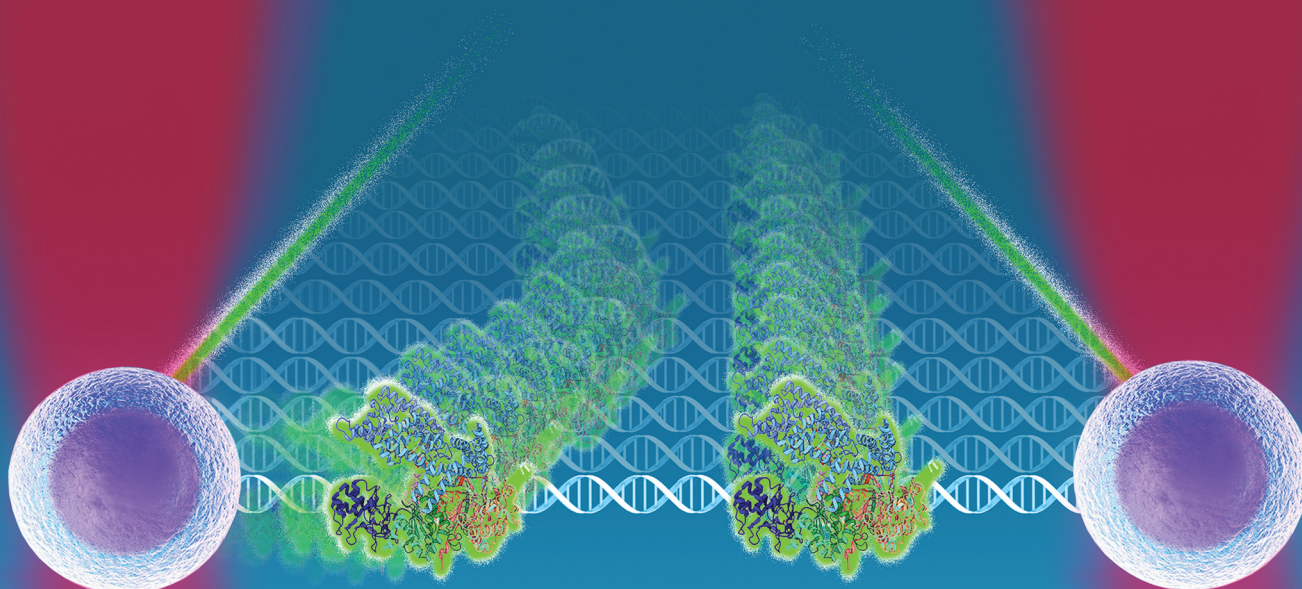


PCCP

Physical Chemistry Chemical Physics

rsc.li/pccp



ISSN 1463-9076

COMMUNICATION

Maria Emanuela Cuomo, David S. Rueda *et al.*
Cas12a target search and cleavage on force-stretched DNA



Cite this: *Phys. Chem. Chem. Phys.*,
2021, 23, 26640

Received 26th July 2021,
Accepted 26th August 2021

DOI: 10.1039/d1cp03408a

rsc.li/pccp

Cas12a target search and cleavage on force-stretched DNA†

Marialucrezia Losito,[‡] Quentin M. Smith,[‡] Matthew D. Newton,[‡]
Maria Emanuela Cuomo^{*,d} and David S. Rueda^{*,ab}

Using optical tweezers, we investigate target search and cleavage by CRISPR–Cas12a on force-stretched λ -DNA. Cas12a uses fast, one-dimensional hopping to locate its target. Binding and cleavage occur rapidly and specifically at low forces (≤ 5 pN), with a 1.8 nm rate-limiting conformational change. Mechanical distortion slows diffusion, increases off-target binding but hinders cleavage.

CRISPR–Cas (clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats and CRISPR-associated proteins) complexes are RNA-guided endonucleases that protect bacteria against invading bacteriophages.^{1,2} Over the past decade, these complexes have gained popularity for their applications in targeted genome editing.³ However, the presence of spurious off-target effects has hindered some therapeutic applications.^{4,5} More recently, Cas12a⁶ (a type V CRISPR effector, Fig. 1A) has surfaced as a promising alternative over the well-known Cas9 for genomic applications^{7,8} and diagnostics⁹ because it presents fewer off-target effects in cells.^{10,11}

Cas12a is a multi-domain protein (Fig. 1A) comprised of a Recognition domain (REC), a protospacer-adjacent motif (PAM, 5'-TTTV-3', with V = A/C/G) interacting domain (PID), an inactive Nuclease domain (NUC) and an active Nuclease domain (RuvC). Unlike Cas9, Cas12a utilizes a single 43 nt-long CRISPR–RNA (crRNA), and RuvC cleaves both the non-target (NTS) and target (TS) strands sequentially, leaving a 5–8 nt overhang.^{6,12} Numerous atomic resolution structures^{13–19} have shown that the NTS interacts first with RuvC, whereas the TS must undergo a large conformational change to

reach the RuvC active site. Despite these structures, the kinetics and target search and cleavage mechanisms of Cas12a are still not fully characterised.

Prior single-molecules studies^{19–23} have confirmed that Cas12a functions differently than Cas9. Cas12a diffuses one-dimensionally to locate targets,²¹ followed by R-loop formation,²² conformational activation¹⁹ and sequential staggered cleavage of the target.²⁰

Here, we use our previously developed optical tweezers assay²⁴ to further investigate the Cas12a target search and cleavage mechanism on mechanically-stretched λ -DNA. To monitor Cas12a–DNA interactions in real-time with single-molecule resolution, we assembled Cas12a complexes with a Cy3-labeled crRNA designed to target a unique sequence at 33.5 kb on λ -DNA (Fig. 1B and ESI†). Biotinylated- λ -DNA was tethered between two ~ 4.9 μ m polystyrene beads through biotin–streptavidin interactions and stretched under 5 pN force (Fig. 1B), to reach the DNA's contour length (~ 16 μ m) without altering base pairing (Fig. 1C). In the Ca²⁺-buffer channel (ESI,† Fig. S1B) to prevent cleavage, we observed a binding event at the expected location for several minutes (Fig. 1D), consistent with previous observations that Cas12a complex binds target DNA with very high affinity.¹² No binding was observed with Cy3-crRNA alone (ESI†), confirming that such events represent stable binding of the holoenzyme complex.

Next, we tested whether Cas12a was active on force-clamped λ -DNA (3 pN) by assembling the labelled complex in the Mg²⁺-buffer channel (ESI,† Fig. S1B). Fluorescent labelling did not affect activity in control bulk assays.²⁰ A single Cas12a complex bound its specific target, as expected, and cleavage was observed at 20 s as a drop in the force between the beads and a displacement of the force-clamped bead (Fig. 2A). We approximate the cleavage rate constant ($k_{\text{cleave}} = 0.021 \pm 0.001$ s^{−1}) by measuring the dwell time at the target site from initial binding to cleavage ($n = 22$). We repeated the measurements at forces ranging 2–7 pN (Fig. 2B). The dwell time between binding and cutting increased linearly with force, and the corresponding rate constants decreased exponentially, indicating that force hinders cleavage. At 10 pN or higher, we could not observe

^a Department of Infectious Disease, Section of Virology, Faculty of Medicine, Imperial College London, London W12 0NN, UK.

E-mail: david.rueda@imperial.ac.uk

^b Single Molecule Imaging Group, MRC London Institute of Medical Sciences, London W12 0NN, UK

^c Discovery Sciences, AstraZeneca, Cambridge CB4 0WG, UK

^d Oncology R&D, AstraZeneca, Cambridge CB2 0RE, UK.

E-mail: Emanuela.Cuomo@astrazeneca.com

† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available. See DOI: 10.1039/d1cp03408a

‡ Equally contributing authors.



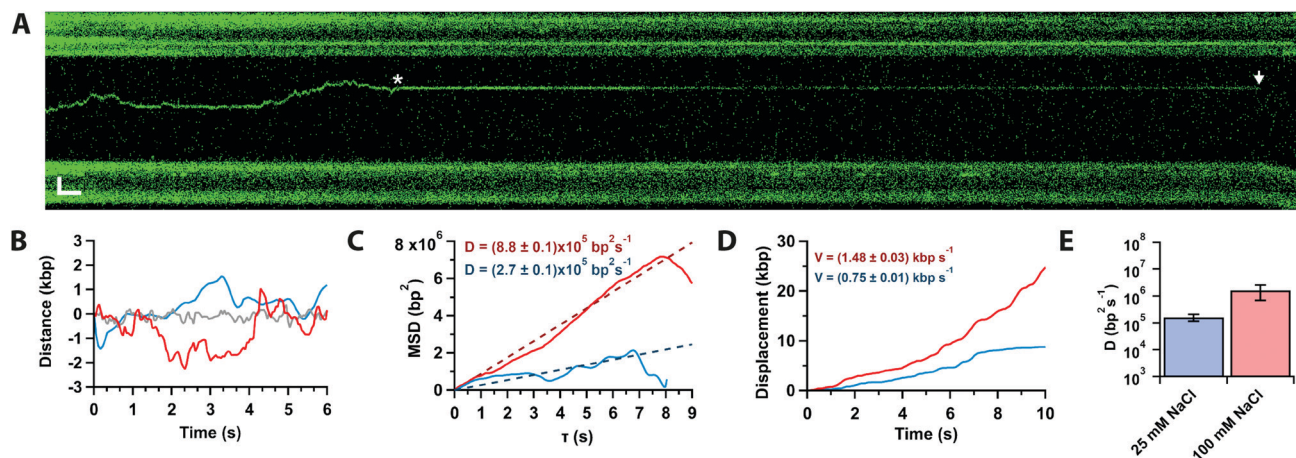


Fig. 3 (A) Kymograph of force-clamped λ -DNA (4 pN) in 10 mM Mg^{2+} and 100 mM Na^+ with a diffusing Cas12a complex. The complex diffuses twice past the target site (star) before binding tightly. Cleavage is observed 75 s later (arrow). Scale bars = 2 μm , 2 s. (B) Trajectories of target bound (grey) and diffusing of Cas12a complex in 10 mM Ca^{2+} and 100 mM (red) or 25 mM (blue) Na^+ . (C) Mean-square displacement analysis and diffusion coefficients of trajectories in (B) at 25 (blue) and 100 mM (red) Na^+ . (D) Cumulative displacement analysis of trajectories in (B) at 25 (blue) and 100 mM (red) Na^+ , and average diffusion velocities. (E) Diffusion coefficients in 25 and 100 mM Na^+ (average and s.e.m., $n = 20$ each).

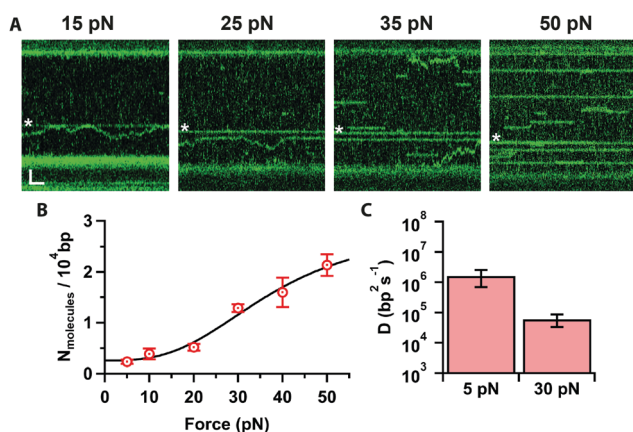


Fig. 4 (A) Kymographs of force stretched λ -DNA (15–50 pN) in 10 mM Ca^{2+} and 100 mM Na^+ , showing Cas12a bound on target (star) and off targets. Scale bars = 2 μm , 1 s. (B) Number of molecules bound per 10 000 bp as a function of force (average and s.e.m., $n = 7$ each), and fit to the Hill equation (line). (C) Cas12a complex diffusion coefficients at 5 and 30 pN (average and s.e.m., $n = 20$ each).

observed diffusion coefficient, which in turn results in frequent off-target Cas12a binding in a force-dependent fashion. Nonetheless, the force-induced cleavage inhibition observed above (Fig. 2) suggests that these off-target binding events may not result in off-target cleavage. Indeed, we never observed cleavage at these forces in Mg^{2+} -buffer.

Conclusions

In recent years, Cas12a⁶ has emerged as a salient alternative for genome editing applications to Cas9 because it exhibits fewer off-target effects in cells^{10,11} and staggered cleavage.^{6,12} While Cas12a has already been investigated by some single-molecule studies,^{19–22} several mechanistic aspects remain poorly

characterized. Here, we have used correlative single-molecule optical tweezers with fluorescent detection to further investigate the target search and cleavage mechanism of Cas12a on mechanically stretched λ -DNA.²⁴ We find that the complex binds primarily away from the target on the DNA and diffuses randomly and bidirectionally until it engages with its target (Fig. 3A). Target recognition likely requires the PID (Fig. 1A) to recognize the PAM sequence as it diffuses over it, which can entail several attempts (Fig. 3A). Once bound at the target site, the duplex is melted, the R-loop formed, and cleavage is observed within seconds (Fig. 2A). Stretching the DNA with force hinders cleavage, which reveals a large amplitude (~ 1.8 nm, Fig. 2B) rate-limiting conformational change. This conformational change could involve a “closing” of the enzyme to bring the TS in Rec (Fig. 1A) into the active site in RuvC (Fig. 1A), and is consistent with known structures^{13–19} and prior observations.^{19,28}

Our diffusion analysis supports a search mechanism that involves hopping on the DNA, as previously proposed.²¹ The observed slow diffusion at higher forces (Fig. 4C), is consistent with the idea that Cas12a probes the DNA sequence at every hop. In this scenario, force-facilitated DNA melting, and R-loop formation would result in longer dwell-times between hops. Therefore, Cas12a likely toggles between “open” and “closed” conformations while hopping. PAM-recognition by PID likely triggers a cascade of conformational changes that result in R-loop formation and staggered cleavage of the target (Fig. 5).

Interestingly, we also observe that off-target binding increases markedly at higher forces (>20 pN), a behaviour akin of Cas9.²⁴ This observation is consistent with the idea that force stretching lowers the DNA melting barrier and facilitates R-loop formation, even in the presence of multiple mismatches. However, Cas12a exhibits fewer off-target effects *in vivo*. The force-induced cleavage inhibition shown here implies that those off-target bound complexes do not cleave, which will



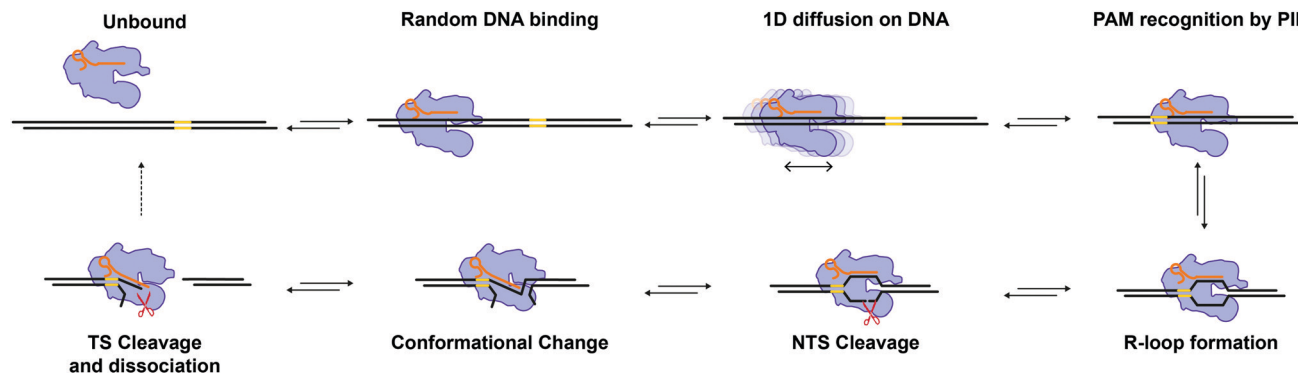


Fig. 5 Model for Cas12a target search and cleavage. Cas12a binds DNA at a random location and undergoes 1D diffusion to locate its target. The PID recognizes the target's PAM sequence, which triggers a cascade of conformational changes to unwind the DNA duplex and form the R-loop. The NTS interacts with the RuvC domain triggering the first cleavage event. A rate limiting conformational change brings the TS into the RuvC active site enabling staggered TS cleavage. The DSB is complete and Cas12a is recycled for another round of catalysis.

have minimal implications for off-target activity *in vivo*. Therefore, our results shed new light into the specificity mechanism of Cas12a. The opposing effect of DNA unwinding on off-target binding and cleavage provides a mechanistic basis for Cas12a specificity. In physiological environments, negatively supercoiled DNA, which is also underwound, may experience similar off-target binding, but it is also unlikely to be cleaved. It is possible to speculate that bacteria have evolved this mechanism to distinguish between their naturally supercoiled genomes, and the linearised genome of invading phages, which would be readily cleaved. Further studies will test these hypotheses directly.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interests.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Single Molecule Imaging Group for useful comments and suggestions, especially Dr A. Kaczmarczyk for assistance calculating the Diffusion Coefficients, and A. Llauro (LUMICKS B.V.) with the tweezer experiments. The Single Molecule Imaging Group is funded by a core grant of the MRC-London Institute of Medical Sciences (UKRI MC-A658-5TY10), a Wellcome Trust Collaborative Grant (206292/Z/17/Z), a BBSRC CASE-studentship (to M.D.N.), and the H2020-MSCA-European Training Network (LightDyNAMics, 765266).

References

- 1 F. J. M. Mojica, C. Ferrer, G. Juez and F. Rodríguez-Valera, Long stretches of short tandem repeats are present in the largest replicons of the Archaea *Haloferax mediterranei* and *Haloferax volcanii* and could be involved in replicon partitioning, *Mol. Microbiol.*, 1995, **17**, 85–93.
- 2 M. Jinek, K. Chylinski, I. Fonfara, M. Hauer, J. A. Doudna and E. Charpentier, A programmable dual-RNA-guided DNA endonuclease in adaptive bacterial immunity, *Science*, 2012, **337**, 816–821.
- 3 D. C. Swarts and M. Jinek, Cas9 versus Cas12a/Cpf1: Structure–function comparisons and implications for genome editing, *Wiley Interdiscip. Rev.: RNA*, 2018, **9**, e1481.
- 4 K. R. Anderson, M. Haeussler, C. Watanabe, V. Janakiraman, J. Lund, Z. Modrusan, J. Stinson, Q. Bei, A. Buechler, C. Yu, S. R. Thamminana, L. Tam, M. A. Sowick, T. Alcantar, N. O'Neil, J. Li, L. Ta, L. Lima, M. Roose-Girma, X. Rairdan, S. Durinck and S. Warming, CRISPR off-target analysis in genetically engineered rats and mice, *Nat. Methods*, 2018, **15**, 512–514.
- 5 B. Wienert, S. K. Wyman, C. D. Richardson, C. D. Yeh, P. Akcakaya, M. J. Porritt, M. Morlock, J. T. Vu, K. R. Kazane, H. L. Watry, L. M. Judge, B. R. Conklin, M. Maresca and J. E. Corn, Unbiased detection of CRISPR off-targets *in vivo* using DISCOVER-Seq, *Science*, 2019, **364**, 286–289.
- 6 B. Zetsche, J. S. Gootenberg, O. O. Abudayyeh, I. M. Slaymaker, K. S. Makarova, P. Essletzbichler, S. E. Volz, J. Joung, J. Van Der Oost, A. Regev, E. V. Koonin and F. Zhang, Cpf1 Is a Single RNA-Guided Endonuclease of a Class 2 CRISPR-Cas System, *Cell*, 2015, **163**, 759–771.
- 7 J. Liu, S. Srinivasan, C. Y. Li, I. L. Ho, J. Rose, M. A. Shaheen, G. Wang, W. Yao, A. Deem, C. Bristow, T. Hart and G. Draetta, Pooled library screening with multiplexed Cpf1 library, *Nat. Commun.*, 2019, **10**, 1–10.
- 8 P. C. DeWeirdt, K. R. Sanson, A. K. Sangree, M. Hegde, R. E. Hanna, M. N. Feeley, A. L. Griffith, T. Teng, S. M. Borys, C. Strand, J. K. Joung, B. P. Kleinstiver, X. Pan, A. Huang and J. G. Doench, Optimization of AsCas12a for combinatorial genetic screens in human cells, *Nat. Biotechnol.*, 2020, **39**, 94–104.
- 9 J. P. Broughton, X. Deng, G. Yu, C. L. Fasching, V. Servellita, J. Singh, X. Miao, J. A. Streithorst, A. Granados, A. Sotomayor-Gonzalez, K. Zorn, A. Gopez, E. Hsu, W. Gu, S. Miller, C. Y. Pan, H. Guevara, D. A. Wadford, J. S. Chen and C. Y. Chiu, CRISPR–Cas12-based detection of SARS-CoV-2, *Nat. Biotechnol.*, 2020, **38**, 870–874.
- 10 B. P. Kleinstiver, S. Q. Tsai, M. S. Prew, N. T. Nguyen, M. M. Welch, J. M. Lopez, Z. R. McCaw, M. J. Aryee and



- J. K. Joung, Genome-wide specificities of CRISPR-Cas Cpf1 nucleases in human cells, *Nat. Biotechnol.*, 2016, **34**, 869–874.
- 11 D. Kim, J. Kim, J. K. Hur, K. W. Been, S. Yoon and J.-S. Kim, Genome-wide analysis reveals specificities of Cpf1 endonucleases in human cells, *Nat. Biotechnol.*, 2016, **34**, 863–868.
 - 12 I. Strohkendl, F. A. Saifuddin, J. R. Rybarski, I. J. Finkelstein and R. Russell, Kinetic Basis for DNA Target Specificity of CRISPR-Cas12a, *Mol. Cell*, 2018, **71**, 816–824.e3.
 - 13 D. Dong, K. Ren, X. Qiu, J. Zheng, M. Guo, X. Guan, H. Liu, N. Li, B. Zhang, D. Yang, C. Ma, S. Wang, D. Wu, Y. Ma, S. Fan, J. Wang, N. Gao and Z. Huang, The crystal structure of Cpf1 in complex with CRISPR RNA, *Nature*, 2016, **532**, 522–526.
 - 14 P. Gao, H. Yang, K. R. Rajashankar, Z. Huang and D. J. Patel, Type V CRISPR-Cas Cpf1 endonuclease employs a unique mechanism for crRNA-mediated target DNA recognition, *Cell Res.*, 2016, **26**, 901–913.
 - 15 T. Yamano, H. Nishimasu, B. Zetsche, H. Hirano, I. M. Slaymaker, Y. Li, I. Fedorova, T. Nakane, K. S. Makarova, E. V. Koonin, R. Ishitani, F. Zhang and O. Nureki, Crystal Structure of Cpf1 in Complex with Guide RNA and Target DNA, *Cell*, 2016, **165**, 949–962.
 - 16 D. C. Swarts, J. van der Oost and M. Jinek, Structural Basis for Guide RNA Processing and Seed-Dependent DNA Targeting by CRISPR-Cas12a, *Mol. Cell*, 2017, **66**, 221–233.e4.
 - 17 S. Stella, P. Alcón and G. Montoya, Structure of the Cpf1 endonuclease R-loop complex after target DNA cleavage, *Nature*, 2017, **546**, 559–563.
 - 18 D. C. Swarts and M. Jinek, Mechanistic Insights into the *cis*- and *trans*-Acting DNase Activities of Cas12a, *Mol. Cell*, 2019, **73**, 589–600.e4.
 - 19 S. Stella, P. Mesa, J. Thomsen, B. Paul, P. Alcón, S. B. Jensen, B. Saligram, M. E. Moses, N. S. Hatzakis and G. Montoya, Conformational Activation Promotes CRISPR-Cas12a Catalysis and Resetting of the Endonuclease Activity, *Cell*, 2018, **175**, 1856–1871.e21.
 - 20 D. Singh, J. Mallon, A. Poddar, Y. Wang, R. Tippana, O. Yang, S. Bailey and T. Ha, Real-time observation of DNA target interrogation and product release by the RNA-guided endonuclease CRISPR Cpf1 (Cas12a), *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U. S. A.*, 2018, **115**, 5444–5449.
 - 21 Y. Jeon, Y. H. Choi, Y. Jang, J. Yu, J. Goo, G. Lee, Y. K. Jeong, S. H. Lee, I. S. Kim, J. S. Kim, C. Jeong, S. Lee and S. Bae, Direct observation of DNA target searching and cleavage by CRISPR-Cas12a, *Nat. Commun.*, 2018, **9**, 1–11.
 - 22 K. van Aelst, C. J. Martínez-Santiago, S. J. Cross and M. D. Szczelkun, The effect of DNA topology on observed rates of R-loop formation and DNA strand cleavage by CRISPR Cas12a, *Genes*, 2019, **10**(2), 169.
 - 23 L. Zhang, R. Sun, M. Yang, S. Peng, Y. Cheng and C. Chen, Conformational Dynamics and Cleavage Sites of Cas12a Are Modulated by Complementarity between crRNA and DNA, *iScience*, 2019, **19**, 492–503.
 - 24 M. D. Newton, B. J. Taylor, R. P. C. C. Driessen, L. Roos, N. Cvetic, S. Allyjaun, B. Lenhard, M. E. Cuomo and D. S. Rueda, DNA stretching induces Cas9 off-target activity, *Nat. Struct. Mol. Biol.*, 2019, **26**, 185–192.
 - 25 E. Evans, *Annu. Rev. Biophys. Biomol. Struct.*, 2001, **30**, 105–128.
 - 26 M. Mora, A. Stannard and S. Garcia-Manyes, The nanomechanics of individual proteins, *Chem. Soc. Rev.*, 2020, **49**, 6816–6832.
 - 27 K. Murugan, A. S. Seetharam, A. J. Severin and D. G. Sashital, *J. Biol. Chem.*, 2020, **295**, 5538–5553.
 - 28 A. Saha, P. R. Arantes, R. V. Hsu, Y. B. Narkhede, M. Jinek and G. Palermo, Molecular Dynamics Reveals a DNA-Induced Dynamic Switch Triggering Activation of CRISPR-Cas12a, *J. Chem. Inf. Model.*, 2020, **60**, 6427–6437.
 - 29 A. Tafvizi, L. A. Mirny and A. M. Van-Oijen, *Chem. Phys. Chem.*, 2011, **12**, 1481–1489.
 - 30 M. D. Newton, S. D. Fairbanks, J. A. Thomas and D. S. Rueda, A Minimal Load-and-Lock RuII Luminescent DNA Probe, *Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.*, 2021, **60**, 20952–20959.

