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Challenges and Opportunities in Antiviral Drug Discovery

Mika Lusie*

Department of Chemistry, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom

Correspondence to: Mika Lusie, Department of Chemistry, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom, Email: lusie.mika@gmail.com

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DESCRIPTION

Antiviral drug discovery plays a critical role in global public health by combating viral infections that pose significant morbidity and mortality worldwide. Despite notable successes in treating diseases such as HIV, hepatitis B and C, and influenza, the discovery and development of effective antiviral agents remain highly challenging. Rapid viral mutation, emerging and re-emerging viral pathogens, limited therapeutic targets, and safety concerns complicate the process. At the same time, advances in molecular biology, computational chemistry, artificial intelligence, and drug delivery technologies have opened new opportunities. This study discusses the major challenges in antiviral drug discovery and highlights emerging opportunities that are shaping the future of antiviral therapeutics. Viruses are obligate intracellular pathogens that rely heavily on host cellular machinery for replication. This dependence makes antiviral drug discovery uniquely complex, as therapeutic agents must selectively inhibit viral processes without harming host cells. The global impact of viral outbreaks such as HIV/AIDS, Ebola, Zika, and more recently COVID-19 has underscored the urgent need for effective antiviral drugs. While vaccines remain the cornerstone of viral prevention, antiviral drugs are essential for treatment, outbreak control, and protection of vulnerable populations.

Major challenges in antiviral drug discovery

Rapid viral mutation and drug resistance one of the most significant challenges in antiviral drug discovery is the high mutation rate of many viruses, particularly RNA viruses. Viral mutations can quickly lead to drug resistance, reducing the long-term effectiveness of antiviral agents. Resistance has been well documented in HIV, influenza, and hepatitis viruses, often necessitating combination therapies or the continual development of new drugs. Limited viral targets viruses have small genomes and encode relatively few proteins, which limits the number of druggable targets. Moreover, many viral proteins lack well-defined binding pockets, making them difficult to target using conventional small-molecule drugs. Targeting host factors involved in viral replication offers an alternative strategy but increases the risk of host toxicity. Because viruses hijack host cellular pathways, distinguishing between viral and host processes is challenging. Antiviral drugs that interfere with host mechanisms can lead to off-target effects and toxicity. Achieving a favourable therapeutic index high antiviral efficacy with minimal host damage remains a central challenge. The continuous emergence of new viral threats poses a major obstacle. Drug discovery is often reactive rather than proactive, with therapeutics developed only after an outbreak occurs. This lag can result in significant loss of life and economic disruption, as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Antiviral drug development is time-consuming and expensive, often taking over a decade from discovery to market approval. High failure rates in clinical trials, regulatory hurdles, and limited commercial incentives for drugs targeting rare or outbreak-specific viruses further complicate development efforts.

Opportunities in antiviral drug discovery

Improved understanding of viral life cycles, protein structures, and host–virus interactions has enabled the identification of novel therapeutic targets. Techniques such as cryo-electron microscopy and next-generation sequencing have accelerated structural and functional insights into viral proteins. Computational methods, including molecular docking, molecular dynamics simulations, and Quantitative Structure–Activity Relationship (QSAR) modeling, have transformed antiviral drug discovery. Artificial intelligence and machine learning enable rapid screening of large compound libraries, prediction of drug–target interactions, and optimization of lead compounds, significantly reducing time and cost. The development of broad-spectrum antivirals that are effective against multiple viruses represents a promising opportunity. Such agents can be deployed rapidly

during outbreaks and provide first-line defence against emerging pathogens before virus-specific drugs are developed. Drug repurposing has gained attention as a fast and cost-effective approach to antiviral therapy. Existing drugs with known safety profiles can be evaluated for antiviral activity, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. This strategy can significantly shorten development timelines. Advances in nanotechnology and targeted drug delivery systems offer improved antiviral efficacy and reduced toxicity. Nanocarriers can enhance drug stability, bioavailability, and targeted delivery to infected tissues or cells.

Future perspectives

The future of antiviral drug discovery lies in integrated, multidisciplinary approaches that combine medicinal chemistry, computational science, systems biology, and clinical research. Global collaboration, open data sharing, and pandemic preparedness initiatives are essential to accelerate antiviral development. Personalized medicine, driven by viral genomics and host genetic profiling, may further optimize antiviral therapy and minimize resistance. Antiviral drug discovery faces numerous challenges, including viral resistance, limited targets, safety concerns, and high development costs. However, rapid technological advancements and innovative strategies are creating unprecedented opportunities. By leveraging computational tools, broad-spectrum approaches, and collaborative research models, the field is well positioned to address current and future viral threats. Continued investment and scientific innovation are essential to ensure global readiness against emerging viral diseases.