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Innovations in mRNA-based cancer immunotherapy: Challenges and future directions

Matthew Essuah [1,*], Buniechukwuenu Emmanuel Mbamalu [2], Ridwan Ayodele Akanmu [3], Sunday Kaura [4], Barakat Tope Kareem [5], David Oluwafemi Ibikunle [6] and Hajara Hashim [7]

[1] *Department of Allied Health Sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana.*
[2] *Department of Medicine, St George's University, Grenada.*
[3] *Department of Medicine, University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri, Nigeria.*
[4] *Department of Medical Biochemistry, Veritas University Abuja, Nigeria.*
[5] *Department of Chemistry, Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Nigeria.*
[6] *Department of Medicine and Surgery, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife, Nigeria.*
[7] *Department of Biological Sciences, Gombe State University, Gombe, Nigeria.*

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Abstract

Messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccines have quickly become a potent tool in cancer immunotherapy, with the potential to personalise cancer treatment and get around many of the drawbacks of conventional therapies. With an emphasis on their processes, technological developments, and clinical applications, this study examines the scientific breakthroughs and difficulties surrounding mRNA cancer vaccines. We begin by investigating the ways in which mRNA vaccines work to stimulate the immune system, encode antigens specific to tumours, and elicit a potent anti-tumor response. We also look at the variety of mRNA vaccines which are currently being deployed and emphasize their successes in clinical studies, especially when combined with immune checkpoint inhibitors. The effectiveness and safety of these vaccines have been significantly increased by technological developments, such as enhancements in mRNA stability, design, and delivery systems (such as lipid nanoparticles and polyplexes). Emerging technologies like circular RNA and self-amplifying present promising opportunities for enduring and more potent therapies. But there are still limitations with mRNA vaccines, such as stability, immunogenicity, degradation, and effective in vivo delivery. Concerns about possible adverse effects and safety in long-term applications are also covered in this review. Despite these obstacles, novel approaches are being developed to boost antigen expression, optimize delivery systems, and improve mRNA stability, establishing mRNA vaccines as a crucial component of tailored cancer immunotherapy. These developments provide the foundation for upcoming advances in mRNA vaccine technology and represent a major breakthrough in the fight against cancer.

Keywords: Antigen expression; Immunotherapy; mRNA cancer vaccines; mRNA stability; Personalized cancer treatments; Self-amplifying RNA

1. Introduction

The rise of immunotherapy has revolutionized cancer treatment, shifting the focus from traditional methods like chemotherapy and radiation to more personalized and targeted approaches. Among these, mRNA-based immunotherapy has gained significant attention due to its unique ability to encode specific antigens that instruct the immune system to target cancer cells [1,2]. While the potential of mRNA technology was first explored in the early 1990s, its breakthrough came with the rapid development of COVID-19 vaccines. The global pandemic accelerated

* Corresponding author: Matthew Essuah; Email: ematthy@gmail.com

advancements in mRNA vaccine technology, thrusting this innovative approach into the spotlight of both infectious disease prevention and cancer immunotherapy [3,4].

Recent technological innovations have addressed longstanding challenges associated with mRNA stability and delivery. For example, Lipid nanoparticles (LNPs) have become an essential method for delivering mRNA, shielding these delicate molecules from quick breakdown and facilitating their absorption by cells [5]. This breakthrough has greatly enhanced the reliability and effectiveness of mRNA vaccines, opening the door for their use in cancer therapies. LNPs encapsulate the mRNA, facilitating its transport and cellular uptake, thus enabling robust antigen expression and subsequent immune responses [6].

The relevance of mRNA-based therapies in cancer treatment is profound. Unlike traditional cancer therapies, which often result in significant damage to healthy tissues, mRNA vaccines can generate highly specific immune responses tailored to the unique genetic makeup of individual tumors [7,8]. This level of personalization offers the potential for significantly improved patient outcomes, with fewer side effects [8]. As this field continues to evolve, it is essential to explore the technological innovations and address the ongoing challenges that remain. Only then can the full potential of mRNA-based cancer immunotherapy be realized.

2. Mechanism of mRNA Cancer Vaccines

The foundation of mRNA cancer vaccines lies in the natural process through which cells produce proteins, where messenger RNA (mRNA) serves as the blueprint for protein production. Using this approach, mRNA vaccines facilitate the expression of tumor-associated antigens, thereby triggering an immune response that selectively targets and eliminates malignant cells bearing these antigens (see figure 1). This strategy offers a unique advantage by eliciting both humoral and cellular immune responses, thereby making it a powerful tool in cancer immunotherapy [9,10].

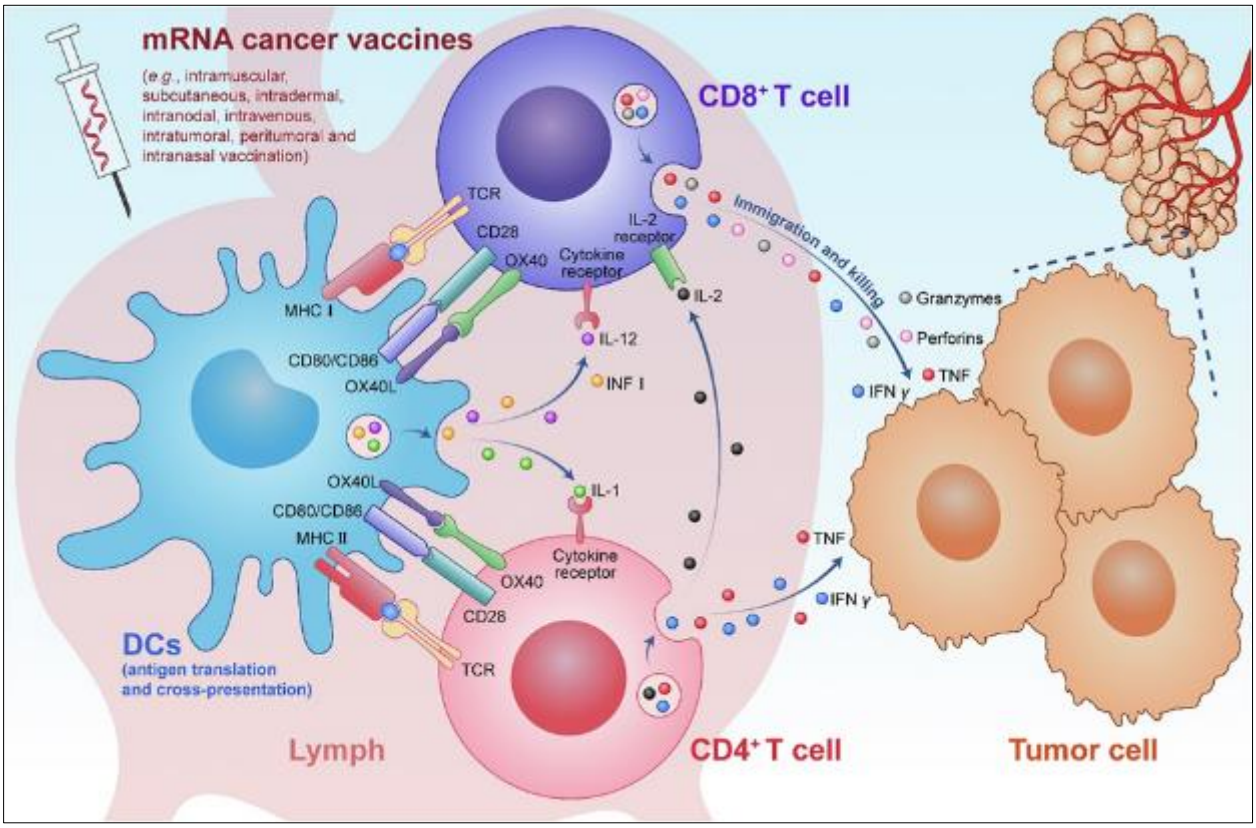

Figure 1 Diagram of the Mechanism of Action of mRNA Cancer Vaccines. Reproduced from Ref [10] with permission. Copyright Elsevier 2022

2.1. Cellular Uptake and Translation

Upon administration, mRNA cancer vaccines are typically delivered through lipid nanoparticle (LNP) systems to protect the fragile mRNA from enzymatic degradation. According to Pardi et al. [11], lipid nanoparticles (LNPs) enhance the

effective transport of mRNA into antigen-presenting cells (APCs) by merging with the cell membrane. This fusion enables the mRNA to break free from the endosome and move into the cell's cytoplasm. Once in the cytoplasm, the host's ribosomal machinery translates the mRNA into the corresponding cancer antigen protein. As reported by Kauffman et al. [12], this translation process is critical, as it allows the immune system to recognize and target tumor-specific antigens that are otherwise not detected by the immune system. These antigens, once synthesized, initiate the downstream immune response that is critical for targeting and eliminating cancer cells.

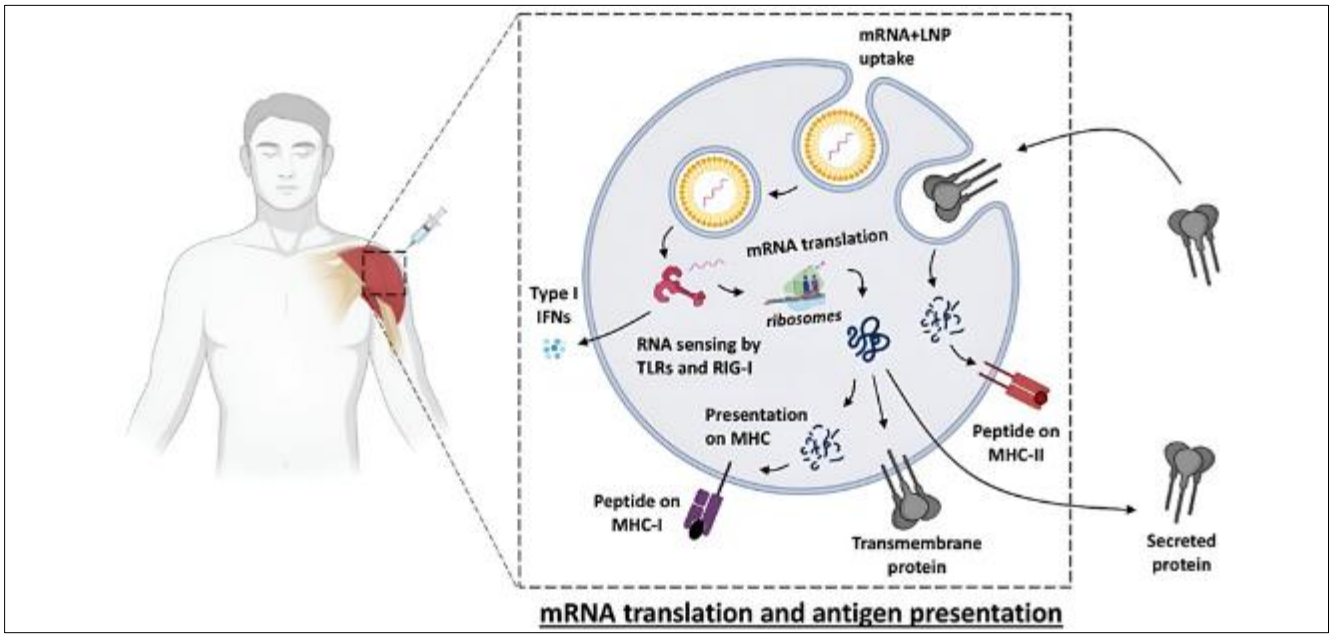

Figure 2 Diagram of Cellular Uptake and Translation of mRNA in Antigen-Presenting Cells. Reproduced from Ref [12] with permission

2.2. Antigen Processing and Presentation

Following the production of the cancer antigen in the cytoplasm, the antigen is processed and presented on the surface of APCs. According to Zhang et al. [13], this occurs through two key pathways: the major histocompatibility complex (MHC) class I and MHC class II presentation systems. In the MHC class I pathway, antigens produced intracellularly are degraded by the proteasome into peptide fragments, which are then loaded onto MHC class I molecules and presented to CD8+ cytotoxic T cells. This pathway is crucial for directly killing cancer cells, as CD8+ T cells recognize the antigen-MHC class I complex and destroy the tumor cells. Conversely, the MHC class II pathway is responsible for displaying antigens from outside the cell to CD4+ helper T cells. These cells play a central role in orchestrating a more extensive immune response, as they stimulate various immune cells, including B cells and macrophages, to engage in defense activities [13,14].

2.3. Immune Activation

The immune activation initiated by mRNA cancer vaccines involves a robust interplay between both cell-mediated and humoral immunity. According to Sahin et al. [14], the activation of CD8+ cytotoxic T cells is central to the elimination of cancer cells. These cells, once activated, can directly recognize and destroy tumor cells presenting the cancer antigen on their surface. Sahin and colleagues further highlight that mRNA vaccines can generate a potent CD8+ T cell response, which is one of the reasons for their effectiveness in targeting solid tumors. Furthermore, CD4+ helper T cells, once stimulated through the MHC class II pathway, play a crucial role in supporting B cell activation. These B cells produce antibodies specific to the tumor antigen, marking the cancer cells for destruction by other immune mechanisms (14). As noted by Pardi et al. [11], this dual activation of both cytotoxic and helper T cells makes mRNA vaccines uniquely capable of generating a comprehensive immune response, targeting cancer cells with high specificity.

2.4. Memory Formation

An important feature of mRNA cancer vaccines is their ability to induce long-lasting immune memory, a critical factor in preventing cancer recurrence. According to a study by Karikó et al. [15], memory B and T cells are formed after the initial immune response, remaining in circulation long after the antigen has been cleared. This memory response allows

the immune system to respond rapidly and effectively if the tumor antigen is encountered again. This aspect of mRNA vaccines offers a unique benefit, especially when applied to cancer immunotherapy, as it offers the potential for durable protection against tumor re-emergence, a challenge faced by traditional cancer therapies.

A crucial advantage of mRNA-based cancer vaccines is their ability to encode for multiple neoantigens—proteins derived from tumor-specific mutations that are unique to cancer cells [11]. This capability enhances the breadth of the immune response, improving the chances of recognizing and eliminating heterogeneous tumor cell populations, which often contribute to tumor progression and resistance to treatment. Additionally, mRNA vaccines can be tailored rapidly to match specific patient profiles, enabling personalized immunotherapy that is particularly effective against cancers with distinct mutational signatures [13]. The modular nature of mRNA sequences allows for the inclusion of elements that increase stability, translation efficiency, and immunogenicity, such as 5' cap structures, untranslated regions (UTRs), and poly(A) tails [12,14].

Recent advancements, as highlighted by research into immune response modulation, indicate that co-delivery of mRNA encoding immune-stimulatory molecules (e.g., cytokines or co-stimulatory proteins) alongside the antigen-coding mRNA can further enhance the vaccine's efficacy [13-15]. These adjuvant mRNA components potentiate the APCs' ability to activate T cells and orchestrate a robust anti-tumor response. Ultimately, the cellular processes initiated by mRNA vaccines culminate in the establishment of immunological memory, where memory T cells persist long-term and can mount a rapid, robust response if the cancer antigens are encountered again. This long-lasting immunity is essential for reducing the risk of cancer recurrence and improving overall patient survival [11,15].

2.5. Delivery Challenges and Solutions

Despite their immense potential, mRNA cancer vaccines face significant challenges related to delivery and stability. According to Kauffman et al. [12], naked mRNA is highly susceptible to degradation by RNases, making it difficult to deliver the mRNA intact to target cells. However, advances in nanoparticle technology, particularly the development of LNPs, have addressed these issues by providing a protective barrier around the mRNA, ensuring its stability during delivery. Studies by Pardi et al. [11] and Kauffman et al. [12] show that LNPs not only enhance mRNA stability but also improve its uptake by target cells, ensuring efficient translation and antigen presentation. In addition to LNPs, other delivery platforms such as electroporation and polymer-based systems are also being explored to further optimize the delivery of mRNA cancer vaccines.

2.6. How mRNA Vaccines Work: Encoding Antigens, Immune Response Initiation

The core mechanism by which mRNA vaccines work lies in their ability to harness the body's cellular machinery to produce antigens that elicit an immune response. mRNA vaccines are designed to encode tumor-associated antigens (TAAs) or tumor-specific antigens (TSAs), which are abnormal proteins expressed by cancer cells. Once mRNA is introduced into the cell cytoplasm, typically within antigen-presenting cells (APCs) such as dendritic cells, it initiates in vivo synthesis of antigens. This process is commonly facilitated by lipid nanoparticles (LNPs) or alternative delivery carriers. From the findings of Sahin et al. [14], once inside the host cell, the mRNA undergoes translation, leading to the production of the encoded antigenic protein. This protein is then processed within the cell and presented on the surface via major histocompatibility complex (MHC) molecules, where it can be recognized by T cells.

The immune response is initiated when these MHC-antigen complexes interact with T cell receptors (TCRs). According to studies by Pardi et al. [11], cytotoxic CD8+ T cells recognize antigens presented on MHC class I molecules, which leads to the destruction of cancer cells expressing these antigens. At the same time, helper CD4+ T cells are triggered through MHC class II molecules, leading to a more extensive immune response that involves the recruitment of B cells and other immune elements, which intensifies the focus on attacking cancer cells. As highlighted by Karikó et al. [15], the concurrent activation of both branches of the adaptive immune system represents a significant benefit of mRNA cancer vaccines, providing a strong and lasting immune attack on tumor cells.

2.7. Types of mRNA Vaccines Used in Cancer Immunotherapy

There are two primary types of mRNA vaccines utilized in cancer immunotherapy: non-replicating mRNA vaccines and self-amplifying mRNA vaccines (See figure 3). Non-replicating mRNA vaccines encode the antigen directly but do not have the ability to replicate once inside the host cell as seen in Figure 3a [16,17]. These vaccines are simpler in design, as noted by Dolgin [18], but require higher doses of mRNA to elicit a strong immune response. From the findings of Kauffman et al. [12], non-replicating mRNA vaccines are most commonly used due to their safety profile and ease of manufacture.

Self-amplifying mRNA vaccines, on the other hand, encode both the antigen of interest and viral replication machinery, allowing the mRNA to replicate within the host cell (see figure 3b). This leads to a higher yield of antigenic proteins, potentially enhancing the immune response while requiring lower doses of the vaccine. According to Zhang et al. [13], report that self-amplifying mRNA vaccines, which are based on alphavirus replicons, demonstrate potential in preclinical and initial clinical studies for the treatment of cancer. Both types of vaccines are being actively researched and optimized to improve their efficacy, safety, and scalability for widespread use in cancer immunotherapy.

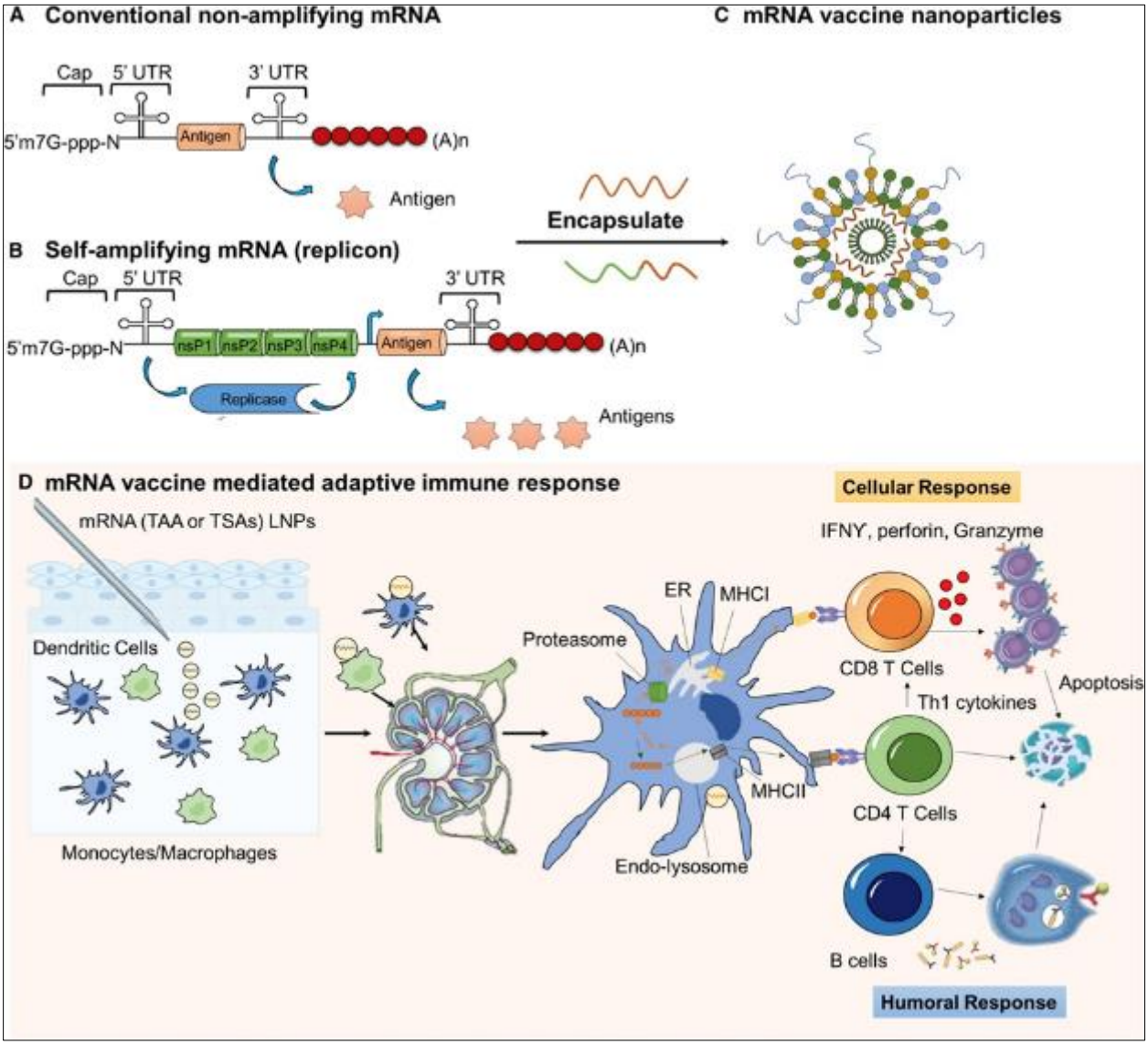

Figure 3 Conventional Non-amplifying and Self-Amplifying mRNA Vaccine and Adaptive Immune Response: (a) The traditional non-amplifying mRNA vaccine's schematic structure. (b) Diagrammatic representation of the self-amplifying mRNA vaccine (replicon), which includes the non-structural proteins that aid in RNA capping and replication as well as the sequence-encoding antigens. (c) An example of a replicon or mRNA vaccination that has been encapsulated in nanoparticles for enhanced in vivo activity. (d) Adaptive immune activation and antigen presentation following subcutaneous injection of mRNA vaccine LNPs. Reproduced from Ref [17] with permission. Copyright Elsevier 2019

Table 1 Summary of mRNA Cancer Vaccines Types

Type	Description	Advantages	Challenges	Examples
Non-replicating mRNA	Only the specific antigen is encoded; lacks viral replication machinery.	Simplifies manufacturing, lower risk of immune over-activation.	Higher dose required for strong immune response; shorter expression duration.	Moderna's mRNA-1273 COVID-19 vaccine (adapted for cancers).
Self-amplifying mRNA	Encodes both antigen and viral replication components, enhancing antigen levels	Prolonged expression, enhanced immune activation, lower doses possible.	Complex synthesis; risk of innate immune activation leading to degradation of mRNA.	SARS-CoV-2 saRNA vaccines in trials; potential applications in solid tumors.

2.8. Current Therapeutic Applications and Clinical Success

The use of mRNA vaccines in treating cancer has demonstrated considerable potential, as numerous mRNA cancer vaccines are now undergoing clinical trials. According to studies by Sahin et al. [14], personalized mRNA vaccines that target patient-specific tumor mutations have demonstrated the ability to mobilize potent, poly-specific immune responses. A significant therapeutic use of mRNA vaccines can be observed in melanoma treatment, where they are paired with immune checkpoint inhibitors to boost the body's overall anti-tumor effectiveness. From the findings of Benteyn et al. [19], mRNA vaccines are also being tested in other solid tumors such as colorectal, ovarian, and lung cancers.

Recent clinical successes have shown that mRNA vaccines can reduce tumor size and even prolong survival in some cases. For example, clinical trials conducted by Sahin et al. [14] on mRNA-based vaccines for advanced melanoma showed a notable increase in progression-free survival when combined with other immunotherapeutic agents. Moreover, mRNA vaccines have been shown to induce immune memory, which is crucial for preventing cancer recurrence. As Zhang et al. [13] notes, while there are still challenges to address, particularly in optimizing vaccine delivery and mitigating off-target effects, the continued development and clinical validation of mRNA cancer vaccines could revolutionize cancer treatment in the coming years.

Table 2 Mechanism of Action of mRNA Cancer Vaccines

Step	Description	Immune Cells Involved
Cellular Uptake	mRNA enters cells via lipid nanoparticles (LNPs), escapes endosomes, and enters the cytoplasm.	Antigen-presenting cells (APCs)
Translation	Host ribosomes translate mRNA into the encoded tumor-specific antigens.	All host cell machinery
Antigen Presentation	Antigens are processed and presented via MHC I and MHC II pathways.	APCs, CD4+ T cells, CD8+ T cells
Immune Activation	Recognition of antigens by T-cells initiates cytotoxic response against tumor cells.	CD4+ T helper cells, CD8+ T cells
Memory Formation	Memory B and T cells form, providing long-term immunity.	Memory B cells, Memory T cells

3. Technological Innovations

3.1. Advances in mRNA Stability and Delivery Systems

The success of mRNA vaccines largely depends on their stability and efficient delivery to target cells. Early mRNA technologies were hindered by instability and rapid degradation in the body due to ribonucleases (RNases) [20,21]. Recent breakthroughs have significantly enhanced the stability of mRNA. Among these, lipid nanoparticles (LNPs) stand out as a pivotal development, now widely recognized as the leading method for delivering mRNA. These LNPs envelop mRNA molecules, shielding them from breakdown and aiding their absorption by cells. Once inside, LNPs release the

mRNA into the cytoplasm, enabling the translation process to begin. According to Yang et al. [22], LNPs play a crucial role in boosting both the stability and transport of mRNA. This mechanism ensures that the mRNA arrives specifically at target cells, notably antigen-presenting cells, which are essential for triggering a robust immune reaction.

Beyond LNPs, other delivery systems such as polyplexes have been explored. Polyplexes involve mRNA complexed with cationic polymers that protect the mRNA and improve cellular uptake. Research by Zhong et al. [23] shows that polyplexes, in addition to LNPs, are emerging as promising alternatives for efficient mRNA delivery, especially in non-cancerous cells. The development of both LNPs and polyplexes underscores the significant technological strides in making mRNA vaccines viable by ensuring that the mRNA remains intact long enough to produce the intended proteins inside the host.

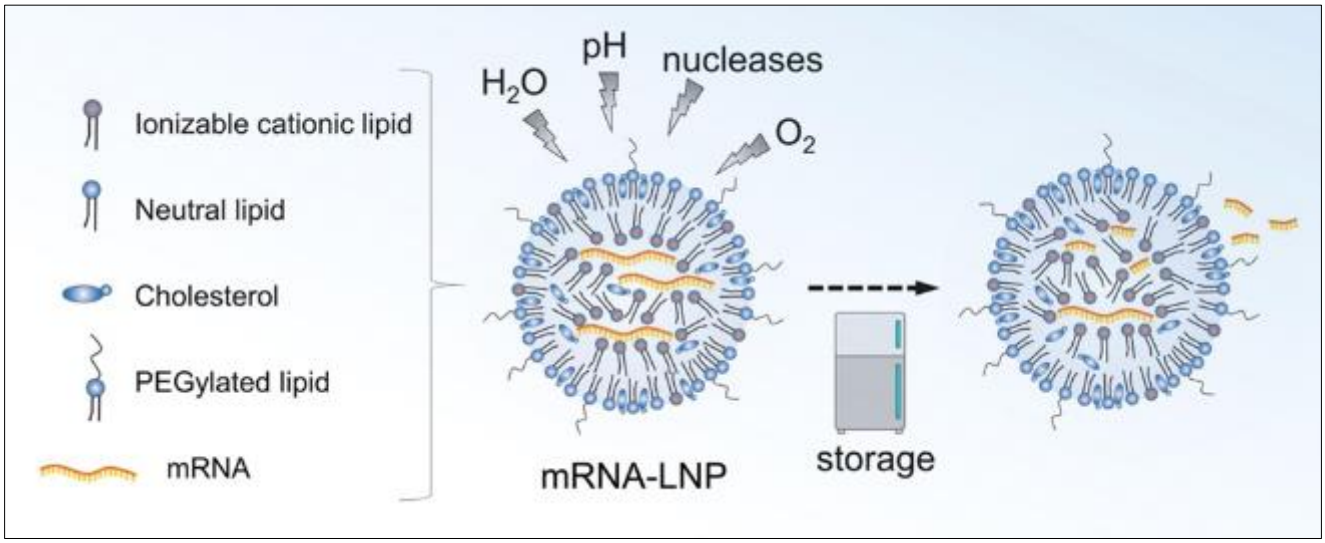

Figure 4 Structure and Function of Lipid Nanoparticles in mRNA Delivery. Reproduced from Ref [21] with permission. Copyright, Elsevier 2021

3.2. Improvements in mRNA Design for Better Expression and Immune Activation

Another critical aspect of mRNA vaccine development is optimizing the mRNA itself for more efficient expression and immune activation. This involves modifications to the mRNA sequence and structure to enhance protein translation while minimizing immune recognition of the mRNA as foreign. According to Karikó et al. [15], one key improvement is the integration of modified nucleosides, like pseudouridine,, which prevent immune sensors like Toll-like receptors from recognizing the mRNA as pathogenic, reducing unwanted inflammatory responses.

Furthermore, optimization of untranslated regions (UTRs) and codon optimization have also been integral to improving mRNA performance. By selecting codons that are more efficiently translated in human cells, scientists can increase protein yield, which is critical for strong immune activation. The UTRs are altered to improve the stability of mRNA and boost translation effectiveness. In their work, Pardi et al. [11] emphasize how optimizing codons has significantly advanced antigen expression, contributing to more potent mRNA vaccines. These technological innovations ensure that the immune system recognizes the antigens produced by the mRNA more effectively, leading to robust immune responses.

3.2.1. Emerging Technologies: Circular and Self-Amplifying RNA

The field of mRNA-based therapeutics, particularly in cancer immunotherapy, is experiencing rapid innovation, with emerging technologies like circular RNA (circRNA) and self-amplifying RNA (saRNA) standing out as game-changers. These innovations could overcome the challenges faced by traditional linear mRNA vaccines, such as their tendency toward instability and limited duration of expression, by introducing novel ways to extend mRNA half-life, enhance protein expression, and optimize immune responses [24,25].

Circular RNA (circRNA) Technology

Circular RNA (circRNA) is gaining significant attention in biotechnology due to its unique structural and functional properties. Unlike linear mRNA, which is prone to degradation by exonucleases, circRNA is covalently closed, forming a

continuous loop that renders it highly resistant to exonucleolytic attack [26,27]. This enhanced stability allows circRNA to have a much longer half-life compared to linear mRNA, potentially resulting in more durable protein expression and prolonged immune stimulation. According to Yang et al. [28], circRNA holds promise as an efficient and long-lasting vehicle for antigen expression in vaccines, including those targeting cancer.

In cancer immunotherapy, the long-term stability of circRNA is particularly beneficial, as persistent antigen expression is crucial for sustained immune responses against tumors [29,30]. Recent research has explored the possibility of engineering circRNA to encode tumor-associated antigens, triggering the enlistment and stimulation of immune cells to fight cancer cells. From the findings of Kristensen et al. [31], the application of circRNA in preclinical cancer models has shown promising results, with longer-lasting immune responses and enhanced tumor shrinkage compared to conventional mRNA-based therapies.

Moreover, circRNA has inherent advantages in immune evasion. Since its structure lacks free 5′ and 3′ ends, it is less likely to activate pattern recognition receptors (PRRs), which typically detect and degrade foreign RNA [30]. This makes circRNA less immunogenic compared to its linear counterparts, reducing the risk of inducing an unwanted inflammatory response. In their study, Sharma et al. [32] emphasize the importance of this feature for cancer therapy, as it allows for a more controlled and targeted immune response without triggering excessive inflammation that could harm healthy tissues.

Despite its advantages, the widespread adoption of circRNA in therapeutic applications is still in its early stages. Challenges remain in efficiently synthesizing and delivering circRNA to target cells, as well as optimizing its circularization process to maximize expression [31]. However, advances in RNA engineering are rapidly addressing these hurdles, paving the way for circRNA to become a powerful tool in the arsenal of cancer immunotherapies.

Self-Amplifying RNA (saRNA)

Self-amplifying RNA (saRNA) represents another groundbreaking innovation in the development of mRNA-based vaccines, offering the potential for significant dose-sparing while enhancing the magnitude and duration of immune responses [33,34]. Unlike conventional mRNA, saRNA includes sequences that enable it to replicate within the host cell using RNA-dependent RNA polymerase (RdRp). As a result, a small initial dose of saRNA can produce exponentially higher levels of antigen, amplifying the immune response without the need for large amounts of RNA to be administered [34].

According to Blakney et al. [35], the self-amplification feature of saRNA significantly improves the potency of vaccines by increasing antigen production, making it particularly suitable for diseases like cancer, where a robust and sustained immune response is needed to eliminate tumor cells. In preclinical studies, saRNA has demonstrated the ability to generate stronger immune responses compared to conventional mRNA vaccines, even when administered at much lower doses.

One of the key advantages of saRNA is its potential to reduce the cost and complexity of vaccine manufacturing. Since smaller doses are required to achieve therapeutic effects, fewer raw materials and less complex logistics are involved in the production and distribution of saRNA-based vaccines. This makes saRNA an attractive option for large-scale cancer immunotherapy applications, where cost-effectiveness and accessibility are critical concerns. According to Lundstrom et al. [36], this technology could revolutionize not only cancer immunotherapy but also other vaccine fields, including infectious diseases and personalized medicine.

Moreover, the versatility of saRNA extends beyond antigen expression. saRNA can be engineered to include immune-modulating molecules, enhancing the ability of the immune system to recognize and attack cancer cells. In their research, Yang et al. [22] show that incorporating immune-stimulatory elements within the saRNA sequence has led to improved outcomes in cancer immunotherapy models, with greater immune infiltration into tumors and increased tumor cell death. This opens up new possibilities for saRNA to not only deliver antigens but also act as a comprehensive immunotherapeutic platform.

However, challenges remain in optimizing the delivery of saRNA, particularly in ensuring its stability and minimizing off-target effects. Like traditional mRNA, saRNA is susceptible to degradation and requires advanced delivery systems to ensure efficient uptake by target cells [37,38]. Lipid nanoparticles (LNPs), as discussed earlier, are currently the most effective delivery vehicle, but further research is underway to explore other materials and strategies that could improve the stability and targeting of saRNA [37].

4. Challenges in mRNA-Based Cancer Immunotherapy

Despite the tremendous potential and rapid advancements in mRNA-based cancer immunotherapy, several challenges must be addressed to maximize their efficacy and ensure successful clinical translation (See Table 3). While the flexibility and adaptability of mRNA vaccines are undeniable, factors such as stability, delivery mechanisms, immune responses, and manufacturing complexities present significant obstacles [39,40]. A thorough understanding of these challenges is essential for researchers and clinicians aiming to optimize mRNA-based treatments and harness their full potential in combating cancer [40]. This section will explore the key challenges faced in the development and implementation of mRNA cancer immunotherapies, along with the potential strategies to overcome them. The key challenges are discussed below.

4.1. mRNA Stability and Degradation

One of the most pressing challenges in mRNA therapy is ensuring the stability of mRNA molecules. Naturally occurring mRNA is prone to rapid degradation by ribonucleases, which can diminish the therapeutic efficacy of mRNA vaccines. As highlighted by Karikó et al. [15], Including altered nucleosides like pseudouridine can improve the stability of mRNA, but this adds complexity to the synthesis and formulation of vaccines. Researchers are actively seeking novel stabilization methods to enhance mRNA's resistance to degradation and prolong its half-life within the body.

4.2. Delivery Systems

Ensuring that mRNA reaches target cells efficiently is essential to produce the intended immune reaction. While modern delivery methods like lipid nanoparticles (LNPs) have greatly advanced the effectiveness of mRNA transport, they continue to encounter certain constraints [40]. These include the potential for immune reactions against the delivery vehicle, variability in cellular uptake, and insufficient targeting of specific cells, such as tumor antigen-presenting cells. According to Yang et al. [22], it's critical to create advanced delivery methods that can increase targeting accuracy, lower toxicity, and boost the overall effectiveness of mRNA transport.

4.3. Immune Response

The immune response elicited by mRNA vaccines can vary widely among individuals due to genetic differences, prior exposure to similar antigens, and the overall health of the immune system[41,42]. Moreover, the risk of inducing unintended inflammatory responses can hinder the desired anti-tumor effect. According to Pardi et al. [11], researchers must continue to explore ways to fine-tune immune activation to enhance anti-tumor immunity while minimizing adverse effects.

4.4. Manufacturing and Scalability

The production of mRNA vaccines at scale presents significant challenges, including maintaining consistency in quality, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness. Current production methods involve complex processes that require specialized equipment and stringent quality control measures to ensure the purity and integrity of the mRNA product [43]. As noted by Blakney et al. [35], developing more streamlined and robust manufacturing processes is essential for meeting the growing demand for mRNA vaccines and facilitating their widespread adoption.

4.5. Regulatory Hurdles

As mRNA technology is relatively new in the field of therapeutics, regulatory frameworks are still evolving. Ensuring that mRNA-based cancer therapies meet safety and efficacy standards poses challenges for developers [44]. Navigating the regulatory landscape requires comprehensive understanding and documentation of the mechanisms of action, long-term effects, and potential risks associated with these therapies.

4.6. Limitations of mRNA Stability, Degradation, and Immunogenicity

The application of mRNA in cancer immunotherapy has garnered significant attention due to its ability to induce potent immune responses and its versatility in encoding various antigens. Nonetheless, significant challenges remain in enhancing the effectiveness and safety of mRNA-based therapies, particularly due to issues surrounding mRNA stability, susceptibility to degradation, and potential immune reactions. Addressing these limitations is essential for progress in the field.

4.6.1. mRNA Stability

One of the primary limitations of mRNA therapeutics is their inherent instability. Natural mRNA molecules are vulnerable to breakdown by ribonucleases, enzymes that are widely present in biological settings. [45]. This instability may cause mRNA to degrade quickly, preventing it from being translated into the desired protein, thereby diminishing the therapeutic effect. The half-life of unmodified mRNA is often very short, ranging from minutes to a few hours, which complicates the administration of effective doses. Researchers have made strides in enhancing mRNA stability through various strategies, including the incorporation of modified nucleotides, such as pseudouridine or 5-methylcytidine, which can hinder recognition by the immune system and ribonucleases [15].

Despite these advancements, achieving the optimal balance between stability and functionality remains challenging. Excessive modifications can impair mRNA translation or folding, which may affect the immunogenicity of the resultant protein [46]. Additionally, stabilization techniques often increase the complexity of the mRNA production process, leading to higher manufacturing costs and potential scalability issues.

4.6.2. mRNA Degradation

The degradation of mRNA not only affects the duration of protein expression but also poses challenges in controlling the timing of the immune response [46]. Rapid degradation can lead to insufficient antigen presentation to the immune system, resulting in suboptimal activation of T cells and other immune components. As highlighted by Maruggi et al. [47], understanding the pathways that regulate mRNA degradation is crucial for developing strategies to enhance the longevity of mRNA in vivo.

Additionally, the type of delivery vehicle chosen for mRNA, like lipid nanoparticles, plays a role in maintaining the mRNA's stability. By encapsulating the mRNA within these nanoparticles, it gains protection against degradation while circulating through the body; however, the efficiency of this protection can vary significantly based on the formulation and administration route. Ensuring the stability of the mRNA throughout its journey to target cells is essential for maximizing therapeutic outcomes [46].

4.6.3. Immunogenicity

Another critical limitation of mRNA therapeutics is the potential for unwanted immunogenicity. While eliciting a strong immune response is desirable in cancer immunotherapy, excessive immunogenicity can lead to adverse reactions, including inflammation, allergic responses, or autoimmune reactions. mRNA, particularly when delivered in its unmodified form, can activate innate immune receptors, such as Toll-like receptors (TLRs), which may result in an exaggerated inflammatory response [11,48].

The risk of immunogenicity is compounded by the presence of contaminating materials during mRNA production, such as residual DNA or host cell proteins, which can further provoke unwanted immune responses. Scientists have investigated the application of chemically altered nucleotides alongside improved delivery mechanisms to reduce these impacts. For instance, incorporating modifications that reduce the ability of mRNA to trigger TLRs has shown promise in decreasing immunogenicity while maintaining sufficient activation of adaptive immune responses [15].

Despite these strategies, achieving a controlled and targeted immune response remains a challenge. Individual variability in immune responses due to genetic factors, prior exposures, and overall health can influence the efficacy of mRNA vaccines. Personalized approaches may be necessary to tailor mRNA therapies to the unique immunological profiles of patients.

4.7. Delivery Issues and Inefficient In Vivo Translation

A major hurdle in utilizing mRNA-based cancer immunotherapy lies in successfully delivering mRNA to the intended cells and ensuring that, once there, it is effectively translated into protein within the cellular environment. While the theoretical framework of mRNA therapy offers considerable promise, practical issues regarding delivery mechanisms and translation efficiency have posed substantial barriers to the successful implementation of mRNA vaccines.

4.7.1. Delivery Issues

Effective delivery of mRNA is critical for eliciting a strong immune response. In its native form, mRNA is a large and negatively charged molecule that is susceptible to degradation by ribonucleases present in the bloodstream and surrounding tissues [49,50]. Moreover, the cell membrane is inherently impermeable to such macromolecules, posing a barrier to cellular uptake. To address these challenges, numerous delivery systems have been designed, with lipid

nanoparticles (LNPs) emerging as the most commonly utilized. LNPs shield mRNA from breakdown, enabling its safe delivery and entry into target cells [49].

However, despite the advances in LNP technology, several challenges persist. For instance, the efficiency of mRNA delivery can vary significantly based on factors such as the formulation of the LNP, the route of administration (e.g., intramuscular, intravenous, or subcutaneous), and the specific characteristics of the target tissues. While LNPs can enhance mRNA stability and facilitate cellular uptake, they may also trigger immune responses that can lead to inflammation or unwanted side effects [35]. Furthermore, successfully directing treatments to particular types of cells, like cancer cells or antigen-presenting cells, continues to pose a significant difficulty. Non-specific distribution of mRNA can result in suboptimal therapeutic effects and unintended consequences in healthy tissues.

In addition to LNPs, other delivery systems such as polyplexes, dendrimers, and viral vectors have been explored. While these alternative systems offer unique advantages, they also come with their own sets of limitations, including potential toxicity, immunogenicity, and complexities in manufacturing [49]. Ultimately, enhancing delivery mechanisms for precise and effective mRNA transportation is crucial for the success of cancer treatments that utilize mRNA technology.

4.7.2. Inefficient In Vivo Translation

Even when mRNA successfully reaches its target cells, the translation of that mRNA into protein is not guaranteed to be efficient. Factors influencing in vivo translation include mRNA structure, the presence of secondary structures, and the availability of ribosomes and other translational machinery [51,52]. The inherent characteristics of mRNA, such as the presence of untranslated regions (UTRs), can significantly impact translation efficiency. For instance, a poorly designed UTR can hinder ribosome binding or lead to premature termination of translation, resulting in lower levels of the desired protein product [53].

Additionally, the surrounding cellular environment significantly impacts the effectiveness of translation. In cancer, the tumor microenvironment often presents challenges, including low oxygen levels, lack of nutrients, and the involvement of regulatory immune cells, all of which can affect the stability of mRNA and the efficiency of translation [52]. According to Pardi et al. [11], understanding these interactions is essential for optimizing mRNA design and ensuring that mRNA can be effectively translated within the challenging environments of tumors.

Moreover, the variability in individual patient responses poses a further complication. Genetic differences, such as polymorphisms in genes encoding components of the translational machinery, can lead to variations in the efficiency of mRNA translation [50]. As a result, mRNA therapies that are effective in one individual may not yield the same results in another, highlighting the need for personalized approaches in mRNA-based cancer immunotherapy.

4.8. Potential Side Effects and Safety Concerns in Long-Term Treatments

While mRNA-based cancer immunotherapies hold great promise for enhancing cancer treatment, their long-term use raises important questions regarding potential side effects and safety. As with any novel therapeutic platform, particularly one designed to modulate the immune system, mRNA vaccines and treatments can elicit both acute and chronic adverse effects, some of which may only manifest after extended periods of use [10]. These side effects stem from the intrinsic nature of mRNA molecules, the immune response they trigger, and the delivery systems employed.

4.8.1. Acute and Chronic Immune Reactions

A key function of mRNA vaccines involves stimulating the immune system to identify and target cancer cells. However, this immune activation can sometimes result in unintended consequences [55]. Acute immune reactions may involve local inflammation at the site of injection, fever, fatigue, and myalgia, which are relatively common in the short term and are typically mild. Clinical studies involving mRNA vaccines, including those for COVID-19 created by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, have extensively recorded these immediate side effects, which were mostly manageable and accepted by participants [56]. However, the potential for more severe immune responses, such as cytokine release syndrome (CRS), remains a concern, particularly in cancer immunotherapy where potent immune activation is desired.

Long-term treatments with mRNA vaccines may also increase the risk of chronic immune activation. Prolonged or repeated stimulation of the immune system could lead to autoimmune diseases, wherein the immune system begins attacking healthy tissues. This is a significant concern, especially in cancer patients who may require extended treatment regimens. According to Sahin et al. [14], while no long-term autoimmune effects have yet been conclusively linked to mRNA therapies, the possibility remains, given that some patients may have pre-existing autoimmune predispositions.

4.8.2. Uncontrolled Inflammation and Toxicity

Another safety concern involves the risk of uncontrolled inflammation or the activation of off-target immune responses. mRNA vaccines work by inducing the production of antigens that prompt immune recognition, but these antigens may sometimes provoke non-specific immune reactions. Lipid nanoparticles (LNPs), a common vehicle for delivering mRNA into cells, can also contribute to inflammatory responses. Studies have shown that certain components of LNPs, such as polyethylene glycol (PEG), may elicit allergic reactions in some individuals [57]. Additionally, the inflammatory pathways activated by mRNA and its delivery systems may lead to systemic reactions if not properly regulated.

Over time, repeated dosing of mRNA vaccines could lead to cumulative toxicities, especially if the immune system becomes overstimulated. For instance, excessive inflammation in vital organs like the liver or kidneys could impair their function, resulting in toxicity that might not be immediately apparent but could manifest after months or years of treatment. Long-term monitoring of patients receiving mRNA therapies is crucial to identify and mitigate these risks [57,58].

4.8.3. Genetic and Epigenetic Implications

There is also concern regarding the potential for mRNA therapies to affect gene expression or induce lasting changes at the genetic or epigenetic level. While mRNA does not integrate into the genome and is considered non-mutagenic, its ability to modulate protein expression raises the question of whether long-term alterations in cellular behavior could occur [59,60]. For example, extended exposure to certain proteins expressed by mRNA vaccines may alter cellular pathways that could predispose patients to other diseases or affect tumor suppression mechanisms.

Emerging research has also raised questions about whether prolonged use of mRNA could lead to immune tolerance, a state in which the immune system becomes desensitized to the target antigens. This could reduce the efficacy of the treatment over time and may require alternating treatment strategies to maintain robust immune activation. According to Pardi et al. [11], the long-term effects of repeated exposure to synthetic mRNA on immune memory and tolerance are still poorly understood and warrant further investigation.

4.8.4. Tumor Escape Mechanisms

One potential concern specific to cancer immunotherapy is the risk of tumor cells developing resistance or "escaping" immune detection. Tumor cells can evolve rapidly under selective pressure from the immune system, potentially leading to the emergence of immune-resistant cancer clones [61]. mRNA-based vaccines, while designed to induce specific immune responses, may inadvertently drive tumor cells to develop mutations that render them invisible to the immune system. According to Kreiter et al. [62], this phenomenon, known as immune escape, is a major challenge in cancer immunotherapy and could limit the long-term effectiveness of mRNA treatments.

Table 3 Challenges in mRNA-Based Cancer Immunotherapy

Challenge	Description	Proposed Solutions
mRNA Stability	mRNA's susceptibility to RNase-mediated degradation limits therapeutic impact.	Chemical modifications, encapsulation in nanoparticles, optimized sequence design.
Delivery Systems	Efficiently targeting mRNA to specific cancer cells remains a challenge.	Lipid-based nanoparticles (LNPs), polyplexes, polymer and peptide carriers.
Immune Response Variability	Immune responses differ due to genetic, environmental, and health factors.	Personalized mRNA vaccines, combination with immune checkpoint inhibitors.
Manufacturing & Scalability	High production cost and quality control remain a barrier to widespread usage.	Advances in automation, cost-effective synthesis, and streamlined production processes.

4.9. Long-Term Monitoring and Regulatory Challenges

Given the novelty of mRNA therapies, it is crucial to conduct long-term follow-up on patients to evaluate how long the protective effects last, the occurrence of delayed side effects, and the overall safety profile. Regulatory agencies, such as the FDA and EMA, are still developing frameworks for evaluating the long-term safety of mRNA therapeutics, particularly in oncology settings. Clinical trials for mRNA cancer vaccines will need to incorporate extended follow-up periods to capture delayed or chronic adverse effects that might arise after years of treatment.

5. Strategies to Overcome Challenges

Despite the tremendous potential of mRNA-based cancer immunotherapies, significant challenges such as mRNA stability, efficient delivery, immunogenicity, and long-term safety concerns continue to impede their widespread clinical application. However, ongoing research is providing innovative strategies to address these barriers. Scientists are developing advanced mRNA stabilization techniques, improving delivery vehicles, and leveraging cutting-edge technologies like self-amplifying mRNA and circular RNA to optimize both safety and efficacy profiles of mRNA vaccines. According to Patel et al. [49] and Sahin et al. [14], these advancements aim to not only improve the immediate success of mRNA therapies but also ensure their sustainable application in long-term cancer treatments. This section will examine the primary approaches being utilized to address these obstacles and unlock the complete capabilities of mRNA cancer immunotherapy.

5.1. New Approaches to Enhance mRNA Stability and Reduce Degradation

One of the key challenges in mRNA-based cancer immunotherapy is the inherent instability of mRNA molecules, which are highly susceptible to degradation by ribonucleases (RNases) and other environmental factors. This instability reduces the effectiveness of mRNA vaccines by limiting the amount of protein produced after delivery into the body. To address these limitations, researchers have developed innovative approaches to enhance mRNA stability, ensuring more effective and prolonged therapeutic effects. These approaches focus on modifying the structural components of mRNA, optimizing delivery systems, and incorporating advanced technologies like self-amplifying mRNA.

5.1.1. mRNA Structural Modifications

A major strategy to improve mRNA stability is through chemical modifications to the mRNA's nucleotide structure. mRNA is composed of four nucleotides—adenosine, cytidine, guanosine, and uridine—each of which can be chemically altered to increase resistance to degradation without compromising the molecule's function. According to Karikó et al. [15], one of the most successful modifications involves replacing uridine with pseudouridine or 1-methylpseudouridine. These modified nucleotides are less recognizable by the body’s immune sensors, making the mRNA more stable and less likely to trigger an unwanted immune response. Furthermore, they enhance the translation efficiency, allowing cells to produce higher amounts of the encoded antigen [63].

The cap structure at the 5' end of the mRNA also plays a crucial role in its stability and efficient translation. Recent research has demonstrated that using a modified cap, including anti-reverse cap analogs (ARCA), can effectively inhibit the degradation of mRNA by exonucleases [64,65]. By optimizing both the cap structure and the internal nucleotides, researchers have significantly extended the half-life of mRNA, ensuring that it remains active long enough to stimulate a strong and sustained immune response in cancer therapies.

5.1.2. Optimization of Delivery Systems

One key strategy for enhancing the stability of mRNA involves creating advanced delivery systems designed to safeguard mRNA from breakdown in vivo. Lipid nanoparticles (LNPs) have emerged as one of the most effective vehicles for delivering mRNA into cells while shielding it from degradation. LNPs are composed of various lipids that encapsulate mRNA, preventing its interaction with degrading enzymes and facilitating its uptake by cells. According to Pardi et al. [11], the use of ionizable lipids in LNP formulations is particularly advantageous because these lipids can transition from a neutral to a positively charged state in acidic environments, enhancing the endosomal escape of mRNA once inside cells [65].

Beyond LNPs, other nanoparticle systems, such as polyplexes and polymeric nanoparticles, have been explored for their ability to enhance mRNA stability. For instance, polypeptide-based polyplexes provide a stable and biocompatible platform for mRNA delivery, as shown by Chen et al. [66], who reported that polyplexes significantly reduce the degradation of mRNA in blood serum. These delivery vehicles not only protect mRNA from extracellular degradation but also facilitate its intracellular delivery, ensuring efficient protein expression in target cells.

5.1.3. Circular RNA and Epitranscriptomic Modifications

Another innovative approach to enhancing mRNA stability involves the use of circular RNA (circRNA). Unlike linear mRNA, circRNA lacks free ends, making it more resistant to exonuclease degradation. From the findings of Di Martino et al. [67], circRNA has demonstrated remarkable stability in vitro, and researchers are exploring its potential for use in cancer immunotherapy. By encoding tumor antigens in circRNA, it may be possible to create vaccines with prolonged activity and reduced degradation, thereby overcoming one of the major limitations of linear mRNA [67]. Furthermore, researchers are investigating epitranscriptomic alterations, including N6-methyladenosine (m6A) methylation, to

understand how they influence the stability and translation of mRNA. According to studies by Chen et al. [66], m6A modifications can stabilize mRNA by influencing its interaction with RNA-binding proteins and other cellular machinery. These modifications are part of the growing field of RNA epigenetics, where the chemical environment of the RNA is fine-tuned to enhance its functional properties, including stability and translational efficiency.

5.2. Innovations in Delivery Platforms

Successfully administering mRNA-based immunotherapies for cancer poses a considerable challenge. This difficulty arises from the susceptibility of mRNA molecules to breakdown and their restricted capacity to penetrate biological barriers to access target cells. In response to these challenges, scientists have focused on developing innovative delivery platforms that can efficiently transport mRNA while enhancing its stability and ensuring targeted delivery to the appropriate cells. These platforms primarily include lipid nanoparticles (LNPs), polymer-based systems, peptides, and other nanoparticle-based vehicles, which collectively aim to optimize mRNA uptake, reduce degradation, and improve therapeutic efficacy.

5.2.1. Lipid Nanoparticles (LNPs)

Lipid nanoparticles (LNPs) are the primary delivery vehicles for mRNA therapies, such as cancer vaccines. These particles are made up of lipid molecules that naturally organize into spherical forms, surrounding and safeguarding mRNA strands from enzymatic breakdown. According to Pardi et al. [11], LNPs are highly effective because they protect mRNA from degradation by external RNases and enhance cellular uptake by encouraging endocytosis. After entering the cells, the lipid nanoparticles (LNPs) merge with the membranes of endosomes, enabling the release of mRNA into the cytoplasm, where it can then be translated into the target antigen. One of the most important components of LNPs is ionizable lipids. In acidic environments like the endosome, they acquire a positive charge, which aids in releasing mRNA into the cytoplasm. From the findings of Hou et al. [68], the inclusion of ionizable lipids has significantly enhanced the efficiency of mRNA delivery in vivo, leading to higher protein expression and stronger immune responses in cancer immunotherapy. The development of next-generation LNPs focuses on refining the lipid composition to further improve the stability and delivery of mRNA vaccines [68].

5.2.2. Polymer-Based Nanoparticles

An alternative, highly promising method for mRNA delivery involves the use of nanoparticles made from polymers. These nanoparticles are crafted from biodegradable materials like poly(lactic-co-glycolic acid) (PLGA) and polyethyleneimine (PEI), which can establish stable bonds with mRNA for effective delivery. According to Chen et al. [66], polymer-based systems offer several advantages, including greater control over particle size and surface charge, which are crucial for optimizing cellular uptake and minimizing off-target effects. One major advantage of polymer-based nanoparticles is their ability to be functionalized with targeting ligands, allowing for selective delivery to specific cell types, such as antigen-presenting cells (APCs) in cancer immunotherapy. Additionally, recent studies have demonstrated that polymeric nanoparticles can be modified with polyethylene glycol (PEG), a process known as PEGylation, to improve the particles' circulation time in the bloodstream and reduce immune clearance, further enhancing the efficiency of mRNA delivery in vivo [69-71].

5.2.3. Peptide-Based Delivery Systems

Peptides are another class of delivery vehicles being explored for mRNA vaccines. Peptide-based systems involve the use of short chains of amino acids to form stable complexes with mRNA, which can then facilitate cellular uptake. According to Nhàn et al. [72], cell-penetrating peptides (CPPs) are a particularly attractive option for mRNA delivery because they can cross the cellular membrane without the need for specific receptors. By modifying the peptide sequences to improve stability and binding affinity, researchers have been able to develop highly efficient peptide-based mRNA delivery systems [72,73]. In addition to CPPs, recent research has focused on developing peptides that can enhance the endosomal escape of mRNA. Endosomal escape is a critical step in mRNA delivery, as failure to exit the endosome results in degradation by lysosomal enzymes. Studies by Yokoo et al. [73] have shown that peptides containing fusogenic sequences, which disrupt endosomal membranes, can significantly improve the efficiency of mRNA release into the cytoplasm, thereby enhancing antigen expression and immune activation.

5.2.4. Hybrid Nanoparticles and Multimodal Delivery Systems

Researchers are also investigating hybrid systems that integrate various materials to develop delivery platforms capable of multiple modes of action. For example, hybrid nanoparticles that integrate both lipid and polymer components offer the advantages of both systems, including enhanced stability, controlled release, and efficient cellular

uptake. According to Kowalski et al. [74], these hybrid systems allow for the encapsulation of larger amounts of mRNA while providing sustained release over time, resulting in prolonged antigen expression in cancer immunotherapy.

Another innovative approach involves the use of stimuli-responsive nanoparticles, which can release mRNA in response to specific environmental triggers, such as changes in pH or temperature. These systems are particularly useful in targeting the acidic tumor microenvironment, where the nanoparticles can selectively release their mRNA payload to activate an immune response specifically in tumor tissues [75]. Such advances in smart delivery systems represent a significant step forward in overcoming the challenges associated with mRNA stability and targeted delivery in cancer therapies.

5.2.5. Peptidic Nanoparticles

Peptidic nanoparticles are a novel delivery system where peptides self-assemble into nanostructures that can encapsulate mRNA. These nanoparticles leverage the stability and biocompatibility of peptides to improve mRNA delivery. According to Morales-Hernández et al. [76], the use of self-assembling peptides allows for the creation of nanoparticles that are highly stable in the bloodstream, while also being able to release mRNA in response to specific intracellular conditions. This targeted delivery reduces off-target effects and enhances the therapeutic potential of mRNA vaccines [76,77].

5.3. Engineering Better Antigen Expression and Immune System Targeting

One of the key challenges in developing mRNA-based cancer vaccines lies in engineering the vaccines to elicit strong and targeted immune responses while maintaining high levels of antigen expression. Antigen expression involves the generation of unique proteins specific to cancer by cells in the body. These proteins are detected by the immune system, prompting it to launch a defensive response. For effective immunotherapy, the mRNA must not only be delivered efficiently to the target cells but also be translated into functional proteins (antigens) in sufficient quantities. In recent years, scientists have achieved major breakthroughs in improving mRNA sequence design for more efficient expression and have developed innovative techniques to strengthen the immune system’s precision in recognizing and attacking specific cancer antigens [78,79].

5.3.1. Optimizing mRNA Sequences for Improved Expression

At the core of mRNA vaccines is the coding sequence of the target antigen. This sequence must be optimized to ensure it is efficiently translated into proteins by the cell's machinery. From the findings of Paremskaia et al. [78], researchers have employed techniques such as codon optimization, which involves altering the mRNA sequence to use codons that are more frequently recognized by the host cell’s ribosomes. This process increases translation efficiency, resulting in higher antigen production. Optimizing codons doesn’t change the resulting protein but enhances the speed and precision of mRNA translation. This, in turn, strengthens the immune system's capacity to identify and target cancer cells effectively.

Furthermore, modifications to the untranslated regions (UTRs) of mRNA have also been explored to improve expression. These areas control the steadiness and translation effectiveness of mRNA molecules. As observed by Ma et al. [79], by engineering the UTRs to interact more effectively with the cellular translation machinery, researchers have been able to significantly increase the half-life of mRNA, leading to prolonged antigen expression. This extended antigen presence is crucial for stimulating a strong and sustained immune response, especially in cancer therapy where the immune system must continuously target malignant cells.

5.3.2. Targeting Specific Immune Cells for Enhanced Immune Activation

Beyond optimizing mRNA sequences, a critical aspect of cancer immunotherapy is ensuring that the antigens produced by the vaccine effectively activate the immune system, particularly cytotoxic T lymphocytes (CTLs) and helper T cells. These immune cells play a crucial role in identifying and destroying cancer cells. According to Fiedler et al. [80], a key approach to enhancing the precision of the immune system in targeting cancer involves utilizing tumor-associated antigens (TAAs). These are proteins that are particularly abundant in cancerous cells. mRNA vaccines encoding these TAAs can train the immune system to selectively target tumor cells while sparing healthy tissues, thereby minimizing the risk of autoimmune reactions.

Moreover, researchers have also engineered mRNA vaccines to include co-stimulatory molecules and adjuvants that boost immune activation. Co-stimulatory molecules such as CD40 ligand or OX40 ligand are crucial for fully activating T cells and enhancing their ability to kill cancer cells. From the findings of Sahin et al. [14], including these molecules in mRNA vaccines has been shown to amplify the immune response, leading to more robust tumor eradication in

preclinical studies. Additionally, the incorporation of immune-stimulating adjuvants into the vaccine formulation has further improved immune activation, making the vaccines more potent against cancers that are traditionally resistant to immune therapies.

5.3.3. Enhancing Antigen Presentation through Dendritic Cell Targeting

Dendritic cells (DCs) are professional antigen-presenting cells (APCs) that play a pivotal role in initiating and regulating the immune response. To improve immune system targeting, scientists have developed mRNA vaccines that specifically deliver the antigen-encoding mRNA to dendritic cells. According to Wculek et al. [81], focusing on dendritic cells can improve how antigens are presented to T cells, which in turn strengthens the immune system's capacity to identify and destroy cancer cells. This is often achieved through the use of targeting ligands or nanoparticles that specifically bind to receptors on dendritic cells, ensuring that the mRNA is preferentially taken up by these key immune cells.

In addition to direct targeting, some mRNA vaccines have been engineered to encode antigens that are specifically processed and presented by dendritic cells. As noted by Rahman et al. [82], this approach not only improves antigen presentation but also enhances the overall efficacy of the vaccine by ensuring that the immune response is directed primarily toward tumor cells. Researchers are also exploring the use of self-replicating mRNA, which can amplify the antigen signal within dendritic cells, leading to more robust T cell activation and a stronger therapeutic response.

5.3.4. Personalized mRNA Vaccines for Cancer Therapy

The rise of personalized medicine has opened new avenues for engineering better immune system targeting in cancer immunotherapy. Custom mRNA vaccines are created to encode neoantigens that are specific to each patient's tumor, making them unique to the individual. From the findings of Sahin et al. [83], by sequencing a patient's tumor and identifying specific mutations that produce neoantigens, researchers can design mRNA vaccines that precisely target the cancer cells while leaving healthy cells untouched. This personalized approach has shown great promise in clinical trials, particularly in treating cancers with a high mutational burden, such as melanoma and lung cancer [83,84].

Personalized mRNA vaccines also offer the advantage of being able to adapt to the evolving nature of cancer. Since tumors can mutate and develop resistance to certain therapies, the ability to quickly sequence and design new mRNA vaccines allows for a more dynamic and tailored approach to cancer treatment. This adaptability is essential for achieving lasting disease management, allowing the immune system to be consistently educated to identify and destroy emerging variants of cancer cells [84].

6. Clinical Applications and Future Directions

The landscape of cancer immunotherapy has been revolutionized by the emergence of mRNA technology, particularly with the success of mRNA vaccines in managing viral infections. This momentum has been carried over into cancer therapy, where researchers and clinicians are increasingly investigating the potential of mRNA-based cancer vaccines. Recent clinical trials have shed light on the efficacy and safety of these vaccines, while new opportunities for personalized treatments and combination therapies with immune checkpoint inhibitors suggest promising future directions for cancer treatment. Below, we explore these key clinical advancements and potential future applications.

6.1. Recent Clinical Trials in Cancer Immunotherapy Using mRNA

Recent clinical studies have shown that mRNA vaccines could be an effective approach for treating cancer through immunotherapy. These studies mainly aim to create therapeutic vaccines designed to either prevent cancer from returning or reduce the size of current tumors by stimulating the immune system to attack antigens specific to cancer cells. Among the most promising mRNA cancer vaccines undergoing clinical evaluation is BNT122, created by BioNTech, which is presently being tested across various cancers, such as melanoma and colorectal cancer. According to the findings of Xu et al. [85], early-phase clinical trials have shown that BNT122 can stimulate strong antigen-specific T cell responses, leading to tumor regression in some patients with advanced melanoma. This vaccine works by encoding neoantigens—unique tumor-specific mutations—allowing the immune system to identify and target malignant cells more effectively.

In a phase I trial for advanced melanoma, as reported by Kreiter et al. [86], patients who were administered an mRNA vaccine aimed at neoantigens showed a notable rise in tumor-infiltrating lymphocytes (TILs), essential for attacking and destroying cancer cells. Furthermore, the trial demonstrated the safety of mRNA vaccines, with only mild to moderate side effects such as fever, fatigue, and injection site reactions. These findings have laid the groundwork for subsequent trials aiming to refine mRNA vaccine formulations and delivery methods to improve therapeutic outcomes.

Another notable example comes from Moderna's mRNA vaccine platform, which is being tested in combination with immune checkpoint inhibitors for the treatment of advanced solid tumors. A research study conducted by Yuan et al. [87] found that pairing an mRNA vaccine with pembrolizumab, a PD-1 inhibitor, resulted in improved immune responses and a reduction in tumor size among patients suffering from advanced non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC). This trial highlights the potential of mRNA vaccines to work synergistically with other immunotherapies, offering new treatment avenues for cancers that are resistant to traditional therapies. While most mRNA cancer vaccines are still in the early stages of clinical development, the growing body of evidence from trials points to their promise in generating robust and durable anti-tumor responses. Researchers are particularly optimistic about mRNA vaccines targeting cancers with high mutational burdens, such as melanoma, lung, and bladder cancers, where the immune system can readily distinguish between normal and malignant cells based on the expression of neoantigens [87].

In a separate study, Liu et al. [88] explored a combination immunotherapy approach for treating triple-negative breast cancer (TNBC), a highly aggressive cancer subtype with limited treatment options and poor prognosis. The authors developed a novel nanoparticle (NP)-based delivery system for an mRNA vaccine that encodes the tumor-associated antigen MUC1. This vaccine specifically targets dendritic cells (DCs) in lymph nodes to stimulate an immune response. The NPs were engineered to bind to mannose receptors on DCs, facilitating the uptake of the MUC1 mRNA vaccine and ensuring localized antigen expression within the lymph nodes (see figure 5). This targeted delivery is crucial, as it directly promotes the activation and expansion of tumor-specific cytotoxic T lymphocytes (CTLs) against TNBC [88].

In the study's experimental model, the combination of the MUC1 mRNA vaccine with an anti-CTLA-4 monoclonal antibody—a checkpoint inhibitor known to enhance T-cell activity—was assessed for its synergistic effects on tumor inhibition. In vivo results demonstrated that the NP vaccine alone could elicit a potent, antigen-specific CTL response against TNBC 4T1 cells, a commonly used TNBC cell line in research. However, when combined with anti-CTLA-4 therapy, the immune response was significantly stronger, leading to enhanced tumor suppression compared to either the vaccine or anti-CTLA-4 antibody alone [88].

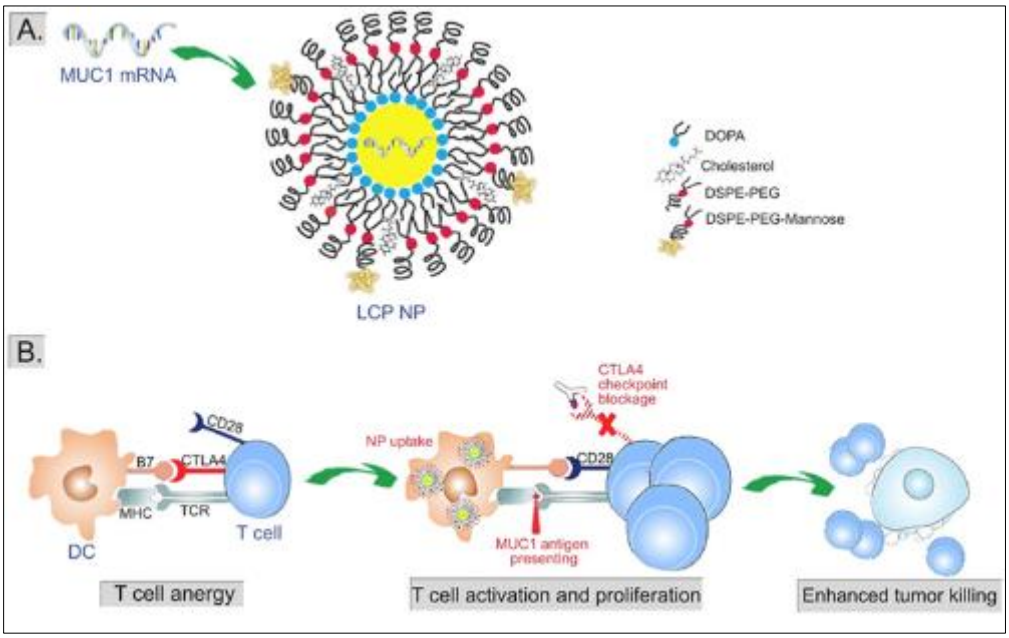

Figure 5 Diagram showing Combination Immunotherapy of MUC1 mRNA Nano-vaccine and CTLA-4 Blockade Effectively Inhibiting Growth of Triple Negative Breast Cancer. Reproduced from Ref [88] with permission. Copyright, Elsevier 2018

This study highlights two important findings: first, it underscores the potential of NP-based mRNA vaccines as an effective strategy for targeting antigens to specific immune cells in the lymph nodes; and second, it provides evidence that the combination of NP-based mRNA vaccines and immune checkpoint inhibitors, like anti-CTLA-4, could offer a promising treatment option for TNBC. These findings support further investigation into the use of mRNA vaccine and checkpoint blockade combinations in cancers that traditionally have low immunogenicity, such as TNBC.

Table 4 Summary of Clinical Trials and Outcomes for mRNA Cancer Vaccines

Vaccine	Cancer Type	Combination Therapy	Key Findings	Trial Phase
BNT122 (BioNTech)	Melanoma	Checkpoint inhibitor (PD-1)	Strong immune response, tumor regression.	Phase I
Moderna mRNA-1647	Non-Small Cell Lung Cancer (NSCLC)	None	Enhanced immune response with pembrolizumab.	Phase I/II
Personalized mRNA vaccines	Melanoma	Immune checkpoint inhibitors	Enhanced immune specificity with patient-specific antigens.	Early-stage trials

6.2. Potential for Personalized mRNA Cancer Vaccines

One of the most groundbreaking aspects of mRNA cancer vaccines is their potential for personalization. Unlike conventional vaccines, which are designed to target specific, pre-identified antigens, personalized mRNA vaccines are tailored to the unique mutational landscape of an individual patient's tumor. From the findings of Supabphol et al. [89], this approach involves sequencing the patient's tumor genome to identify neoantigens—mutant proteins that are exclusively expressed by cancer cells. The identified neoantigens are then encoded into the mRNA vaccine, training the patient's immune system to recognize and attack the cancer cells without harming normal tissue.

This personalized approach holds several advantages. Firstly, it ensures that the vaccine targets antigens that are specific to the patient's tumor, thus minimizing off-target effects and reducing the risk of autoimmunity. Secondly, as cancer cells evolve and acquire new mutations, the mRNA vaccine can be rapidly adapted to include these new antigens, making it a flexible and dynamic treatment option. According to Xu et al. [85], personalized mRNA vaccines can be custom-manufactured within weeks, allowing for timely intervention in cancer management. This quick turnaround time is particularly important for cancers that progress rapidly, as it enables the immune system to mount an effective response before the disease becomes more advanced.

Personalized mRNA vaccines have shown significant promise in clinical trials. In a phase I study conducted by Supabphol et al. [89], personalized mRNA vaccines targeting neoantigens in patients with advanced melanoma resulted in durable clinical responses, with some patients achieving complete remission. Moreover, the study demonstrated that these vaccines could induce polyfunctional T cell responses, which are critical for effective tumor eradication. Notably, the patients who received the personalized vaccines showed an expansion of tumor-specific T cells, suggesting that the immune system could mount a sustained attack on the cancer even after vaccination [90].

The future of personalized mRNA vaccines is highly promising, with ongoing research exploring their application in a wider range of cancers, including pancreatic, breast, and glioblastoma. While the development of personalized mRNA vaccines poses logistical challenges, such as the need for sophisticated tumor sequencing and vaccine manufacturing facilities, advancements in genomic technologies and mRNA synthesis are rapidly addressing these hurdles. As personalized medicine continues to gain traction in oncology, mRNA vaccines are expected to play a central role in delivering tailored, precision therapies to cancer patients.

6.3. Future Directions for Research, Including Combination Therapies with Checkpoint Inhibitors

While mRNA vaccines have shown significant potential in cancer immunotherapy, their full therapeutic potential may be realized when combined with other immunotherapies, such as immune checkpoint inhibitors. Checkpoint inhibitors, like CTLA-4and PD-1 inhibitors, work by blocking the inhibitory signals that tumors use to evade immune detection, thereby allowing T cells to recognize and destroy cancer cells. When used in combination with mRNA vaccines, these inhibitors can further amplify the immune response, enhancing the overall efficacy of the treatment. According to studies by Yuan et al. [87], pairing mRNA vaccines with checkpoint inhibitors produces enhanced effects in both preclinical studies and early-stage clinical trials. For example, in patients with advanced melanoma, the combination of an mRNA vaccine with pembrolizumab led to improved progression-free survival compared to pembrolizumab alone. This suggests that mRNA vaccines can prime the immune system to respond more effectively to checkpoint inhibitors, potentially overcoming resistance to these therapies in certain cancers.

Furthermore, researchers are investigating the potential of using mRNA vaccines in conjunction with other treatments, including adoptive T cell therapy and oncolytic viruses. From the findings of Liu et al. [91], the integration of mRNA

vaccines with these therapies has the potential to create a multi-pronged attack on cancer, targeting the tumor from multiple angles and reducing the likelihood of immune escape. For instance, the process of adoptive T cell transfer includes modifying a patient's T cells so they can produce receptors that identify antigens unique to cancer cells. When combined with an mRNA vaccine, these engineered T cells can be further activated and directed to attack the tumor more effectively.

Future research is also focusing on improving the delivery and formulation of mRNA vaccines to enhance their therapeutic efficacy [90]. Nanoparticle-based delivery systems, as highlighted by Kowalski et al. [74], are being developed to protect mRNA molecules from degradation and ensure their efficient uptake by antigen-presenting cells. The integration of enhanced delivery methods and immune-modulating adjuvants is anticipated to significantly boost the effectiveness of mRNA vaccines in treating cancer through immunotherapy.

Looking ahead, researchers are investigating the potential combination of mRNA vaccines with cutting-edge technologies like CRISPR gene editing and artificial intelligence (AI). AI algorithms, for example, could be used to predict the most immunogenic neoantigens from a patient's tumor, streamlining the design of personalized mRNA vaccines. Additionally, CRISPR technology could be leveraged to enhance the precision of mRNA vaccines by editing the tumor's genetic makeup to create new therapeutic targets.

7. Conclusion

mRNA-based cancer vaccines represent a groundbreaking advancement in cancer immunotherapy, offering a unique and highly adaptable approach to targeting tumors. This review has outlined the multifaceted challenges and innovations that are shaping the future of this therapeutic area. From enhancing mRNA stability to improving delivery systems with technologies like lipid nanoparticles, significant strides have been made in addressing the inherent - limitations of mRNA stability, degradation, and immune activation. Moreover, emerging technologies such as self-amplifying and circular RNAs are paving the way for more efficient and durable treatments.

Clinical trials have demonstrated the effectiveness of mRNA vaccines in provoking robust immune responses and, when combined with immune checkpoint inhibitors, further amplifying therapeutic outcomes. Personalized mRNA vaccines stand out as a particularly promising innovation, tailoring treatments to an individual's tumor-specific neoantigens, thereby minimizing off-target effects and improving therapeutic efficacy.

However, despite the remarkable progress, challenges remain. The long-term safety of mRNA vaccines, delivery issues, and the potential for unforeseen side effects need continuous evaluation. Nevertheless, the rapid pace of technological innovations and the ongoing success of clinical trials provide optimism that mRNA vaccines will soon become a cornerstone of personalized cancer treatment. Future research will likely focus on optimizing combination therapies, exploring new delivery methods, and further integrating emerging technologies to fully unlock the potential of mRNA-based cancer immunotherapies.

This ongoing research promises to not only revolutionize cancer treatment but also to provide a blueprint for tackling other diseases through precision medicine. The future of mRNA technology is undoubtedly bright, and its applications in oncology may lead to substantial improvements in patient outcomes and survival rates across diverse cancer types.

Compliance with ethical standards

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