Review

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Chinedu Eucharia Joseph , Aashika Jain , Muneer Oladipupo Yaqub , Lekshmi K. Edison *

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Review

CRISPR-Cas Systems: Bridging Bacterial Immunity and Host Interactions

Chinedu Eucharia Joseph [1], Aashika Jain [2], Muneer Oladipupo Yaqub [3] and Lekshmi K. Edison [4,*]

[1] Department of Microbiology and Parasitology, Microbiology Laboratory, Benue State University Teaching Hospital, Makurdi, Benue State 970101, Nigeria

[2] Department of Medical Biotechnology, Manipal School of Life Sciences, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, Karnataka 576104, India

[3] Department of Biological Sciences, School of Natural Science and Mathematics, University of Texas at Dallas, Texas, TX 75080, USA

[4] Department of Comparative, Diagnostic, and Population Medicine, College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32610, USA

* Correspondence: edison.le@ufl.edu

Abstract

The CRISPR-Cas system is one of the most versatile and adaptive defense mechanisms in prokaryotes, facilitating sequence-specific identification and neutralization of invading genetic elements, such as bacteriophages and plasmids. Beyond their primary function in adaptive immunity, accumulating evidence indicates that CRISPR-Cas systems are intricately integrated into bacterial physiology and involve processes such as gene regulation, stress response, biofilm dynamics, quorum-sensing pathways, and virulence modulation. These functions underscore the multifaceted role of CRISPR-Cas in bacterial survival, persistence, and host-pathogen interactions. Moreover, the horizontal transfer and evolutionary diversification of CRISPR-Cas systems underscores their significance in shaping microbial communities and facilitating co-evolutionary interactions with phages. The translational potential of these systems extends well beyond microbial immunity and offers promising applications in microbiome engineering, antimicrobial development, and precision medicine. This review synthesizes the current knowledge on the regulatory and adaptive roles of CRISPR-Cas, highlighting their dual function as protectors of genomic integrity and modulators of host interactions.

Keywords: CRISPR-Cas systems; prokaryotic adaptive immunity; host-pathogen interactions; synthetic biology applications; molecular mechanisms

1. Introduction

1.1. Overview of CRISPR-Cas Systems

The CRISPR-Cas system functions as an adaptive immune mechanism in prokaryotes, consisting of DNA loci known as clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeat (CRISPR) and adjacent Cas (CRISPR-associated) genes, which encode specialized proteins [1]. A CRISPR locus comprises short repetitive DNA sequences interspersed with unique "spacer" segments, which are derived from viruses or plasmids. These spacers serve as genetic records of previous infections. Concurrently, Cas genes encode nucleases, helicases, and other proteins that facilitate the immune response [2,3]. CRISPR-based immunity is characterized by three distinct stages: adaptation, which involves the integration of a new spacer from foreign DNA into the CRISPR array; expression, which encompasses the transcription and processing of the array into CRISPR RNAs (crRNAs); and interference, which entails the formation of an effector complex, wherein a crRNA directs Cas proteins to identify and cleave complementary nucleic acids [4,5]. Through this mechanism, bacteria

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and archaea achieve sequence-specific defense against invasive genetic elements, similar to an immune "memory" that targets recurring viruses for elimination [5,6].

CRISPR sequences were first identified in bacteria in 1987. However, their functions remained enigmatic until the mid-2000s. A pivotal insight emerged in 2005, when researchers observed that numerous CRISPR spacers corresponded to sequences from bacteriophages. This observation led to the hypothesis that CRISPR may serve as a prokaryotic antiviral system [1]. In 2007, experimental evidence confirmed that a *Streptococcus thermophilus* strain acquired phage resistance by incorporating new spacers following phage exposure. This finding provides direct evidence that the CRISPR-Cas system confers adaptive immunity against viruses [7]. The discovery that bacteria and archaea possess an adaptive, heritable immune system has fundamentally transformed our understanding of microbe–virus interactions. In CRISPR-based immunity, the microorganism effectively "remembers" previous infections by storing fragments of invader DNA, subsequently utilizing this memory to identify and eliminate invading pathogens with remarkable sequence specificity [8].

Researchers have identified a diverse array of CRISPR-Cas systems, which has led to their formal classification into several types and two broad classes. Class 1 CRISPR systems, which are prevalent in most CRISPR-bearing bacteria and nearly all archaea, utilize multi-protein effector complexes, such as the cascade complex with Cas3 nuclease. In contrast, class 2 systems depend on a single large Cas protein, such as Cas9, Cas12, or Cas13, to function as the effector responsible for cleaving target nucleic acids [9]. CRISPR-Cas systems are categorized into six primary types (Types I–VI), each characterized by a distinct signature Cas nuclease. These types encompass numerous subtypes, with Cas3, Cas9, Cas10, Cas12, and Cas13 serving as signature effectors for Types I, II, III, V, and VI, respectively [10]. As of 2020, a revised classification identified two classes, six types, and at least 33 subtypes of CRISPR-Cas systems (Table 1), highlighting the considerable diversity of this adaptive immunity mechanism in prokaryotes [9].

Table 1. Classification of CRISPR-Cas systems.

Class	Type and Subtypes	Signature Cas Nuclease	Target	Representative Organisms (Examples)
1	I-A	Cas3 (HD-nuclease helicase)	DNA	*Archaeoglobus fulgidus* (archaeon); *Sulfolobus solfataricus* (archaeon)
1	I-B	Cas3	DNA	*Clostridium kluyveri* (anaerobic bacterium)
1	I-C	Cas3	DNA	*Bacillus halodurans* (alkaliphilic bacterium)
1	I-D	Cas3	DNA	*Cyanothece* sp. ATCC 51142 (cyanobacterium)
1	I-E	Cas3	DNA	*Escherichia coli* K12 (enteric model bacterium)
1	I-F	Cas3	DNA	*Yersinia pseudotuberculosis* (enteric pathogen); *Shewanella putrefaciens* (marine bacterium)
1	I-G	Cas3	DNA	*Geobacter sulfurreducens* (metal-reducing bacterium)
1	III-A	Cas10 (large subunit with HD nuclease domain)	DNA & RNA †	*Staphylococcus epidermidis* (skin commensal bacterium)
1	III-B	Cas10	DNA & RNA †	*Pyrococcus furiosus* (hyperthermophilic archaeon)
1	III-C	Cas10	DNA & RNA †	*Methanothermobacter thermautotrophicus* (methanogenic archaeon)
1	III-D	Cas10	RNA (primarily)	*Synechocystis* sp. PCC6803 (photosynthetic model cyanobacterium)
1	III-E	Cas10	RNA (primarily)	*Candidatus Scalindua brodae* (anammox bacterium)
1	III-F	Cas10	DNA (predicted)	*Thermotoga lettingae* (thermophilic bacterium)

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1	IV-A	Csf1 (Cas8-like large subunit)	DNA (plasmid) ‡	*Thioalkalivibrio* sp. K90mix (haloalkaliphilic bacterium)
1	IV-B	Csf1	DNA (plasmid) ‡	*Rhodococcus jostii* RHA1 (soil actinomycete)
1	IV-C	Csf1	DNA (predicted) ‡	*Thermoflexile* sp. (Anaerolineae bacterium)
2	II-A	Cas9 (RuvC + HNH nuclease domains)	DNA	*Streptococcus pyogenes* (Group A strep pathogen); *Streptococcus thermophilus* (dairy fermenter)
2	II-B	Cas9	DNA	*Legionella pneumophila* (intracellular pathogen)
2	II-C	Cas9	DNA	*Neisseria meningitidis* (meningococcus pathogen); *Campylobacter jejuni* (enteric pathogen); *Micrarchaeum acidiphilum* (ARMAN-1 archaeon)
2	V-A	Cas12a (Cpf1 family)	DNA	*Francisella novicida* (tularemia-like bacterium)
2	V-B	Cas12b (C2c1)	DNA	*Alicyclobacillus acidoterrestris* (thermoacidophilic bacterium); *Gluconacetobacter* sp. (planctomycete bacterium)
2	V-C	Cas12c (C2c3)	DNA	*Oleiphilus* sp. SM1 (marine hydrocarbon-degrader)
2	V-D	Cas12d (CasY)	DNA	Uncultured bacterium (metagenomic assembly)
2	V-E	Cas12e (CasX)	DNA	*"Candidatus"* Deltaproteobacteria bacterium (metagenome)
2	V-F	Cas12f (Cas14a–c)	DNA	Uncultured archaeon (nanoarchaeote; hot spring); *Bacillus thuringiensis* (spore-forming bacterium)
2	V-G	Cas12g	RNA	Hot spring metagenome (unidentified thermophiles)
2	V-H	Cas12h	DNA	Hypersaline lake sediment metagenome (unidentified)
2	V-I	Cas12i	DNA	Freshwater pond metagenome (unidentified)
2	V-K	Cas12k (C2c5, Tn7-linked)	DNA	*Cyanothece* sp. PCC 8801 (cyanobacterium; CRISPR-associated transposon)
2	VI-A	Cas13a (C2c2 family; dual HEPN RNase domains)	RNA	*Leptotrichia shahii* (human oral bacterium)
2	VI-B	Cas13b (dual HEPN domains)	RNA	*Prevotella buccae* (human gut anaerobe); *Bergeyella zoohelcum* (oral bacterium)
2	VI-C	Cas13c (dual HEPN domains)	RNA	*Fusobacterium perfoetens* (oral/fusiform bacterium)
2	VI-D	Cas13d (dual HEPN domains)	RNA	*Ruminococcus bicirculans* (gut anaerobe)

† Type III systems are capable of cleaving transcribed RNA and may also cleave DNA as a secondary function; certain subtypes within this category primarily target one form of nucleic acid. ‡ Type IV systems are typically found on plasmids or mobile genetic elements (MGE) and often lack the interference of the Cas3/Cas10 nuclease, so their targeting capacity is presumed and may be supplementary.

1.2. Historical Context

1.2.1. Evolutionary Development in Bacteria and Archaea

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CRISPR-Cas defense mechanisms are ancient and appear to have co-evolved with the persistent threat of viruses within microbial ecosystems. Genomic analyses indicate that approximately 40% of sequenced bacteria and over 80% of archaea possess at least one CRISPR-Cas system [11,12], indicating this adaptive immunity occurred early and has been retained in many lineages. Phylogenetic analyses indicate that the multi-component Class 1 systems may constitute the original form of CRISPR-Cas immunity. For example, the complex Type III systems, which are capable of targeting both DNA and RNA, are considered a common ancestral branch from which other types have evolved [13,14]. In contrast, Class 2 systems, such as the Cas9-based Type II, likely emerged at a later stage and are predominantly found in bacteria. It is noteworthy that the distribution of CRISPR-Cas systems is uneven. Many bacterial taxa, as well as some archaeal groups, completely lack these systems. This suggests that there may be fitness costs or alternative anti-phage strategies that render CRISPR-Cas systems unnecessary in certain ecological niches [9,15]. In environments characterized by high viral diversity, microbes frequently possess multiple distinct CRISPR-Cas systems within a single genome. This phenomenon reflects the intense evolutionary "arms race" between hosts and their viruses. For example, nearly all known hyperthermophilic archaea encode several CRISPR-Cas variants, likely due to the strong selective pressure exerted by diverse co-existing viruses, which favors the retention of a broad array of immune defense modules [16,17].

1.2.2. From Microbial Immunity to Genome Editing

Over the past decade, the CRISPR-Cas system has evolved significantly from a simple bacterial defense mechanism to a transformative tool in biotechnology. A pivotal moment occurred in 2012–2013, when researchers successfully re-engineered the Type II CRISPR-Cas9 system from Streptococcus into a streamlined two-component format. This innovation involved the integration of the Cas9 enzyme with a synthetic single-guide RNA, enabling precise targeting and cleavage of DNA at specified sequences [18,19]. This significant advancement involved the repurposing of a bacterial immune nuclease for precise genome editing, representing a transformative technological development that initiated a new era in genetic engineering [1]. The CRISPR-Cas9 genome editing technology, renowned for its ease and precision, has been rapidly demonstrated across a variety of cell types and organisms, thereby catalyzing a proliferation of applications ranging from fundamental research to agricultural enhancement and gene therapy. Moreover, the CRISPR toolkit continues to expand as researchers have adapted additional Cas enzymes, such as Cas12 (Type V) for alternative DNA editing capabilities and Cas13 (Type VI) for RNA targeting and editing, thereby extending CRISPR's applicability beyond DNA cleavage [20]. In conclusion, what initially functioned as a microbial defense mechanism has now become a fundamental component of contemporary biotechnology, demonstrating the significant influence of CRISPR-Cas on both bacterial-host interactions and revolutionary genome engineering applications.

2. CRISPR Role in Host-Pathogen Interaction

2.1. Adaptive Immunity Against Foreign Genetic Elements

CRISPR-Cas systems function as advanced adaptive immune mechanisms in bacteria and archaea, safeguarding these prokaryotic hosts against invasive genetic elements such as bacteriophages and plasmids. These systems comprise a CRISPR locus, an array of short repetitive DNA sequences interspersed with unique "spacer" sequences derived from previous invaders, and adjacent Cas genes that encode the protein machinery necessary for defense. During the adaptation (spacer acquisition) phase of immunity, specialized Cas1–Cas2 integrase complexes capture short fragments of foreign DNA (protospacers) from an infecting virus or plasmid and integrate them as new spacers at the CRISPR locus [21]. The integration of spacers derived from invaders establishes a heritable genetic record of the pathogen.

During the subsequent interference phase, the CRISPR array undergoes transcription and is processed into small CRISPR RNAs (crRNAs). These crRNAs then assemble with Cas nucleases to

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form a ribonucleoprotein complex, known as the effector complex. This complex is guided by base-pair complementarity between the crRNA spacer sequence and the target protospacer within the invader genome, enabling it to bind and cleave the foreign nucleic acid, thereby neutralizing the threat. It is noteworthy that most DNA-targeting CRISPR systems necessitate the presence of a short protospacer-adjacent motif (PAM) flanking the target sequence for efficient recognition, which aids in distinguishing non-self DNA from self DNA [8,21,22]. Through the mechanism of spacer acquisition and targeted interference, the CRISPR-Cas system functions as an adaptive, sequence-specific immune system. This system enables prokaryotes to withstand recurrent attacks by identical phages or mobile genetic elements. The effectiveness of this immune response is demonstrated by the direct communication of numerous CRISPR spacers to phage or plasmid sequences, as well as by experimental evidence indicating that the acquisition of phage-derived spacers informs heritable phage resistance to the host cell [23,24]. Such CRISPR-Cas defenses play a pivotal role in host-pathogen interactions, shaping the co-evolutionary arms race between bacteria and their genetic invaders.

2.2. Regulation of Endogenous Gene Expression

CRISPR-Cas systems in bacteria serve functions beyond the defense against foreign DNA. They also play a role in regulating the host organism's gene expression and physiological processes [25]. These systems can target the bacterial genome or transcripts, thereby modulating genes involved in metabolism, virulence, and stress responses. The mechanism often involves direct interference with transcription or cleavage of specific mRNA transcripts [26]. For example, in *Salmonella typhi,* a CRISPR-Cas system regulates an outer membrane protein regulator (OmpR), altering the synthesis of outer membrane proteins [27]. Likewise, in *Francisella novicida*, the Cas9 protein uses a small CRISPR-associated RNA (scaRNA) to repress an *endogenous* immunostimulatory lipoprotein gene, effectively silencing its transcription [28].

Another crucial aspect is the control of mobile genetic elements (MGEs) like plasmids and transposons, which help maintain genomic integrity and optimize fitness [29]. CRISPR-Cas systems often carry spacers matching plasmid or prophage sequences, indicating the ability to recognize and neutralize these elements if they become active [28]. For instance, in *Acinetobacter baumannii*, a type I-Fb CRISPR-Cas system was shown to prevent uptake of an antibiotic resistance plasmid and thereby reduce virulence, highlighting how CRISPR limits horizontal gene transfer to benefit the host cell [30]. This regulatory role over MGEs ensures that bacteria do not acquire genetic elements that could be deleterious or energetically costly. In addition, CRISPR-Cas system activity in modulating metabolic operations as well as stress responses further substantiates their plasticity in roles beyond simple protection at an immune level [31]. Under nutrient-deficient conditions, these systems can downregulate non-essential metabolic pathways to conserve resources for vital processes. Conversely, when nutrients are plentiful, CRISPR-Cas may allow full metabolic activity.

During environmental challenges, such as oxidative stress or DNA damage, CRISPR-Cas systems are frequently activated to confer cellular protection. For instance, evidence indicates that CRISPR-Cas transcription is upregulated under such stress conditions, thereby mitigating stress-induced damage to the bacterium [25]. In *A. baumannii*, the deletion of the cas3 gene not only impacted virulence but also modified the regulation of carbon metabolism and oxidative phosphorylation pathways [32], suggesting that a functional CRISPR-Cas system plays a role in coordinating metabolic responses to stress. By specifically targeting stress-response genes, such as those involved in DNA repair, membrane stabilization, or the production of heat-shock proteins, the CRISPR-Cas system can ensure that the cell allocates energy towards functions critical for survival. These multifaceted regulatory roles of CRISPR-Cas underscore their versatility in bacterial survival and adaptation beyond simple immune defense [25]. Table 2 summarizes experimental evidence of the role of CRISPR-Cas in endogenous gene expression across bacteria.

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Table 2. caption.

Bacterial Strain	CRISPR type	Regulated Gene/Pathway	Effect on physiology (metabolism, stress, virulence)	References
Francisella novicida	II-B (Cas9)	Bacterial lipoprotein (BLP) transcript; scaRNA-Cas9 complex	↓ surface BLP → ↓ TLR2 recognition → ↑ immune evasion / virulence	[33,34]
Pseudomonas aeruginosa PA14	I-F (Cas3)	*lasR* (QS master regulator) mRNA	Post-transcriptional control of QS → dampened host TLR4 response → ↑ immune evasion	[35]
Salmonella enterica (Enteritidis)	I-E (Cas3)	*lsr* operon / AI-2 uptake & processing (QS)	↑ AI-2 signaling → ↑ biofilm & host-cell virulence	[36]
Streptococcus pyogenes (GAS)	II-A (Cas9)	Global virulence regulons (e.g., Mga/CovR-S; multiple factors proteomically affected)	Δcas9 → ↓ adherence, ↓ survival in blood, ↓ virulence in mouse skin model	[37]
Campylobacter jejuni NCTC11168	II-C (Cas9)	Endogenous mRNAs (crRNA-dependent binding/cleavage)	Cas9 regulates virulence programs; Δcas9 → ↓ adhesion/invasion, ↓ biofilm	[38,39]
Streptococcus mutans UA159	I-C (Cas3)	VicRK-linked biofilm genes; stress tolerance	Δcas3 → ↓ biofilm; ↑ fluoride sensitivity (metabolic/stress shift)	[24,40]
Acinetobacter baumannii ATCC19606	I-Fb (Cas3)	*abaI* (AHL synthase; QS) mRNA; OmpA & biofilm genes	Cas3 activity → ↑ QS/biofilm/virulence; Δcas3 → ↓ biofilm & pathogenicity	[30]
Streptococcus agalactiae (GBS)	II-A (Cas9)	Endogenous regulation linked to colonization/immune evasion	Cas9 contributes to mucosal colonization & host interaction	[41]

QS = quorum sensing; AI-2 = autoinducer-2 (universal QS molecule); AHL = acyl-homoserine lactone. Up arrow (↑) and down arrow (↓) indicate an increase and a decrease in the corresponding phenotype, respectively.

2.3. Influence on Biofilm Formation

Biofilms are structured communities of bacteria encapsulated within a self-produced extracellular matrix, which adhere to surfaces. This mode of existence significantly enhances bacterial persistence by providing protection against antibiotics, desiccation, and host immune responses [42,43]. Bacteria in biofilms can be up to 1,000 times more resistant to antibiotics than free-living cells [43]. CRISPR-Cas systems play a significant role in modulating biofilm formation by regulating the expression of genes associated with biofilm production, including those encoding exopolysaccharides, adhesins, and matrix enzymes [44]. Additionally, these systems influence the signaling pathways that govern biofilm dynamics [44,45] . Under specific conditions, bacteria employ the CRISPR-Cas system to mitigate excessive biofilm accumulation. The overproduction of the biofilm matrix can occasionally impede nutrient access or result in energy wastage; thus, CRISPR-Cas functions to inhibit critical factors that promote biofilm formation. This process frequently involves the enhanced degradation of RNA transcripts or signaling molecules that trigger matrix production [46]. For example, when researchers employed a CRISPR-Cas9 system to target the quorum-sensing regulator sdiA in *Salmonella*, they noted a reduction in cell adhesion and biofilm

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formation [43]. This implies that the native CRISPR-Cas can similarly interfere with biofilm-promoting signals. By moderating transcription of biofilm-associated genes, CRISPR-Cas helps avoid hyper-biofilm formation that could impede growth or resource uptake.

In certain contexts, the activity of CRISPR-Cas systems can actually promote the development of biofilms, particularly when these biofilms function as protective environments against threats such as antibiotics or bacteriophages. A study was observed in *S. enterica*, where the deletion of the cas3 gene, which encodes the principal nuclease of a Type I-E CRISPR-Cas system, resulted in a marked reduction in biofilm formation. In contrast, the wild-type CRISPR-Cas system facilitated substantial biofilm development and enhanced virulence [32,36]. Transcriptomic analysis has demonstrated that the CRISPR-Cas system in wild-type Salmonella specifically targets the lsr operon, which is involved in the uptake and processing of the AI-2 quorum-sensing signal. By partially inhibiting the lsr genes, such as lsrF and lsrG, which are responsible for the degradation of AI-2, Cas3 facilitates the accumulation of AI-2. This accumulation subsequently inactivates the repressor LsrR and leads to the upregulation of the entire biofilm matrix production pathway. **[36]**. In essence, *Salmonella's* CRISPR-Cas boosts quorum-sensing signals to induce biofilm formation when it is beneficial for survival. Another study showed that a *Campylobacter jejuni* strain with an intact Type II-C CRISPR-Cas formed stronger biofilms than a CRISPR-deficient mutant, suggesting that without CRISPR control, biofilm formation was attenuated [39]. This dynamic regulation ensures that the biofilm maintains an optimal density, which is essential for providing adequate protection. It also prevents the biofilm from becoming excessively abundant, thereby allowing resources to be allocated more efficiently to other areas.

In addition to their direct impact on biofilm-related genes, CRISPR-Cas systems play a role in biofilm formation through their interactions with bacteriophages. Numerous bacterial genomes contain lysogenic phages (prophages), the activation of which can disrupt biofilms by either lysing host cells or modifying gene expression [47]. The CRISPR-Cas system serves as a regulatory mechanism for prophages. Bacteria frequently possess CRISPR spacers that correspond to prophage DNA, suggesting that the CRISPR system can target and sustain prophage dormancy. By regulating lysogenic phages, CRISPR-Cas contributes to the stability of biofilms and prevents abrupt phage-induced lysis within the microbial community. In the case of *Francisella*, both the Cas9 and Cas12a systems contain spacers against a resident prophage, ensuring its latency unless activation is required [28]. CRISPR-Cas helps protect biofilms from harmful viruses called lytic phages. If a phage enters a biofilm, bacteria with CRISPR-Cas can destroy the phage's DNA. This stops the biofilm from being destroyed [48]. In this way, CRISPR-Cas systems are critically important for bacterial resilience, particularly in the regulation of biofilms and interactions with lysogenic phages within specific environments. The phage defense is essential in environments where phages are prevalent. CRISPR-Cas systems offer a dual benefit to biofilms: they modulate the extent and architecture of the biofilm and function as a collective immune system against phage incursions. This ensures that bacterial communities form biofilms that are optimally robust—sufficiently strong to provide protection, yet not excessively overgrown to become detrimental—and remain resilient against external threats.

2.4. Interaction with Quorum-Sensing Mechanisms

Quorum sensing (QS) is a bacterial communication mechanism that coordinates population-wide behaviors through the release of signaling molecules known as autoinducers. When these signaling molecules reach a critical concentration, they trigger changes in gene expression, leading to collective behaviors such as biofilm formation, virulence factor production, and bioluminescence, among others [49]. By targeting and modulating key components of quorum sensing, CRISPR-Cas systems have the capacity to either enhance or suppress bacterial community behaviors [50]. The CRISPR-Cas system has the capability to bind to or cleave the DNA/RNA of key quorum-sensing (QS) regulators, thereby modulating the production or response of QS signals. By degrading the messenger RNAs of transcriptional regulators within QS circuits, CRISPR-Cas can attenuate or amplify QS signals. For instance, a CRISPR interference strategy that targeted the luxS gene,

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responsible for synthesizing the AI-2 autoinducer in *E. coli*, resulted in a significant reduction in biofilm formation (Figure 1) [43]. This demonstrates the principle that interfering with QS genes leads to altered group behavior. In natural environments, a bacterium's endogenous CRISPR-Cas system may similarly identify and cleave QS regulator mRNAs. This mechanism enables the system to suppress quorum-sensing signals and subsequent behaviors when such actions would be disadvantageous. Modulating QS can be beneficial to prevent premature expression of virulence factors or to remain undetected at low population densities [51].

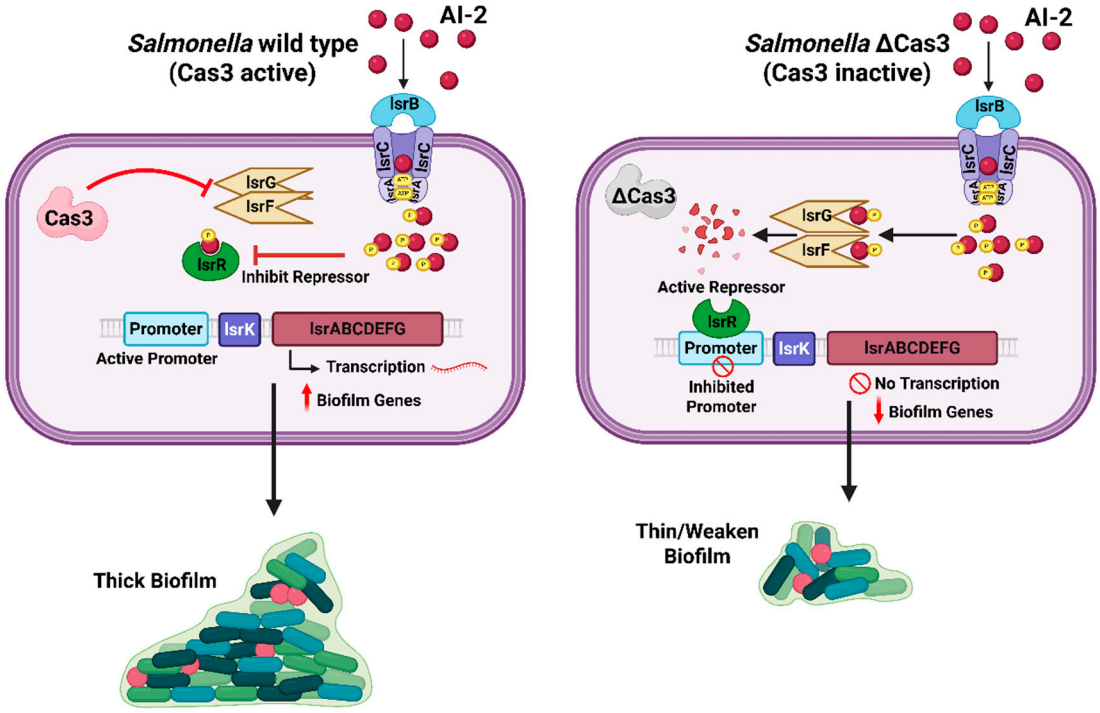

Figure 1. Role of Cas3 in regulating quorum sensing and biofilm formation in *Salmonella*. In wild *Salmonella*, Cas3 interferes with the activity of the *lsrF/G* genes, reducing degradation of the quorum-sensing signal autoinducer-2 (AI-2). This leads to the accumulation of AI-2, inhibition of the repressor LsrR, activation of the *lsr* operon promoter, and transcription of the *lsr* operon and other biofilm-associated genes, resulting in robust and thick biofilm formation. In the absence of Cas3, *lsrF/G* genes remain active, causing AI-2 degradation. The active repressor LsrR inhibits the *lsr* operon promoter, suppressing transcription of other *lsr* operon and associated biofilm-associated genes and leading to weakened, thin biofilm architecture (Created using Biorender.com).

QS is strongly linked to virulence in many pathogens. Pathogenic bacteria often use QS to turn on virulence genes only when they have a sufficient population to overwhelm the host [52]. By targeting QS pathways, CRISPR-Cas has the potential to modulate virulence in a density-dependent manner. The implication of this finding is that CRISPR-Cas systems influence quorum sensing within the framework of biofilm dynamics and pathogen production [45]. QS supports the production and dispersal of extracellular polymeric matrix components, such as those involved in bioluminescence-associated biofilm formation [53]. Meanwhile, CRISPR-Cas systems can indirectly influence these processes by modulating quorum sensing signals, for example, by targeting quorum sensing-regulatory mRNAs, thereby affecting matrix synthesis and dispersal through an indirect regulatory pathway [54]. Moreover, pathogenic bacteria regulate the expression of virulence genes through quorum-sensing systems. By targeting these signaling pathways, CRISPR-Cas systems hold the potential to modulate bacterial virulence.

2.5. Modulation of Virulence Factors

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CRISPR-Cas systems have emerged as significant modulators of bacterial virulence [26]. These systems can regulate the expression of virulence factor genes, thereby enabling pathogens to fine-tune their pathogenicity in response to environmental cues. This regulation can occur through the direct targeting of virulence gene transcripts. When a CRISPR-Cas system possesses a spacer that matches an endogenous virulence gene (or a regulator of virulence genes), the resulting crRNA-Cas complex can bind to and cause degradation or transcriptional repression of that mRNA, thus reducing the production of the virulence factor [55]. This mechanism enables bacteria to downregulate specific toxins or surface proteins when their expression may be disadvantageous, such as in scenarios where they could elicit a robust immune response under adverse conditions. Conversely, under conditions favorable for infection, relieving that CRISPR-based repression can quickly ramp up virulence factor production.

A well-documented instance is the Cas9-based CRISPR system in *F. novicida*, which primarily does not serve an immune function but instead targets one of the bacterium's own genes. Specifically, Cas9 represses an endogenous bacterial lipoprotein that is highly immunostimulatory to the host. By silencing the expression of this lipoprotein, the bacterium effectively conceals one of its molecular signatures from the host immune system. Consequently, this results in enhanced virulence: mutants lacking Cas9 (and thus unable to repress the lipoprotein) exhibit significantly reduced virulence due to increased detection by the host. A Δcas9 strain of *F. novicida* exhibits significant attenuation in animal models; however, the deletion of the immunostimulatory lipoprotein gene results in the restoration of virulence [28]. This finding underscores the critical role of Cas9 in regulating a specific virulence factor gene, which is essential for the pathogenicity of *F. novicida*.

Beyond the regulation of individual genes, CRISPR-Cas systems have the capacity to modulate entire virulence regulons. In the previously mentioned study on *Salmonella*, the presence of Cas3 was found to influence the Salmonella Pathogenicity Island-1 (SPI-1) regulon, which comprises a cluster of genes responsible for encoding a Type III secretion system and effectors necessary for host cell invasion. Notably, the majority of these invasion-related genes were markedly downregulated in the cas3-null mutant, suggesting that a functional CRISPR-Cas system is essential for the full activation of Salmonella's invasion machinery [36]. In Enterococcus faecalis, strains possessing a CRISPR-Cas system have been observed to result in higher mortality rates in mice compared to strains lacking CRISPR, indicating a potential association between CRISPR loci and virulence. [56]. Researchers hypothesize that the CRISPR-Cas system may modulate virulence by interacting with global regulatory elements or by detecting signals that enable the activation or repression of virulence genes as required [25].

2.6. Evasion of Host Immune Responses

Pathogenic microorganisms must effectively evade or withstand the host's immune response to ensure their survival. Bacteria have developed several CRISPR-Cas–mediated mechanisms to circumvent immune detection and destruction. CRISPR-Cas systems facilitate bacterial evasion of the immune system by downregulating the expression of highly immunogenic proteins on their surfaces. For instance, *F. novicida* employs Cas9 to suppress a surface lipoprotein that would otherwise elicit a robust immune response. [28]. By degrading the mRNA of these proteins or otherwise inhibiting their expression, the CRISPR-Cas system reduces the number of target molecules available for recognition by immune cells. This mechanism of immune evasion enables the bacterium to establish an initial presence within the host without immediately triggering the host's immune defenses.

Within a host organism, bacteria are subjected to reactive oxygen species (ROS), antimicrobial peptides, and various other stressors imposed by immune cells. The CRISPR-Cas system plays a crucial role in enhancing stress resistance, thereby facilitating immune evasion. Under conditions of oxidative stress, such as those encountered within a macrophage's phagolysosome, bacteria possessing active CRISPR-Cas systems exhibit improved capacity to manage cellular damage. In certain instances, the CRISPR-Cas system is upregulated in response to oxidative or envelope stress, thereby contributing to the prevention of DNA damage and other forms of cellular injury [25]. In

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Staphylococcus aureus, the Type III-A CRISPR-Cas system is activated in response to phage-induced oxidative stress, indicating its potential function in mitigating such adverse conditions [57]. Similarly, *Streptococcus anginosus* strains possessing CRISPR-Cas systems exhibited distinct stress survival profiles compared to those lacking such systems, suggesting a trade-off between immune function and stress tolerance [58].

As previously discussed, numerous bacteria employ QS to regulate virulence, often increasing the production of toxins or biofilm upon reaching high cell densities. Nevertheless, an intense QS response can also activate the immune system, for example, by prompting the bacteria to produce molecules that host cells recognize as foreign or harmful. The CRISPR-Cas system provides bacteria with a mechanism to modulate QS when a more hidden approach is required. An illustrative example is in *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, where the deletion of its cas3 gene resulted in elevated levels of the QS regulator LasR, which consequently rendered the infection more detectable by the host immune system through TLR4 recognition [35]. Under normal circumstances, the CRISPR-Cas system likely regulates QS-controlled virulence, maintaining it in check until the bacteria are prepared for a comprehensive attack. This concept is consistent with observations indicating that isolates from chronic infections frequently possess functional CRISPR systems and demonstrate reduced virulence, thereby facilitating persistent colonization rather than acute disease manifestation. Through mechanisms such as reducing antigenicity, enhancing stress resilience, and modifying communication signals, CRISPR-Cas systems play a crucial role in enabling bacteria to evade host immune responses. This dual functionality of CRISPR-Cas, offering both immune defense against phages and immune evasion from the host, positions it as a significant factor in pathogenesis.

3. Host Defense Against Horizontal Gene Transfer (HGT)

3.1. CRISPR-Cas Systems as Barriers to HGT

CRISPR-Cas systems are highly specialized adaptive immune systems of bacteria and archaea that are essential to protect genomic integrity by mitigating horizontal gene transfer (HGT) [59]. HGT, known as the movement of genetic material between organisms independent of classical reproduction, is one of the main methods by which bacteria attain beneficial characteristics like antibiotic resistance or virulence factors [60]. Although HGT allows for genetic diversity, it comes at a considerable threat to bacterial populations by introducing potentially harmful or disruptive genetic material. CRISPR-Cas systems act as a barrier to protect bacteria, specifically by targeting and inactivating foreign genetic material [61]. Mobile genetic elements (MGEs), such as plasmids, transposons, and bacteriophages, represent significant vectors for HGT. CRISPR-Cas systems recognize these elements through PAMs [62]. Once recognized, the Cas effector complex binds to the target DNA, initiating its cleavage and degradation. For example, in *Escherichia coli*, the Type I-E CRISPR-Cas system employs a multi-subunit Cascade complex to recognize and bind the target DNA, while the Cas3 nuclease degrades the DNA in a processive manner [63]. This targeted degradation prevents the replication and integration of MGEs, effectively halting the spread of foreign genetic material within the bacterial population.

Plasmids and bacteriophages are key vectors for gene exchange within microbial populations. Plasmids usually encode genes for antibiotic resistance or metabolic benefit, whereas bacteriophages enable lysogenic conversion and stimulate the horizontal dissemination of virulence factors [64]. The CRISPR-Cas systems are remarkable for their efficacy at combating these issues. Studies have shown that those of *Streptococcus thermophilus* have a powerful capacity to recognize and cleave phage DNA, to give protection against phage infections [59]. As a result, the acquisition of plasmids is limited by site-specific cleavage at replication origins or essential maintenance genes. The restriction ensures that only those plasmids lacking CRISPR-targeting sequences are able to survive and thus control influxes of potentially harmful genetic material.

Beyond single bacterial cells, the activity of CRISPR-Cas systems shapes the genetic landscape of whole microbial communities. By selectively restricting the propagation of MGEs, these systems

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shape the gene pool available for HGT, affecting microbial diversity and evolutionary paths [65]. For example, the inhibition of conjugative plasmids by CRISPR-Cas systems in *Enterococcus faecalis* has been correlated with decreased spread of antibiotic resistance genes in clinical settings [66]. Although CRISPR-Cas systems are effective, they encounter some challenges. Certain mobile genetic elements (MGEs) have evolved mechanisms to counteract CRISPR systems, including the production of anti-CRISPR proteins that inhibit the activity of CRISPR effector complexes [67]. Furthermore, the energetic burden associated with CRISPR-Cas system maintenance and function may result in their disappearance in environments where the likelihood of HGT is minimal [68]. Elucidating these dynamics is important for harnessing CRISPR-Cas systems for biotechnological and clinical purposes.

3.2. Prevention of Lysogenic Conversion

Lysogenic conversion occurs when bacteriophages insert their genetic material into bacterial chromosomes in the form of prophages. While this process can sometimes bring adaptive benefits, e.g., the acquisition of toxin genes or stress-resistance traits. However, it poses substantial dangers at the same time [69]. Prophage integration can disrupt the regulation of host genes, reduce genome stability, destabilize cellular processes, and even cause the lysis of host cells under unfavorable conditions. The CRISPR-Cas systems work to mitigate these risks by blocking prophage integration and actively targeting integrated prophage sequences for degradation. These systems recognize specific sequences within the phage genome during or shortly after the infection process, thereby inhibiting the successful integration of phage DNA into the host chromosome [70]. For example, Type I and Type II CRISPR-Cas systems have been shown to inhibit phage lysogeny by degrading the phage DNA before it can recombine with the bacterial genome [71,72]. This mechanism guarantees that only phages devoid of CRISPR-targeted sequences can establish lysogeny, thereby restricting the spread of potentially harmful prophages. By preventing prophage integration, CRISPR-Cas systems play a vital role in maintaining bacterial genome stability.

The inhibition of lysogenic conversion significantly impacts the broader dynamics between phages and their bacterial hosts. By restricting the capacity of temperate phages to establish lysogeny, CRISPR-Cas systems compel these phages to either adopt a lytic lifestyle or develop escape mutations. This interaction influences the co-evolutionary processes between bacteria and phages, thereby affecting the structure and stability of microbial communities. Furthermore, CRISPR-mediated suppression of lysogeny diminishes the horizontal transfer of prophage-associated genes, such as those encoding virulence factors or antibiotic resistance determinants, thereby enhancing the protection of the microbial genome [61,73]. Despite their effectiveness, the inhibitory role of CRISPR-Cas systems in lysogeny is not fully explored. Some bacteriophages have evolved mechanisms to evade CRISPR targeting, including mutating their target sequences or carrying anti-CRISPR proteins [74]. Future research could focus on enhancing CRISPR-Cas activity through synthetic biology approaches, potentially creating engineered systems capable of broader or more precise targeting of lysogenic phages.

3.3. Influence on Antibiotic Resistance Spread

CRISPR-Cas systems are essential for preventing the spread of antibiotic resistance genes, a significant public health issue. HGT mechanisms, including conjugation, transformation, and transduction, commonly mediate the transfer of resistance genes among bacterial species [75]. By targeting and degrading MGEs that carry antibiotic resistance genes, CRISPR-Cas systems restrict their spread and ensure the sustained effectiveness of antibiotics. Plasmids and integrative conjugative elements (ICEs) are common vectors for resistance genes. CRISPR-Cas systems are able to recognize these MGEs based on sequence-specific recognition and degrade their DNA, preventing their horizontal transfer [76,77]. For example, research has shown that CRISPR-Cas systems in *Enterococcus faecalis* target plasmids that bear vancomycin resistance genes, successfully inhibiting the spread of resistance in microbial populations [78]. Type I and II CRISPR systems in other bacterial

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species have also been found to prevent the conjugative transfer of resistance genes, indicating their significance in antimicrobial resistance control [79].

In addition to limiting the dissemination of existing resistance genes, CRISPR-Cas systems are involved in preventing the development of novel resistance mechanisms. By mitigating the acquisition of foreign DNA, these systems limit the genetic diversity available for selection under antibiotic pressure. This restriction slows the emergence of multidrug-resistant strains, particularly in environments with high antibiotic use, such as hospitals and agricultural setups [80]. Engineered CRISPR-Cas systems have also demonstrated potential in the battle against resistance. For example, synthetic CRISPR constructs targeting β-lactamase genes have been successfully delivered to bacterial populations via conjugative plasmids, which selectively kill resistant strains without harming susceptible bacteria [76,77]. Such applications represent promising approaches to addressing the global problem of antimicrobial resistance.

The activity of CRISPR-Cas systems has a profound impact on microbial population dynamics by altering competitive interactions among species. Bacteria that have effective CRISPR-Cas systems are better at excluding their competitors from picking up resistance genes, which in turn alters the balance of microbial communities. This selective pressure can cause the overall prevalence of resistance genes to reduce in a population, thus promoting a healthier ecosystem where antibiotic therapies remain effective [81]. In addition, the capacity of CRISPR-Cas systems to prevent the spread of resistance genes may help to delay the development of resistance hotspots in environments where there is high exposure to antibiotics, including wastewater treatment plants or hospital effluent systems [82]. These ecological effects highlight the important role played by CRISPR-Cas systems in maintaining microbial diversity and mitigating the global antimicrobial resistance crisis.

Despite their potential, natural CRISPR-Cas systems exhibit certain limitations in addressing antibiotic resistance. Some bacterial species completely lack CRISPR-Cas systems, while others may possess inactive or less effective variants [83]. Additionally, MGE has developed mechanisms to avoid CRISPR-Cas targeting, such as sequence mutations or the production of anti-CRISPR proteins, which can compromise the efficiency of these systems [73]. Future research should prioritize the development of engineered CRISPR-Cas systems to directly target and eliminate resistance genes across diverse bacterial populations. Integrating CRISPR-based strategies with existing antimicrobial stewardship programs and environmental interventions could significantly enhance efforts to mitigate the spread of antibiotic resistance. Moreover, investigating the co-evolution of CRISPR-Cas systems and MGEs may uncover novel strategies to strengthen bacterial defenses against HGT.

3.4. Balancing Genetic Diversity and Stability

CRISPR-Cas systems play a dual role in bacterial populations, balancing the need for genetic stability with the necessity for genetic diversity. This balance is essential for microbial persistence, allowing adaptation to changing environments while protecting against the disruptive effects of uncontrolled HGT [84]. One of the main roles of CRISPR-Cas systems is to restrict gene flow by detecting and degrading foreign DNA. This activity ensures genomic stability by reducing the integration of potentially harmful MGEs, such as plasmids, transposons, and prophages [85]. For example, by blocking the uptake of antibiotic resistance genes or virulence factors, CRISPR-Cas systems protect bacterial populations from traits that could otherwise compromise their fitness in certain environments [86]. However, this limitation on gene flow also limits the genetic innovation opportunities, which is essential for adaptation. The uptake of genes via HGT can provide bacteria with novel traits that enhance survival under stressful conditions, such as exposure to antibiotics or environmental toxins [87]. Some studies suggest that bacteria with less active CRISPR-Cas systems may have greater potential for taking up adaptive traits through HGT, thus providing them with a competitive advantage in rapidly changing environments [88,89]. This trade-off highlights the evolutionary pressures on CRISPR-Cas systems to balance defensive functions and flexibility. While stringent targeting of MGEs prevents harmful effects, overly restrictive CRISPR activity could prevent the acquisition of beneficial traits, thus reducing long-term adaptability.

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The influence of CRISPR-Cas systems extends beyond individual organisms, affecting entire microbial communities. By regulating the spread of MGE, these systems control the exchange of genetic material within and among bacterial populations. This regulatory function has profound effects on microbial ecology, including the structuring of populations, niche differentiation, and resilience of communities [11,90,91]. For example, in environments where there is intense predation by bacteriophages, bacteria possessing active CRISPR-Cas systems can dominate due to their resistance to phage infection. In contrast, the environments where genetic exchange is beneficial, e.g., biofilms or microbiomes, bacteria with less active or no CRISPR-Cas systems can dominate owing to their greater potential for genetic exchange [92].

In addition, CRISPR-Cas systems contribute significantly to microbial adaptation by shaping the genetic diversity available for evolutionary selection. Through the allowance of some genetic elements while precluding others, these systems create a filter that directs the evolutionary trajectory of bacterial populations. This filtering effect has been observed in natural environments, where the diversity of CRISPR arrays is linked to the range of environmental challenges faced by bacterial communities [11]. Although CRISPR-Cas systems play a crucial role in maintaining a balance between genetic diversity and stability, they are not devoid of limitations. The metabolic cost of maintaining these systems can be significant, leading some bacteria to lose CRISPR-Cas loci in environments where HGT is not a significant threat [93]. Additionally, the specificity of CRISPR targeting may be manipulated by MGEs that develop strategies to evade detection, such as through the mutation of target sequences or the expression of anti-CRISPR proteins [94]. Future research should focus on understanding the ecological and evolutionary factors that drive the diversity of CRISPR-Cas systems in microbial populations. Investigating the interplay between CRISPR activity, environmental pressures, and microbial community dynamics could provide insights into how these systems shape bacterial evolution.

3.5. Acquisition of CRISPR-Cas Systems via HGT

The acquisition of CRISPR-Cas systems through HGT is an interesting aspect of bacterial evolution that underscores the dynamic nature of microbial genomes. Despite the fact that CRISPR-Cas systems are largely considered barriers to HGT, they themselves can be horizontally transferred between species, leading to the patchy distribution of these systems in bacterial populations [61]. Comparative genomics studies have uncovered several cases in which CRISPR-Cas loci have been transferred horizontally between bacterial species. These transfers tend to happen via MGE, like plasmids or transposons, that acquire and spread CRISPR-associated genes [85,95,96]. For example, researchers have reported the horizontal transfer of Type I and Type III CRISPR-Cas loci within and among varied members of the family Enterobacteriaceae, suggesting that these systems can become broadly disseminated across phylogenetic divides [97,98].

Horizontal acquisition of CRISPR-Cas loci may encode unique spacer sequences that enable recipient bacteria to quickly acquire adaptive immunity against phages and other MGEs, providing immediate survival benefits under hostile conditions. It is especially beneficial in ecosystems with high phage diversity or elevated HGT rates, where bacterial populations need to continuously evolve to prevent extinction [24]. Such events can lead to rapid shifts in microbial community dynamics, influencing competition, adaptation, and overall ecosystem stability[99]. The horizontal transfer of CRISPR-Cas systems helps explain their uneven distribution among bacterial populations. Although some species have highly diverse and active CRISPR arrays, others do not have these systems at all. This uneven distribution is likely the result of a mixture of ecological pressures, including phage pressure, and evolutionary trade-offs, such as the metabolic burden of CRISPR-Cas locus maintenance [11].

While horizontal transfer enables the dissemination of CRISPR-Cas systems, it also presents challenges. The integration of foreign CRISPR loci into a recipient genome can disrupt existing regulatory networks or impose metabolic burdens, potentially reducing fitness [100]. Moreover, the functionality of horizontally acquired CRISPR-Cas systems may be compromised if essential

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components are not co-transferred or if incompatibility arises with the host's existing genetic machinery [101]. The horizontal transfer of CRISPR-Cas systems also points to their double function as both barriers and promoters of HGT. By taking part in their own spread, CRISPR-Cas systems play a role in the wider evolutionary context of microbial life by facilitating the rapid adaptation to environmental pressures. This duality underscores the complexity of bacterial evolution and the multifaceted interaction between defense mechanisms and genetic exchange in the establishment of microbial diversity and robustness.

4. Future Directions in CRISPR-Cas Research and Host Interaction

4.1. Expanding CRISPR Applications Beyond Immunity

Initially identified as an adaptive immune mechanism, CRISPR-Cas is now acknowledged for its broader roles in bacterial biology. Recent research has uncovered non-canonical functions of CRISPR-Cas systems that affect bacterial physiology and interactions with hosts. These "moonlighting" activities encompass roles in stress tolerance, virulence, biofilm formation, DNA repair, and other cellular processes, suggesting that CRISPR components may engage in gene regulation and signaling functions beyond their established role in immunity [102].

4.2. Development of CRISPR-Based Antimicrobials

CRISPR-based antimicrobials are being developed to specifically target pathogens, offering a precise strategy against multidrug-resistant bacteria. By programming CRISPR-Cas nucleases to cleave antibiotic resistance genes or essential bacterial sequences, researchers can selectively eliminate or neutralize drug-resistant strains. For example, the CRISPR/Cas9 system has been employed to eradicate plasmids harboring resistance genes in S. aureus and E. coli, thereby reinstating their susceptibility to antibiotics. Furthermore, CRISPR interference (CRISPRi) strategies have been utilized to disrupt biofilm-associated infections. Specifically, the silencing of QS and adhesion genes via CRISPR has demonstrated remarkable efficacy in reducing biofilm formation and enhancing the treatment of persistent infections. These advancements underscore CRISPR's potential as a novel class of "smart" antibiotics, specifically designed to address antibiotic resistance and biofilm-related diseases [103].

4.3. Understanding CRISPR–Host Co-Evolution

Bacteria and bacteriophages are engaged in a continuous evolutionary arms race, with the CRISPR-Cas system serving as a crucial defense mechanism that drives mutual adaptation. As bacteria acquire new spacers to defend against phages, viruses counter-evolve through escape mutations or the production of anti-CRISPR proteins that neutralize the bacterial immune system. This reciprocal evolution fosters rapid genetic change and sustains diversity within microbial populations. Indeed, bacteria–phage coevolution is a significant driver of microbial diversity and community dynamics, influencing which bacterial strains persist and how microbial communities evolve over time [104]. Studying these CRISPR-mediated interactions offers valuable insights into the adaptive evolution of both microorganisms and their viral counterparts, highlighting a continuous "evolutionary arms race" that influences microbial ecosystems.

4.4. CRISPR-Cas in Host–Microbiome Engineering

Utilizing CRISPR technology for microbiome engineering represents a growing area of research with significant implications for health, agriculture, and disease prevention. Researchers are investigating CRISPR-based methodologies to selectively edit or eliminate specific microbes within complex microbial communities, with the objective of beneficially modulating the microbiome. For example, a Phase 2 clinical trial utilizing CRISPR-enhanced bacteriophages (phage therapy augmented with CRISPR technology) demonstrated a significant reduction in pathogenic E. coli

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among patients with urinary tract infections, resulting in improved symptoms. In a separate study, CRISPR gene-editing was applied to modify the gut microbiota composition in mice, effectively preventing the manifestation of a disease phenotype, such as reducing the risk of asthma by reshaping the microbiome [105]. These findings underscore the potential of CRISPR technology to precisely manipulate microbiomes for health benefits. Similar approaches are anticipated in agriculture, such as modifying soil or plant microbiomes to enhance crop resilience, and in precision medicine to address conditions linked to the microbiome. Nevertheless, CRISPR-based microbiome editing is still in its early stages and faces challenges related to delivery, stability, and safety that must be addressed before it can be widely applied. Ongoing initiatives, such as the BIOME project, are actively engaged in the development of safer and more efficient CRISPR microbiome editors, highlighting the potential of this approach for future therapeutic applications and ecosystem management. [105].

4.5. Synthetic Biology and CRISPR Innovations

Synthetic biology is advancing CRISPR-Cas innovations by designing systems tailored for specific applications and integrating CRISPR with other technologies. One approach involves the creation or discovery of novel Cas variants engineered for specialized tasks. For example, the introduction of Cas12 and Cas13 enzymes has expanded the CRISPR toolkit beyond Cas9, enabling multiplex DNA edits and direct RNA targeting for host applications that necessitate these capabilities [106,107]. Researchers are integrating CRISPR with complementary biotechnological tools to develop multifunctional platforms. This approach includes employing nanotechnology to enhance the delivery of CRISPR components, incorporating CRISPR-based gene circuits into cells, and utilizing machine learning to optimize guide RNA design and predict off-target effects [106,108,109]. The integration of CRISPR with other advanced technologies seeks to enhance both precision and versatility. For instance, the development of high-fidelity Cas proteins aims to minimize off-target effects, while coupling CRISPR with transcriptional regulators facilitates the creation of programmable cellular "devices." These endeavors in synthetic biology suggest the potential for custom-designed CRISPR systems that can be precisely tailored for various host organisms and complex tasks, thereby advancing next-generation genome engineering and therapeutic applications [110–112].

5. Conclusions

CRISPR-Cas systems serve not only as prokaryotic immune defenses but also as pivotal regulators of bacterial adaptation and survival in complex environments. By orchestrating immunity against phages, regulating endogenous genes, modulating biofilm formation and quorum sensing, and fine-tuning virulence, these systems exemplify the intricate interplay between microbes and their hosts. Their evolutionary plasticity, coupled with emerging synthetic and therapeutic applications, positions CRISPR-Cas as a cornerstone of both microbial ecology and biotechnology. Continued exploration of their roles in host-pathogen interactions will not only deepen our understanding of bacterial physiology but also unlock new strategies for antimicrobial innovation and microbiome-based interventions.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CRISPR	Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats
Cas	CRISPR-associated protein
AI-2	Autoinducer-2 (universal quorum-sensing molecule)
AHL	Acyl-homoserine lactone
BLP	Bacterial lipoprotein
EPS	Extracellular polymeric substances (biofilm matrix)
MGE	Mobile genetic element
QS	Quorum sensing
ROS	Reactive oxygen species
SPI-1	Salmonella pathogenicity island 1
TLR2	Toll-like receptor 2
TLR4	Toll-like receptor 4
WT	Wild type

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