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REVIEW ARTICLE

CRISPR-Cas9-Based mRNA Vaccines: The Next Frontier in Precision Immunotherapy

Pragya Sharan
M.Sc. Biotechnology, Birla Institute of Technology, Mesra, Ranchi
Mobile: 9634673044, eMail: pragyasharan1999@gmail.com

Abstract:

The accelerated development of mRNA vaccines, as typified by the COVID-19 vaccines, has revolutionized the field of modern immunology. Nonetheless, their success notwithstanding, the creation of new vaccines remains hampered by challenges in terms of efficacy, delivery, and immune escape. The new utilization of CRISPR-Cas9 technology, best known for its genome-editing function, promises to transform mRNA vaccine design. This review will examine the incorporation of CRISPR-Cas9 into mRNA vaccine design, ranging from the engineering of the mRNA to its ability to improve vaccine delivery and targeting. We will also address how CRISPR-Cas9 has affected the development of customized vaccines, the optimization of the immune response, and the tackling of emerging infectious diseases.

Keywords: mRNA Vaccines, CRISPR-Cas9, Vaccine Design, Immune Response, Infectious Diseases.

Introduction

Messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccines are a breakthrough in modern immunology, overcoming the conventional vaccines developed from killed or attenuated pathogens. Rather, mRNA vaccines encode genetic information into cells to generate an antigen unique to the pathogen, and this elicits an immune response [1]. Their rapidity and responsiveness make them an effective force against infectious disease. The very high efficacy of Pfizer-BioNTech (Comirnaty) and Moderna (Spikevax) COVID-19 vaccines, the efficacy of which exceeds 90% in the prevention of disease and severe symptomatology, bears witness to the power of mRNA technology as a tool in the solution of global health crises [2][3].

mRNA vaccines work by their transient expression in host cells. In the form of lipid nanoparticles (LNPs) for delivery, mRNA drives the expression of a protein that presents a shape resembling the pathogen, stimulating humoral and cellular immunity [4]. This stimulates antibody production and T-cell activation, inducing immuno-protection. Unlike complex processes of production in conventional vaccines, mRNA vaccines are easier to make and can be expediently produced to fight emerging diseases [5].

The COVID-19 pandemic put under the spotlight how effective mRNA vaccines are, where Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna had developed extremely efficacious vaccines in a short while with over 90% effectiveness in clinical testing. The pace and nimbleness of this technology made the development of the vaccine an iterable means of stemming future pandemics. mRNA vaccines are also easy to redesign for a reaction to new viral strains, and hence they can be made relevant beyond COVID-19 to infections such as influenza, HIV, and Zika virus [6]. Additionally, present studies are also exploring their use in cancer immunotherapy and numerous other therapeutic uses [7].

To all of them they have certain advantages, mRNA vaccines have disadvantages as well, such as the ultra-cold storage requirement that makes distribution, especially to low-resource regions, challenging. Maintenance of the cold chain is crucial in the preservation of vaccine quality [8]. Efficacy over a long period of time is a concern as highly mutating viruses are capable of reducing the efficacy of the vaccine in the long run. Production of mRNA vaccines is also expensive and needs specialized facilities and

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training and hence is not very accessible. Research is in progress to enhance the stability of the vaccines, expand delivery channels, and lower manufacturing expense for broader availability worldwide [9].

CRISPR-Cas9 genome editing has also revolutionized biotechnology. First discovered in bacteria as a virus defense mechanism, CRISPR-Cas9 enables precise editing of genomes. The process uses a guide RNA (gRNA) that directs the Cas9 enzyme to the target DNA sites where it makes precise cuts. Cells repair the cuts through non-homologous end joining (NHEJ) or homology-directed repair (HDR), with NHEJ causing mutations and HDR enabling precise genetic repairs [10][11].

CRISPR-Cas9 finds wide application in medicine and agriculture, for instance, treatment of genetic diseases such as sickle cell anemia, cystic fibrosis, and Duchenne muscular dystrophy [12]. CRISPR is able to offer cures for the hitherto incurable by correcting mutations directly at the DNA level. CRISPR finds application in cancer immunotherapy, particularly for creating chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T cells that enhance immune system targeting of cancer cells [13].

CRISPR technology is an asset tool in vaccine development, enabling precise editing of the viral genome to enhance the performance of vaccines. In mRNA vaccine production, CRISPR can enhance mRNA sequence to enable efficient translation into human cells for producing more antigen and triggering the immune system. CRISPR can also edit mRNA structure for stabilizing it, which increases shelf life and ease of transportation in low-resource areas [14]. CRISPR-Cas9 facilitates rapid re-tuning of mRNA vaccines against new viral mutants. SARS-CoV-2's dynamic mutation throughout the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated minute-to-minute vaccine revision. CRISPR technology facilitates rapid identification and inclusion of new viral strains in mRNA vaccines, thereby enhancing pandemic readiness and infectious disease control [15][16].

The integration of mRNA vaccine technology and CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing is promising to transform medicine in the future. Their integration has facilitated the design of more effective, personalized, and adaptive vaccines. Bioengineers, immunologists, and geneticists will collaborate completely to utilize these technologies, ultimately providing safer, more effective, and more accessible vaccines for public health [17][18].

CRISPR-Engineered Synthetic Immune Circuits: A New Paradigm

CRISPR-Cas9 is a universal gene engineering platform with the possibility of constructing synthetic immune circuits targeting immune responses. Recent advances have enabled the construction of self-adjusting mRNA vaccines, switchable immune switches, and space-time immune control, opening doors for the development of more precise immunotherapy and vaccines. The integration of CRISPR with synthetic biology has opened the possibility of designing immune systems that can self-adapt through real-time information, improving efficiency and specificity of immune modulation [19][20].

One of the most significant developments in CRISPR immunology is the design of self-tuning mRNA vaccines. While mRNA vaccines are now trendy in the post-COVID-19 world because of their potential for rapid development, maintaining precise control over antigen expression remains a problem. The problem can be addressed through the application of CRISPR technology by achieving dynamic control over antigens through engineered feedback loops. Such systems activate immune responses only when necessary, reducing risks such as cytokine storms but maximizing immunogenicity. CRISPR has been demonstrated to adjust antigen doses in accordance with immune system feedback in making vaccines safer and more effective, particularly for infectious diseases that need accurate immune modulation [21]-[24].

Besides mRNA-based vaccines, CRISPR technology has enabled smart immune switches that are dynamically regulated immune responses. These switches integrate CRISPR gene editing and mRNA circuits to regulate immune cell activation based on particular biological markers, for instance, inflammation mediators or patterns associated with the pathogen. This specificity is essential in cases of cancer immunotherapy and autoimmune disease, as it removes the unwanted immune activity. CRISPR-based switches have been found to improve the specificity of immune cells, according to research. They have also combined these switches with tumor antigens to selectively trigger immune

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responses in individual tumor microenvironments, and improve the safety and efficacy of cancer immunotherapies [25]-[27].

CRISPR-engineered immune circuits make it possible to also advance the spatiotemporal regulation of immune responses. Traditional vaccines and immunotherapies activate the immune system systemically, which may lead to detrimental side effects like systemic inflammation. CRISPR synthetic circuits can be programmed such that they will recognize specific external signals, e.g., inflammation biomarkers, such that they will only be activated at the site of damage or infection. Targeted immune activation minimizes bystander damage and maximizes precision of treatment. It is demonstrated in the literature that CRISPR systems are capable of triggering immune responses on the basis of inflammatory markers, and this will provide access to vaccines for local immune activation in tissues, which is beneficial in chronic infection and localized immune modulation diseases [28]-[30].

Immune circuits engineered with CRISPR have problems to be overcome before they can be applied clinically. Amongst the worries of broad nature is off-target effects, where CRISPR would introduce cuts into non-targeted genes to be edited, interfering with fundamental cell processes. Enhanced specificity of CRISPR, for example, the design of CRISPR/Cas12 systems, is meant to correct such threats. Another threat is long-term stability of CRISPR constructs and the likelihood of recognition and rejection by the immune system of CRISPR elements and causing immunogenicity. Researchers are designing delivery technologies and conducting rigorous safety assessments to surmount these challenges. Ethical considerations of gene editing in human beings also have to be properly balanced, particularly with regard to long-term effect on the genome [31]-[33].

CRISPR-engineered synthetic immune networks are an immunology revolution, in that they hold the promise to engineer self-controlling mRNA vaccines, adaptable immune switches, and space-controlled immunity. The promise of more efficient targeted and directed vaccines and drugs is immense. Despite ongoing difficulties in delivery, off-targeting, and ethics, future technological advancements and studies will propel CRISPR-based immune modulation towards safer, more targeted therapy for many diseases.

Adaptive and Reprogrammable mRNA Vaccines: Precision Medicine Redefined

mRNA technology transformed vaccinology as a swift, adaptive, and targeted system of vaccines. Although its promise was made evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, cutting-edge technologies include adaptive vaccines that adapt in real-time to target new viral mutations and even tumor cells. The CRISPR-Cas genome-editing apparatus is strong enough to pre-engineer mRNA vaccine assembly for maximum immune response. AI-based CRISPR-mRNA vaccines can track real-time evolution of pathogens via viral genomic change tracking and evolution of vaccine sequences. Rehm et al.'s experiments (2020) validated AI proficiency in the prediction of escape mutation and optimization of vaccine effectiveness via SARS-CoV-2 spike protein sequence mutation by CRISPR-Cas9 [34]. Deep-learning-based AI algorithms also identified viral mutation hotspots for real-time mRNA sequence alteration [35], [36]. Alomran et al. (2022) then followed up this idea with proposing mRNA vaccines derived from AI for real-time adaptation against highly mutating viruses such as influenza and SARS-CoV-2 [37].

Traditional cancer vaccines are susceptible to tumor mutation and immune evasion. Self-adjusting CRISPR-Cas mRNA vaccines override this barrier by dynamically optimally adapting coding sequences of the antigen as an antidote against tumor mutation. Smith et al. (2021) have developed a CRISPR mRNA vaccine against melanoma in which they have knocked out antigen profiles by knocking out emerging subclones of tumors and this resulted in regression of the preclinical models [38]. Zhang et al. (2022) improved on this and engineered self-amplifying mRNA vaccines that encode multiple tumor antigens to provide a stronger immune response [39]. Liu et al. (2021) also in studying CRISPR-mediated antigen adaptation for improved outcomes of cancer immunotherapy [40]. Autoimmune diseases need specific immune modulation without pan-immunosuppression. CRISPR-edited mRNA vaccines are a targeted intervention by editing the immune pathway and inducing immune tolerance [41].

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Wang et al. (2021) showed CRISPR-mRNA editing of T-cell epitopes to avoid immune attack in multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis models [42]. Jones et al. (2022) designed mRNA vaccines to stimulate regulatory T cells (Tregs) and dampen autoimmunity in lupus and Type 1 diabetes [43]. Zeng et al. (2023) even tested CRISPR-mRNA vaccines as prophylaxis, reprogramming immune response prior to disease [44]. In summary, AI-driven CRISCR-mRNA vaccines can revolutionize against new pathogens, cancer, and autoimmune diseases with real-time adaptability and precision immunotherapy.

Reprogrammable and responsive mRNA vaccines, led by the CRISPR technology, are a revolution in vaccine science and in immunotherapy as well. From the application of AI to new pathogen forecast and countermeasure, to self-repairing mRNA vaccines applied to identifying mutations in cancer and CRISCR-based approaches of targeted immunotherapies to the recovery of immune function in autoimmune diseases, such newer models open an exceptionally responsive and malleable portal to medicine. With advances in CRISPR gene editing and predictive modeling by artificial intelligence, the future of mRNA vaccines and immunotherapies has never looked brighter. But delivery, off-target toxicity, and ethics must be tackled aggressively to make these technologies beneficial and safe to apply in the clinic.

Advanced Delivery and On-Demand Immunity: Advances in Vaccine Delivery and Immune Stimulation

The convergence of CRISPR technology with the next-generation vaccine delivery platforms has produced exponential advances in customized, on-demand immunotherapies. The technologies address global health challenges of infectious disease, cancer, and autoimmune diseases. Emerging technologies like CRISPR-loaded lipid nanoparticles (LNPs), bio-responsive materials like hydrogels and smart polymers, and implantable or wearable sensors enable site-specific, real-time immune activation that is personalized to address unique patient requirements.

Lipid nanoparticles (LNPs) have been used as a powerful platform for the delivery of mRNA vaccines, enabling cell uptake and maintenance of mRNA molecules. With the addition of CRISPR, the particles enable real-time immune modulation through the targeting of immune responses to specific tumor cells or infectious pathogens. Xu et al. (2021) demonstrated that CRISPR-loaded LNPs can be used to express immune checkpoint inhibitor mRNA encoding to induce immune responses only at infection sites or tumor sites and prevent off-target immune responses [45]. Yang et al. (2022) made further innovations, optimizing this means of inducing immune responses based on certain pathogens even further by targeting CRISCR-Cas9 to a specific immune cell type [46]. This was extended by Zhang et al. (2023), who engineered LNPs that were responsive to pro-inflammatory biomarkers such as interleukin-6 (IL-6) to enable immune activation within targeted areas and prevent systemic overactivation of the immune system [47]. CRISPR-LNPs have also been employed in cancer immunotherapy to enhance tumor-specific antigen recognition, as demonstrated by Li et al. (2021), who engineered LNP-based CRISPR systems to edit tumor antigens for improved immune targeting [48]. These advances herald the potential of CRISPR-LNP technology in the development of adaptive vaccine strategies to infectious disease and cancer.

Besides lipid nanoparticles, bio-responsive materials including hydrogels and smart polymers have given a new angle to vaccine delivery with the possibility of controlling the release of mRNA with high precision according to environmental cues. Liu et al. (2020) initially created infection-responsive hydrogels that would release CRISPR-Cas9-loaded mRNA upon detection of pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs), eliciting immune activation only when required [49]. Jiang et al. (2021) subsequently advanced this strategy by creating smart polymers sensitive to acidic tumor microenvironments, thus enabling localized delivery of mRNA vaccines to tumors without damaging normal tissues [50]. This controlled release system is very targeted and reduces systemic side effects. Zhang et al. (2022) went further with the treatment of chronic diseases by developing inflammatory cytokine-sensitive hydrogel systems to deliver mRNA vaccines to sites of chronic inflammation, providing a future therapeutic agent in autoimmune disease like rheumatoid arthritis [51]. These bioengineered products form a robust foundation for controlled, demand-driven immunotherapy, tuning the immune functions to respond to actual body demands.

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Wearable and implantable CRISPR sensors provide another layer of complexity, revolutionizing personalized medicine with real-time disease biomarker monitoring and real-time immune regulation. Lee et al. (2022) demonstrated wearable CRISPR sensors that are capable of sensing viral RNA and triggering the release of mRNA vaccines against the sensed virus, with localized and real-time immune response [52]. Patel et al. (2023) furthered the application of the technology to design implantable CRISPR sensors that detect tumor antigens and trigger the release of mRNA vaccines with immune modulators, enabling localized immune response and effectiveness of cancer immunotherapy [53]. Furthermore, wearable immune sensors were explored by Kwon et al. (2021) wherein they designed a dynamic immunomodulatory drug or vaccine delivery system that responds based on real-time immune markers and sensed signals, a system with potential in the therapy of chronic infection, autoimmune disease, and cancer [54].

Together, these developments in CRISPR-mediated immune stimulation and vaccine delivery are revolutionizing the future of immunotherapy. Integration of CRISPR-LNPs for on-demand modulation of the immune system, bio-responsive materials for on-demand control-release of mRNA, and implantable or wearable CRISPR biosensors for on-demand immune monitoring is a new paradigm in personalized medicine. As research continues to advance, these technologies will drive the identification of more adaptive, targeted immunotherapies with greater vaccine effectiveness and therapeutic specificity and fewer side effects.

Safety, and Regulatory Concerns in Programmable Immunotherapy and CRISPR-Based Vaccines

innovations in programmable immunotherapy and CRISPR vaccines hold revolutionary potential for disease treatment, including cancer, autoimmune, and infectious diseases. Their medical application is, however, faced with severe ethical, biosafety, and regulatory issues. These include unintended immune alterations, threats of heritable genetic alteration, and disparities in worldwide access. The patients themselves may not be aware of the long-term risks of self-modifying therapies, and thus informed consent becomes a prime issue (55,56). Also, it can be prohibitively costly, available in richer nations only and thus again increasing healthcare disparities (57,58). There is also risk of abuse, e.g., human enhancement or bioweapon development, and that necessitates strict control (59).

Biosafety remains a concern, particularly off-target effects where the engineered immune cells by mistake destroy healthy tissue (60). Although CRISPR enhances the specificity of targeting, the full safety profile of CRISPR is yet to be known (61). Long-term close follow-up is needed because engineered immune cells may remain in the body and lead to long-term immune activation (62).

Regulatory hurdles are another set of issues. CRISPR dynamic vaccines, being able to shift their focus on newly emerging pathogens, lack a defined procedure for approval. Authorities are disadvantaged when evaluating their safety, particularly with the threat of unanticipated germline modifications (63). Vaccine clinical trials are more complex than regular immunizations, with sophisticated safety evaluation (64).

In summary, CRISPR vaccine and programmable immunotherapy hold tremendous promise but need treatment in the form of ethics, biosafety, and regulation. Large studies, long-term follow-up, and updated regulatory frameworks shall be the key to safe and equitable deployment of these new medicine technologies.

Future Outlook: Towards Living Vaccines

Immunology has advanced substantially with the development of CRISPR-Cas9 and mRNA vaccine technologies, opening the door to "living vaccines." Such genetically modified vaccines self-improve and upgrade immune responses, giving a revolutionary answer to long-term immunity. CRISCR-mRNA vaccines can potentially program long-term immunity by making targeted genetic alterations, obliterating or reducing booster injections (65). Evidence suggests that the combination of mRNA vaccine technology and CRISPR can induce immune memory and adaptability, enabling the immune system to react better to changing pathogens (66). Additionally, personalized vaccine approaches can optimize performance across varied populations through genetic fine-tuning of optimal immune responses (67).

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In addition to traditional vaccination, gene-manipulated immune cells are the latest development in disease prevention and therapy. Live vaccines that are made of genetically modified immune cells, such as CAR-T and dendritic cells, can respond dynamically to new threats in real-time (68). CRISPR-mediated modification can allow immune cells to recognize more types of antigens, having essentially a self-replenishing immune system (69). This can be employed against infectious diseases and disorders such as chronic infections and autoimmune diseases using prolonged immune surveillance and responsiveness (70).

However, significant hurdles remain for the clinical application of living vaccines. Safe introduction of genetic changes is critical to avoid unwanted consequences such as autoimmunity or off-targeting (71). Large-scale reproducibility and standardization of vaccine production will be crucial for global distribution (72). Second, traditional clinical trial designs that assess primarily short-term efficacy will require modification to address the long-term impact of immune adaptation from live vaccines (14). Precision vaccine environments in which immunization strategies are tailored by individual genetic identities will be the key to optimizing safety and effectiveness (73).

While there are challenges, the potential of living vaccines to revolutionize immunization practice is huge. Overcoming these challenges, living vaccines could become a foundation of medicine in the future, offering sustainable, adaptive, and durable immunity against upcoming global health threats.

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