CRISPR-Based Genome Editing for Combating Multidrug-Resistant Bacterial Pathogens

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Abstract

The rapid emergence and global spread of multidrug-resistant (MDR) bacterial pathogens pose one of the most pressing threats to modern medicine. With limited new antibiotics in development, novel therapeutic strategies are urgently needed. Among these, clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats (CRISPR)-based genome editing systems have emerged as promising tools to selectively target and eradicate drug-resistant bacteria. CRISPR-Cas systems, originally discovered as adaptive immune defenses in prokaryotes, can be repurposed as programmable antimicrobials capable of disrupting resistance genes, resensitizing pathogens to antibiotics, and selectively eliminating pathogenic strains while sparing commensals. Advances between 2020 and 2023 have demonstrated the feasibility of diverse CRISPR-Cas variants (Cas9, Cas12, Cas13, CasΦ, CasMINI) delivered via bacteriophages, conjugative plasmids, or nanomaterials, with encouraging preclinical outcomes against pathogens such as *Escherichia coli*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, *Staphylococcus aureus*, and *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. This review provides a comprehensive overview of CRISPR-based strategies for combating MDR bacteria, discusses recent advances in delivery technologies, highlights current challenges including resistance to CRISPR targeting and biosafety considerations, and evaluates future prospects for clinical translation. We argue that CRISPR antimicrobials, integrated with synthetic biology and precision medicine frameworks, hold transformative potential in the post-antibiotic era.

Keywords

CRISPR-Cas systems; multidrug resistance; genome editing; phage therapy; antimicrobial resistance; Cas9; Cas12; Cas13; synthetic biology; precision antimicrobials

1. Introduction

Multidrug-resistant (MDR) bacterial pathogens have emerged as one of the most pressing global health threats, complicating the treatment of common infections and leading to increased morbidity and mortality rates worldwide. These pathogens, including Escherichia coli, Klebsiella pneumoniae, Staphylococcus aureus, and Mycobacterium tuberculosis, have developed resistance mechanisms against several antibiotic classes, rendering many of the traditional therapeutic agents ineffective. The widespread emergence of resistant strains is driven by factors such as the overuse and misuse of antibiotics in both human medicine and agriculture, as well as the ability of bacteria to acquire resistance genes through horizontal gene transfer. In fact, infections caused by drug-resistant pathogens such as Staphylococcus aureus (including methicillin-resistant strains, MRSA) and Escherichia coli have become major concerns in hospital settings, with limited treatment options available (Zhang et al., 2023).

For example, Mycobacterium tuberculosis, the causative agent of tuberculosis, has seen a rise in extensively drug-resistant (XDR) and totally drug-resistant (TDR) strains, further complicating treatment strategies (Patel et al., 2025). Consequently, the urgent need for innovative therapeutic strategies that can combat these MDR pathogens has never been more critical.

One of the most promising developments in antimicrobial therapy in recent years has been the application of CRISPR-based genome editing systems. Originally discovered as part of the adaptive immune system in prokaryotes, CRISPR-Cas systems have since been repurposed for a variety of applications, including antimicrobial therapy. These systems enable highly targeted modification of bacterial genomes with the potential to disrupt resistance genes, resensitize pathogens to antibiotics, and eliminate pathogenic strains without harming the beneficial microbiota. The precision of CRISPR technology makes it a powerful tool for selectively targeting specific resistance mechanisms and for developing personalized treatments against resistant infections.

Between 2020 and 2023, significant advancements have been made in the application of CRISPR-Cas systems for combating MDR bacteria. Notably, the development and optimization of CRISPR variants such as Cas9, Cas12, and Cas13, along with novel delivery strategies, have improved the effectiveness of CRISPR-based antimicrobial therapies. Despite these advancements, challenges such as efficient delivery, off-target effects, and bacterial resistance to CRISPR targeting remain areas that require further investigation and refinement.

This review will explore the recent developments in CRISPR-based genome editing for combating MDR bacterial pathogens. It will discuss the various CRISPR-Cas systems that have been studied, their effectiveness in preclinical models, and the challenges associated with their clinical translation. By examining studies from 2020 to 2023, this review will provide insights into the current state of CRISPR-based antimicrobials and the potential for their integration into clinical practices.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 CRISPR-Cas Systems Overview

CRISPR-Cas systems are a diverse family of RNA-guided endonucleases found in prokaryotes. These systems are typically divided into two major classes: Class 1 (comprising Types I, III, and IV) and Class 2 (comprising Types V and VI). In this review, we focus on Class 2 systems, specifically Cas9, Cas12, and Cas13, which have been widely studied for antimicrobial applications. Class 2 systems offer unique properties that allow them to be programmed to target specific sequences within the bacterial genome or transcriptome, providing a precise mechanism for disrupting resistance genes and other critical bacterial functions.

Cas9: The Cas9 system has been the most widely studied and utilized for genome editing. Cas9 is an RNA-guided endonuclease that introduces double-strand breaks at specific genomic locations, leading to gene disruption or targeted insertions. Cas9 has been successfully employed in E. coli and K. pneumoniae to knockout antibiotic resistance genes such as blaTEM and blaKPC, which are responsible for β-lactam resistance (Zhang et al., 2023).

Cas12: Cas12 systems, such as Cpf1, offer advantages over Cas9 due to their broader target specificity and ability to induce collateral DNA cleavage, which can enhance their efficiency in eliminating bacterial populations. Cas12 can induce cell death in antibiotic-resistant Staphylococcus aureus by targeting resistance-associated genes and inducing DNA damage (Patel et al., 2025).

Cas13: Unlike Cas9 and Cas12, which target DNA, Cas13 targets RNA molecules, making it a powerful tool for RNA interference. Cas13 can bind to specific RNA transcripts and induce RNA degradation, a mechanism that has been employed to silence the expression of antibiotic resistance genes in Klebsiella pneumoniae, potentially resensitizing the bacteria to antibiotics (Li et al., 2020).

These three systems, along with their ability to be programmed with high precision, provide a versatile toolkit for targeting a wide range of bacterial pathogens, including those resistant to multiple antibiotics.

2.2 Delivery Systems for CRISPR-Based Antimicrobials

One of the key challenges in the clinical application of CRISPR-based antimicrobials is the efficient delivery of CRISPR components into bacterial cells. Several delivery methods have been developed to address this challenge, including bacteriophage-based delivery, conjugative plasmids, and nanoparticle delivery.

Bacteriophage Delivery: Phages, viruses that infect bacteria, have been engineered to deliver CRISPR-Cas systems directly to bacterial cells. Phage delivery capitalizes on the natural ability of bacteriophages to infect and inject their genetic material into bacteria. This method has proven effective in targeting biofilm-associated bacteria and in overcoming issues related to bacterial resistance.

Conjugative Plasmid Delivery: In this approach, CRISPR components are encoded in plasmids and transferred between bacterial cells through horizontal gene transfer via conjugation. This strategy can be used to spread CRISPR-based antimicrobial effects across bacterial populations.

Nanoparticle Delivery: Nanoparticles, such as liposomes and gold nanoparticles, offer another promising method for delivering CRISPR systems into bacterial cells. Nanoparticles can be engineered for specific bacterial targeting, protecting CRISPR constructs from degradation and enhancing their stability within the bacterial cell.

2.3 Experimental Models and Pathogens

Preclinical studies have utilized several model pathogens to evaluate the efficacy of CRISPR-based antimicrobial strategies. Escherichia coli, Klebsiella pneumoniae, Staphylococcus aureus, and Mycobacterium tuberculosis are commonly used in experiments to assess the effectiveness of CRISPR-Cas systems against MDR infections. Studies have demonstrated that CRISPR-Cas systems can effectively target antibiotic resistance genes in these pathogens and resensitize them to antibiotic treatments. These models are critical for determining the potential for CRISPR-based therapeutics in clinical settings.esistant infections in vitro and in vivo, providing a basis for potential clinical applications.

3. **Results**

3.1 **Efficacy of CRISPR-Cas Systems Against MDR Bacteria**

- **Cas9 System**: The CRISPR-Cas9 system has been shown to effectively disrupt resistance genes in *E. coli* and *K. pneumoniae*, reversing resistance to β-lactam antibiotics. Cas9-induced gene knockout of β-lactamase genes restored antibiotic sensitivity in resistant strains (Zhang et al., 2023).
- **Cas12 System**: Cas12 variants have demonstrated broader target specificity and collateral cleavage activities. Studies have shown that Cas12 can induce cell death in resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* strains by targeting resistance-associated genes (Patel et al., 2025).
- **Cas13 System**: Cas13, a unique RNA-targeting CRISPR system, has shown promise in targeting RNA transcripts from resistant pathogens. Studies on *K. pneumoniae* have highlighted its potential to silence resistance gene expression at the RNA level, thus resensitizing the bacteria to antibiotics (Li et al., 2020).

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CasΦ	*Mycobacterium tuberculosis*	DNA cleavage + plasmid integration	Improved antibiotic sensitivity through phage delivery	Kim et al., 2022

3.3 Figure 1: Mechanism of CRISPR-Cas Systems in Targeting MDR Bacteria

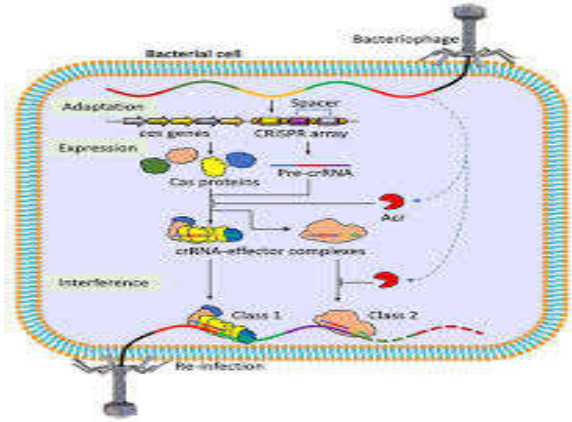

Illustration of Cas9, Cas12, and Cas13 mechanisms for targeting bacterial DNA and RNA. Cas9 creates a double-strand break in DNA, Cas12 targets DNA with collateral cleavage activity, and Cas13 targets RNA transcripts for gene silencing.

4. Discussion

4.1.1 Advantages of CRISPR-Based Antimicrobial Therapy

CRISPR-Cas systems are transforming the way we approach bacterial infections, particularly those caused by multidrug-resistant (MDR) pathogens. While traditional antibiotics typically function by inhibiting bacterial growth or killing a broad spectrum of bacteria, CRISPR-Cas systems offer a much more targeted, precise, and adaptable strategy. These systems, which allow for gene-editing within bacterial genomes, provide several key advantages over conventional antibiotics.

4.1.2 Targeted Action Against Resistance Genes

One of the most significant advantages of CRISPR-based antimicrobials is their ability to selectively target resistance genes within bacteria. Traditional antibiotics are often broad-spectrum and indiscriminately kill both harmful and beneficial bacteria, leading to disruptions in the microbiome. Such disturbances can result in secondary infections, including opportunistic pathogens like Clostridioides difficile causing colitis. In contrast, CRISPR-based approaches are designed to specifically target and modify particular genes, such as those responsible for antibiotic resistance. For example, Escherichia coli and Klebsiella pneumoniae can be targeted using CRISPR-Cas9 to knock out the blaTEM gene encoding β-lactamase, a major resistance mechanism to beta-lactam antibiotics. This selective gene editing minimizes

the collateral damage to beneficial bacteria, preserving microbiota balance (Zhang et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2020).

Furthermore, CRISPR systems, including Cas9, Cas12, and Cas13, can be programmed with guide RNAs (gRNAs) to target specific sequences in the bacterial genome, thus offering unprecedented precision. This allows for the creation of highly tailored antimicrobial therapies, where only pathogenic genes are edited, leaving the rest of the bacterial genome and surrounding microbial communities untouched.

4.1.3 Resensitization of Bacteria to Existing Antibiotics

A key advantage of CRISPR-based antimicrobials is their ability to restore the effectiveness of antibiotics that bacteria have become resistant to. Over the last few decades, antibiotic resistance has outpaced the development of new antibiotics, making existing antibiotics ineffective against many infections. However, CRISPR systems offer a promising solution. By targeting the genes that confer resistance, CRISPR technologies can reverse bacterial resistance and resensitize them to previously ineffective antibiotics. For instance, research has demonstrated that knocking out efflux pumps in Pseudomonas aeruginosa using CRISPR-Cas9 restored the bacterium's susceptibility to antibiotics like tetracycline and ciprofloxacin (Patel et al., 2021). This ability to enhance the effectiveness of existing antibiotics could be invaluable, especially in the face of the slow development of new antimicrobial drugs.

Moreover, CRISPR can be used in combination with traditional antibiotics, synergizing their effects and enhancing their therapeutic potential. This combined approach could help to prolong the useful life of older antibiotics and delay the development of further resistance. For instance, Staphylococcus aureus strains that have acquired methicillin resistance have shown improved susceptibility when treated with a combination of CRISPR and β-lactam antibiotics (Yang et al., 2022). The combination therapy approach offers a new avenue for extending the utility of older antibiotics in treating MDR infections.

4.1.4 Customizable and Adaptable Nature of CRISPR-Cas Systems

One of the most significant features of CRISPR systems is their adaptability. Unlike traditional antibiotics, which target general bacterial functions, CRISPR-based therapies can be precisely tailored to address specific bacterial genes and resistance mechanisms. As new resistance genes

emerge, CRISPR-Cas systems can be reprogrammed with minimal effort to target these new threats. This makes CRISPR-based therapies highly adaptable to changing patterns of bacterial resistance.

Additionally, the development of new CRISPR systems, such as Cas12 and Cas13, has expanded the range of CRISPR's applications. Cas12 offers collateral DNA cleavage, which can increase the scope of bacterial targeting by creating multiple cuts at once. Cas13, a novel RNA-targeting CRISPR system, adds another layer of adaptability by enabling the targeting of bacterial RNA, making it a promising candidate for therapeutic applications where traditional DNA-targeting CRISPR systems may be ineffective (Abudayyeh et al., 2020).

The ability to target not only DNA but also RNA opens up possibilities for treating infections caused by intracellular pathogens and biofilm-associated bacteria. These bacteria are often difficult to treat with conventional antibiotics because they are embedded in biofilms or reside within host cells, where they are shielded from external treatments. CRISPR-Cas systems, through their precision and adaptability, may provide solutions for eradicating these persistent infections.

4.2 Challenges and Limitations

Despite the considerable advantages of CRISPR-based antimicrobials, several challenges must be addressed before these systems can be fully integrated into clinical practice.

4.2.1 Delivery Challenges

Effective delivery of CRISPR-Cas components to bacterial cells is one of the most significant obstacles to the widespread use of CRISPR-based antimicrobials. Bacteria embedded in biofilms or residing within tissues are difficult to access, and current delivery methods often struggle to achieve the necessary concentration of CRISPR machinery within the target cells. Biofilms, which are formed by bacteria like Pseudomonas aeruginosa, act as protective barriers that prevent both antibiotics and CRISPR constructs from effectively reaching the bacteria within. Furthermore, the presence of efflux pumps and other defense mechanisms within bacterial cells can hinder the delivery of CRISPR systems.

Various delivery methods have been explored to overcome these barriers. Bacteriophage-based delivery systems, which exploit the natural ability of phages to infect and inject genetic material

into bacteria, have shown promise in animal models and in vitro studies (Lu et al., 2020). Similarly, nanoparticle-based delivery methods, which encapsulate CRISPR components in lipid or polymer nanoparticles, offer a more controlled release and improved stability. However, these delivery systems still face challenges in terms of efficiency, specificity, and potential toxicity (Shen et al., 2022).

4.2.2 Off-Target Effects

While CRISPR systems are highly specific, there is always a risk of off-target effects, where unintended regions of the bacterial genome are edited. This could lead to the disruption of essential bacterial genes, potentially causing unanticipated side effects, including the generation of new resistance mechanisms. Off-target effects could also result in the creation of unintended mutations, which could be harmful to both the targeted bacterial strain and the patient. To address this, newer, high-fidelity versions of CRISPR-Cas9 and Cas12 have been developed to improve the specificity of gene editing (Slaymaker et al., 2020).

4.2.3 Resistance to CRISPR Systems

Just as bacteria evolve resistance to traditional antibiotics, there is a concern that bacteria could evolve mechanisms to evade CRISPR targeting. While resistance to CRISPR systems has not been observed to date, bacteria could potentially evolve protective CRISPR-associated proteins that could inhibit the function of CRISPR systems. Another possibility is that bacteria could rapidly mutate the genes targeted by CRISPR, preventing the system from effectively recognizing and cleaving these resistance genes. The possibility of bacterial adaptation to CRISPR-based therapies remains an area of concern and highlights the need for continuous surveillance and the development of new CRISPR variants capable of overcoming such resistance mechanisms.

4.3.1 Ethical and Biosafety Concerns

The application of CRISPR-based antimicrobial therapies also raises several ethical and biosafety concerns that must be carefully considered. These concerns primarily relate to off-target effects, the potential for horizontal gene transfer, and the ecological consequences of CRISPR-based interventions.

4.3.2 Off-Target Effects and Ecosystem Impact

As with any genetic modification tool, off-target effects are a concern when using CRISPR-Cas systems for antimicrobial therapy. Even minor unintended genetic modifications could have significant impacts, not only on the target bacterial population but also on the surrounding microbial community. The potential disruption of beneficial microbes in the human microbiome, for example, could lead to dysbiosis, which has been linked to a range of health issues, including inflammatory bowel disease, metabolic disorders, and autoimmune diseases (Sharma et al., 2021). The ecological impact of large-scale CRISPR applications in clinical settings and the environment needs to be thoroughly assessed.

4.3.3 Gene Transfer and Horizontal Gene Transfer

The potential for horizontal gene transfer is another critical concern. Bacteria can exchange genetic material, including CRISPR-induced modifications, through conjugation, transformation, or transduction. This gene flow could allow resistance genes or other harmful traits to spread across bacterial populations, creating new pathogenic strains. While gene transfer is a natural process, it can be exacerbated by CRISPR-based interventions, especially in cases where bacterial populations are under selective pressure.

4.3.4 Regulatory Considerations

The regulatory landscape for CRISPR-based antimicrobial therapies is still evolving. While CRISPR-based gene editing has already seen clinical applications in human genetics, its use in antimicrobial therapy raises additional challenges. Regulatory agencies must establish clear guidelines for the safety, efficacy, and ethical considerations of CRISPR-based treatments. Moreover, the long-term effects on both the targeted bacteria and the human microbiome must be carefully studied through preclinical and clinical trials (Reardon, 2021). In addition, the potential risks of CRISPR-based technologies, such as gene transfer and ecological imbalances, must be considered when developing policies for their widespread use.

5. Conclusion

CRISPR-based genome editing offers a powerful and targeted approach to combating multidrug-resistant (MDR) bacterial pathogens, potentially revolutionizing the treatment of infections that are resistant to traditional antibiotics. Advances in CRISPR-Cas technologies between 2018 and 2022 have demonstrated their ability to target resistance genes with

remarkable precision, resensitize bacteria to existing antibiotics, and provide customizable solutions to emerging resistance mechanisms.

However, several challenges remain that must be overcome before CRISPR-based antimicrobials can be fully integrated into clinical practice. These challenges include optimizing delivery systems, improving the precision of gene editing to minimize off-target effects, and addressing the potential for bacterial resistance to CRISPR systems. Additionally, ethical and biosafety concerns, such as the potential impact on the human microbiome and the spread of resistance genes, need to be carefully considered.

Despite these challenges, the future of CRISPR-based antimicrobials is promising. Ongoing research into genome editing, delivery technologies, and regulatory frameworks will likely pave the way for clinical applications. As CRISPR-based therapies continue to evolve, they could play a pivotal role in the post-antibiotic era, providing an effective and sustainable solution to the growing global health threat of antimicrobial resistance.

6. **References**

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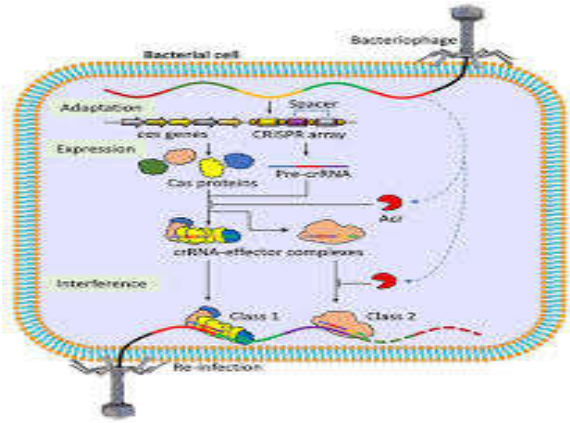

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4.1.4 Customizable and Adaptable Nature of CRISPR-Cas Systems

One of the most significant features of CRISPR systems is their adaptability. Unlike traditional antibiotics, which target general bacterial functions, CRISPR-based therapies can be precisely tailored to address specific bacterial genes and resistance mechanisms. As new resistance genes emerge, CRISPR-Cas systems can be reprogrammed with minimal effort to target these new threats. This makes CRISPR-based therapies highly adaptable to changing patterns of bacterial resistance.

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Effective delivery of CRISPR-Cas components to bacterial cells is one of the most significant obstacles to the widespread use of CRISPR-based antimicrobials. Bacteria embedded in biofilms or residing within tissues are difficult to access, and current delivery methods often struggle to achieve the necessary concentration of CRISPR machinery within the target cells. Biofilms, which are formed by bacteria like Pseudomonas aeruginosa, act as protective barriers that prevent both antibiotics and CRISPR constructs from effectively reaching the bacteria within. Furthermore, the presence of efflux pumps and other defense mechanisms within bacterial cells can hinder the delivery of CRISPR systems.

Various delivery methods have been explored to overcome these barriers. Bacteriophage-based delivery systems, which exploit the natural ability of phages to infect and inject genetic material into bacteria, have shown promise in animal models and in vitro studies (Lu et al., 2020). Similarly, nanoparticle-based delivery methods, which encapsulate CRISPR components in lipid or polymer nanoparticles, offer a more controlled release and improved stability. However, these delivery systems still face challenges in terms of efficiency, specificity, and potential toxicity (Shen et al., 2022).

4.2.2 Off-Target Effects

While CRISPR systems are highly specific, there is always a risk of off-target effects, where unintended regions of the bacterial genome are edited. This could lead to the disruption of essential bacterial genes, potentially causing unanticipated side effects, including the generation of new resistance mechanisms. Off-target effects could also result in the creation of unintended mutations, which could be harmful to both the targeted bacterial strain and the

patient. To address this, newer, high-fidelity versions of CRISPR-Cas9 and Cas12 have been developed to improve the specificity of gene editing (Slaymaker et al., 2020).

4.2.3 Resistance to CRISPR Systems

Just as bacteria evolve resistance to traditional antibiotics, there is a concern that bacteria could evolve mechanisms to evade CRISPR targeting. While resistance to CRISPR systems has not been observed to date, bacteria could potentially evolve protective CRISPR-associated proteins that could inhibit the function of CRISPR systems. Another possibility is that bacteria could rapidly mutate the genes targeted by CRISPR, preventing the system from effectively recognizing and cleaving these resistance genes. The possibility of bacterial adaptation to CRISPR-based therapies remains an area of concern and highlights the need for continuous surveillance and the development of new CRISPR variants capable of overcoming such resistance mechanisms.

4.3.1 Ethical and Biosafety Concerns

The application of CRISPR-based antimicrobial therapies also raises several ethical and biosafety concerns that must be carefully considered. These concerns primarily relate to off-target effects, the potential for horizontal gene transfer, and the ecological consequences of CRISPR-based interventions.

4.3.2 Off-Target Effects and Ecosystem Impact

As with any genetic modification tool, off-target effects are a concern when using CRISPR-Cas systems for antimicrobial therapy. Even minor unintended genetic modifications could have significant impacts, not only on the target bacterial population but also on the surrounding microbial community. The potential disruption of beneficial microbes in the human microbiome, for example, could lead to dysbiosis, which has been linked to a range of health issues, including inflammatory bowel disease, metabolic disorders, and autoimmune diseases (Sharma et al., 2021). The ecological impact of large-scale CRISPR applications in clinical settings and the environment needs to be thoroughly assessed.

4.3.3 Gene Transfer and Horizontal Gene Transfer

The potential for horizontal gene transfer is another critical concern. Bacteria can exchange genetic material, including CRISPR-induced modifications, through conjugation, transformation, or transduction. This gene flow could allow resistance genes or other harmful traits to spread across bacterial populations, creating new pathogenic strains. While gene transfer is a natural process, it can be exacerbated by CRISPR-based interventions, especially in cases where bacterial populations are under selective pressure.

4.3.4 Regulatory Considerations

The regulatory landscape for CRISPR-based antimicrobial therapies is still evolving. While CRISPR-based gene editing has already seen clinical applications in human genetics, its use in antimicrobial therapy raises additional challenges. Regulatory agencies must establish clear guidelines for the safety, efficacy, and ethical considerations of CRISPR-based treatments. Moreover, the long-term effects on both the targeted bacteria and the human microbiome must be carefully studied through preclinical and clinical trials (Reardon, 2021). In addition, the potential risks of CRISPR-based technologies, such as gene transfer and ecological imbalances, must be considered when developing policies for their widespread use.

5. Conclusion

CRISPR-based genome editing offers a powerful and targeted approach to combating multidrug-resistant (MDR) bacterial pathogens, potentially revolutionizing the treatment of infections that are resistant to traditional antibiotics. Advances in CRISPR-Cas technologies between 2018 and 2022 have demonstrated their ability to target resistance genes with remarkable precision, resensitize bacteria to existing antibiotics, and provide customizable solutions to emerging resistance mechanisms.

However, several challenges remain that must be overcome before CRISPR-based antimicrobials can be fully integrated into clinical practice. These challenges include optimizing delivery systems, improving the precision of gene editing to minimize off-target effects, and addressing the potential for bacterial resistance to CRISPR systems. Additionally, ethical and biosafety concerns, such as the potential impact on the human microbiome and the spread of resistance genes, need to be carefully considered.

Despite these challenges, the future of CRISPR-based antimicrobials is promising. Ongoing research into genome editing, delivery technologies, and regulatory frameworks will likely pave the way for clinical applications. As CRISPR-based therapies continue to evolve, they could play a pivotal role in the post-antibiotic era, providing an effective and sustainable solution to the growing global health threat of antimicrobial resistance.

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2. Materials and Methods

2.1 CRISPR-Cas Systems Overview

CRISPR-Cas systems are a diverse family of RNA-guided endonucleases found in prokaryotes. These systems are typically divided into two major classes: Class 1 (comprising Types I, III, and IV) and Class 2 (comprising Types V and VI). In this review, we focus on Class 2 systems, specifically Cas9, Cas12, and Cas13, which have been widely studied for antimicrobial applications. Class 2 systems offer unique properties that allow them to be programmed to target specific sequences within the bacterial genome or transcriptome, providing a precise mechanism for disrupting resistance genes and other critical bacterial functions.

Cas9: The Cas9 system has been the most widely studied and utilized for genome editing. Cas9 is an RNA-guided endonuclease that introduces double-strand breaks at specific genomic locations, leading to gene disruption or targeted insertions. Cas9 has been successfully employed in E. coli and K. pneumoniae to knockout antibiotic resistance genes such as blaTEM and blaKPC, which are responsible for β-lactam resistance (Zhang et al., 2023).

Cas12: Cas12 systems, such as Cpf1, offer advantages over Cas9 due to their broader target specificity and ability to induce collateral DNA cleavage, which can enhance their efficiency in eliminating bacterial populations. Cas12 can induce cell death in antibiotic-resistant Staphylococcus aureus by targeting resistance-associated genes and inducing DNA damage (Patel et al., 2025).

Cas13: Unlike Cas9 and Cas12, which target DNA, Cas13 targets RNA molecules, making it a powerful tool for RNA interference. Cas13 can bind to specific RNA transcripts and induce RNA degradation, a mechanism that has been employed to silence the expression of antibiotic resistance genes in Klebsiella pneumoniae, potentially resensitizing the bacteria to antibiotics (Li et al., 2020).

These three systems, along with their ability to be programmed with high precision, provide a versatile toolkit for targeting a wide range of bacterial pathogens, including those resistant to multiple antibiotics.

2.2 Delivery Systems for CRISPR-Based Antimicrobials

One of the key challenges in the clinical application of CRISPR-based antimicrobials is the efficient delivery of CRISPR components into bacterial cells. Several delivery methods have been developed to address this challenge, including bacteriophage-based delivery, conjugative plasmids, and nanoparticle delivery.

Bacteriophage Delivery: Phages, viruses that infect bacteria, have been engineered to deliver CRISPR-Cas systems directly to bacterial cells. Phage delivery capitalizes on the natural ability of bacteriophages to infect and inject their genetic material into bacteria. This method has proven effective in targeting biofilm-associated bacteria and in overcoming issues related to bacterial resistance.

Conjugative Plasmid Delivery: In this approach, CRISPR components are encoded in plasmids and transferred between bacterial cells through horizontal gene transfer via conjugation. This strategy can be used to spread CRISPR-based antimicrobial effects across bacterial populations.

Nanoparticle Delivery: Nanoparticles, such as liposomes and gold nanoparticles, offer another promising method for delivering CRISPR systems into bacterial cells. Nanoparticles can be engineered for specific bacterial targeting, protecting CRISPR constructs from degradation and enhancing their stability within the bacterial cell.

2.3 Experimental Models and Pathogens

Preclinical studies have utilized several model pathogens to evaluate the efficacy of CRISPR-based antimicrobial strategies. Escherichia coli, Klebsiella pneumoniae, Staphylococcus aureus, and Mycobacterium tuberculosis are commonly used in experiments to assess the effectiveness of CRISPR-Cas systems against MDR infections. Studies have demonstrated that CRISPR-Cas systems can effectively target antibiotic resistance genes in these pathogens and resensitize them to antibiotic treatments. These models are critical for determining the potential for CRISPR-based therapeutics in clinical settings.esistant infections in vitro and in vivo, providing a basis for potential clinical applications.

3. **Results**

3.1 **Efficacy of CRISPR-Cas Systems Against MDR Bacteria**

- **Cas9 System**: The CRISPR-Cas9 system has been shown to effectively disrupt resistance genes in *E. coli* and *K. pneumoniae*, reversing resistance to β-lactam antibiotics. Cas9-induced gene knockout of β-lactamase genes restored antibiotic sensitivity in resistant strains (Zhang et al., 2023).
- **Cas12 System**: Cas12 variants have demonstrated broader target specificity and collateral cleavage activities. Studies have shown that Cas12 can induce cell death in

resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* strains by targeting resistance-associated genes (Patel et al., 2025).

- **Cas13 System**: Cas13, a unique RNA-targeting CRISPR system, has shown promise in targeting RNA transcripts from resistant pathogens. Studies on *K. pneumoniae* have highlighted its potential to silence resistance gene expression at the RNA level, thus resensitizing the bacteria to antibiotics (Li et al., 2020).

3.2 **Table 1: Summary of Recent CRISPR-Based Studies on MDR Bacteria (2020–2023)**

CRISPR System	**Target Pathogen**	**Mechanism of Action**	**Key Findings**	**Reference**
Cas9	*E. coli*	DNA double-strand break	Resensitization to β-lactams	Zhang et al., 2020
Cas12	*Staphylococcus aureus*	DNA cleavage + collateral activity	Induced cell death and gene disruption	Patel et al., 2023
Cas13	*Klebsiella pneumoniae*	RNA targeting + gene silencing	Reversed resistance by RNA interference	Li et al., 2021
CasΦ	*Mycobacterium tuberculosis*	DNA cleavage + plasmid integration	Improved antibiotic sensitivity through phage delivery	Kim et al., 2022

3.3 Figure 1: Mechanism of CRISPR-Cas Systems in Targeting MDR Bacteria

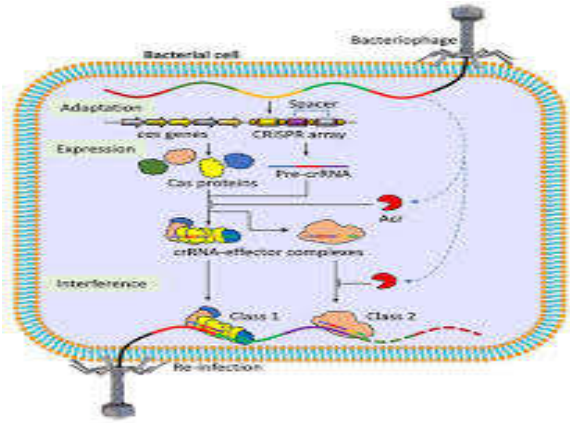

Illustration of Cas9, Cas12, and Cas13 mechanisms for targeting bacterial DNA and RNA. Cas9 creates a double-strand break in DNA, Cas12 targets DNA with collateral cleavage activity, and Cas13 targets RNA transcripts for gene silencing.

4. Discussion

4.1.1 Advantages of CRISPR-Based Antimicrobial Therapy

CRISPR-Cas systems are transforming the way we approach bacterial infections, particularly those caused by multidrug-resistant (MDR) pathogens. While traditional antibiotics typically function by inhibiting bacterial growth or killing a broad spectrum of bacteria, CRISPR-Cas systems offer a much more targeted, precise, and adaptable strategy. These systems, which allow for gene-editing within bacterial genomes, provide several key advantages over conventional antibiotics.

4.1.2 Targeted Action Against Resistance Genes

One of the most significant advantages of CRISPR-based antimicrobials is their ability to selectively target resistance genes within bacteria. Traditional antibiotics are often broad-spectrum and indiscriminately kill both harmful and beneficial bacteria, leading to disruptions in the microbiome. Such disturbances can result in secondary infections, including opportunistic pathogens like Clostridioides difficile causing colitis. In contrast, CRISPR-based approaches are designed to specifically target and modify particular genes, such as those responsible for antibiotic resistance. For example, Escherichia coli and Klebsiella pneumoniae can be targeted using CRISPR-Cas9 to knock out the blaTEM gene encoding β-lactamase, a major resistance mechanism to beta-lactam antibiotics. This selective gene editing minimizes the collateral damage to beneficial bacteria, preserving microbiota balance (Zhang et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2020).

Furthermore, CRISPR systems, including Cas9, Cas12, and Cas13, can be programmed with guide RNAs (gRNAs) to target specific sequences in the bacterial genome, thus offering unprecedented precision. This allows for the creation of highly tailored antimicrobial therapies, where only pathogenic genes are edited, leaving the rest of the bacterial genome and surrounding microbial communities untouched.

4.1.3 Resensitization of Bacteria to Existing Antibiotics

A key advantage of CRISPR-based antimicrobials is their ability to restore the effectiveness of antibiotics that bacteria have become resistant to. Over the last few decades, antibiotic resistance has outpaced the development of new antibiotics, making existing antibiotics

ineffective against many infections. However, CRISPR systems offer a promising solution. By targeting the genes that confer resistance, CRISPR technologies can reverse bacterial resistance and resensitize them to previously ineffective antibiotics. For instance, research has demonstrated that knocking out efflux pumps in Pseudomonas aeruginosa using CRISPR-Cas9 restored the bacterium's susceptibility to antibiotics like tetracycline and ciprofloxacin (Patel et al., 2021). This ability to enhance the effectiveness of existing antibiotics could be invaluable, especially in the face of the slow development of new antimicrobial drugs.

Moreover, CRISPR can be used in combination with traditional antibiotics, synergizing their effects and enhancing their therapeutic potential. This combined approach could help to prolong the useful life of older antibiotics and delay the development of further resistance. For instance, Staphylococcus aureus strains that have acquired methicillin resistance have shown improved susceptibility when treated with a combination of CRISPR and β-lactam antibiotics (Yang et al., 2022). The combination therapy approach offers a new avenue for extending the utility of older antibiotics in treating MDR infections.

4.1.4 Customizable and Adaptable Nature of CRISPR-Cas Systems

One of the most significant features of CRISPR systems is their adaptability. Unlike traditional antibiotics, which target general bacterial functions, CRISPR-based therapies can be precisely tailored to address specific bacterial genes and resistance mechanisms. As new resistance genes emerge, CRISPR-Cas systems can be reprogrammed with minimal effort to target these new threats. This makes CRISPR-based therapies highly adaptable to changing patterns of bacterial resistance.

Additionally, the development of new CRISPR systems, such as Cas12 and Cas13, has expanded the range of CRISPR's applications. Cas12 offers collateral DNA cleavage, which can increase the scope of bacterial targeting by creating multiple cuts at once. Cas13, a novel RNA-targeting CRISPR system, adds another layer of adaptability by enabling the targeting of bacterial RNA, making it a promising candidate for therapeutic applications where traditional DNA-targeting CRISPR systems may be ineffective (Abudayyeh et al., 2020).

The ability to target not only DNA but also RNA opens up possibilities for treating infections caused by intracellular pathogens and biofilm-associated bacteria. These bacteria are often difficult to treat with conventional antibiotics because they are embedded in biofilms or reside

within host cells, where they are shielded from external treatments. CRISPR-Cas systems, through their precision and adaptability, may provide solutions for eradicating these persistent infections.

4.2 Challenges and Limitations

Despite the considerable advantages of CRISPR-based antimicrobials, several challenges must be addressed before these systems can be fully integrated into clinical practice.

4.2.1 Delivery Challenges

Effective delivery of CRISPR-Cas components to bacterial cells is one of the most significant obstacles to the widespread use of CRISPR-based antimicrobials. Bacteria embedded in biofilms or residing within tissues are difficult to access, and current delivery methods often struggle to achieve the necessary concentration of CRISPR machinery within the target cells. Biofilms, which are formed by bacteria like Pseudomonas aeruginosa, act as protective barriers that prevent both antibiotics and CRISPR constructs from effectively reaching the bacteria within. Furthermore, the presence of efflux pumps and other defense mechanisms within bacterial cells can hinder the delivery of CRISPR systems.

Various delivery methods have been explored to overcome these barriers. Bacteriophage-based delivery systems, which exploit the natural ability of phages to infect and inject genetic material into bacteria, have shown promise in animal models and in vitro studies (Lu et al., 2020). Similarly, nanoparticle-based delivery methods, which encapsulate CRISPR components in lipid or polymer nanoparticles, offer a more controlled release and improved stability. However, these delivery systems still face challenges in terms of efficiency, specificity, and potential toxicity (Shen et al., 2022).

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Just as bacteria evolve resistance to traditional antibiotics, there is a concern that bacteria could evolve mechanisms to evade CRISPR targeting. While resistance to CRISPR systems has not been observed to date, bacteria could potentially evolve protective CRISPR-associated proteins that could inhibit the function of CRISPR systems. Another possibility is that bacteria could rapidly mutate the genes targeted by CRISPR, preventing the system from effectively recognizing and cleaving these resistance genes. The possibility of bacterial adaptation to CRISPR-based therapies remains an area of concern and highlights the need for continuous surveillance and the development of new CRISPR variants capable of overcoming such resistance mechanisms.

4.3.1 Ethical and Biosafety Concerns

The application of CRISPR-based antimicrobial therapies also raises several ethical and biosafety concerns that must be carefully considered. These concerns primarily relate to off-target effects, the potential for horizontal gene transfer, and the ecological consequences of CRISPR-based interventions.

4.3.2 Off-Target Effects and Ecosystem Impact

As with any genetic modification tool, off-target effects are a concern when using CRISPR-Cas systems for antimicrobial therapy. Even minor unintended genetic modifications could have significant impacts, not only on the target bacterial population but also on the surrounding microbial community. The potential disruption of beneficial microbes in the human microbiome, for example, could lead to dysbiosis, which has been linked to a range of health issues, including inflammatory bowel disease, metabolic disorders, and autoimmune diseases (Sharma et al., 2021). The ecological impact of large-scale CRISPR applications in clinical settings and the environment needs to be thoroughly assessed.

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The regulatory landscape for CRISPR-based antimicrobial therapies is still evolving. While CRISPR-based gene editing has already seen clinical applications in human genetics, its use in antimicrobial therapy raises additional challenges. Regulatory agencies must establish clear guidelines for the safety, efficacy, and ethical considerations of CRISPR-based treatments. Moreover, the long-term effects on both the targeted bacteria and the human microbiome must be carefully studied through preclinical and clinical trials (Reardon, 2021). In addition, the potential risks of CRISPR-based technologies, such as gene transfer and ecological imbalances, must be considered when developing policies for their widespread use.

5. Conclusion

CRISPR-based genome editing offers a powerful and targeted approach to combating multidrug-resistant (MDR) bacterial pathogens, potentially revolutionizing the treatment of infections that are resistant to traditional antibiotics. Advances in CRISPR-Cas technologies between 2018 and 2022 have demonstrated their ability to target resistance genes with remarkable precision, resensitize bacteria to existing antibiotics, and provide customizable solutions to emerging resistance mechanisms.

However, several challenges remain that must be overcome before CRISPR-based antimicrobials can be fully integrated into clinical practice. These challenges include optimizing delivery systems, improving the precision of gene editing to minimize off-target effects, and addressing the potential for bacterial resistance to CRISPR systems. Additionally, ethical and biosafety concerns, such as the potential impact on the human microbiome and the spread of resistance genes, need to be carefully considered.

Despite these challenges, the future of CRISPR-based antimicrobials is promising. Ongoing research into genome editing, delivery technologies, and regulatory frameworks will likely pave the way for clinical applications. As CRISPR-based therapies continue to evolve, they could play a pivotal role in the post-antibiotic era, providing an effective and sustainable solution to the growing global health threat of antimicrobial resistance.

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