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THE GUT MICROBIOME AS A CRITICAL DETERMINANT OF CLINICAL OUTCOMES IN CANCER THERAPEUTICS: EFFICACY, TOXICITY, AND THERAPEUTIC MODULATION

D. Basta

Department of Veterinary Medicine, University of Bari Aldo Moro, Bari, Italy

Corresponding Author: Domenico Basta, FRSPH; e-mail: domenico.basta@uniba.it

Abstract – The intestinal gut microbiota has emerged as a fundamental systemic orchestrator of host immunity and a key determinant of therapeutic efficacy and treatment-related toxicity across diverse oncological modalities. Over the past decade, preclinical investigations and clinical trials have demonstrated that the composition of the intestinal commensal ecosystem dictates host responses to immune checkpoint inhibitors (ICIs), standard cytotoxic chemotherapy, and radiotherapy. Specific immunomodulatory bacterial taxa, such as *Akkermansia muciniphila, Faecalibacterium prausnitzii,* and *Bifidobacterium* species, modulate host antigen presentation, induce systemic and intratumoral T-cell infiltration, and synthesize immunologically active metabolites like short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs). Conversely, gut dysbiosis induced by broad-spectrum antibiotic exposure or dietary imbalances compromises survival outcomes and escalates therapy-related toxicities, such as chemotherapy-induced mucositis and immunotherapy-related colitis. This narrative review synthesizes the current clinical and mechanistic evidence linking the gut microbiota to cancer treatment outcomes. Furthermore, we critically evaluate therapeutic strategies aimed at manipulating the gut ecosystem, including donor-derived Fecal Microbiota Transplantation (FMT), next-generation live biotherapeutics, dietary interventions, and selective enzymatic inhibitors, to optimize clinical responses and reduce toxicity in cancer patients.

Keywords: Gut microbiota, Cancer immunotherapy, Immune checkpoint inhibitors, Fecal microbiota transplantation, Dysbiosis, Chemo-resistance.

INTRODUCTION

The human gut microbiota represents an intricate ecosystem comprising trillions of microorganisms that co-evolved to regulate host metabolic homeostasis, sustain intestinal epithelial barrier integrity, and direct the maturation and priming of the host immune system[1]. In oncology, historical paradigms focused predominantly on the carcinogenic potential of single, highly specialized pathogenic microbes, exemplified by the association of *Helicobacter pylori* with gastric adenocarcinoma and mucosa-associated lymphoid tissue (MALT) lymphoma[2]. However, contemporary oncology has transitioned toward a holistic understanding of the intestinal microbiome as a dynamic, targetable "endocrine" organ capable of modulating host physiology both locally and systemically.

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Emerging clinical evidence underscores that the composition and diversity of the gut microbiota are intimately linked to the therapeutic trajectory of cancer patients[3]. This relationship encompasses two crucial dimensions: the enhancement of anti-tumor treatment efficacy and the mitigation of treatment-related adverse effects. Conversely, the perturbation of this microbial equilibrium – commonly termed dysbiosis – serves as a primary driver of therapy resistance and severe, dose-limiting toxicities[4]. This narrative review delineates the biological mechanisms through which the gut microbiota influences systemic cancer therapy, analyzes pioneering clinical trials demonstrating the predictive and therapeutic potential of the microbiome, and discusses next-generation strategies currently undergoing clinical evaluation to modulate this ecosystem for improved oncological outcomes.

LITERATURE SEARCH STRATEGY

A comprehensive literature search was conducted to identify relevant clinical and preclinical studies. Databases including PubMed, MEDLINE, and Scopus were queried for English-language articles published up to May 2026. Search terms included combinations of “gut microbiota”, “cancer immunotherapy”, “immune checkpoint inhibitors”, “fecal microbiota transplantation”, and “chemotherapy-induced toxicity”. Priority was given to highly cited landmark clinical trials, narrative reviews, and mechanistic studies detailing the onco-microbiome axis.

BIOLOGICAL MECHANISMS AND CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE ONCO-MICROBIOME AXIS

To fully comprehend the clinical impact of the onco-microbiome axis, it is necessary to examine both its fundamental biological pathways and its real-world therapeutic implications. This section explores the complex cellular and biochemical mechanisms through which intestinal commensals modulate systemic immunity. It further evaluates how these microbial interactions affect the efficacy of immune checkpoint inhibitors, standard chemotherapy, and radiotherapy, while highlighting strategic interventions to optimize oncological care and minimize toxicity.

The Onco-Microbiome Axis: Biological Mechanisms of Systemic Immunomodulation

The capacity of intestinal commensal bacteria to govern anti-tumor immune responses at distal extra-intestinal tumor sites is mediated by highly complex, overlapping cellular and biochemical pathways. The innate and adaptive arms of the host immune system are continually primed by gut microbes through multiple interacting mechanisms. First, commensal microorganisms present pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs), such as lipopolysaccharides (LPS) and peptidoglycans, which bind to host Toll-like receptors (TLRs) and NOD-like receptors on dendritic cells (DCs) within the lamina propria. This signaling cascades into the maturation of DCs, upregulating their expression of MHC-II and co-stimulatory molecules (CD80/CD86), thereby enhancing their tumor-antigen presentation capacity in draining lymph nodes[5]. Furthermore, systemic microbial metabolites play a fundamental role; short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs), primarily acetate, propionate, and butyrate, are generated through the anaerobic fermentation of dietary fibers by specialized commensal taxa (e.g., Faecalibacterium, Roseburia). These SCFAs act as potent inhibitors of histone deacetylases (HDACs) and as ligands for G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs), such as GPR41 and GPR43. At the systemic level, SCFAs epigenetically reprogram CD8+ T-cells, enhancing their production of interferon-gamma (IFN-gamma) and granzyme B, thereby maximizing their cytotoxic capacity against cancer cells[6]. Other metabolites, such as microbial-derived inosine, activate adenosine A2A receptors on T-cells, acting synergistically with anti-CTLA-4 blockade to promote anti-tumor responses[7]. Finally, systemic immunity is also modulated *via* antigenic cross-reactivity, or molecular mimicry, resulting from striking structural and conformational homologies between specific commensal bacterial antigens and tumor-associated antigens (TAAs). For instance, tail double-stranded DNA bacteriophages residing within *Enterococcus hirae* express tape measure proteins that share epitope homology with specific tumor antigens. This homology

leads to the clonal expansion of cross-reactive CD8+ T-cell populations that actively home to and infiltrate the tumor microenvironment (TME)[8].

Gut Microbiota and Immune Checkpoint Inhibitor (ICI) Efficacy

The clinical utility of immune checkpoint inhibitors (ICIs) targeting the PD-1/PD-L1 and CTLA-4 axes is heavily restricted by primary or secondary drug resistance, with only 20-40% of unselected solid tumor patients deriving durable benefit[9]. Landmark clinical cohorts published in 2018 revolutionized this landscape by demonstrating that the baseline composition of the gut microbiota distinguishes responders from non-responders to ICIs across multiple advanced malignancies.

In a pioneering study, Routy et al[10] established that advanced non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) and renal cell carcinoma (RCC) patients responding to anti-PD-1 therapy exhibited an enrichment of *Akkermansia muciniphila* in their stool samples prior to treatment initiation. Fecal microbiota transplantation (FMT) from responsive patients into germ-free or antibiotic-treated mice successfully transferred the responsive phenotype, a benefit that was recapitulated in non-responsive animals through the oral gavage of *A. muciniphila*.

Concurrently, Gopalakrishnan et al[11] and Matson et al[12] analyzed metastatic melanoma cohorts, demonstrating that a high baseline alpha-diversity and a relative abundance of members of the Ruminococcaceae family (notably *Faecalibacterium prausnitzii*) and *Bifidobacterium longum* correlated with significantly prolonged progression-free survival (PFS). Conversely, non-responders displayed an over-representation of *Bacteroidales* species, associated with a less inflamed tumor microenvironment and reduced cytotoxic T-cell infiltration. Table 1 summarizes the key baseline clinical cohorts defining the gut microbiota-ICI efficacy axis.

TABLE 1. SUMMARY OF KEY BASELINE CLINICAL COHORTS DEFINING THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN GUT MICROBIOTA COMPOSITION AND IMMUNE CHECKPOINT INHIBITOR (ICI) EFFICACY. THE TABLE SUMMARIZES THE MALIGNANT INDICATIONS, SAMPLE SIZES, TAXONOMIC ENRICHMENT IN RESPONDERS VERSUS NON-RESPONDERS, AND THE REPORTED CLINICAL BIOMARKERS.

Study	Malignancy	Sample Size (N)	Enrichment in Responders	Enrichment in non-responders	Key clinical finding/ biomarker
Routy et al[10]	NSCLC, RCC, Urothelial	249	*Akkermansia muciniphila*, *Enterococcus hirae*, *Alistipes*	*Clostridium* spp., Bacteroides	*A. muciniphila* enrichment correlates with superior PFS and OS; oral supplementation restores ICI efficacy *in vivo*.
Gopalakrishnan et al[11]	Metastatic melanoma	112	Ruminococcaceae, *Faecalibacterium*, Clostridiales	Bacteroidales, *Escherichia coli*	Responders display higher alpha-diversity and enhanced systemic and intratumoral CD8+ T-cell responses.
Matson et al[12]	Metastatic melanoma	42	*Bifidobacterium longum*, *Enterococcus faecium*, *Collinsella aerofaciens*	*Roseburia intestinalis*, *Bacteroides thetaiotaomicron*	Higher abundance of beneficial commensals correlates with functional anti-tumor T-cell priming.
Pinato et al[13]	Mixed solid tumors	121	N/A	N/A	Prior broad-spectrum antibiotic exposure (<30 days of ICI initiation) significantly impairs OS and PFS.

Influence on Conventional Cytotoxic Chemotherapy and Radiotherapy

Beyond immune-mediated checkpoint blockade, the gut microbiota fundamentally modulates the therapeutic index of classic cytotoxic drugs and ionizing radiation through direct metabolic transformation, immune adjuvant effects, and toxicity pathways, frequently described under the “TIMER” framework (Translocation, Immunomodulation, Metabolism, Enzymatic degradation, and Reduced diversity)[14].

Chemotherapeutic Efficacy and Intratumoral Degradation

The antitumor efficacy of several frontline chemotherapies is strictly dependent on microbial interactions. For example, the alkylating agent cyclophosphamide alters the intestinal mucosal barrier, promoting the selective translocation of Gram-positive bacteria (*Lactobacillus johnsonii* and *Enterococcus hirae*) into secondary lymphoid organs, where these commensals stimulate the generation of pathogenic T helper 17 (pTh17) cells and memory Th1 responses vital for the drug's immunogenic cell death-inducing efficacy[15]. Similarly, the tumor-suppressive efficacy of platinum-based agents like oxaliplatin relies on the generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS) by intratumoral inflammatory cells; in germ-free or broad-spectrum antibiotic-treated mice, tumor-infiltrating myeloid cells fail to produce sufficient ROS upon oxaliplatin administration due to the absence of priming by Gram-negative commensal-derived components, resulting in marked drug resistance[16]. Conversely, intratumoral bacteria can act as direct negative regulators of chemotherapy. Geller et al[17] demonstrated that Gammaproteobacteria residing within pancreatic ductal adenocarcinomas express the long isoform of the enzyme cytidine deaminase (CDD_L), which rapidly metabolizes gemcitabine (2',2'-difluorodeoxycytidine) into its inactive metabolite (2',2'-difluorodeoxyuridine), entirely abrogating its chemotherapeutic efficacy. In preclinical models, the co-administration of the antibiotic ciprofloxacin successfully rescued gemcitabine sensitivity.

Mitigation of Chemotherapy-Induced Toxicity

Standard chemotherapeutic regimens frequently induce debilitating gastrointestinal mucosal toxicities that necessitate dose reductions or treatment cessation. A premier example is irinotecan (CPT-11)-induced severe, late-onset diarrhea. CPT-11 is a prodrug metabolized by host hepatic carboxylesterases into its active cytotoxic form, SN-38, which is subsequently detoxified in the liver *via* glucuronidation into inactive SN-38G and excreted into the bile. However, commensal bacteria in the lumen of the colon expressing beta-glucuronidase enzymes cleave the glucuronide group from SN-38G, re-converting it back into the highly toxic, free SN-38 within the intestinal lumen. This results in severe epithelial desquamation, inflammation, and diarrhea[18]. The development of selective, non-lethal inhibitors of bacterial beta-glucuronidases represents a highly promising supportive oncology approach, preserving intestinal bacteria while preventing mucosal injury[18].

MITIGATING IMMUNE-RELATED ADVERSE EVENTS (IRAES)

The therapeutic benefit of ICIs is frequently offset by the development of autoimmune-like toxicities, termed immune-related adverse events (irAEs), of which immune-mediated colitis is the most common cause of permanent treatment discontinuation. Retrospective and prospective profiling has demonstrated that specific gut microbial signatures are protective against irAE development. Patients with an enrichment of the phylum Bacteroidetes and families such as Bacteroidaceae and Rikenellaceae exhibit a significantly lower incidence of ipilimumab-induced colitis[19]. Mechanistically, these taxa facilitate the expansion of mucosal regulatory T-cells (Treg cells) by synthesizing immunotolerogenic metabolites and protecting mucosal barrier integrity, thereby mitigating the systemic hyperinflammatory state triggered by immune checkpoint blockade.

MICROBIOME-TARGETING THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS

Given the clear clinical associations, direct modulation of the gut microbiota has transitioned from an observational concept to interventional clinical trials aiming to convert ICI non-responders into responders and to reduce toxicity. A unified visual framework detailing how the gut microbiota modulates therapeutic efficacy and mediates toxicity reduction is illustrated in Figure 1.

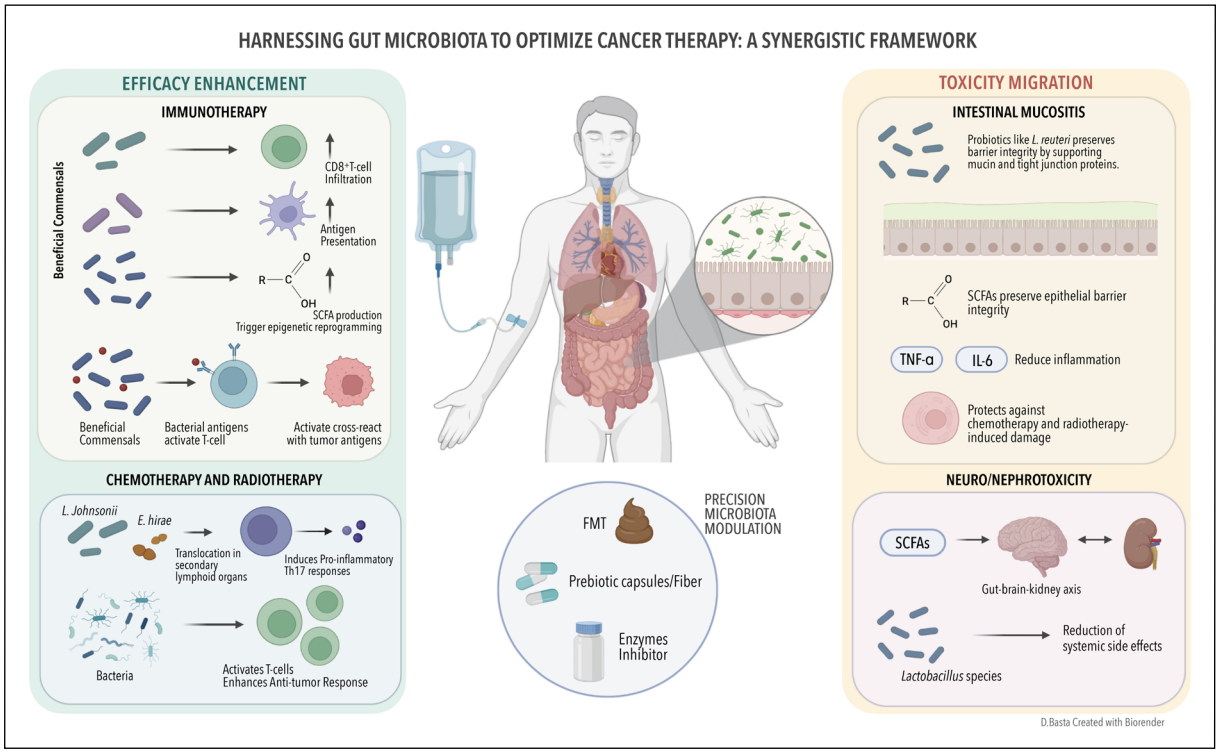

Figure 1. Synergistic framework harnessing the gut microbiota to optimize cancer therapy. This schematic represents the multifaceted interactions between the gut microbiota and cancer treatment. The left panel details mechanisms through which beneficial commensal bacteria enhance immunotherapy and chemotherapy efficacy, specifically via immune cell activation (e.g., priming CD8+ T-cells), enhanced tumor antigen presentation, and the production of beneficial metabolites such as short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs). The center panel summarizes precision modulation strategies, including Fecal Microbiota Transplantation (FMT), next-generation Live Biotherapeutic Products (LBPs), prebiotic interventions, and selective enzymatic inhibitors, all designed to reset the microbial landscape. The right panel illustrates the goal of these interventions: strengthening the intestinal epithelial barrier to systematically mitigate and prevent severe treatment-related toxicities, such as chemotherapy-induced mucositis and immunotherapy-related colitis.

Fecal Microbiota Transplantation (FMT)

The definitive proof-of-concept that the microbiota dictates therapeutic response in humans emerged from two independent Phase I clinical trials in patients with anti-PD-1 refractory metastatic melanoma. Baruch et al[20] and Davar et al[21] performed FMT using donor stool obtained from long-term ICI-responders, followed by re-induction of anti-PD-1 therapy in refractory recipients. FMT successfully reprogrammed the intestinal microbiota of the recipients, leading to a durable reversal of immunotherapy resistance in approximately 30% to 35% of previously refractory patients. Analysis of post-FMT biopsies revealed an increased infiltration of CD8+ T-cells and decreased populations of immunosuppressive myeloid-derived suppressor cells (MDSCs) within the tumor microenvironment. Building upon these melanoma studies, recent data (such as those by Kim et al[22] in 2024) have demonstrated the feasibility of using FMT to rescue anti-PD-1 efficacy in a tumor-agnostic manner across multiple solid tumors, confirming that the immunological benefits of a "responder" microbiota are not limited to melanoma.

Live Biotherapeutic Products (LBPs) and Probiotics

While FMT represents a full ecosystem transplant, the use of defined bacterial consortia or single-strain Live Biotherapeutic Products (LBPs) offers a more standardized, reproducible, and safer alternative. In a randomized Phase I trial in metastatic RCC patients treated with nivolumab and ipilimumab, Dizman et al[23] demonstrated that co-supplementation with the butyrate-produc-

ing strain Clostridium butyricum MIYAIRI 588 (CBM588) significantly prolonged progression-free survival (12.7 months *vs.* 2.5 months in the control group) and significantly increased the objective response rate. Additionally, preclinical work by Tanoue et al[24] identified a rational consortium of 11 healthy human donor-derived bacterial strains that cooperatively induce IFN-gamma-producing CD8+ T-cells in the intestine and systemically, markedly augmenting the efficacy of anti-PD-1/anti-CTLA-4 therapeutic regimens without triggering inflammatory side effects. Importantly, the specific choice of probiotic matters; observational data from Spencer et al[25] revealed a critical clinical caveat in which melanoma patients self-administering over the counter, multi-strain commercial probiotics actually displayed a 70% lower likelihood of responding to anti-PD-1 therapy compared to non-users. This finding highlights that untargeted, low-quality probiotics can reduce gut microbial diversity through competitive exclusion of key commensals, emphasizing the vital need for strictly regulated, clinically validated LBPs rather than generic over-the-counter supplements.

Dietary and Prebiotic Modulations

Diet represents the most potent, rapid-acting, and modifiable orchestrator of gut microbiota composition. Spencer et al[25] demonstrated that melanoma patients consuming a high-fiber diet (equal to or greater than 20 g/day of dietary fiber) experienced a significant reduction in the risk of disease progression or death when treated with ICIs. For every 5-gram increase in daily dietary fiber intake, the risk of disease progression was reduced by 30%. Mechanistically, prebiotic fibers naturally enrich SCFA-producing taxa (e.g., *Faecalibacterium*), facilitating the systematic release of systemic anti-tumor metabolites. Table 2 provides a comparative evaluation of current microbiota modulation strategies in oncology.

TABLE 2. COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF CURRENT MICROBIOME-TARGETING THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS IN ONCOLOGY. THE TABLE COMPARES FOUR PRIMARY MODALITIES – FECAL MICROBIOTA TRANSPLANTATION (FMT), LIVE BIOTHERAPEUTIC PRODUCTS (LBPS), DIETARY INTERVENTIONS, AND ENZYME INHIBITION – HIGHLIGHTING THEIR MAIN MECHANISMS OF ACTION, SPECIFIC TARGET TAXA, KEY SUPPORTING CLINICAL EVIDENCE, AND THEIR RESPECTIVE OPERATIONAL ADVANTAGES OR LIMITATIONS.

Modality	Main Mechanism of Action	Specific Taxa/ Strains	Key Clinical Evidence	Advantages & Hurdles
Fecal Microbiota Transplantation (FMT)	Complete restoration of microbial diversity; full taxonomic and functional reset.	Whole-stool transplant from healthy, long-term ICI responders.	Reversed anti-PD-1 refractory status in melanoma (Baruch et al[20], Davar et al[21]) and solid tumors (Kim et al[22]).	Pros: Maximum therapeutic efficacy. Cons: Risk of pathogen transmission; lack of scalability; recipient rejection.
Live Biotherapeutic Products (LBPs)	Target-specific immunomodulation via high-purity single strains or defined consortia.	*Clostridium butyricum* (CBM588), *Akkermansia muciniphila*, 11-strain mixture.	Prolonged PFS in RCC patients receiving ipilimumab/nivolumab + CBM588 (Dizman et al[23]).	Pros: Highly standardized; excellent safety profile. Cons: Strains may fail to engraft long-term in a dysbiotic host.
Dietary Interventions	Natural enrichment of indigenous beneficial taxa via metabolic substrates.	High-fiber diet (>= 20 g/day), resistant starch, inulin.	High fiber intake linked to prolonged PFS and improved response rates on anti-PD-1 (Spencer et al[25]).	Pros: High safety; low cost; universally accessible. Cons: Relies heavily on patient compliance; slow onset.
Enzyme Inhibition	Selective targeting of toxic bacterial metabolites without altering global viability.	Highly selective inhibitors of bacterial beta-glucuronidase.	Alleviates irinotecan-induced mucositis and diarrhea in preclinical animal models (Wallace et al[18]).	Pros: Prevents dose-limiting toxicity. Cons: Requires co-administration with chemotherapy; early clinical stage.

LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT EVIDENCE

Despite the promising clinical trajectory of microbiome-targeted therapies, several significant limitations characterize the currently available evidence. A major limitation is the predominance of observational studies – both retrospective and prospective cohorts – which establish correlations rather than definitive causality between microbial signatures and clinical outcomes. Furthermore, the field suffers from a profound heterogeneity in microbiome analysis methods. Variations across studies in sample collection, DNA extraction protocols, sequencing platforms (e.g., 16S rRNA gene sequencing *vs.* whole-metagenome shotgun sequencing), and downstream bioinformatics pipelines severely hinder cross-study comparability and reproducibility. Consequently, there is an ongoing lack of standardized microbial biomarkers that are consistently predictive across different cancer types, geographic populations, and specific therapeutic settings. Addressing these methodological discrepancies and biological variables is an essential prerequisite before microbiome diagnostics can be reliably integrated into routine clinical and oncological practice.

CONCLUSIONS

The gut microbiota is no longer viewed as a passive bystander in the human body, but rather as an active, highly dynamic, and targetable therapeutic organ that directly governs the efficacy and tolerability of modern cancer therapeutics. Integrating metagenomic profiling of the patient's microbiome, preserving microbial diversity through stringent antibiotic stewardship, and actively modulating the gut ecosystem via donor-derived FMT, precision prebiotics, or tailored next-generation live biotherapeutics represent the next frontier in personalized oncology. To successfully translate these insights into standard clinical practice, close interdisciplinary collaboration among gastroenterologists, medical oncologists, and microbiologists is urgently required. Future randomized clinical trials must focus on determining optimal microbial consortia, standardization of FMT delivery protocols, and identifying robust microbial biomarkers to systematically match patients with the most effective adjuvant microbial-targeted therapies.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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Author's Contributions

Domenico Basta conceived, designed, performed the extensive literature search, structured the manuscript draft, designed the clinical data tables, and approved the final submitted version.

Artificial Intelligence Statement

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