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CRISPR to the rescue? Gene editing vs. Resistance.

Cristina Martin*

Division of Infectious Diseases, Harvard Medical School, USA

***Correspondence to:** Cristina Martin, Division of Infectious Diseases, Harvard Medical School, USA , E-mail: Chri.martin@gmail.com

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Introduction

Antibiotic resistance has emerged as one of the most pressing global health threats of the 21st century. As bacteria evolve to evade even our most potent drugs, scientists are turning to an unlikely ally: CRISPR. Originally discovered as a bacterial immune system, CRISPR-Cas systems have rapidly become the cornerstone of modern gene editing. But can this molecular scalpel truly help us outsmart resistant microbes? CRISPR (Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats) is a revolutionary gene-editing tool that allows scientists to cut and modify DNA with unprecedented precision. Paired with Cas enzymes—most famously Cas9—CRISPR can target specific genetic sequences, enabling researchers to silence, replace, or enhance genes [1, 2].

Originally found in bacteria as a defense mechanism against viruses, CRISPR has been repurposed to edit genomes across species—from plants to humans. Its simplicity, affordability, and versatility have made it a game-changer in biotechnology. Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) occurs when bacteria, viruses, fungi, or parasites evolve to resist the drugs designed to kill them. Overuse and misuse of antibiotics in medicine and agriculture have accelerated this process. The World Health Organization warns that AMR could cause 10 million deaths annually by 2050 [3, 4].

Traditional antibiotics target essential bacterial functions like cell wall synthesis or protein production. But bacteria fight back through:These mechanisms make infections harder to treat, leading to longer hospital stays, higher costs, and increased mortality. CRISPR offers a novel approach to combating resistance by directly targeting the genes responsible for it. Here's how: CRISPR-Cas9 can be programmed to cut resistance genes like *blaNDM-1* or *mcr-1*, rendering bacteria susceptible to antibiotics again [5, 6].

Many resistance genes reside on plasmids—mobile DNA elements. CRISPR can selectively eliminate these plasmids without harming the host bacterium. CRISPR screening helps identify genes that, when silenced, make bacteria more sensitive to antibiotics. This can guide combination therapies. Engineered bacteriophages can deliver CRISPR payloads to resistant bacteria, offering targeted antimicrobial action. A 2025 study showed that CRISPR-Cas9 could eliminate *KPC-2* and *IMP-4* resistance genes, restoring antibiotic sensitivity in *E. coli*. In cancer research, CRISPR has been used to knock out drug efflux genes, enhancing chemotherapy efficacy [7, 8].

CRISPR-based diagnostics can detect resistance genes in clinical samples, enabling rapid and precise treatment decisions. Getting CRISPR systems into bacteria in vivo remains complex. Phages, nanoparticles, and conjugative plasmids are being explored. Unintended edits could disrupt beneficial genes or microbiota. Ironically, bacteria may evolve mechanisms to evade CRISPR-based attacks. Releasing gene-edited organisms into the environment raises ecological and ethical questions. In a 2025 breakthrough, researchers developed CRISPR-GPT, an AI tool that guides novice scientists through CRISPR experiments. First-time users achieved up to 90% editing efficiency, highlighting the potential for widespread adoption. CRISPR is also being used to combat vector-borne diseases. Scientists have edited mosquito genes to prevent them from biting or transmitting malaria. A single amino acid change in the FREP1 gene rendered mosquitoes resistant to

Plasmodium infection, slashing transmission rates by 93% [9, 10].

Conclusion

CRISPR is not a silver bullet, but it's a powerful addition to our antimicrobial arsenal. Its ability to precisely target resistance genes offers hope in an era of dwindling antibiotic efficacy. As delivery methods improve and ethical frameworks evolve, CRISPR could redefine how we treat infections, design drugs, and safeguard public health.

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