

Mechanochemistry as a Solvent-Free Manufacturing Platform for Industrial Chemical Processes

Jaya Pandey
Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus
E-mail: jpandey@lko.amity.edu

Abstract: Mechanochemistry has seen a resurgence of interest as a solvent-free synthetic platform due to the increasing need for environmentally friendly, energy-efficient, and sustainable chemical manufacturing. Mechanochemistry eliminates or significantly reduces the need for bulk solvents by using mechanical force, such as that produced by grinding, milling, or extrusion, to start and maintain chemical transformations in the solid state. The principles of mechanochemical activation, recent technological developments that allow industrial scalability, and representative applications in environmental engineering, materials science, and pharmaceuticals are all critically examined in this review. Green chemistry metrics, techno-economic factors, and the function of continuous mechanochemical processes in contemporary manufacturing are given special attention. Mechanochemistry is positioned as a revolutionary strategy for next-generation industrial chemical processes in the review's conclusion, which also discusses current issues and future prospects.

Keywords: Mechanochemistry, Solvent-Free Manufacturing, Industrial Chemical Processes

1. Introduction

Organic solvents, which frequently make up the majority of material input and waste output in industrial processes, are crucial to conventional chemical manufacturing [1-4]. A potent substitute for conventional solution-phase synthesis is mechanochemistry, which is defined as the start of chemical reactions by mechanical energy as opposed to heat or light. Despite the fact that mechanochemical phenomena have been understood for centuries, it has only been in the last 20 years that their systematic application to synthetic chemistry has accelerated due to advancements in instrumentation, mechanistic understanding, and alignment with Green Chemistry principles. Mechanochemistry significantly modifies reaction environments, mass transfer pathways, and energy utilization by moving reactions from the solution to the solid state [5]. This article reviews important applications in environmental technologies, materials synthesis, and pharmaceutical manufacturing [6].

2. Fundamental Principles of Mechanochemical Activation

The direct transformation of mechanical energy into chemical potential is how mechanochemistry works. Mechanochemical reactions take place at solid-solid interfaces under extreme mechanical stress, as opposed to solution-based chemistry, where molecular diffusion, solvation, and thermal activation predominate. Compression, shearing, and impact are common sources of mechanical energy that are usually applied with a mortar and pestle, planetary ball mills, mixer mills, or twin-screw extruders [7].

At the microscopic level, several interrelated phenomena contribute to mechanochemical reactivity. Mechanical action induces particle size reduction, generating fresh surfaces and increasing the surface-to-volume ratio of reactants. Simultaneously, plastic deformation and fracture introduce crystal defects such as dislocations, vacancies, and amorphous regions, which possess higher free energy and enhanced chemical reactivity. Localized frictional heating during collisions may further assist bond activation, although contemporary studies suggest that defect formation and intimate mixing play a more decisive role than extreme temperature spikes.

From a theoretical perspective, mechanochemical kinetics have been described using models that link reaction rates to applied force and collision frequency. The Bell–Evans model accounts for force-dependent lowering of activation barriers, while emerging concepts in quantum mechanochemistry propose direct coupling of mechanical work into molecular vibrational modes. The increasingly accepted “pseudofluid” model treats mechanically agitated solids as a dynamic ensemble in which reaction rates depend on the frequency of productive particle collisions rather than on diffusion through a solvent medium. These frameworks collectively explain why mechanochemical reactions can follow familiar kinetic laws despite occurring in heterogeneous solid-state environments [8,9].

3. Technological Advances Enabling Industrial Scale-Up

Historically, mechanochemistry was perceived as difficult to scale due to the batch nature of ball milling and challenges associated with energy transfer and process control. Recent technological developments have significantly altered this perception. Among these, continuous mechanochemical processing—particularly using twin-screw extrusion (TSE)—has emerged as a decisive breakthrough.

Twin-screw extruders enable the continuous feeding, mixing, reaction, and discharge of solid reactants under controlled shear and compression. Unlike batch mills, TSEs offer steady-state operation, reproducible product quality, and straightforward integration into existing manufacturing lines. Their industrial relevance has been demonstrated in pharmaceutical and materials synthesis, where high space–time yields and solvent-free conditions have been achieved on multi-kilogram scales [10].

4. Applications in Pharmaceutical Manufacturing

The pharmaceutical industry represents one of the most advanced application domains for solvent-free mechanochemistry. The synthesis of active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) and their intermediates is traditionally solvent-intensive, generating large waste streams and incurring high costs. Mechanochemical routes offer a direct means of addressing these issues by eliminating bulk solvents and simplifying process workflows.

Numerous APIs and key intermediates have been synthesized mechanochemically using ball milling or extrusion, often under milder conditions and with fewer auxiliary reagents than conventional methods. Beyond synthesis, mechanochemistry offers exceptional control over solid-state forms, including polymorphs and cocrystals. Since crystal form strongly influences solubility, stability, and bioavailability, mechanochemical cocrystallization has become a valuable tool in drug development and intellectual property management.

Mechanochemistry also plays an important role in pharmaceutical formulation. Mechanical blending and milling can generate amorphous solid dispersions, drug–polymer complexes, and nanosized particles that enhance the dissolution rate of poorly soluble drugs. Importantly, these transformations can often be achieved without organic solvents, avoiding residual solvent concerns and simplifying regulatory approval [11].

5. Broader Industrial Applications in Materials and Environmental Sectors

Beyond pharmaceuticals, mechanochemistry has gained prominence in materials science, particularly for the synthesis of advanced functional materials. Metal–organic frameworks (MOFs), known for their high porosity and tunable structures, can be synthesized rapidly via mechanochemical routes without solvothermal conditions. This solvent-free approach expands precursor compatibility, reduces energy consumption, and enables scalable production.

High-entropy oxides (HEOs) constitute another important class of materials benefiting from mechanochemical synthesis. Achieving homogeneous mixing of multiple metal cations is challenging using traditional high-temperature methods, whereas mechanochemical milling can induce solid-state diffusion and phase formation at or near room temperature. Such materials are of growing interest for catalysis, energy storage, and electronic applications.

6. Challenges and Future Perspectives

Despite its promise, several challenges hinder the widespread industrial adoption of mechanochemistry. Quantifying and standardizing mechanical energy input remains difficult, complicating process comparison and scale-up. Contamination from milling media and equipment wear is another concern, particularly for high-purity applications.

Engineering challenges associated with large-scale solid handling, heat dissipation, and process control must also be addressed. Furthermore, the field would benefit from more comprehensive life cycle assessments and techno-economic studies to substantiate sustainability claims across diverse applications.

7. Conclusions

Mechanochemistry represents a paradigm shift in chemical manufacturing, offering a solvent-free, energy-efficient, and versatile platform for industrial processes. Advances in equipment design, mechanistic understanding, and process monitoring have transformed it from a laboratory curiosity into a practical manufacturing strategy. With demonstrated success in pharmaceuticals, materials science, and environmental applications, and supported by strong sustainability metrics, mechanochemistry holds significant promise for the future of industrial chemistry. Addressing remaining scientific and engineering challenges will be crucial to realizing its full potential as a mainstream manufacturing technology.

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