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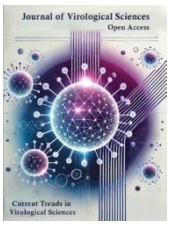

Perspective

Advancements in Vaccine Technology for Universal Influenza Vaccines

Rachel Kim*

Division of Virology, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA

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Abstract

Seasonal influenza vaccines offer limited protection due to the rapid antigenic drift of influenza viruses, necessitating annual reformulation. The threat of influenza pandemics further underscores the urgent need for broadly protective, or "universal," influenza vaccines. This perspective article explores the cutting-edge advancements in vaccine technology aimed at achieving this goal. We discuss innovative approaches targeting conserved viral antigens, novel delivery systems, and immunomodulatory strategies designed to elicit durable and cross-reactive immune responses against diverse influenza strains. The successful development of a universal influenza vaccine would represent a paradigm shift in influenza prevention and pandemic preparedness.

Introduction

Influenza viruses are a significant cause of respiratory illness worldwide, leading to substantial morbidity, mortality, and economic burden. Current seasonal influenza vaccines primarily target the highly variable hemagglutinin (HA) and neuraminidase (NA) glycoproteins on the viral surface. However, the continuous antigenic drift in these proteins necessitates annual vaccine reformulation to match circulating strains, often resulting in suboptimal protection. Furthermore, the unpredictable emergence of novel pandemic influenza viruses with the potential for high virulence highlights the critical need for broadly protective vaccines that can offer immunity against a wide range of influenza subtypes, regardless of antigenic variation. This perspective article will explore the exciting advancements in vaccine technology that are paving the way for the development of universal influenza vaccines.

The Limitations of Current Seasonal Influenza Vaccines

Traditional inactivated and live-attenuated influenza vaccines induce strain-specific neutralizing antibodies primarily targeting the globular head region of the HA protein. While effective when the vaccine strains are well-matched to the circulating viruses their efficacy can be significantly reduced during seasons with antigenic drift or when facing a pandemic strain with a novel HA or NA. This limitation underscores the urgency to develop vaccines that can elicit broadly reactive and durable immune responses against conserved regions of the influenza virus.

Novel Approaches Targeting Conserved Antigens

The quest for a universal influenza vaccine focuses on eliciting immune responses against more conserved regions of the virus, which are less susceptible to mutation. Several promising targets are under investigation:

- **The Hemagglutinin (HA) Stalk Domain:** The stalk domain of the HA protein is more conserved than the globular head and is a target for broadly neutralizing antibodies. Vaccine strategies aimed at focusing the immune response on the stalk domain, such as headless HA constructs or chimeric HA antigens, are showing promise in preclinical and early clinical trials. These approaches aim to elicit antibodies that can neutralize a broader range of influenza subtypes within the same group (e.g., H1-like or H3-like).
- **The Matrix Protein 2 Ectodomain (M2e):** M2e is a highly conserved extracellular domain of the M2 protein found in influenza A viruses. Vaccines targeting M2e can induce broadly reactive antibodies that interfere with viral replication. However, M2e is relatively small and poorly immunogenic, necessitating the use of multiple copies or fusion to carrier proteins to enhance immunogenicity.
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*Correspondence to: Rachel Kim, Division of Virology, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA, E-mail: r.kim@uwvirology.edu

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- **Nucleoprotein (NP) and Matrix Protein 1 (M1):** These internal viral proteins are highly conserved across influenza A subtypes and are recognized by cellular immune responses, particularly cytotoxic T lymphocytes (CTLs). Vaccines that elicit strong and broadly reactive CTL responses targeting these internal antigens could provide protection against severe disease, even if they don't completely prevent infection.
- **Neuraminidase (NA) Stalk and Other Conserved Epitopes:** While NA is also subject to antigenic variation, certain regions, particularly the stalk domain, are more conserved. Targeting these regions, alone or in combination with other conserved antigens, is being explored as a strategy to broaden protection.

Innovative vaccine technology platforms

Advancements in vaccine technology are playing a crucial role in the development of universal influenza vaccines.

- **Nanoparticle-based vaccines:** Nanoparticles can be engineered to display multiple copies of conserved antigens in a highly organized manner, enhancing their immunogenicity and promoting the activation of B cells and T cells. Different types of nanoparticles, including protein nanoparticles, virus-like particles (VLPs), and liposomes, are being explored for universal influenza vaccine delivery.
- **Viral-vectored vaccines:** These vaccines use a harmless virus (the vector) and it to deliver genetic material encoding conserved influenza antigens into host cells, where the antigens are then expressed, triggering an immune response. Adenoviruses, lentiviruses, and other viral vectors are being investigated for their ability to elicit both humoral and cellular immunity against conserved influenza targets.
- **DNA and mRNA Vaccines:** Nucleic acid-based vaccines offer the advantage of rapid design and manufacturing. DNA and mRNA encoding conserved influenza antigens can be delivered directly into host cells, leading to antigen expression and immune activation. mRNA vaccines, in particular, have shown great promise due to their high efficacy and safety profile, as demonstrated by their success against COVID-19.
- **Adjuvants and immunomodulators:** Adjuvants are substances added to vaccines to enhance the immune response. Novel adjuvants are being developed to specifically boost the breadth, magnitude, and durability of immune responses against conserved influenza antigens. Immunomodulatory strategies aim to shape the immune response towards more broadly protective mechanisms, such as the induction of broadly neutralizing antibodies and cross-reactive T cells.

Conclusion

The development of a universal influenza vaccine represents a major goal in public health, with the potential to significantly reduce the burden of seasonal influenza and provide crucial protection against future pandemics. Advancements in vaccine technology, coupled with a deeper understanding of influenza virus immunology, are driving innovation in this field. By focusing on conserved viral antigens, utilizing novel delivery systems and adjuvants, and fostering continued research and collaboration, the realization of a broadly protective and durable universal influenza vaccine is becoming increasingly within reach. This breakthrough would mark a transformative step in our ability to combat the ever-evolving threat of influenza viruses.