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Popular Article

Synthetic Viruses: A Double-Edged Sword in Scientific Advancement

Koppu Vasavi [1*], Mudasir M. Rather, Bhavani Puvvala, Tripti Pande
Ph.D. scholar, ICAR-Indian Veterinary Research Institute(ICAR-IVRI)
Izatnagar, Bareilly-243 122, Uttar Pradesh, India
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Abstract

The field of synthetic biology has made remarkable advancements in recent years, enabling the construction of artificial organisms and genetic circuits. Among these achievements, the creation of synthetic viruses has emerged as a prominent area of study. Synthetic viruses are designed and engineered to possess specific properties and functions, ranging from therapeutic applications to understanding fundamental biological processes. This article provides an overview of synthetic viruses, highlighting their design, principles, diverse applications, and the ethical considerations associated with their development and use.

Introduction

In recent years, the field of biotechnology has witnessed groundbreaking advancements that have revolutionized various industries, including medicine, agriculture, and environmental science. One of the most intriguing and controversial developments in this domain is the creation of synthetic viruses. Synthetic viruses, also known as designer viruses or viral nanobots, are artificially engineered viruses designed to carry out specific tasks, ranging from targeted gene delivery to disease eradication (Guenther, CM et al., 2014) This technological frontier holds immense potential for scientific and medical progress, but it also raises profound ethical and safety concerns.

A synthetic virus is a product of the convergence of biotechnology, genetic engineering, and virology (Collins, L. T. et al., 2023). Researchers are able to manipulate the genetic material of viruses by altering their DNA or RNA sequences, enabling them to create customized viral structures and functionalities. These synthetic viruses can be designed to infect specific cell types, deliver therapeutic payloads, or even reprogram cellular machinery for various purposes.

Design and principles of Synthetic virus:

The design of synthetic viruses involves following steps

- **Identification of target:** The first step in designing synthetic virus is to identify the specific target or purpose for which the synthetic virus is being designed (Wimmer E, et al., 2009). This could include gene therapy, vaccine development, or other therapeutic applications.
- **Selection of viral backbone:** select a viral backbone or template from existing viruses that possess certain desirable characteristics, such as efficient replication, cellular tropism (ability to infect specific cell types), or stability. Commonly used viral backbones include adenoviruses, lentiviruses, retroviruses, or adeno-associated viruses (AAVs).
- **Genetic modification:** Once the viral backbone is selected, genetic modifications are made to the viral genome. This involves manipulating the DNA or RNA sequences of the virus to achieve the desired functionalities. Techniques such as gene insertion, deletion, or substitution are employed to introduce or remove specific genes, regulatory elements, or target-specific features, gene editing, by modification of viral capsids and incorporation of genetic circuits.
- **Gene editing using programmable nucleases:** Programmable nucleases, such as CRISPR-Cas9, zinc finger nucleases (ZFNs), and transcription activator-like effector nucleases (TALENs), are molecular tools that can be used to introduce targeted double-strand breaks in specific genomic regions (Li, H., et al., 2020). These breaks can then be repaired by the cell's DNA repair machinery, resulting in precise modifications to the DNA sequence. Gene editing using programmable nucleases has revolutionized genome engineering due to its simplicity, efficiency, and versatility.
- **DNA synthesis and assembly:** With advancements in DNA synthesis technologies, it is now possible to chemically synthesize DNA sequences of varying lengths, including entire viral genomes (Hughes RA, et al., 2017) These synthetic DNA fragments can be assembled using techniques such as polymerase chain reaction (PCR), restriction enzyme digestion, and ligation, allowing the creation of custom-designed genetic constructs.
- **Site-directed mutagenesis:** Site-directed mutagenesis involves introducing specific mutations at desired locations within a DNA sequence. This technique can be used to study the effects of specific genetic changes or to engineer proteins with improved or altered functions.
- **Homologous recombination:** Homologous recombination is a natural DNA repair mechanism that can be exploited for genome engineering. By designing DNA fragments with homology to

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specific genomic regions, scientists can use recombination to replace or insert genetic material into the target genome. This technique is particularly useful for introducing large DNA fragments or precise modifications.

- **RNA interference (RNAi):** RNAi is a technique that involves introducing small RNA molecules, called small interfering RNAs (siRNAs), into cells to selectively silence or knockdown specific genes (Dana H, et al., 2017). RNAi can be used to study gene function or to manipulate gene expression levels.
- **Payload incorporation:** Synthetic viruses are often designed to carry therapeutic payloads, such as therapeutic genes, drugs, or other therapeutic agents. The payload is incorporated into the viral genome or as a separate entity within the viral particle. This payload can be designed to target specific cells, deliver therapeutic molecules, or induce desired biological effects.
- **Optimization and testing:** The modified viral genome is then optimized to enhance viral replication, infectivity, and target specificity. This may involve fine-tuning viral gene expression, modifying viral surface proteins, or optimizing the packaging efficiency of the viral particles. The engineered synthetic virus is tested extensively in vitro and in animal models to assess its safety, efficacy, and functionality.
- **Safety considerations:** Safety is a critical aspect of synthetic virus design. Researchers must carefully consider and address potential risks associated with the use of synthetic viruses, including unintended effects, toxicity, and potential for uncontrolled spread. Safety features such as self-limiting replication, controlled payload release, or inducible viral inactivation systems may be incorporated to mitigate these risks.
- **Ethical and regulatory considerations:** The design and use of synthetic viruses also involve ethical and regulatory considerations. Research involving synthetic viruses is subject to rigorous oversight and compliance with applicable guidelines and regulations. Ethical considerations include ensuring responsible research practices, minimizing risks, and avoiding the misuse or intentional design of synthetic viruses for harmful purposes.

Applications

- ✓ **Research and understanding of viral diseases:** Synthetic viruses can be used to study the mechanisms of viral infections, replication, and pathogenesis. By manipulating specific viral genes or components, researchers can gain insights into how viruses function and interact with host cells, leading to a better understanding of viral diseases.

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- ✓ **Vaccine development:** Synthetic viruses can serve as tools for vaccine development. Scientists can engineer attenuated or non-pathogenic versions of viruses to create vaccines that stimulate an immune response without causing disease. By modifying viral proteins or genetic material, synthetic viruses can potentially be used as safer and more targeted vaccine candidates.
- ✓ **Gene therapy:** Synthetic viruses, particularly viral vectors, can be employed as delivery systems for gene therapy. These viruses can be modified to carry therapeutic genes into target cells, helping to correct genetic disorders or treat diseases. Viral vectors derived from synthetic viruses have shown promise in early clinical trials for conditions such as cancer, genetic disorders, and certain viral infections.
- ✓ **Drug Discovery:** Synthetic viruses offer a promising avenue for drug discovery and testing. By designing viruses with specific genetic modifications, researchers can identify potential drug targets, test the efficacy of antiviral compounds, and develop new therapeutic strategies to combat viral infections.
- ✓ **Biosensing and Diagnostic Tools:** Synthetic viruses can be engineered to act as biosensors for detecting specific pathogens or markers of disease. These engineered viruses can provide rapid and accurate diagnostic capabilities, enabling early detection and containment of viral outbreaks.
- ✓ **Biotechnology and industrial applications:** Synthetic viruses have potential applications in various biotechnological and industrial processes. For instance, they can be used to produce viral vectors for gene delivery in biopharmaceutical manufacturing or to engineer viruses for targeted gene editing techniques like CRISPR-Cas9. Additionally, synthetic viruses can be utilized in the production of vaccines, viral vectors for gene therapy, and other biotechnological products.

Conclusion

Synthetic viruses mark a significant milestone in scientific advancement. However, their creation also poses ethical and safety challenges that must be addressed through rigorous regulation and responsible research practices. These engineered pathogens offer unprecedented opportunities for understanding viral mechanisms, developing vaccines, and advancing research in various fields. They hold the potential to revolutionize disease prevention, treatment, and diagnostics.

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