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Development of Antiviral Therapies Using CRISPR-Cas Technology

Ranjit Singh[1]*, Nikita Paliya[2,3], Kusum Sharma[3], Vikas Malik[3]

[1]Shobhit University, Gangoh, Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh-2473410, India, [2]Integrated Institute of Medical and Health Sciences, Delhi, India, [3]V Mags Global EduTech, New Delhi, India. *Corresponding Author's Email: ranjitsps@gmail.com

Abstract

Viruses continue to pose significant global health threats, with emerging epidemics such as HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 highlighting the limitations of current antiviral therapies, including drug resistance and the inability to target latent infections. The CRISPR-Cas system, a revolutionary gene-editing technology, offers promising alternatives for addressing these challenges. This article reviews the mechanisms of CRISPR-Cas in antiviral therapy, focusing on its ability to target both viral genomes and host factors critical for viral replication, recent advancements, limitations, and future prospects. Moreover, CRISPR can enhance antiviral strategies by editing host genes to confer cellular resistance and developing precise diagnostic tools for rapid viral detection. Even though research has demonstrated the potential of CRISPR in preclinical settings, challenges including incomplete viral clearance, off-target effects, and the transient nature of RNA-targeting strategies still exist. Further research is still required to determine the scalability of CRISPR technologies as well as their safety and effectiveness in human trials. Additionally, ethical concerns and the need for optimized delivery systems must be addressed for widespread clinical application. Despite these obstacles, recent advancements in CRISPR-based therapies for viral infections are promising, and ongoing research could soon result in more effective and adaptable antiviral treatments, potentially revolutionizing the future of infectious disease management.

Keywords: Antiviral Therapy, Clinical Application, CRISPR-Cas, SHERLOCK.

Introduction

Viruses are among the most persistent and adaptable pathogens that pose significant threats to human health globally. From the devastating effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, viral diseases continue to challenge the capabilities of modern medicine. Traditional antiviral treatments, such as vaccines and antiviral drugs, have achieved considerable success (1, 2). However, these therapies often come with limitations including drug resistance, narrow therapeutic windows, and the inability to address latent infections. The need for innovative, precise, and adaptable antiviral strategies has never been more critical.

The CRISPR-Cas system, originally discovered as a bacterial adaptive immune mechanism, has revolutionized the field of genetic engineering. It offers a powerful and precise tool for gene editing, enabling targeted modifications of DNA or RNA sequences (3). Recent studies have demonstrated the potential of CRISPR-Cas systems in the development of antiviral therapies by directly targeting viral genomes or modulating host factors involved in viral replication. The versatility of this technology allows it to address both DNA and RNA viruses, offering hope for combating a wide array of viral infections, including those resistant to existing treatments (4).

This article delves into the mechanisms of CRISPR-Cas in antiviral applications, highlights recent advancements, examines challenges and limitations, and discusses future directions in harnessing this transformative technology to combat viral diseases.

The aim of this research is to explore and consolidate the current understanding of CRISPR-Cas technology in the development of antiviral therapies. This includes examining its mechanisms, evaluating recent advancements, identifying key limitations, and addressing existing research gaps. The study seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of how CRISPR-Cas systems can be optimized and integrated into the

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broader framework of antiviral strategies to address emerging challenges, including drug resistance, latent infections, and zoonotic viral threats.

Mechanisms of CRISPR-Cas in Antiviral Therapy

CRISPR-Cas DNA editing system is involved in antiviral therapy using different mechanisms as follows:

Targeting Viral Genomes

CRISPR-Cas9 and CRISPR-Cas12a DNA editing systems are engineered to cleave the genomes of DNA viruses like hepatitis B virus (HBV) and herpes simplex virus (HSV), disrupting viral replication and reducing viral load. CRISPR-Cas13, an RNA-targeting variant, has been particularly effective against RNA viruses such as influenza and SARS-CoV-2, offering a direct approach to degrade viral RNA within host cells (5).

Editing Host Factors

By targeting host genes essential for viral entry or replication, CRISPR can create cellular resistance to infection. For example, editing the CCR5 receptor has shown promise in HIV therapy, as this receptor is crucial for viral entry into immune cells (6).

Development of Diagnostic Tools

CRISPR-based diagnostics, such as SHERLOCK (Specific High-Sensitivity Enzymatic Reporter UnLOCKing) and DETECTR (DNA Endonuclease Targeted CRISPR Trans Reporter), enable the rapid and precise detection of viral infections, facilitating early diagnosis and timely intervention (7).

Key Findings in Past Researches and Their Limitations

Several studies demonstrated the ability of CRISPR-Cas9 DNA editing technology to excise integrated HIV-1 proviral DNA from host genomes, offering a potential cure for HIV. However, challenges include incomplete removal of the virus and the risk of off-target effects, which could cause unintended genomic alterations. Another research regarding CRISPR-Cas13 showed that this editing technology can effectively degrade influenza virus RNA in infected cells. Though the procedure is promising, the transient nature of RNA targeting and potential immunogenicity of delivery vectors remain significant hurdles. Preclinical studies using CRISPR-Cas9 to disrupt HBV DNA showed decrease in viral replication. Limitations of this study include incomplete clearance of covalently closed circular DNA (cccDNA) of HBV and the risk of viral escape mutations.

In addition, CRISPR technologies have also enabled the study of zoonotic viruses like Nipah and Hendra, thus improving understanding of viral pathogenesis. However, the application in therapeutic contexts is limited by the lack of in vivo studies and the complexity of zoonotic virus reservoirs. Nevertheless, efforts to develop CRISPR systems targeting conserved viral genome regions have shown potential for broad-spectrum applications. However, the scalability and adaptability of such approaches remain underexplored.

Key Researchers and Their Contributions

Dr. Kamel Khalili, Lewis Katz School of Medicine at Temple University, USA: A breakthrough research led to the HIV-1 proviral DNA removal from the genome of infected cells using CRISPR-Cas9 editing system. The studies exhibited the potentiality of this system to remarkably reduce HIV DNA in preclinical models. However, there are still issues with entire proviral clearance and worries about off-target consequences (8).

Dr. Jennifer Doudna, University of California, Berkeley, USA: Doudna is a pioneer in CRISPR technology, and her work has paved the way for its application in antiviral treatments and other fields. Now-a-days, her research is mainly focussed to develop the CRISPR-Cas13 technology to target RNA viruses like SARS-CoV-2 (9).

Dr. Feng Zhang, Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard: Research is ongoing to develop CRISPR-Cas13 editing system for targeting viral RNA, specifically respiratory viruses such as SARS-CoV-2 and influenza.

The key findings are advancement of SHERLOCK (Specific High-sensitivity Enzymatic Reporter unlocking) diagnostics, with proper implications for viral treatments (10).

Dr. Amit Choudhary, Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA: The goal was to minimize the off-target effects of CRISPR systems, which is essential for safe antiviral implications. Important developments include more specialized CRISPR-Cas system variations (11).

Dr. Stanley Perlman, University of Iowa: Investigating various applications of CRISPR technologies for coronaviruses, including SARS-CoV-2 is one of the major research area. Several research collaborations demonstrated the ability of CRISPR-Cas13 editing system to decrease in vitro viral replication (12).

Dr. Guocai Wang, Chinese Academy of Sciences: In-depth studies on CRISPR-Cas9 DNA editing technology for hepatitis B virus (HBV) was performed. In preclinical models, cccDNA of HBV was partially cleared, indicating difficulties in achieving total viral eradication (13).

Dr. Rodolphe Barrangou, North Carolina State University, USA: Research was focused on investigating virus-host interactions and possible antiviral therapeutics using CRISPR technologies. The key innovation of his study was to highlight the therapeutic potential of CRISPR technology for newly developing zoonotic viruses (14).

Research Gaps

Most CRISPR-based antiviral research is in the preclinical stage, with limited clinical data from human trials. Development of scalable and cost-effective CRISPR-based treatments for widespread use remains a significant hurdle world-wide. Apart from its cost, long-term safety and efficacy of CRISPR therapies in humans are yet to be comprehensively studied, particularly in the context of latent viral infections. Moreover, optimization of delivery methods to ensure tissue specificity and reduction of off-target effects is crucial for successful clinical translation. Furthermore, addressing regulatory challenges and ethical implications, particularly for heritable genome editing, is essential for advancing CRISPR-based therapies.

Recent Advancements

Researchers have successfully used CRISPR-Cas13 DNA editing system for degradation of SARS-CoV-2 RNA, demonstrating a significant reduction in in-vitro viral replication (15). This approach highlights the potential of CRISPR-Cas13 in addressing pandemics caused by RNA viruses. Preclinical studies using CRISPR-Cas9 have shown success in excising latent HBV DNA from infected liver cells, paving the way for potential cures for chronic hepatitis B. Engineering CRISPR systems to target conserved regions of viral genomes has demonstrated broad-spectrum antiviral capabilities, reducing the likelihood of resistance development while enhancing therapeutic efficacy (16, 17). CRISPR tools are also being employed to study zoonotic viruses such as Nipah and Hendra viruses, enabling researchers to understand viral evolution and identify therapeutic targets.

Challenges and Limitations

Efficient and tissue-specific delivery of CRISPR components remains a major challenge. Current methods, such as viral vectors and lipid nanoparticles, require optimization to enhance safety and efficacy. The potential for unintended edits to the host genome poses risks, necessitating the development of highly specific guide RNAs and rigorous safety evaluations. Host immune reactions against CRISPR proteins, such as Cas9, can limit therapeutic effectiveness and require strategies to mitigate immune activation. Moreover, viruses may evolve to evade CRISPR targeting, underscoring the need for dynamic and adaptable antiviral strategies.

Future Directions

Research into non-viral delivery methods, such as exosomes and nanoparticle-based platforms, could overcome current delivery challenges. Integrating CRISPR-based antivirals with traditional therapies, such as antiviral drugs and immune-modulators, could enhance treatment outcomes. Additionally, development of CRISPR systems are capable of targeting highly mutable viruses, such as HIV and influenza, will be critical for addressing resistance. Furthermore, advancing CRISPR-based antivirals into clinical trials requires robust regulatory frameworks to address ethical and safety concerns. Besides that, international cooperation in research, funding, and data sharing will accelerate the development and deployment of CRISPR-based therapies.

Conclusion

The development of antiviral therapies using CRISPR-Cas technology marks a paradigm shift in the fight against viral diseases. By leveraging the precision and versatility of CRISPR systems, researchers are addressing longstanding challenges in antiviral treatment, including drug resistance and latent infections. While significant hurdles remain, continued advancements in delivery mechanisms, specificity, and clinical validation will pave the way for CRISPR-based

therapies to become a cornerstone of modern medicine. The integration of CRISPR technology into antiviral strategies holds the promise of a future where viral infections are not only treatable but curable.

Abbreviation

None.

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Ranjit Singh and Nikita Paliya. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Ranjit Singh and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics Approval

Not applicable.

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