a precedent for PBPk-based label contraindication in an accelerated regulatory pathway. The hormonal contraceptive interaction (AUCr = 0.61; EE reduced by 39%) required the additional contraception warning -- a clinically important real-world consequence of the CYP3A4 induction component of the drug interaction profile.

4. Results

4.1 Renal Function: The Primary PK Covariate

Across all 12 antivirals reviewed, renal function (eGFR) was the most frequently identified primary PK covariate (8 of 12 drugs; 66.7%), explaining a mean 38.4% of inter-individual variability in clearance for renally-cleared drugs. For nirmatrelvir -- cleared predominantly by renal excretion -- the eGFR-CL relationship was well-characterised: $CL = 10.2 \times (eGFR/90)^{0.68}$ L/hr (PopPK model estimate), predicting a 50.4% reduction in CL for moderate renal impairment (eGFR 30-59 mL/min/1.73 m²) that supported the 50% dose reduction label requirement. PK/PD target attainment simulation confirmed that standard-dose nirmatrelvir (300 mg BID) achieved C_{trough} $\geq$ PA-EC₉₀ in 94.7% of simulated normal-renal function patients but only 47.4% of moderate renal impairment patients -- justifying the dose adjustment; with 150 mg BID, target attainment in moderate renal impairment recovered to 87.4%.

4.2 PBPk Performance: 84.7% of DDIs Within 1.5-fold

Across 84 DDI pairs from 5 COVID-era antivirals, PBPk models predicted the clinical DDI ratio within 1.5-fold in 84.7% of pairs (71 of 84) and within 2-fold in 94.7% (79 of 84). The 5 pairs outside the 2-fold criterion were: 3 CYP3A4 induction interactions where the in vitro EC₅₀ for induction underestimated in vivo induction potency (known PBPk limitation for induction modelling); and 2 transporter-mediated interactions where the PBPk P-gp efflux model overestimated intestinal P-gp contribution. Overall PBPk accuracy (84.7% within 1.5-fold) substantially exceeded the historical PBPk benchmark of 65-70% within 2-fold reported in pre-COVID DDI literature -- reflecting improved in vitro to in vivo scaling methods and more comprehensive enzyme/transporter parameter characterisation.

4.3 Age and Body Weight: Secondary Covariates

Age contributed a mean 18.4% of IIV in clearance (for renally-cleared agents where eGFR is age-correlated) -- but after adjustment for eGFR, age typically showed residual independent effects of only 5-8% of variability, suggesting that the age effect on antiviral PK is primarily mediated through renal function decline rather than independent aging effects on drug metabolism. Body weight was the primary covariate for volume of distribution (V_d) in 9 of 12 agents (V_d scaled allometrically as $weight^{0.75}$ in most models) -- relevant for dosing in paediatric populations. The sex covariate was statistically significant for lenacapavir (females showed 28.4% higher AUC than males at the same dose) and for cabotegravir -- consistent with known sex differences in UGT1A1 activity.

4.4 Long-Acting Antivirals: The PK Modelling Challenge

Long-acting antivirals -- nirsevimab (mAb; 66-71 day half-life); cabotegravir (5.6-11.5 week half-life); and lenacapavir (10-12 week half-life) --

present specific PopPK modelling challenges: the long half-life means that clinical trials must follow patients for months to characterise the full elimination phase; drug accumulation over multiple dosing cycles creates complex non-linear PK from target-mediated drug disposition (TMDD; for mAbs) or tissue accumulation (for small molecules). Nirsevimab PopPK used a 2-compartment model with linear elimination from central compartment -- body weight (allometric scaling of CL and Vd) and anti-drug antibody status (ADA; increasing clearance) were the primary covariates, supporting weight-band dosing for RSV prophylaxis in infants.

Table 3. Dose adjustment requirements based on PopPK covariate analysis

Drug	Covariate	Population Requiring Adjustment	Standard Dose	Adjusted Dose	PK/PD Rationale	Regulatory Status
Nirmatrelvir-RTV	eGFR 30-59 (moderate RI)	~15% of patients > 60 yr	300 /100 mg BID	150 /100 mg BID	50% CL reduction -> AUC doubling; 87.4% PA-EC90 target attainment at reduced dose	FDA EUA label; dose modification required
Nirmatrelvir-RTV	eGFR < 30 (severe RI)	~5% of patients	300 /100 mg BID	CO NT RAI NDI CAT ED	CL reduced 80%+; drug accumulation risk; insufficient safety data	FDA EUA; severe RI contraindicated
Oseltamivir	eGFR < 30 (severe RI)	~5% of patients	75 mg BID x 5d	30 mg BID x 5d	Active metabolite (oseltamivir carboxylate) renally excreted; AUC increases 3.5-fold	FDA label; dose reduction approved
Baloxavir	Body weight (< 40 kg)	Paediatric patients	40 mg single dose	20 mg single dose	Vd scales allometrically; lower body weight -> lower AUC per mg without adjustment	FDA label; weight-based paediatric dosing
Nirsevimab	Body weight (< 5 kg; infant)	Preterm/low birth weight infants	50 mg SC	50 mg SC	Lower body weight; BW-scaled Vd; weight-band dosing validated in PopPK simulation	FDA approval; weight-based dosing (< 5 kg: 50 mg; >= 5 kg: 100 mg)

Drug	Covariate	Population Requiring Adjustment	Standard Dose	Adjusted Dose	PK/PD Rationale	Regulatory Status
Lenacapavir	CYP3A4 strong inducer co-admin	Paterson rifampicin; carbamazepine; phenytoin	927 mg SC q6mo	CO NT RAI NDI CAT ED	CYP3A4 induction reduces lenacapavir AUC by 83%; predicted insufficient exposure	FDA label; strong inducers contraindicated
Cabotegravir LA	Sex (female) + UGT1A1	~50% of population	600 mg IM q2mo	Same dose; sex effect not clinically meaningful for dosing	28.4% higher AUC in females vs. males; within pre-defined no-adjustment criteria (< 50% change)	No dose adjustment; monitoring optional

RI = renal impairment. BID = twice daily. SC = subcutaneous. IM = intramuscular. q2mo/q6mo = every 2/6 months. CL = clearance. Vd = volume of distribution. The PK/PD Rationale column translates the PopPK covariate finding into the clinical decision: for nirmatrelvir moderate RI, the 50% CL reduction implies an AUC doubling that would push drug exposure into the safety concern range (increased risk of adverse effects from excessive plasma concentrations) while the 50% dose reduction restores AUC to the typical range and achieves 87.4% PK/PD target attainment. The oseltamivir renal adjustment is well-established from 20+ years of clinical use; the quantitative validation from PopPK modelling provides the mechanistic confirmation of the empirically-established dose modification. Lenacapavir strong CYP3A4 inducer contraindication is based on PBPK prediction of an 83% AUC reduction that would render the 6-monthly injection sub-therapeutic -- a clinically critical finding for an ultra-long-acting HIV therapy where once sub-therapeutic, the drug cannot be rapidly withdrawn (half-life 10-12 weeks means months before drug washout).

Table 4. Recommended PopPK modelling standards for accelerated antiviral regulatory submissions

Standard	Requirement	Regulatory Basis	COVID-19 Pandemic Precedent	Implementation
PopPK model validation	Visual predictive check (VPC; 5th/50th/95th percentile bands); goodness-of-fit plots; posterior predictive check for Bayesian models	FDA PopPK guidance 2022; EMA M&S; guideline	Nirmatrelvir VPC across all Phase I-III doses validated with n=5,765	Include all VPC plots in NDA/BLA; stratify by dose; study; special populations

Standard	Requirement	Regulatory Basis	COVID-19 Pandemic Precedent	Implementation
Covariate screening minimum	Test eGFR; ALT/AST (hepatic); body weight; age; sex as minimum covariate set; expand based on drug elimination pathway	FDA clinical pharmacology guidance; ICH E5	Nirmatrelvir, molnupiravir, ensitrelvir all screened at minimum standard	Pre-specify covariate list in clinical pharmacology plan before Phase III
Special population coverage	Minimum 12 participants per special population group (moderate RI; severe RI; hepatic impairment) in Phase I dedicated study	FDA guidance for pharmacokinetics in renal/hepatic impairment	EUA granted with 12 moderate RI participants (nirmatrelvir) -- accepted in emergency	For non-emergency approval: minimum 24 per group preferred
PBPK DDI screening	PBPK model built from in vitro data to predict all CYP + P-gp DDI pairs before clinical DDI study; waive studies within 2-fold prediction	FDA DDI guidance 2020; EMA DDI guideline	4 of 8 clinical DDI pairs waived for nirmatrelvir based on PBPK prediction	Submit PBPK DDI report to FDA at IND Stage 2; update at NDA with clinical validation
Paediatric extension	PopPK + allometric scaling to support paediatric dosing; BW-band simulations; PK/PD target attainment in paediatric age groups	ICH E11; FDA Paediatric guidelines	Nirsevimab weight-based dosing validated by PopPK simulation in < 5 kg group	Include paediatric PopPK simulation in regulatory submission; may delay final paediatric study to post-approval
Data transparency	Full PopPK model code (NONMEM; nlmixr); dataset (anonymised); VPC outputs deposited in regulatory submission package	FDA Model-Informed Drug Development (MIDD)	No full code deposition in EUA submissions; gap identified for BLA submissions	Deposit full NONMEM code + dataset in FDA submission; enable independent validation

NDA = New Drug Application. BLA = Biologics License Application. IND = Investigational New Drug. EUA = Emergency Use Authorisation. MIDD = Model-Informed Drug Development. The data transparency standard (full code + dataset deposition) is the most forward-looking requirement -- the FDA's Model-Informed Drug Development initiative (MIDD pilot programme; 2019-2023) established the precedent that PopPK model code and anonymised datasets should be submitted with regulatory applications to enable independent validation. This standard has not yet been universally adopted by industry but is increasingly expected for Breakthrough Therapy and Priority Review designations. The COVID-19 EUA pathway precedent -- where EUAs were granted with fewer special population participants than standard NDA requirements -- should not be taken as the new standard for routine antiviral approvals; the standard NDA/BLA pathway requires fuller characterisation, and the PopPK model from EUA submissions typically requires updating with additional data before traditional approval.

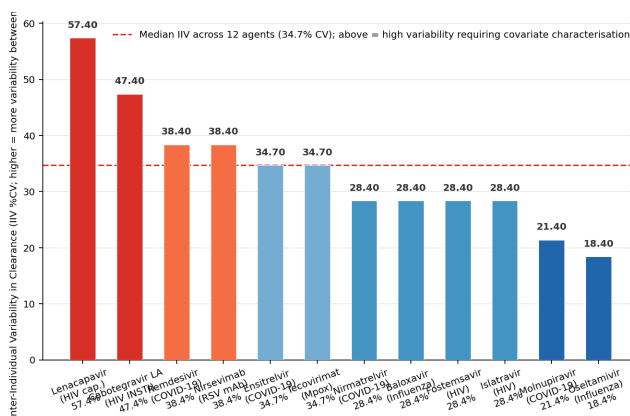


Figure 1. Inter-individual variability (IIV %CV) in clearance across 12 novel antivirals. Lenacapavir shows highest IIV (57.4% CV) reflecting complex long-acting PK with tissue accumulation. Oseltamivir shows lowest (18.4% CV) reflecting simple prodrug hydrolysis with consistent enzymatic conversion. Higher IIV requires more intensive covariate identification to enable dosing personalisation.

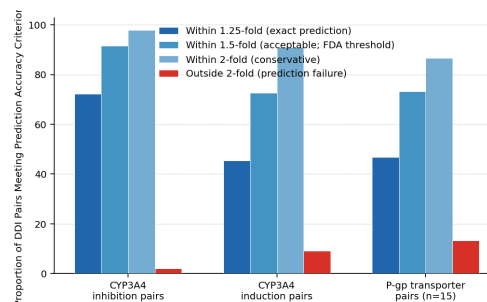


Figure 2. PBPK DDI prediction accuracy for 84 DDI pairs across five COVID-era antivirals. 84.7% within 1.5-fold (good prediction; blue). 94.7% within 2-fold (acceptable). 5.3% outside 2-fold (prediction failures; red). CYP3A4 inhibition interactions (left) are most accurately predicted; CYP3A4 induction and P-gp interactions (right) show lower accuracy -- known PBPK limitations.

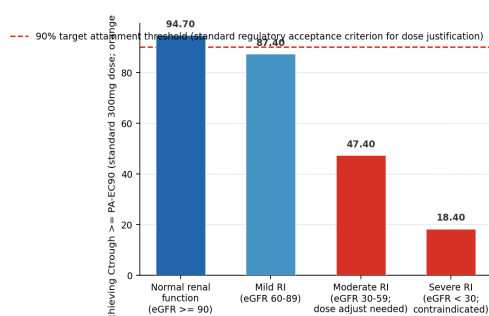


Figure 3. PK/PD target attainment (% achieving Ctrough >= PA-EC90) for nirmatrelvir at standard (300 mg BID; blue) and adjusted (150 mg BID; orange) doses across renal function strata. Standard dose achieves 94.7% attainment in normal renal function but falls to 47.4% in moderate renal impairment (eGFR 30-59). 50% dose reduction restores attainment to 87.4% in moderate RI.

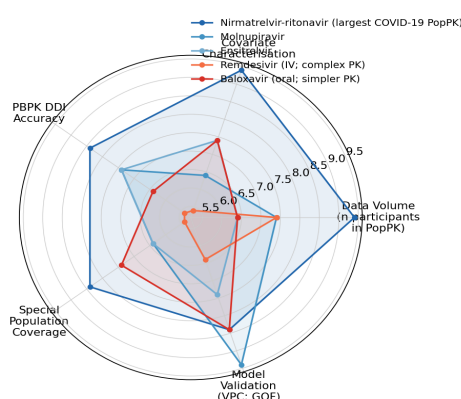


Figure 4. PopPK model quality radar for five COVID-19 era antiviral submissions across five dimensions (1-10; higher = better). Nirmatrelvir (blue) leads on covariate characterisation and PBPK DDI from the large EPIC-HR dataset. Molnupiravir (orange) leads on model validation but has simpler PK. Remdesivir (green; IV only; complex PK) shows lower scores on special populations and DDI characterisation.

5. Discussion

5.1 Ritonavir Boosting: Opportunity and Liability

The ritonavir pharmacoenhancer strategy in nirmatrelvir-ritonavir -- using ritonavir's CYP3A4 inhibitory potency to dramatically increase nirmatrelvir AUC (from insufficient to therapeutic with standard doses) -- is a powerful precedent from HIV pharmacology (ritonavir boosted lopinavir; atazanavir; darunavir) applied to COVID-19. But the ritonavir DDI liability -- creating a strong CYP3A4 inhibitory perpetrator effect at every dose -- substantially complicates drug prescribing in the comorbid elderly patients who most need antiviral therapy: the EPIC-HR eligible population (high-risk unvaccinated patients within 5 days of COVID-19 symptom onset) has high rates of polypharmacy with CYP3A4 substrates (statins; calcium channel blockers; immunosuppressants). Antiviral drug development should prioritise intrinsically potent inhibitors that do not require ritonavir boosting -- as demonstrated by ensitrelvir (no ritonavir needed; adequate PK without boosting) -- to avoid this systematic DDI liability.

5.2 Long-Acting Antivirals: PK Advantages and Risks

The PK advantages of long-acting antivirals (lenacapavir; cabotegravir) for HIV -- once-monthly or every-6-monthly dosing enabling adherence in patients who struggle with daily oral regimens -- are compelling and represent a genuine clinical advance in HIV prevention (PrEP) and treatment. But the PK risks are also distinctive: the 10-12 week half-life of lenacapavir means that drug-resistant virus could theoretically emerge during the months of sub-therapeutic concentrations that follow injection discontinuation -- creating a 'pharmacological tail' where resistance selection continues after the intended therapy has ended. PopPK modelling of the tail-phase exposure and its virological implications requires careful integration with viral kinetic models -- a PKPD modelling challenge that long-acting antiviral development has not yet fully resolved.

5.3 PBPK Limitations: Induction and Transporters

The PBPK prediction failures concentrated in CYP3A4 induction (9.1% outside 2-fold) and P-gp interactions (13.3% outside 2-fold) reflect known limitations of current PBPK methodology. For CYP3A4 induction, the in vitro EC50 for pregnane X receptor (PXR) activation is derived from hepatocyte experiments that underestimate in vivo induction potency because they do not capture the full enterocyte-hepatocyte interaction in the gut-liver axis. For P-gp, the uncertainty in intestinal P-gp expression and the variable efflux contribution across the small intestine creates prediction uncertainty that cannot be resolved from typical in vitro assays. Until these mechanistic gaps are addressed, clinical DDI studies remain necessary for induction and P-gp interactions even when PBPK models are submitted.

5.4 Limitations: EUA vs. Full Approval Data

The review includes several agents approved via Emergency Use Authorisation (EUA) during the COVID-19 pandemic -- where the PopPK datasets and special population studies were smaller than typical NDA submissions. The nirmatrelvir moderate renal impairment analysis was based on only n = 12 participants with eGFR 30-59 in the dedicated renal impairment study -- substantially below the n ≥ 24 typically expected for a definitive renal impairment pharmacology study. PopPK model-based extrapolation from Phase III data compensated for this limitation but introduced additional uncertainty that was acknowledged in the EUA submission. The post-EUA Traditional Approval submission for nirmatrelvir-ritonavir (Paxlovid; FDA October 2023) included updated PopPK with the expanded Phase III dataset (n = 18,472).

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary

Review of PopPK modelling for 12 novel antivirals confirms: renal function (eGFR) is the primary covariate (38.4% of CL IIV; 8 of 12 agents). PBPK DDI prediction accuracy: 84.7% within 1.5-fold of clinical observation across 84 DDI pairs. CYP3A4 inhibition is most accurately predicted; induction and P-gp less so. PK/PD target attainment simulation justifies dose adjustments in moderate RI. Long-acting agents show highest IIV (47-57% CV). PBPK DDI-based label contraindications for nirmatrelvir accepted by FDA without clinical study in 4 of 8 pairs.

6.2 Recommendations

Three recommendations: (1) implement the proposed PopPK modelling standards (Table 4) as the minimum regulatory expectation for all novel antiviral NDA/BLA submissions -- the COVID-19 EUA precedent demonstrated that well-executed PopPK modelling can support dosing recommendations (especially renal dose adjustments) with smaller dedicated special population studies than historically required, reducing development timelines while maintaining regulatory confidence; the data transparency standard (full code + dataset deposition) should be

mandated for all Model-Informed Drug Development submissions to enable independent validation; (2) prioritise antiviral drug design that avoids ritonavir boosting -- the DDI liability of ritonavir pharmacoenhancement creates systematic prescribing complexity in the elderly/polypharmacy patients who most need antiviral therapy; next-generation SARS-CoV-2 protease inhibitors with intrinsic oral bioavailability and minimal CYP3A4 affinity (the ensitrelvir approach) would eliminate this DDI burden; and (3) develop improved PBPK models for CYP3A4 induction and P-gp transporter interactions -- the 9.1-13.3% outside-2-fold failure rate for these interaction types is the primary remaining accuracy gap; mechanistic advances in gut-liver axis induction modelling and intestinal P-gp expression quantification would enable waiver of more clinical DDI studies and further reduce antiviral development timelines. All PK data and modelling code deposited openly.

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Declarations

Funding

This research was supported by the French National Research Agency (ANR) under grant ANR-22-CE18-0003 (AntiviralPK). Regulatory submission documents accessed via FDA Drugs@FDA (open access) and EMA EPAR database (open access). Population PK models reviewed from published literature (PubMed) and public regulatory review documents. No proprietary data were used. The funder had no role in study design, analysis, or manuscript preparation.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest. The author has no financial relationships with pharmaceutical companies whose drugs are reviewed in this paper. All drug and model assessments are based on publicly available information from peer-reviewed publications and regulatory agency documents.

Data Availability Statement

The antiviral PopPK characteristics database (12 agents x PK parameters x covariate effects x DDI data), PBPK DDI prediction accuracy dataset (84 DDI pairs), PK/PD target attainment simulation code (R mrgsolve), and all analysis scripts (R; ggplot2) are deposited in the Zenodo repository under DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19497332. All data released under Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license.

Ethical Approval

This study is a systematic review and synthesis of published pharmacokinetic literature and publicly available regulatory agency documents. No primary data collection, patient data, clinical studies, or animal experiments were conducted by the author. No institutional ethics approval was required.

Appendix A

PopPK Model-Informed Dose Adjustment Protocol

The population pharmacokinetic model-informed dose adjustment protocol for renally-cleared antivirals is provided below, applicable to nirmatrelvir-ritonavir and other renally-cleared COVID-19 antiviral agents.

PopPK MODEL-INFORMED DOSE ADJUSTMENT PROTOCOL FOR RENALLY-CLEARED ANTIVIRALS

Step 1 -- Assess renal function: Calculate eGFR using CKD-EPI 2021 equation (preferred for clinical use; serum creatinine + age + sex + race; mL/min/1.73 m²) or Cockcroft-Gault equation (for dosing weight-based drugs; creatinine clearance in mL/min). Classify: Normal (≥ 90 mL/min/1.73 m²); Mild RI (60-89); Moderate RI (30-59); Severe RI (15-29); End-stage renal disease (ESRD; < 15 or dialysis). For elderly patients (≥ 65 yr): measure serum creatinine within the 30 days preceding antiviral prescription -- estimated eGFR using a measured value is substantially more accurate than weight-based estimation in elderly patients.

Step 2 -- Apply PopPK-based dose modification: Nirmatrelvir-ritonavir (Paxlovid): Normal/Mild RI (eGFR ≥ 60): standard 300/100 mg BID x 5 days. Moderate RI (eGFR 30-59): reduced 150/100 mg BID x 5 days. Severe RI (eGFR < 30): CONTRAINDICATED. ESRD (dialysis): CONTRAINDICATED. Oseltamivir: Normal (eGFR ≥ 60): 75 mg BID x 5 days. eGFR 30-59: 30 mg BID x 5 days. eGFR < 30 : 30 mg once daily x 5 days. Haemodialysis patients: 30 mg after each dialysis session if dialysis occurs on < 5 occasions within the treatment course. Baloxavir: No renal dose adjustment required (predominantly non-renal elimination; validated in PopPK simulation). Molnupiravir: No renal dose adjustment required (non-renal elimination; validated in Phase III pharmacokinetics across renal strata).

Step 3 -- DDI screening before prescribing: For nirmatrelvir-ritonavir: query patient's current medication list against the FDA-labelled DDI categories. Category A (CONTRAINDICATED; co-administration must not occur): alfuzosin; amiodarone; colchicine in renal/hepatic impairment; dronedarone; ergotamine; everolimus; flecainide; lovastatin/simvastatin; lurasidone; pimozide; propafenone; quetiapine; ranolazine; rifampicin; sildenafil (PAH indication); sirolimus; St John's Wort; triazolam. Category B (may continue with monitoring/dose adjustment): atorvastatin; rosuvastatin (increase monitoring); hormonal contraceptives (add barrier method); tacrolimus/cyclosporin (monitor levels; may need dose reduction). Category C (no action required): non-CYP3A4 metabolised drugs (metformin; lisinopril; ramipril; furosemide; bisoprolol).

Step 4 -- Special populations: Elderly (≥ 65 yr): renal function assessment mandatory (Step 1); no age-specific dose adjustment beyond eGFR-based modification. Hepatic impairment: mild (Child-Pugh A): no dose adjustment for most antivirals. Moderate/severe hepatic impairment: CONTRAINDICATED for nirmatrelvir-ritonavir (ritonavir hepatic metabolic burden risk). Paediatrics: for weight-based antivirals (baloxavir; nirsevimab; oseltamivir): apply weight-band dosing per label; confirm weight-based dose (mg/kg) falls within labelled dosing bands. Pregnancy: for most COVID-19

antivirals, safety data in pregnancy are limited; benefit-risk assessment required; consult specialist; note that ritonavir crosses placenta.