

3 **Structural and Functional Insights into Non-Structural Proteins of**  
4 **Coronaviruses**

5 **Mohammed A. Rohaim<sup>1,2</sup>, Rania F. El Naggar<sup>3</sup>, Emily Clayton<sup>2</sup>, and Muhammad**  
6 **Munir<sup>2,\*</sup>**

7 <sup>1</sup> Department of Virology, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Cairo University, 12211 Giza,  
8 Egypt; [mohammed\\_abdelmohsen@cu.edu.eg](mailto:mohammed_abdelmohsen@cu.edu.eg) (M.A.R.)

9 <sup>2</sup> Division of Biomedical and Life Sciences, Faculty of Health and Medicine, Lancaster  
10 University, Lancaster LA1 4YG, UK; [m.a.rohaim@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:m.a.rohaim@lancaster.ac.uk) (M.A.R.);  
11 [e.clayton3@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:e.clayton3@lancaster.ac.uk) (E.C.); [mohammad.munir@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:mohammad.munir@lancaster.ac.uk) (M.M.)

12 <sup>3</sup> Department of Virology, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, University of Sadat City, 32897  
13 Sadat, Egypt; [raniamohammedvet@gmail.com](mailto:raniamohammedvet@gmail.com) (R.F.E.)

14 \* Correspondence: [mohammad.munir@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:mohammad.munir@lancaster.ac.uk); **Tel.: (+441524 595083)**

15 **Abstract:** Coronaviruses (CoVs) are causing a number of human and animal diseases because of  
16 their zoonotic nature such as *Middle East respiratory syndrome* (MERS), *severe acute respiratory*  
17 *syndrome* (SARS) and *coronavirus disease 2019* (COVID-19). These viruses can infect  
18 respiratory, gastrointestinal, hepatic and central nervous systems of human, livestock, birds, bat,  
19 mouse, and many wild animals. The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-  
20 CoV-2) is a newly emerging respiratory virus and is causing CoVID-19 with high morbidity and  
21 considerable mortality. All CoVs belong to the order *Nidovirales*, family *Coronaviridae*, are  
22 enveloped positive-sense RNA viruses, characterised by club-like spikes on their surfaces and  
23 large RNA genome with a distinctive replication strategy. Coronavirus have the largest RNA  
24 genomes (~26–32 kilobases) and their expansion was likely enabled by acquiring enzyme  
25 functions that counter the commonly high error frequency of viral RNA polymerases. Non-  
26 structural proteins (nsp) 7-16 are cleaved from two large replicase polyproteins and guide the  
27 replication and processing of coronavirus RNA. Coronavirus replicase has more or less universal  
28 activities, such as RNA polymerase (nsp 12) and helicase (nsp 13), as well as a variety of unusual  
29 or even special mRNA capping (nsp 14, nsp 16) and fidelity regulation (nsp 14) domains. Besides  
30 that, several smaller subunits (nsp 7– nsp 10) serve as essential cofactors for these enzymes and  
31 contribute to the emerging “nsp interactome.” In spite of the significant progress in studying  
32 coronaviruses structural and functional properties, there is an urgent need to understand the  
33 coronaviruses evolutionary success that will be helpful to develop enhanced control strategies.  
34 Therefore, it is crucial to understand the structure, function, and interactions of coronaviruses RNA  
35 synthesizing machinery and their replication strategies.

36 **Keywords:** Coronaviruses; Human; Emerging; Control; Replication.

## 37 1. Introduction

38 Coronaviruses (CoVs) are major threats to humans and vertebrate species. They can infect  
39 human, livestock, birds, bat, mouse and many other wild animals with the respiratory,  
40 gastrointestinal, hepatic and central nervous system infections [1-3]. The current classification of  
41 coronaviruses recognizes 39 species in 27 subgenera, five genera and two subfamilies that belong  
42 to the family *Coronaviridae*, suborder *Cornidovirineae*, order *Nidovirales* and realm *Riboviria*  
43 [4,5]. Alternatively, coronaviruses are divided into four genera on the basis of genetic and  
44 serologic properties; *Alphacoronavirus*, *Betacoronavirus*, *Gammacoronavirus*, and  
45 *Deltacoronavirus* in the subfamily *Coronavirinae* [6-9]. While CoVs can infect many hosts [10],  
46 the coronaviruses infecting humans are all belonging to either alpha- or beta- CoVs. The outbreaks  
47 of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) and  
48 coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) have shown the potential for transmission of newly  
49 emerging CoVs from animal to human and human to human [5,11-12]. The SARS-CoV proteins  
50 consist of two large polyproteins: ORF1a and ORF1ab (which cleavage proteolytically to shape  
51 16 non-structural proteins) (Table 1). While accessory proteins have been found to be dispensable  
52 for *in vitro* viral replication, others have been shown to play a significant role in *in vivo* virus-host  
53 interactions [13]. Comparatively, the SARS-CoV-2 lacks the hemagglutinin esterase gene found  
54 in other human coronavirus (hCoV) HKU1, a lineage A betacoronavirus [14]. It has been  
55 suggested that spike protein, envelope protein, membrane protein, nucleocapsid protein, 3CL  
56 protease, papain such as protease, RNA polymerase [16], and helicase protein are viable antiviral  
57 drug targets. The CoV outbreaks are highly likely to be unavoidable in the future due to climate  
58 and ecology changes, and increased human-animal interactions. Thus, the development of  
59 effective therapies and vaccines against CoVs is urgently needed.

60

## 61 2. Virion Properties and Genome organization (with main focus on the nsps)

62 Coronaviruses are enveloped, 80-220 nm in size, pleomorphic but mostly spherical, and carry  
63 characteristic and large (20 nm long) club-shaped spikes (trimers spike protein). The combination  
64 of nucleocapsid (N) protein with the genomic RNA forms the helical nucleocapsid that is  
65 surrounded by a viral membrane (M) proteins which are composed of icosahedral structures. Some  
66 coronaviruses often have a second peripheral short (5 nm long) spikes (hemagglutinin-esterase  
67 (HE) protein), which is a peculiar feature of certain betacoronaviruses. Coronaviruses genome is  
68 linear positive-sense, infectious, single-stranded RNA 5' capped and 3' polyadenylated, the  
69 biggest known non-segmented RNA viral genomes (27.6- 31 kb). However, the overall  
70 organization of the genomes is similar [6]. Maintaining such a large CoV genome may be linked  
71 to the unique features of the CoV replication transcription complex (RTC), which contains many  
72 RNA processing enzymes such as the non-structural protein 14's (nsp14's) 3'-5' exoribonuclease.  
73 The 3'-5' exoribonuclease is unique to CoVs in all RNA viruses and is likely to provide an RTC  
74 proofreading function [16-18]. The major virion proteins include a nucleocapsid protein (N, 50-60  
75 kDa) and several envelope proteins; the spike glycoprotein trimer (S, 180- 220 kDa per monomer),  
76 a triple-spanning transmembrane protein (M, 23-35 kDa) and a minor transmembrane protein (E,

77 9-12 kDa), which together with the M protein is essential for coronavirus virion assembly and  
78 budding. Cellular immune responses are generated primarily against the S and N proteins. The 5'-  
79 terminal two thirds of the genome include two open reading frames (ORFs), 1a and 1b, that  
80 together encode all non-structural proteins for the formation of the RTC, whereas the 3'- proximal  
81 third encodes the structural and accessory proteins [19]. ORF1a encodes polyprotein (pp) 1a  
82 containing nsp1-11, while ORF1a and ORF1b together produce pplab containing nsp1-16 through  
83 a (-1) ribosomal frameshift overreading the stop codon of ORF1a [20]. In general, SARS-CoV-2  
84 has a total of 11 genes with 11 open reading frames (ORFs); ORF1ab, ORF2 (Spike protein),  
85 ORF3a, ORF4 (Envelope protein), ORF5 (Membrane protein), ORF6, ORF7a, ORF7b, ORF8,  
86 ORF9 (Nucleocapsid protein), and ORF10 [14]. Coronaviruses are unique among Nidoviruses  
87 because their genomes encode variable numbers of accessory proteins (four or five in majority;  
88 eight in the SARS coronaviruses) that are valueless during virus replication in vitro, but they  
89 improve the virus fitness in vivo.

90

### 91 **3. Non-Structural Proteins (nsps) of Coronaviruses**

92 The enzymatic activities and functional domains of CoVs nsps are expected to be conserved  
93 between the various genera of CoVs, suggesting their significance in viral replication [6,21]. Apart  
94 from these nsps with established functions, there are other nsps whose biological functions and  
95 roles remain to be explored throughout the CoV life cycle. This review considers comprehensive  
96 analysis of the nsp of CoVs and to critically assess their functionalities among well-known  
97 coronaviruses.

98

#### 99 *3.1. Coronavirus nsp1*

100 CoV nsp1's cumulative knowledge has confirmed the symmetric features and disparate  
101 mechanisms among various CoVs to block expression of the host gene and antagonise innate  
102 immune responses that can provide perspective into the expanding repertoire of new viral immune  
103 evasion strategies. Furthermore, despite the lack of obvious primary sequence homology within  
104 CoVs, there was also a significant correlation between the nsp1 of various CoVs belonging to  
105 different genera, inferring their evolutionary linkage and role in the adaptation of CoVs to different  
106 host species. Previous studies reported that the nsp1 proteins of SARS-CoV can promote host  
107 mRNA degradation, suppress host gene expression [22-24] and block host translational machinery  
108 function by binding to the ribosome small subunit [22]. Likewise, SARS-CoV nsp1 has a novel b-  
109 barrel structure mixed with helixes based on Nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) analysis [25].  
110 These studies suggest that coronavirus nsp1 is a major virulence and pathogenicity factor  
111 [22,23,26]. Overall, CoV nsp1, with its intriguing properties and characteristics, is an exciting  
112 avenue for future research that could potentially lead to the discovery of novel players and  
113 pathways of host gene regulation. The fact that nsp1 of various CoVs share a similar biological  
114 role to inhibit host gene expression using different modes of action has also posed some important

115 questions about the effect of these functions and divergent mechanisms on the virulence and  
116 pathogenesis of emerging human CoVs.

117

### 118 3.2. *Coronavirus nsp2*

119 The nsp2 protein is an interesting target for genetic studies, as it has been reported that  
120 engineered mutations that eliminate cleavage at CS1 between nsp1 and nsp2 produce infectious  
121 virus [27], suggesting that nsp2 either maintains role in un-cleaved form or has a viral replication  
122 feature that can be dispensed with. Still, it is not known whether nsp2, as a mature protein or as a  
123 component of the polyprotein coronavirus, is essential for viral replication. Reverse genetic  
124 deletion of the MHV and SARS-CoV polyprotein nsp2 domains enabled the recovery of infectious  
125 mutants with growth deficiencies and RNA synthesis, and demonstrated intact polyprotein  
126 processing, including cleavage at engineered chimeric nsp1/3 cleavage sites. SARS-CoV holds the  
127 most similar general structure and sizes of nsps 1, 2, and 3 to betacoronaviruses [6,21]. However,  
128 there are also major variations between the MHV and SARS-CoV nsps 1, 2, and 3. The  
129 identification or resemblance between MHV and SARS-CoV nsp1 and nsp2 is very minimal  
130 [28,29]. Previous studies showed that nsp2 and nsp3 potentially originate as precursor proteins  
131 until they are transformed into mature nsp2 and nsp3 products. Because of the large size of this  
132 nsp2-3 precursor, previous studies identified it as 290-kDa [30] or 250-kDa [31] based on sodium  
133 dodecyl sulphate (SDS) polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (PAGE). In addition, subsequent  
134 studies showed that the MHV and SARS-CoV replicase polyproteins nsp2 domains are not  
135 required for viral replication [32]. These findings indicate that the coronavirus polyprotein has  
136 significant structural and functional flexibility and that ORF1 encodes at least one and perhaps  
137 number of protein domains, which may be devoted to functions other than those of the product  
138 [32]. Reverse genetics studies were carried out to establish mutant MHV and SARS-CoV nsp2  
139 knockout, the rescue viruses did not replicate, yet processed other replicase proteins correctly [32].  
140 These findings put the basis for studies of replicase protein involvement in host pathogenesis,  
141 virus-cell interactions, and virus complementation and approaches to the development of stably  
142 attenuated animal and human coronaviruses [32].

143

### 144 3.3. *Coronavirus nsp3*

145 Nsp3 is the biggest multi-domain protein produced by coronaviruses, with different domain  
146 structure and organization in CoV genera. The individual coronaviruses may have 10 to 16  
147 domains, 8 domains and two conserved transmembrane regions [33]. The nsp3 multidomain plays  
148 various roles in CoV infection; it releases nsp1, nsp2, and itself from the polyproteins and binds  
149 to form the replication / transcription complex with other viral nsps as well as RNA. Nsp3 acts on  
150 host protein post-translation modifications to antagonise the host's innate immune response (by  
151 de-MARylation, de-PARYlation (possibly), deubiquitination, or deISGylation). Recent studies  
152 have shown that the biochemical characterization of SARS-CoV-2's deubiquitinating and

153 deISGylating behaviours are closer to that of its counterpart in MERS-CoV than that of SARS-  
154 CoV. SARS-CoV-2 papain-like protease (PLpro) deISGylating activity appeared to be the most  
155 dominant of its diverse proteolytic functions and appeared to be species-specific [34].  
156 Additionally, in host cells, nsp3 itself is changed, namely by N-glycosylation of the domain 3Ecto.  
157 Nsp3 may also interact with host proteins (such as RCHY1) to promote survival of viruses. Nsp3  
158 was also identified as the largest non-structural protein of CoVs based on a high rate of positively  
159 selected mutation sites as the major selective target for driving evolution in CoVs [35]. The papain-  
160 like protease domain(s) releases nsp3 from polyprotein, which is (are) part of nsp3 itself [36]. Nsp3  
161 plays major roles in the CoV life cycle; it can act as a scaffold protein to interact with itself and to  
162 bind to other viral nsps or host proteins [37-40]. Nsp3 is essential for the formation of RTC, which  
163 in association with modified host ER membranes may result in formation of convoluted  
164 membranes (CMs) and double-membrane (DMVs) [41-46]. Speculating why coronaviruses retain  
165 many essential functions in one protein is interesting, while nsp3 protein shows high-rate genetic  
166 diversity during CoV evolution. Ultimately, increased research into the structure and function of  
167 nsp3 is required to get a more complete understanding of this protein.

168

#### 169 3.4. *Coronavirus nsp4*

170 Nsp4 is a transmembrane protein, 500 amino acid residues in length, and is the only protein  
171 of the viral polyprotein produced by both PLpro and Mpro after processing. nsp4 has four  
172 transmembrane helices and a conserved cytosolic C-terminal domain throughout the *Nidovirales*  
173 [47], but only the nsp4 part of the C-terminal appears to be retained in the *Nidovirales* however,  
174 deletion of the C-terminal domain resulted in slightly reduction in growth [48]. It was also shown  
175 that nsp4 interacts with nsp2 in a two-hybrid yeast system [37] and in cells with other nsp4  
176 molecules [45]. SARS-CoV nsp4 is an important component for viral double-membrane vesicle  
177 formation [43]. Studies on intracellular expression have shown a biological interaction between  
178 the carboxyl-terminal region of MHV (betacoronavirus) nsp3 and nsp4 [45], and full-length co-  
179 expression of SARS-CoV nsp3 and nsp4 results in comprehensive membrane pairing, where the  
180 paired membranes are kept at the same distance as the authentic DMVs [43].

181

#### 182 3.5. *Coronavirus nsp5*

183 Coronavirus nsp5 is one of three parts of the coronavirus replicase machinery, together with  
184 the nsp12 polymerase and nsp13 helicase regions, that is preserved all over the *Nidovirales* [49].  
185 nsp5 is regarded as the main protease (Mpro), a protease similar to chymotrypsin related to the  
186 enteroviral 3C protease. It belongs to the endopeptidase's family C30 and is responsible for  
187 cleavage within polyprotein 1a/1ab at 11 sequence specific sites. The resultant "mature" protein  
188 products (nsp4- 16) are assembled into replication complex components [36,50]. Nsp5 can be  
189 divided into three domains based on both structure and sequence characteristics that are conserved  
190 in all coronaviruses, *Nidovirales* and several other RNA viruses that share a similar processing

191 scheme for polyproteins; a two-domain active region (I and II) and a third domain (III) play a role  
192 in nsp5 dimerization [36]. Previous study based on interactome analysis revealed that nsp12 and  
193 nsp14 can interact directly with nsp5 [51], and nsp14 and 16 can also interact indirectly with nsp5  
194 as part of nsp10-14-16 complex [38,51-53]. Overall, this indicates that nsp5 plays a critical role in  
195 both RNA replication and in the formation of DMV, possibly by releasing nsp4 and nsp6  
196 proteolytically. To date, nsp3, nsp5, nsp10, nsp12, nsp14 and nsp16 are the only proteins where  
197 temperature sensitive mutations have been discovered [54-56]. Nsp10 can interact directly with  
198 nsp5 [38], and paradoxically, both nsp10 and nsp3 mutations inhibit Mpro activity [56,57].

199

### 200 *3.6. Coronavirus nsp6*

201 While most nsp6 coronavirus proteins are predicted to contain seven transmembrane regions  
202 by TMHMM2.0 [58], only six of these functions as membrane-spanning helices. Nsp6 has six  
203 regions of transmembrane, with both termini on the cytosolic side of the membrane [59]. Nsp6  
204 over-expression disturbs intracellular membrane trafficking [59], resulting in an accumulation of  
205 single membrane vesicles around the complex of microtubules [43]. It has also been demonstrated  
206 that SARS-CoV nsp6 interacts with nsp2, nsp8, nsp9 and accessory protein 9b by two-hybrid yeast  
207 assays [37]. It is interesting that both the 4Endo and 6Endo domains are just as well conserved in  
208 coronaviruses, as is the Mpro catalytic domain. Mapping the structural variations of the SARS-  
209 CoV-2 genome and selection trends, there were two mutations affecting Non-Structural Protein 6  
210 (nsp6) and Open Reading Frame10 (ORF 10) and associated with virus-host interaction, mainly  
211 cellular autophagy induced by viruses [61].

### 212 *3.7. Coronavirus nsp7*

213 The SARS-CoV (betacoronavirus) nsp7 protein structure (83-amino acid) was determined  
214 using both NMR [62] and X-ray crystallography with a hexadecameric supercomplex consisting  
215 of recombinant nsp7 and nsp8 [63]. Reverse-genetic studies aimed at particular residues within  
216 SARS-CoV nsp7 verified the significance of this protein for the virus replication [64], even though  
217 the effect of single point mutations was less than predicted based on the in vitro biochemical  
218 characterization of the RNA-binding properties of protein complexes containing nsp7. The nsp7-  
219 fold includes four helices with quiet different position and spatial orientation, suggesting that the  
220 protein's configuration is mainly affected by the interaction with nsp8 [65].

### 221 *3.8. Coronavirus nsp8 and nsp7–nsp8 Complexes*

222 Initially, the 200-amino-acid-long nsp8 subunit took centre stage due to two reports, the first  
223 describing a fascinating hexadecameric structure consisting of eight copies of each of nsp7 and  
224 nsp8 [63], and the second revealing a nsp8-specific "secondary" RNA polymerase activity [66]  
225 involved in the CoV RNA synthesis process. Although the structures of feline coronavirus (FCoV;  
226 alphacoronavirus 1) nsp7 and nsp8 were found to mimic their SARS-CoV (betacoronavirus)  
227 counterparts, two copies of nsp7 and one copy of nsp8 forming a heterotrimer were found to be

228 assembled into a very different higher-order complex [67]. SARS-CoV nsp8 was found to adopt  
229 two different conformations inside the nsp7– nsp8 hexadecamer. The phylogenetic relationship  
230 and similarity percentage of SARS-CoV-2 in relation with other human coronaviruses is shown in  
231 Fig. 1a and 1b, respectively. These have been named "golf club" and "bent shaft golf club" [63],  
232 with the golf club's globular head considered a new fold. Biochemistry and reverse genetics studies  
233 pointed to an important role in RNA synthesis for SARS-CoV nsp8 residues K58, P183, and R190  
234 (Fig. 1c), replacing which was lethal to SARS-CoV whereas P183 and R190 residues were  
235 presumed to be involved in interactions with nsp12, while K58 may be critical for interactions  
236 with nsp8–RNA [64]. The amino acid sequence alignment for nsp8 of SARS-CoV-2 compared to  
237 other human coronaviruses is shown in Fig. 1d. It has been reported that SARS-CoV nsp8 is an  
238 interaction partner of many other viral proteins (including nsp2, nsp3 and nsp5 to nsp16) based on  
239 yeast two-hybrid and glutathione S-transferase (GST) pull-down assays, although most of these  
240 interactions remain to be verified in the infected cell [68].

### 241 3.9. *Coronavirus nsp9*

242 CoV nsp9 subunit is the second replicase cleavage product after nsp5 based on obtaining  
243 crystal structures, is approximately 110 amino acids long [69,70]. The dimerization of the nsp9's  
244 biologically active form may be capable of binding nucleic acids in a non-sequential manner, with  
245 an apparent preference for single-stranded RNA [69- 71]. The nsp9 protein function still so far  
246 unknown however, site directed mutagenesis studies within nsp9 revealed that point mutations  
247 within nsp9 can block CoV replication [72,73] that suppose its role during viral pathogenesis.  
248 Mutations in nsp9 were also found to lead to increase the pathogenesis of SARS-CoV  
249 (betacoronavirus) in mice model infected with a mouse-adapted strain of virus (MA-15) [74].  
250 Further studies are required to describe how the nsp9 dimerization and mutagenesis may affect  
251 interactions with other replicase subunits, such as nsp8 and nsp12-RdRp. Nsp8 and nsp12 have  
252 been identified as interaction partners for nsp9 [68,70,75] and colocalize on membranous  
253 replication organelles with nsp9 [76].

### 254 3.10. *Coronavirus nsp10*

255 The nsp10 subunit protein (139 residues; SARS-CoV) is one of the most conserved CoV  
256 proteins and is believed to serve as an essential multifunctional replication factor. Nsp10 was  
257 shown to be dimerized, as well as interact with nsp1, nsp7, nsp14, and nsp16 using yeast two-  
258 hybrid assay. These interactions were confirmed by coimmunoprecipitation and/or GST pull-down  
259 assays [37,38,51,77]. Nsp10 's interactions with nsp14 and nsp16 and possibly other subunits of  
260 the viral replication complex can be a target for the development of antiviral compounds against  
261 pathogenic coronaviruses [78]. The significant role of nsp10 in replication was asserted from the  
262 MHV (betacoronavirus) temperature-sensitive mutant phenotype in which a nsp10 mutation was  
263 responsible for a deficiency in the synthesis of minus-strand RNA [54]. Moreover, the protein was  
264 involved in the regulation of polyprotein processing [57]. Based on biochemical and structural  
265 tests, nsp10 protein has been found to bind two strongly affinated  $Zn^{2+}$  ions, indicating the presence

266 of two zinc finger motifs [79]. Similarly, nsp10 exhibited a weak affinity for single- and double-  
267 stranded RNA and DNA, proposing that protein might act as part of a larger RNA-binding  
268 complex. Nsp10 interacts with nsp14 and nsp16 and controls their respective activities ExoN and  
269 ribose-2'-O-MTase (2'-O-MTase) based on the recent biochemical studies [52,80].

### 270 3.11. *Coronavirus nsp11*

271 Inside the polyprotein, coronavirus nsp10 is accompanied by a short peptide of highly variable  
272 sequence mapping the genomic RNA region where the ribosomal frameshift signal leading to the  
273 replicase enzyme cluster being translated into open reading frame 1b is located. Depending on the  
274 CoV species, nsp11 consists of 13–23 residues. In SARS-CoV (betacoronavirus), nsp11 is a 13-  
275 residue peptide which is very small cleavage product processed from the C-terminus of polyprotein  
276 1a (pp1a) at the nsp10/11 junction, however processing of nsp11 has not been demonstrated in  
277 infected cells. The structure of the un-cleaved nsp10–11 polypeptide showed some differences in  
278 oligomerization and crystal packing, but little difference in the core nsp10 structure [81]. Thus,  
279 nsp11 more likely forms part of an essential translation reading frame shift mechanism and is  
280 unlikely to significantly influence the function of nsp10. The N-terminal sequence of nsp11  
281 (encoded between the nsp10/11 junction and the ORF1a/1b frameshift site) in the pp1ab frameshift  
282 component is equivalent to the N-terminal portion of nsp12 subunit.

### 283 3.12. *Coronavirus nsp12*

284 Nsp12 has at least two domains, the recently described, "nidovirus-wide conserved domain  
285 with nucleotidyl transferase activity" (nidovirus RdRp-associated nucleotidyltransferase  
286 (NiRAN)) [82] and the canonical RdRp domain C-terminal [83]. The nsp12-coding sequence  
287 contains the ribosomal frameshift site ORF1a/1b, and a programmed -1 frameshifting event drives  
288 the translation of ORF1b to produce the polyprotein pp1ab that contains nsp12. CoVs' nsp12-RdRp  
289 is a primary drug target, which can be inhibited within the host cell without any toxic side effects.  
290 Nucleoside analogues are an important class of antiviral drug candidates able to target the viral  
291 RdRps but attempts to use them to inhibit CoV replication have so far not been very successful  
292 [1,84]. Ribavirin, a guanosine analogue with a wide range of antiviral activity commonly used  
293 against various RNA viruses due to its mechanism in the induction of lethal mutagenesis by  
294 increasing the RdRp error rate, inhibition of viral mRNA capping and reduction of viral RNA  
295 synthesis by cellular enzyme inhibition (inosine monophosphate dehydrogenase (IMPDH)), which  
296 decreases the availability of intracellular GTP [17,85,86]. In spite of ribavirin was used to treat  
297 small numbers of SARS and MERS infected patients [87], in vitro and vivo studies with different  
298 CoVs and infected cell cultures [84,88-90] established its poor activity and strongly suggested that  
299 ribavirin does not target the CoV RdRp directly or is targeted (itself) by the nsp14-ExoN activity  
300 [17]. It will be important to better understand the structure and function of nsp12-RdRp that will  
301 be helpful to develop new strategies that will reduce the impact of drug resistance-inducing  
302 mutations, which are a common problem when targeting rapidly evolving RNA viruses.

303



### 304 3.13. *Coronavirus nsp13*

305 The CoV genome encodes two replicase polyproteins pp1a and pp1ab to support effective  
306 replication, which is processed proteolytically into 16 non-structural proteins (nsps) [21,91,92]  
307 that assemble into the membrane-associated replication-transcription complexes (RTCs), to drive  
308 viral genome replication and translation. The RNA-dependent RNA polymerase (nsp12) and the  
309 helicase (nsp13) are main components of RTC [28,29,64]. Positive stranded RNA viruses with a  
310 genome greater than 7 kb have been shown to encode helicases [93,94] that are classified into six  
311 super-families (SF1-SF6) and participate in almost every aspect of nucleic acid metabolism [95].  
312 Whatever their functional diversity, all helicases contain core domains which hydrolyse NTPs and  
313 have accessory domains or inserts of different functions, such as assisting in the catalytic activity  
314 or interacting with other protein partners [93,94]. Bioinformatic analysis revealed that CoV nsp13  
315 belongs to the superfamily SF1, including Rep, UvrD, PcrA, RecD, Pif1, Dda, Upf1-like helicases  
316 and various + RNA virus helicases [83] and exhibits multiple enzymatic activities, which include  
317 hydrolysis of NTPs and dNTPs, unwinding of DNA and RNA duplexes with 5'-3' directionality  
318 and the RNA 5'-triphosphatase activity [96- 98]. CoV helicase is one of the three most conserved  
319 evolutionary proteins in nidoviruses [99] and is thus an important target for drug development  
320 [100]. Physically, CoV's RNA-dependent RNA polymerase (RdRP, nsp12) might interact with  
321 nsp13 and improve its relaxing activity [101,102]. In silico prediction for SARS-CoV-2, nsp13 is  
322 about 596 amino acids (located in polyprotein orf1ab). SARS-CoV-2 nsp13's overall structure  
323 adopted a triangular pyramid shape and included five domains similar to SARS and MERS.  
324 Among these, two "RecA-like" domains, 1A (261-441 a.a) and 2A (442-596 a.a), and 1B domain  
325 (150-260 a.a) forming the triangular base, while N-terminal Zinc binding domain (ZBD) (1-99 a.a)  
326 and stalk domain (100-149 a.a), which connects ZBD and 1B domain, are arranged at the apex of  
327 the pyramid [103]. It has shown that small molecules capable of inhibiting the NTPase activity  
328 through interference with ATP binding [103]. The phylogenetic relationship and similarity % of  
329 SARS-CoV-2 nsp13 in relation with other human coronaviruses is shown in Fig. 2a and 2b,  
330 respectively. The SARS-CoV-2 nsp13 identified similar retained active site residues of the NTPase  
331 including Lys288, Ser289, Asp374, Glu375, Gln404 and Arg567 similar to SARS-CoV nsp13  
332 [103] (Fig. 2c). All of these residues were clustered together in the cleft between domain 1A and  
333 2B at the base, while the docking grid was formed by locating bound ADP of crystallised yeast  
334 Upf1 and identifying top hits [103].

### 335 3.14. *Coronavirus nsp14*

336 Coronavirus nsp14 plays a crucial role in viral RNA synthesis and has a bifunctional through  
337 its N-terminal exonuclease (ExoN) domain and C-terminal part [6,104]. The N-terminal  
338 exonuclease (ExoN) domain is thought to promote the fidelity of CoV RNA synthesis while the  
339 C-terminal part carries an AdoMet-dependent guanosine N7-MTase activity [6,104]. The  
340 phylogenetic relationship and similarity percentage of SARS-CoV-2 nsp14 compared to other  
341 human coronaviruses is shown in Fig. 3a and 3b, respectively. X-ray structure for nsp14  
342 demonstrated functionally important interactions between the N-terminal (ExoN) and C-terminal

343 (N7-MTase) domains, with three ExoN  $\alpha$ -helices maintaining the core of the N7-MTase substrate-  
344 binding pocket [105]. Reverse genetics studies confirmed that the specific role of N7-MTase  
345 activity during virus replication whereas the SARS-CoV N7-MTase has been shown to methylate  
346 5' cap structures sequentially independently using a variety of RNAs and to be active on cap  
347 analogues and GTP [106]. Alanine scanning mutagenesis has identified a number of 10 primary  
348 residues for enzymatic activity within the N7-MTase domain [105]. Similarly, two clusters of  
349 residues essential to MTase activity have been identified; the first cluster (nsp14 residues 331–  
350 336) corresponds to the AdoMet-binding site's DXGXPXA motif and correlates to 3H-labeled  
351 AdoMet binding. The second cluster (nsp14 residues 414 and 428) forms a constricted pocket that  
352 holds the cap structure (GpppA) between two  $\beta$ -strands ( $\beta$ 1 and  $\beta$ 2) and helix 1, placing the  
353 guanine's N7 position close to AdoMet based on the analysis of the X-ray structure of a complex  
354 SARS-CoV nsp10/ nsp14 [107] (Fig. 3c). Drugability of the nsp14 N7-MTase has been explored  
355 using a small set of MTase inhibitors previously documented [52,108,109]. The nsp14 N7-MTase  
356 is an obvious prospect for antiviral strategies, particularly since it demonstrates a variety of  
357 features distinctive from MTases host cell [110].

### 358 *3.15. Coronavirus non-structural protein 15 (nsp15; endoribonuclease)*

359 Coronavirus non-structural protein 15 (nsp15), a highly conserved portion of nidovirus with  
360 endoribonuclease activity, acts in combination with the viral replication complex to restrict the  
361 access of viral dsRNA to host dsRNA sensors that means nsp15 is not required for viral RNA  
362 synthesis but acts to mediate evasion of host dsRNA sensors [111]. Nsp15 is a key component of  
363 coronavirus pathogenesis that highlighted in nsp15 mutant viruses; CoVs that include a mutation  
364 in nsp15, whether render nsp15 unstable or deactivate endoribonuclease function, enhance the IFN  
365 production dependent on MDA5, and activate host dsRNA sensors. Therefore, mutant nsp15  
366 viruses can elicit cell apoptosis and demonstrate lower macrophage replication [111]. The  
367 phylogenetic relationship and similarity percentage of SARS-CoV-2 nsp15 in relation with other  
368 human coronaviruses is shown in Fig. 4a and 4b, respectively. Functional genomics analysis  
369 showed that nsp15 comprises a cellular endoribonucleases domain with distant similarity. Nsp15,  
370 called NendoU, endoribonuclease is highly preserved among vertebrate nidoviruses  
371 (coronaviruses and arteriviruses) [6]. Structural and functional studies revealed that the SARS-  
372 CoV nsp15 create oligomers to cleave RNA molecules with a preference for uridylylates at the 3'-  
373 end [112-115]. Previous studies reported that coronavirus nsp15 overexpression can antagonise  
374 the innate immune responses, but there was no direct evidence to suggest that in case of viral  
375 infection it can counteracts the innate immunity [116]. 3D crystal structure of the nsp15 of SARS-  
376 CoV-2 (PDB ID: 6VWW) and the amino acid sequence alignment for nsp8 of SARS-CoV-2  
377 compared to other human coronaviruses (HCoVs) is shown in Fig. 4d and 4c, respectively. Nsp15  
378 can act as a "gatekeeper" for sequestration of viral dsRNA within complex replication and away  
379 from host dsRNA sensors. Previous reports suggested that nsp15 could be part of a viral RNA  
380 decay pathway due to increased accumulation of viral dsRNA in cells infected with nsp15 mutant  
381 viruses [117]. Further studies are needed to fully elucidate the mechanisms used by nsp15 to

382 potentially hide or degrade viral RNA and ultimately prevent host dsRNA sensors from activating  
383 and evaluate the nsp15-mediated dsRNA cleavage in the virus infection context.

### 384 *3.16. Coronavirus nsp16 2'-O-Methyl Transferase*

385 The existence of the 2'-O-methyl transferase (2'-O-MTase) domain in CoV nsp16 was  
386 identified using bioinformatics tools [6,118] that illustrated a model containing a conserved K–D–  
387 K–E catalytic tetrad characteristic of AdoMet-dependent 2'-O-MTases and conserved AdoMet-  
388 binding site [118]. The FCoV (alphacoronavirus 1) nsp16 protein showed specific interaction with  
389 cap-0-containing RNAs and responsible for the transfer of a methyl group from AdoMet to the 2'-  
390 O position of the first N7-methylated substrate nucleotide [119]. The phylogenetic relationship  
391 and similarity % of SARS-CoV2 nsp15 in relation with other human coronaviruses is shown in  
392 Fig. 5a and 5b. The nsp16 amino acid sequence is highly conserved throughout the entire CoV  
393 family and suggests similar structural domains and functional activities that illustrated in the  
394 structural similarities between SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV nsp16/nsp 10 complexes, suggest  
395 mutations that would maintain or modify activity in the viral family, leading to similar phenotypic  
396 mutants [120,121]. Therefore, antiviral therapies that target nsp16/nsp10's behaviour and function  
397 may also be successful against SARS-CoV and HCoV 229E, as well as emerging viruses such as  
398 MERS-CoV, PEDV [120,121]. RNA-cap methyltransferase (nsp16) may be regarded as key for  
399 antiviral drug development against SARS-CoV-2 [122], while no effective inhibitors or licenced  
400 medicines currently exist that can be used as targets for the production of antivirals.

401 Surprisingly, the nsp10 residues included in the nsp10/ nsp16 interaction are highly conserved  
402 within the CoV family and it has recently been shown that nsp10 of various CoVs (FCoV, MHV,  
403 SARS-CoV, MERS-CoV) are functionally compatible in stimulating activity of nsp16 2'-O-MTase  
404 [123]. Thereby, compounds or peptides that block such mechanism can have broad-spectrum anti-  
405 CoV effects, a hypothesis that has been explored and supported using synthetic peptides that  
406 imitate the nsp10 interface and in vitro suppress nsp16 2'-O-MTase activity [123,124]. Previous  
407 studies stated that deleting the nsp16 coding sequence can ablate RNA synthesis and viral  
408 replication; similar to deleting up stream components (Exonuclease- nsp14 and N-terminal zinc  
409 binding domain endoribonuclease- nsp15) [125]. While the nsp16 exhibited an increased type I  
410 IFN sensitivity as in case of MHV (betacoronavirus) and 229E mutants [126], the SARS-CoV  
411 mutant virus failed to induce further type IFN either in vitro or in vivo [120]. 3D crystal structure  
412 of the nsp16 of SARS-CoV-2 (PDB ID: 6VWW) and the amino acid sequence alignment for nsp8  
413 of SARS-CoV-2 compared to other human coronaviruses (HCoVs) is shown in Fig. 5c and 5d,  
414 respectively.

415 Similarly, following the nsp16 mutant virus challenge compared to wild type virus; there was no  
416 significant change in the induction magnitude or kinetics of interferon stimulated genes (ISGs)  
417 including IFIT1 and MDA5 [120]. Without functional nsp16, both in vitro and in vivo infections  
418 for SARS-CoV (betacoronavirus), HCoV 229E (alphacoronavirus), and MHV (betacoronavirus)  
419 are significantly attenuated as a result of increasing the viral RNA recognition by host sensor

420 molecules as well as the effector responses of the IFIT family of ISGs [120]. Identifying these  
421 viral/host interactions allows the development of new therapies against the virus, while also  
422 enhancing the effectiveness of the existing immune response [120].

#### 423 **4. Conclusions**

424 Accumulated knowledge around CoV nsps' has revealed conserved functions and divergent  
425 mechanisms among various CoVs to block expression of the host gene and antagonise innate  
426 immune responses that provide insight into the expanding repertoire of new immune evasion virus  
427 strategies. Furthermore, given the lack of apparent primary sequence homology between nsps of  
428 CoVs, it is important to highlight the functional similarities between them that will help to  
429 understand their evolutionary association and the adaptation of CoVs to specific host species.  
430 There is no doubt that further characterization of the "nsp interactome" within the CoV-infected  
431 cell will provide more clues about how specific functions are switched on and off or modulated.  
432 Understanding these mechanisms will not only highlight their critical roles in the virus replication  
433 cycle but may also exposed some key druggable targets to propose novel therapeutics.

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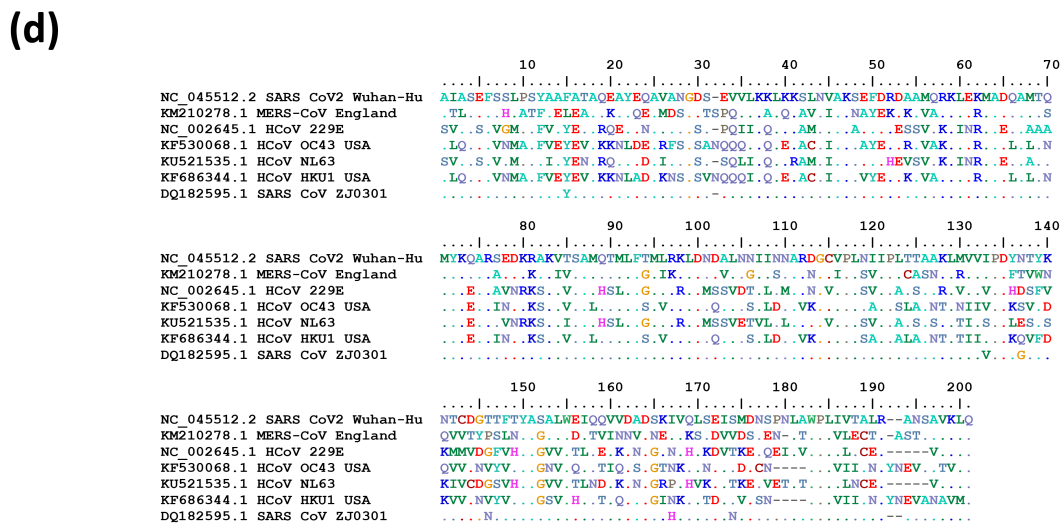
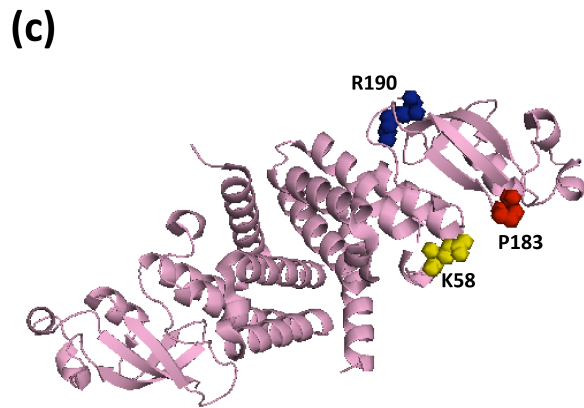
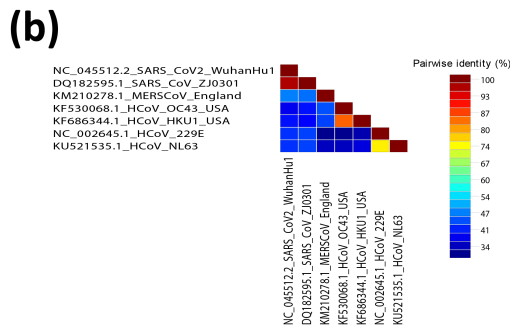
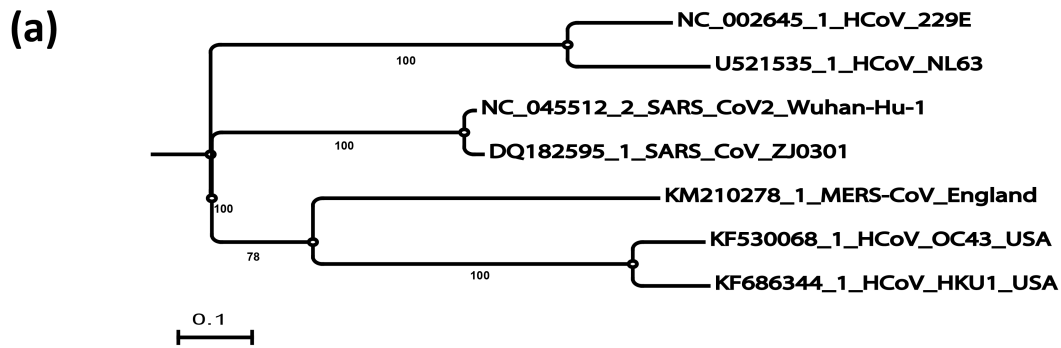
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887 **Figure legends**

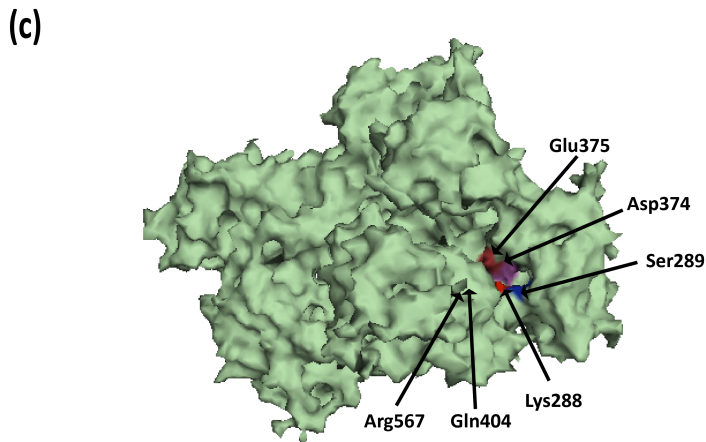
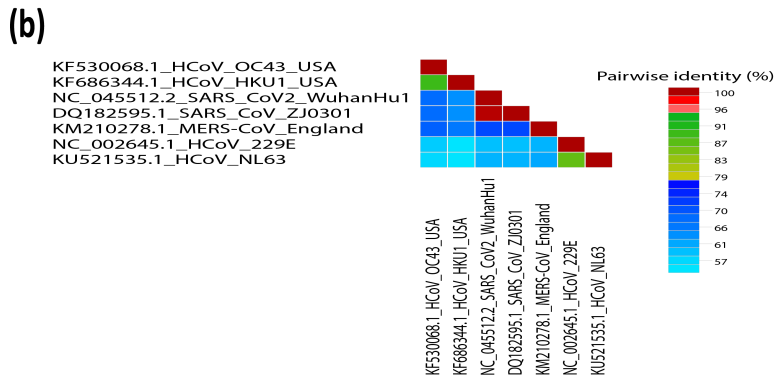
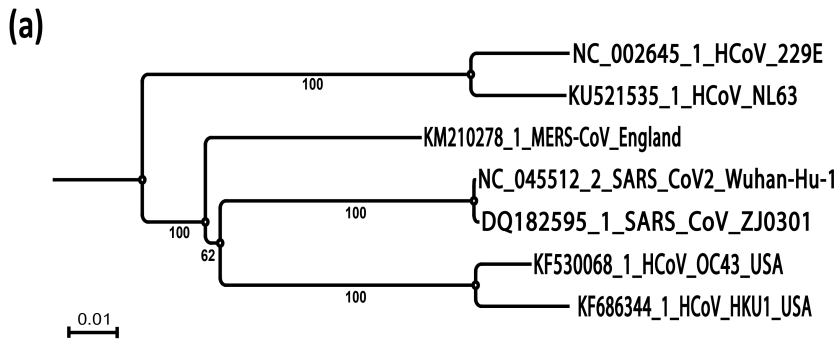
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889 Fig. 1. SARS-CoV-2 nsp8 evolutionary changes in compared to other human coronaviruses. **(a)**  
890 Phylogenetic tree construction by the neighbour joining method was performed using MEGA X  
891 software, with bootstrap values being calculated from 1000 trees using amino acid sequences of  
892 nsp8 **(b)** Pairwise identity % plot of nsp8 CoVs amino acid sequences performed using SDT  
893 program, **(c)** 3D crystal structure of the nsp7- nsp8 complex of SARS-CoV-2 (PDB ID: 6YHU)  
894 and **(d)** Multiple amino acid sequence alignment for nsp8 of SARS-CoV-2 compared to other  
895 human coronaviruses.





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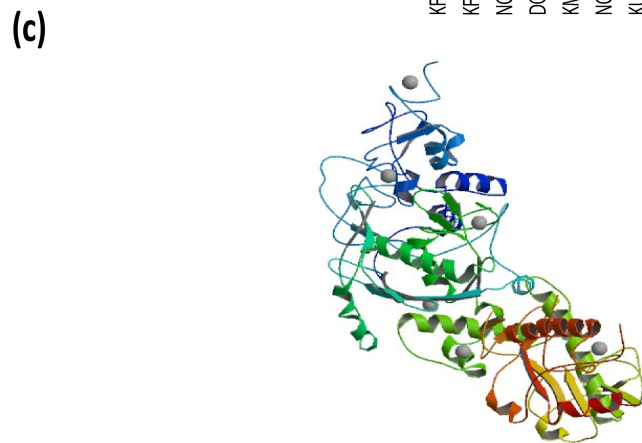
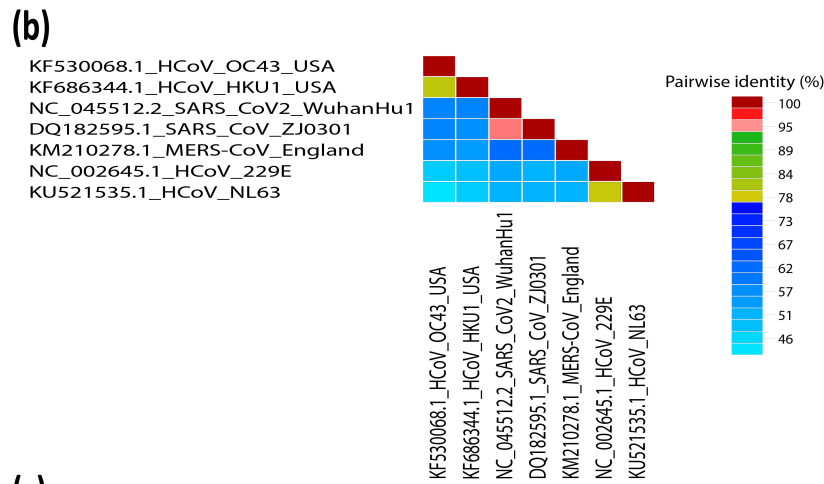
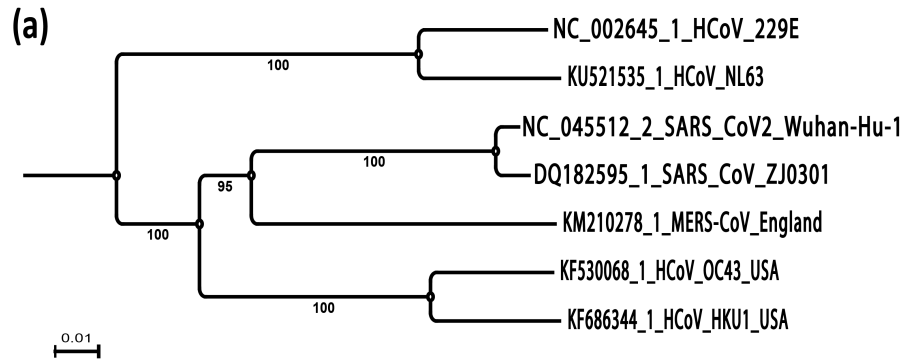
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904 Fig. 2. SARS-CoV-2 nsp13 evolutionary changes in compared to other human coronaviruses. (a)  
 905 Phylogenetic tree construction by the neighbour joining method was performed using MEGA X  
 906 software, with bootstrap values being calculated from 1000 trees using amino acid sequences of  
 907 nsp13 (b) Pairwise identity % plot of nsp13 CoVs amino acid sequences performed using SDT  
 908 program, (c) 3D crystal structure of the nsp13 of SARS-CoV-2 (PDB ID: 6JYT).

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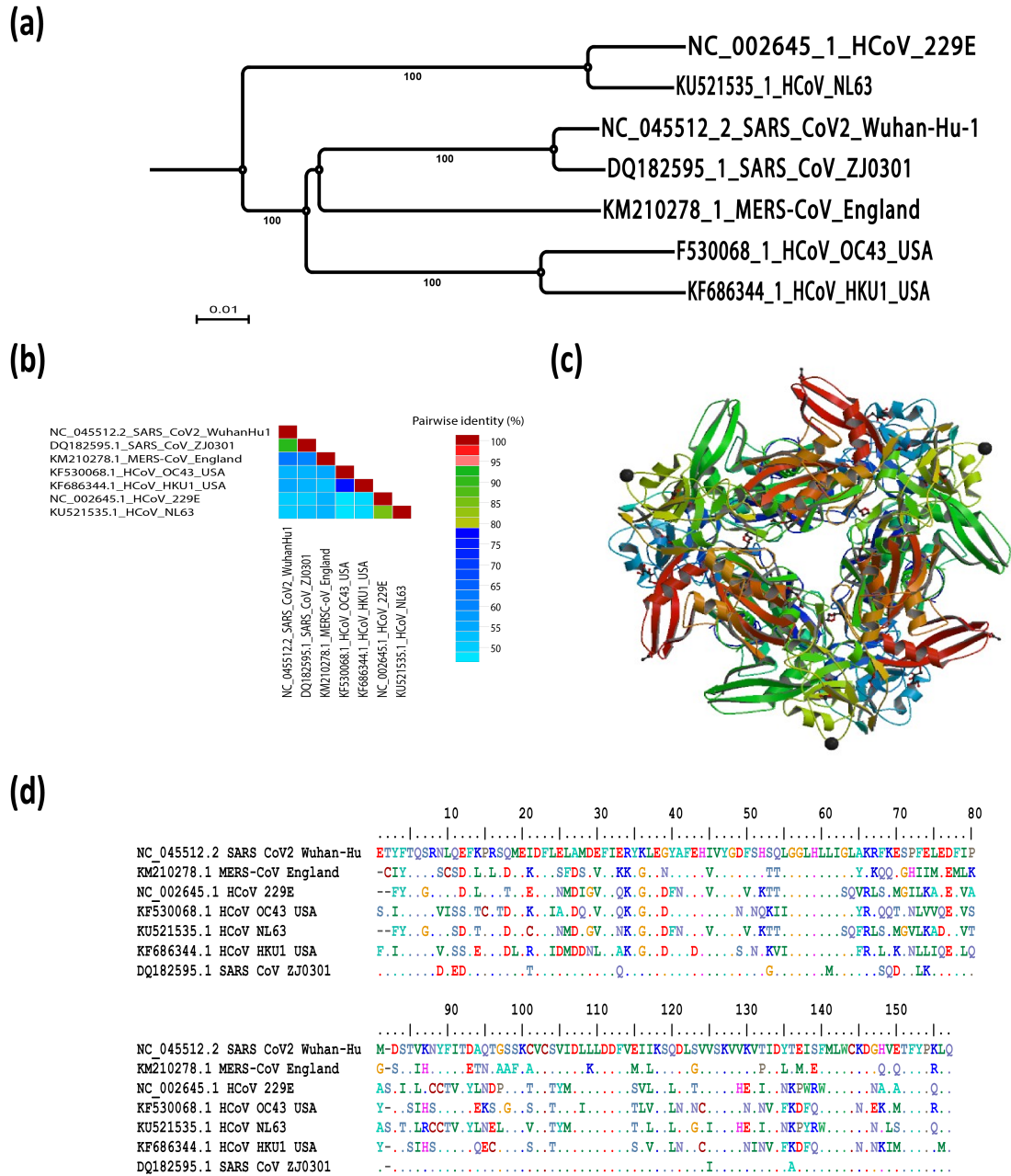
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 913 Fig. 3. SARS-CoV-2 nsp14 evolutionary changes in compared to other human coronaviruses. **(a)**  
 914 Phylogenetic tree construction by the neighbour joining method was performed using MEGA X  
 915 software, with bootstrap values being calculated from 1000 trees using amino acid sequences of  
 916 nsp14 **(b)** Pairwise identity % plot of nsp14 CoVs amino acid sequences performed using SDT  
 917 program, **(c)** 3D crystal structure of the nsp14- nsp10 complex of SARS-CoV-2(PDB ID: 5C8U).

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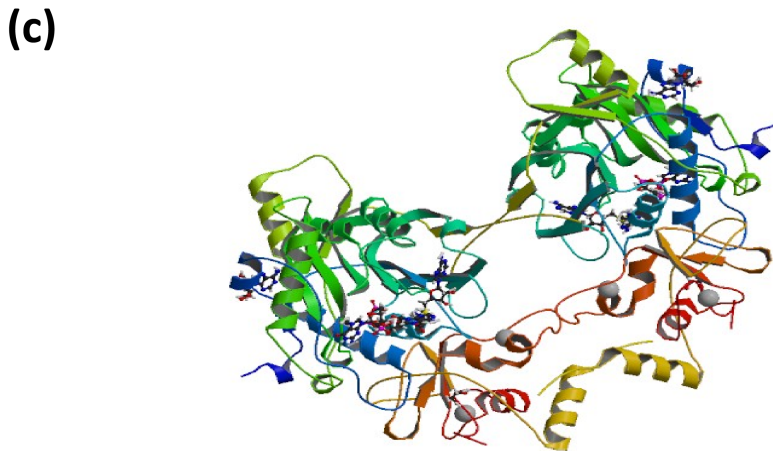
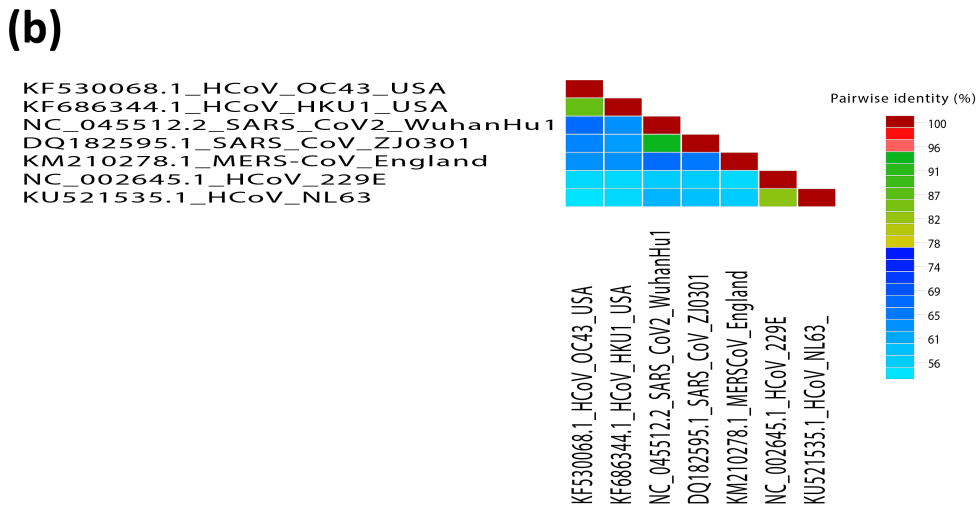
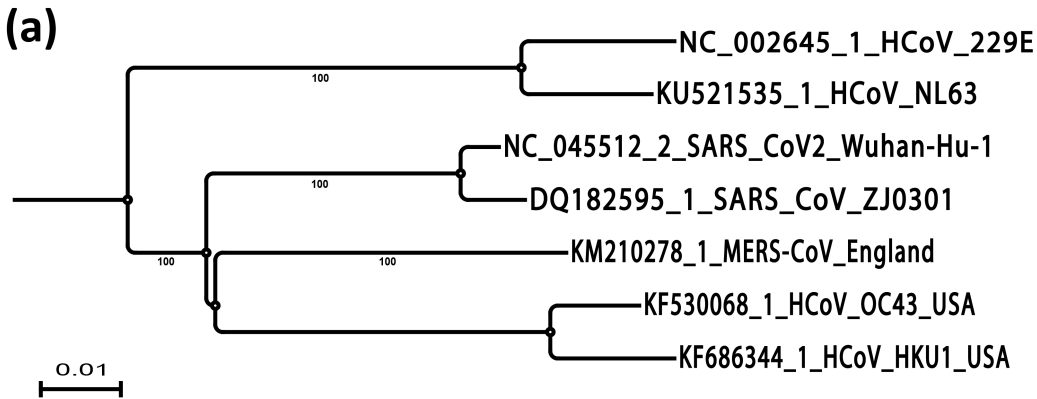


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921 Fig. 4. SARS-CoV-2 nsp15 evolutionary changes in compared to other human coronaviruses. **(a)**  
 922 Phylogenetic tree construction by the neighbour joining method was performed using MEGA X  
 923 software, with bootstrap values being calculated from 1000 trees using amino acid sequences of  
 924 nsp15, **(b)** Pairwise identity % plot of nsp15 CoVs amino acid sequences performed using SDT  
 925 program, **(c)** 3D crystal structure and **(d)** the multiple amino acid sequence alignment for of the  
 926 nsp15 of SARS-CoV-2 (PDB ID: 6VWW) compared to other human coronaviruses.

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929 Fig. 5.  
 930 SARS-CoV-2 nsp16 evolutionary changes in compared to other human coronaviruses. **(a)**  
 931 Phylogenetic tree construction by the neighbour joining method was performed using MEGA X  
 932 software, with bootstrap values being calculated from 1000 trees using amino acid sequences of  
 933 nsp16, **(b)** Pairwise identity % plot of nsp16 CoVs amino acid sequences performed using SDT  
 934 program and **(c)** 3D crystal structure of the nsp16 of SARS-CoV-2 (PDB ID: 7BQ7).

