



## Interview

**What are the current topics in the field of virology, and what is new regarding vaccines and antiviral therapies? The conference presidents in an interview about the 35th Annual Meeting of the Society for Virology (GfV).**

**Heidelberg, March 2026.** Under the scientific leadership of the conference presidents Prof. Ralf Bartenschlager and Prof. Hans Georg Kräusslich, the GfV Annual Meeting 2026 demonstrates: virology is a constantly evolving field that ranges from the discovery of previously unknown viruses to the development of new prevention and therapy concepts. Interdisciplinary research—bringing together such diverse fields as biology, biotechnology, medicine, chemistry, physics, and engineering—plays a central role. The range of topics is broad: it extends from DNA and RNA origami, with which researchers literally assemble immune cells from molecular building blocks, to new imaging methods that make viral infections visible with an unprecedented level of detail, all the way to game-changer therapies. These include lenacapavir, which is revolutionizing the prevention of HIV infection, as well as curative therapies for chronic liver infections caused by certain viruses. Accordingly, this year's meeting brings together some of the most exciting breakthroughs of recent years.

***The GfV Annual Meeting is one of the most important virology congresses in German-speaking countries (Germany, Austria, Switzerland). Which technological advances—such as in genomics, diagnostics, or antiviral development—particularly shape the 2026 program?***

**Prof. Ralf Bartenschlager:** Synthetic biology and its applications in the fields of virology and immunology—through synthetic immune cells and vaccines—represent the next generation of immune prevention and therapy. In Heidelberg, for example, researchers are investigating how immune cells can be built from scratch using molecular components. In this so-called DNA and RNA origami, long single strands of DNA or RNA—usually of viral origin—are folded into complex three-dimensional structures with the help of short synthetic DNA strands. We have invited two internationally renowned speakers on this topic. Another central focus of this year's conference is imaging techniques with high temporal and spatial resolution in complex systems that increasingly resemble the situation in the infected organism. Several talks by international experts as well as many contributions submitted by participants will address this topic.

***Virus evolution is a key topic of the meeting. What new insights do you expect from research on the host specificity of the influenza virus?***

**Prof. Hans-Georg Kräusslich:** We begin the meeting with this topic, with a particular focus on influenza viruses and the evolution of avian influenza. In recent years, this has infected numerous animal species worldwide and, in some cases, severely endangered them; more recently, cattle in the United States have been affected for the first time. Important insights concern the role of host factors for the various pathogens and how the virus can adapt to them. In addition to influenza, we will also hear contributions about other rapidly evolving viruses that, for example, are

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spreading northward from tropical regions and are transmitted by insects. Another highlight will be a lecture on the evolution of the hepatitis B virus over the past 10 million years.

***The session on the development of antiviral therapies is a central highlight. What new insights do you expect from research in this area?***

Prof. Hans-Georg Kräusslich: Lenacapavir is a game changer in HIV prevention, and through basic research—including work from Heidelberg—we have learned a great deal about its mechanism of action. A lenacapavir injection only needs to be administered twice a year and effectively protects against infection with the HI virus. People who are exposed to a high risk of HIV infection, such as women in southern Africa, in particular can benefit from this. One of the developers of lenacapavir will give a lecture at the meeting.

Prof. Ralf Bartenschlager: Another important topic is the development of therapies against chronic viral hepatitis. This concerns, on the one hand, the highly effective and curative therapy of chronic hepatitis C virus infection. In recent years, antiviral drugs have been developed that have revolutionized the treatment of this infection, and we were also able to make important contributions to their development. On the other hand, the therapy of chronic hepatitis D virus infection has experienced a turning point with the approval of the drug bulevirtide, which was developed by Stephan Urban from Heidelberg. In the workshops and poster sessions, a large number of new antiviral approaches will also be presented, using small molecules, biological agents, or gene- and cell-therapeutic approaches.

***Do you see trends or scientific breakthroughs that are currently fundamentally changing the understanding of virus evolution?***

Prof. Ralf Bartenschlager: In the field of bioinformatics there have been major technological advances that will be highlighted in the congress program: using bioinformatic methods—including the deep mining of large databases and AI prediction algorithms—tools have been established for the identification of new viruses, for virus surveillance, for the diagnosis of viral infections, and for the prediction of pandemic pathogens. These methods allow us to make predictions about the origin of viruses and their adaptation to the host organism, as well as to trace their probable origins. This also enables better predictions of zoonoses and of the conditions that allow pathogens to jump into the human population.

***What message would you like to convey to society when it comes to preparing for future viral threats?***

Prof. Hans-Georg Kräusslich: A central message is directed at policymakers. They should not forget the lessons of the pandemic and should make the corresponding adjustments in pandemic preparedness. With well-prepared pandemic prevention, the population is also better protected against viral threats. In addition, we once again strongly remind people to make use of the protective measures that have proven effective, such as vaccinations and masks; there is still much that could be achieved here.

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Prof. Ralf Bartenschlager: The next generation of immune prevention and therapy is represented by synthetic biology and its application in virology and immunology, using synthetic immune cells and vaccines. In Heidelberg, for instance, researchers are investigating how immune cells can be constructed from molecular components. This process, known as DNA and RNA origami, involves folding long single strands of DNA or RNA — mostly of viral origin — into complex three-dimensional structures with the help of short synthetic DNA strands. We have invited two internationally renowned speakers to discuss this topic. Another central focus of this year's conference is imaging techniques with high temporal and spatial resolution in complex systems that increasingly resemble the situation in an infected organism. There will also be several presentations by international experts on this topic, as well as many contributions from participants.

***Virus evolution is a key topic at the conference. What new findings do you expect from research into the host specificity of the influenza virus?***

Prof. Hans-Georg Kräusslich: We will begin the conference by focusing on influenza viruses and the evolution of avian influenza. This virus has recently infected numerous animal species worldwide, posing a significant threat to some of them. Most recently, cattle in the United States were infected for the first time. Key findings concern the role of host factors in relation to various pathogens and how the virus can adapt to them. As well as influenza, there will be presentations on other rapidly evolving viruses spreading northwards from tropical regions and transmitted by insects. Another highlight will be the presentation on the evolution of the hepatitis B virus over the last 10 million years.

***The session on the development of antiviral therapies is a key highlight. What new findings do you expect from research in this area?***

Prof. Hans-Georg Kräusslich: Lenacapavir is a game changer in HIV prevention. We have learnt a great deal about its mechanism of action through basic research, including work carried out in Heidelberg. Lenacapavir only needs to be injected twice a year to provide effective protection against HIV infection. This is particularly beneficial for people at high risk of HIV infection, such as women in southern Africa. One of lenacapavir's developers will give a presentation at the conference.

Prof. Ralf Bartenschlager: Another important topic is the development of therapies for chronic viral hepatitis. On the one hand, this involves highly effective, curative therapies for chronic hepatitis C virus infection. In recent years, antiviral drugs have been developed that have transformed the treatment of this infection, and we have made significant contributions to their development. Conversely, the treatment of chronic hepatitis D virus infection has reached a turning point with the approval of bulevirtide, an active ingredient developed by Stephan Urban in Heidelberg. The workshops and poster sessions will also present a variety of new antiviral approaches using small molecules, biological agents, or gene and cell therapy.

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***Are there any current trends or scientific breakthroughs that are fundamentally changing our understanding of virus evolution?***

Prof. Ralf Bartenschlager: The congress programme will highlight major technological advances in the field of bioinformatics. Using bioinformatic methods, including deep mining of large databases and AI prediction algorithms, we have developed tools to identify new viruses, monitor them, diagnose viral infections and predict pandemic pathogens. These tools enable us to make predictions about the origin of viruses and how they adapt to the host organism, as well as trace their probable origin. It also allows us to predict zoonoses more accurately and identify the conditions that enable pathogens to spread to the human population.

***What message would you like to send to society about preparing for future viral threats?***

Prof. Hans-Georg Kräusslich: One key message is aimed at politicians. They must not forget the lessons learned from the pandemic and must make appropriate adjustments to pandemic preparedness. Well-prepared pandemic prevention measures also protect the population against viral threats. Furthermore, we would like to reiterate the importance of implementing proven protective measures, such as vaccinations and face coverings. There is still much to be achieved in this area.

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