

# 1 **Transmission and persistence of crAssphage, a ubiquitous human-associated** 2 **bacteriophage**

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9

## 10 **Abstract**

11 The recently discovered crAssphage is by far the most abundant and ubiquitous known  
12 human gut bacteriophage. It appears to be highly specific to the human gastrointestinal tract;  
13 however, the patterns of transmission and persistence of this bacteriophage are unknown. Here,  
14 we identify modes of transmission and describe long-term persistence of crAssphage in several  
15 human populations. We find that most humans harbor a single, dominant strain of crAssphage  
16 in their microbiome. This is in contrast to the bacterial microbiota, where individuals can harbor  
17 a variety of closely- or distantly-related strains of the same bacterial species. We show that  
18 crAssphage can be vertically transmitted from mother to infant, acquired through fecal  
19 microbiota transplantation, and transmitted in immunocompromised hosts in a hospital setting.  
20 We also observe that once a crAssphage strain is acquired, it persists stably within an individual  
21 over a timescale of months. These results enhance our understanding of the dynamics of  
22 crAssphage, which has emerged as one of the most successful human-associated microbes,  
23 and provide a foundation for future studies of the role of this phage in the biology of the human  
24 microbiome.

## 26 **Main text**

27 In addition to trillions of bacteria, the human gastrointestinal tract is densely populated  
28 with bacteriophages. Bacteriophages can drive bacterial community composition and mediate  
29 horizontal gene transfer<sup>1</sup>, and alterations in the human gut virome have been associated with  
30 disease<sup>2,3</sup>. Yet, our knowledge of the contributions of specific bacteriophages to human biology  
31 is limited, in part due to the paucity of viral sequences represented in reference databases.  
32 High-throughput sequencing and advanced genomic tools have facilitated the *in silico* discovery  
33 and characterization of previously unknown bacteriophages. The preeminent example of such a  
34 discovery is crAssphage (cross Assembly phage), initially identified from human virome  
35 sequencing data<sup>4</sup>. CrAssphage is a bacteriophage with an ~97 kilobase circular, double-

36 stranded DNA genome. Interestingly, crAssphage sequences are found almost exclusively in  
37 human fecal metagenomes, and can be highly abundant. Initial estimates indicate that  
38 crAssphage is present in 73-77% of humans<sup>4,5</sup>, challenging the notion that the gut virome is  
39 highly individual-specific. Subsequently, it has been shown that a wide range of crAss-like  
40 phages exists in nature<sup>5,6</sup>. However, whether or how crAssphage influences host biology or is  
41 involved in disease is unknown. To answer higher-order questions about the role of crAssphage  
42 in human biology, it is necessary to establish basic principles of crAssphage acquisition,  
43 persistence, and distribution. To this end, we analyzed crAssphage sequences from both  
44 published and novel datasets, finding that crAssphage typically exhibits monoclonal dominance  
45 in a given individual and can be transmitted vertically from mothers to infants as well as  
46 horizontally in adults with compromised or simplified microbiomes.

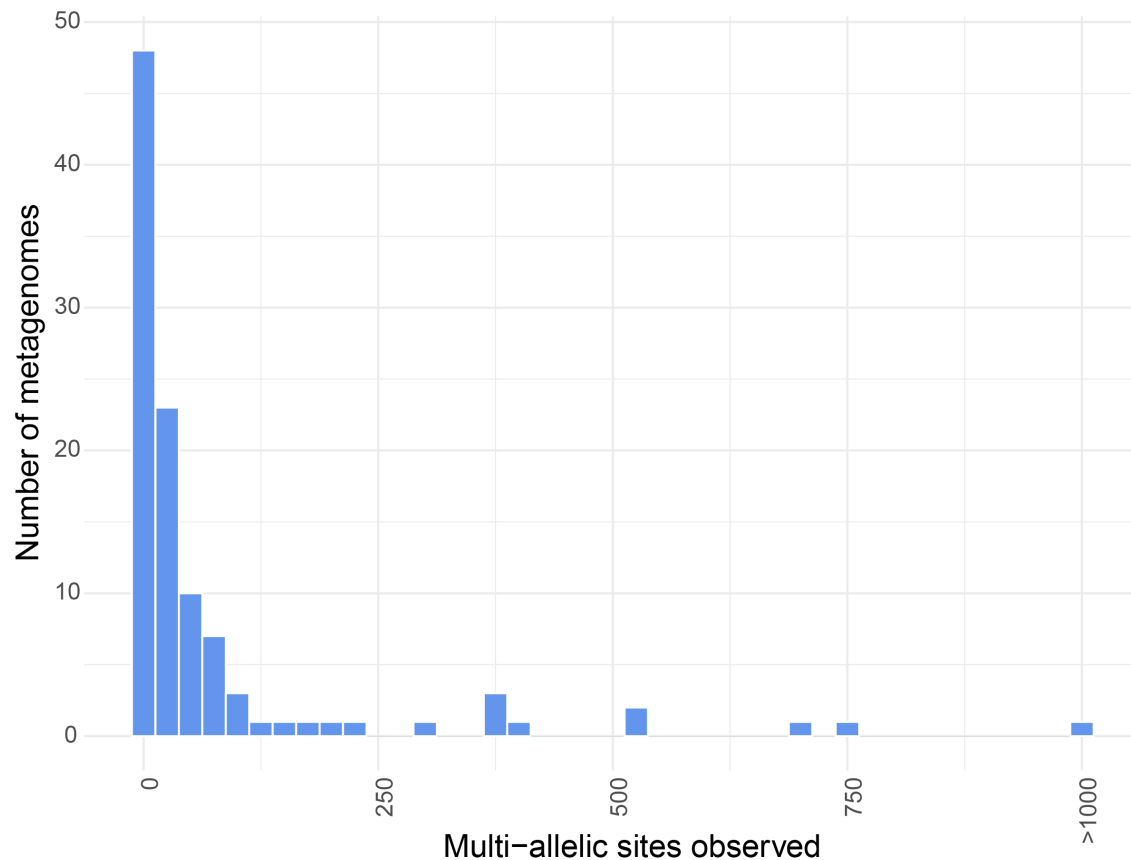
47  
48 To determine whether individuals have one or many crAssphage strains in the gut metagenome,  
49 we identified sites with more than one variant present in the crAssphage genome (multi-allelic  
50 sites) from stool metagenomic sequencing data from individuals from four cohorts (Table S1)<sup>7-9</sup>.  
51 We aligned metagenomic sequencing reads to the crAssphage reference genome<sup>4</sup> and  
52 identified single-nucleotide variants (SNVs) that are present at intermediate frequency (between  
53 10% and 90% frequency). We limited our analysis to metagenomes with 30X coverage or  
54 greater of the crAssphage genome. We find that 77 of 106 metagenomes (73%) have fewer  
55 than 50 multiallelic sites (Figure 1), suggesting that most individuals are likely colonized by a  
56 single crAssphage or near-identical crAssphages. 28 of 106 metagenomes (26%) have between  
57 50 and 999 multiallelic sites, corresponding to polymorphism in roughly 0.05% to 0.999% of the  
58 genome. One of 106 metagenomes (1%) have 1000 or more multiallelic sites, corresponding to  
59 greater than 1% of the genome. These results suggest an exclusion principle which favors  
60 colonization of a particular strain within the gut of an individual, though notably, a minority of  
61 individuals may be simultaneously colonized by more than one crAssphage strain. The number  
62 of multi-allelic sites stays relatively stable within individuals over time (Figure S1). We observe  
63 that SNVs are relatively evenly distributed throughout the genome (Figure S2).

64

65

66

67 **Figure 1: Multi-allelic sites in the crAssphage genome**



68

69 *Histogram showing distribution of the number of multi-allelic sites in the crAssphage genome in*  
70 *metagenomic datasets (n=106). Multi-allelic sites are defined as positions with a non-reference*  
71 *base between 0.1 and 0.9 frequency.*

72

73 While crAssphage has been detected in infant gut metagenomes<sup>10,11</sup>, we do not yet know from  
74 where crAssphage is acquired. Given the apparent specificity of crAssphage to the human gut  
75 as opposed to other mammals or the environment, we hypothesized that crAssphage is likely  
76 acquired through human-to-human contact. It is well-documented that infants acquire many of  
77 their first microbes, such as *Bacteroides* species, from their mother during and after  
78 delivery<sup>7,8,12,13</sup>. However, it has been shown that adult twins and their mothers have unique gut  
79 viromes<sup>14</sup>. Given that *Bacteroides* species are believed to be the bacterial host of  
80 crAssphage<sup>4,15</sup>, we postulated that crAssphage is vertically transmitted from mother to infant,  
81 similar to what is observed for many bacterial taxa and in contrast to what is reported for other  
82 members of the human virome. To test the hypothesis that crAssphage is vertically transmitted,  
83 we examined publicly available shotgun metagenomic data from two stool microbiome  
84 datasets<sup>7,8</sup> from mothers and their infants (n=142 mother-infant pairs). We evaluated  
85 crAssphage presence and relatedness using StrainSifter<sup>16</sup>, a tool that performs variant calling

86 and phylogenetic analysis of microbial genomes. We considered metagenomes to contain the  
87 phage if there were reads mapping to the crAssphage reference genome with at least 5X  
88 coverage. We detected crAssphage strains in 27 of the 142 mothers studied (19%) and 16 of  
89 142 infants (11%) (Figure 2). Of the 27 mother-infant pairs where crAssphage strains were  
90 detected in at least one maternal sample, we find that 6 pairs (22%) share an identical or highly  
91 related strain of crAssphage between the mother and infant, indicating that crAssphage can be  
92 vertically transmitted from mother to infant. Ten of 142 infants (7%) harbor a strain of  
93 crAssphage that is not detected in the mother's stool. This could be a result of sampling during  
94 a low-crAssphage state in the mother; alternatively, these infants may have acquired  
95 crAssphage from another individual in their household.

96  
97 It has previously been reported that birth mode does not influence crAssphage relative  
98 abundance in the gut virome of Irish infants<sup>11</sup>. In the two mother-infant cohorts analyzed here,  
99 we only detect crAssphage in the gut microbiome of vaginally-born infants. Zero of 22  
100 Cesarean-born infants have crAssphage in their stool samples at 5X coverage or greater; this is  
101 not statistically significantly within this sample collection (Fisher's exact test;  $p=0.1332$ ).  
102 However, these samples were obtained from highly heterogeneous populations in diverse global  
103 regions, and studies of larger cohorts are necessary to definitively determine the relationship  
104 between birth mode and crAssphage colonization. Notably, crAssphage is not sufficiently  
105 abundant to be detected in meconium or shortly after birth in our analysis and is only found in  
106 infant stool sampled at least one month after birth. It is important to note, however, that these  
107 datasets comprise total metagenomic shotgun sequencing as opposed to enriched viral  
108 particles. It is possible that crAssphage particles are transmitted to the infant during vaginal birth  
109 and persist in the infant gut, but that they are not detected until host *Bacteroides* strains achieve  
110 higher relative abundance later in development<sup>7,17,18</sup>. Alternatively, it is possible that crAssphage  
111 is not sufficiently abundant to be detected in total shotgun metagenomic data in some samples.  
112 Finally, we observe that crAssphage strains are maintained in samples from multiple mothers  
113 over time (for up to three months of sampling), consistent with previous findings that the human  
114 gut virome is stable over time<sup>19,20</sup>.

115

116

117 **Figure 2: Vertical transmission of crAssphages**



130 transmission can occur beyond early life, we next asked whether new or different crAssphage  
131 strains can be acquired in adulthood.

132

133 Based on the observation that adults typically have a single strain or a population of very closely  
134 related strains of crAssphage, we predicted that adult individuals with the greatest likelihood of  
135 acquiring a new crAssphage are those who have experienced a dramatic simplification of their  
136 microbiome and subsequent exposure to crAssphage which could occupy the newly vacant  
137 niche.

138

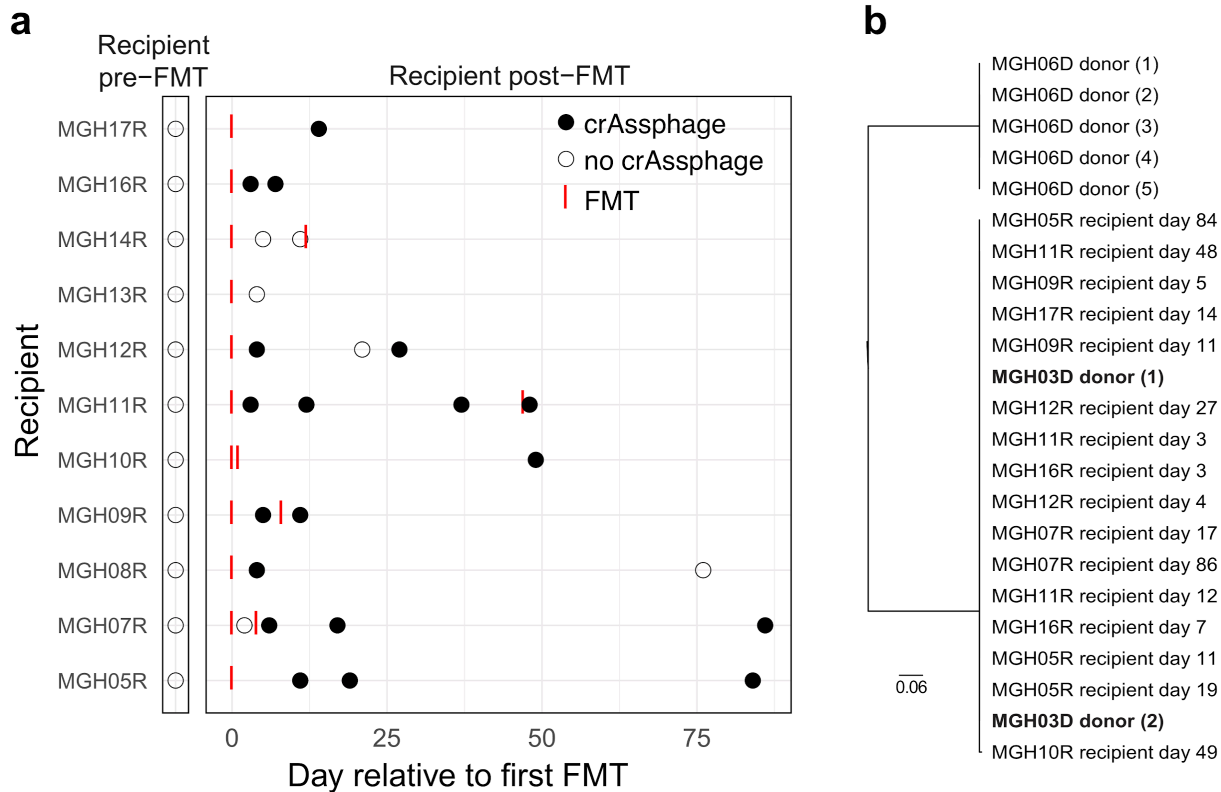
139 Two examples of such dramatic perturbations to the microbiome are (i) when individuals  
140 experience infection with the gut pathogen *Clostridium difficile*, are treated with antibiotics, and  
141 subsequently receive fecal microbiota transplantation (FMT)<sup>9,21</sup>, and (ii) when individuals  
142 undergo hematopoietic cell transplantation (HCT) and associated microbiome disruption from  
143 drug exposures and immunosuppression<sup>22,23</sup>.

144

145 To evaluate whether crAssphage can be transmitted to adults during fecal microbiota  
146 transplantation for the treatment of *C. difficile* associated diarrhea, we examined crAssphage  
147 strains in a publicly available dataset of shotgun fecal metagenomes from FMT donors and  
148 recipients<sup>9</sup>. Recipients were treated with oral antibiotics including metronidazole, vancomycin,  
149 and fidaxomicin prior to transplantation. We observe that crAssphage is present at 1X coverage  
150 or greater in samples from two donors, MGH06D and MGH03D. 12 recipients received stool  
151 preparations from either of those two donors, and the donor crAssphage engrafts in nine of  
152 those recipients (82%) (Figure 3a). Each of those nine recipients received stool preparations  
153 from the same donor (MGH03D), and the recipient strain is the same as the donor strain (Figure  
154 3b). Zero recipients who received FMT from a crAssphage-negative donor acquired crAssphage  
155 during the sampling period. In situations where crAssphage engrafts, it persists for days to  
156 months corresponding to the duration of sampling (Figure 3a). None of the recipients in this  
157 study had crAssphage in their gut prior to FMT, suggesting that crAssphage is below the  
158 detection limit, not as ubiquitous as has been described, or more likely, is cleared or  
159 substantially diminished in abundance when individuals are treated with drugs such as  
160 metronidazole, which have high activity against the likely crAssphage hosts, *Bacteroides*  
161 species. The FMT data show that crAssphage can be acquired as an adult and can stably  
162 engraft on a timescale of months.

163

164 **Figure 3: CrAssphage acquisition via FMT**



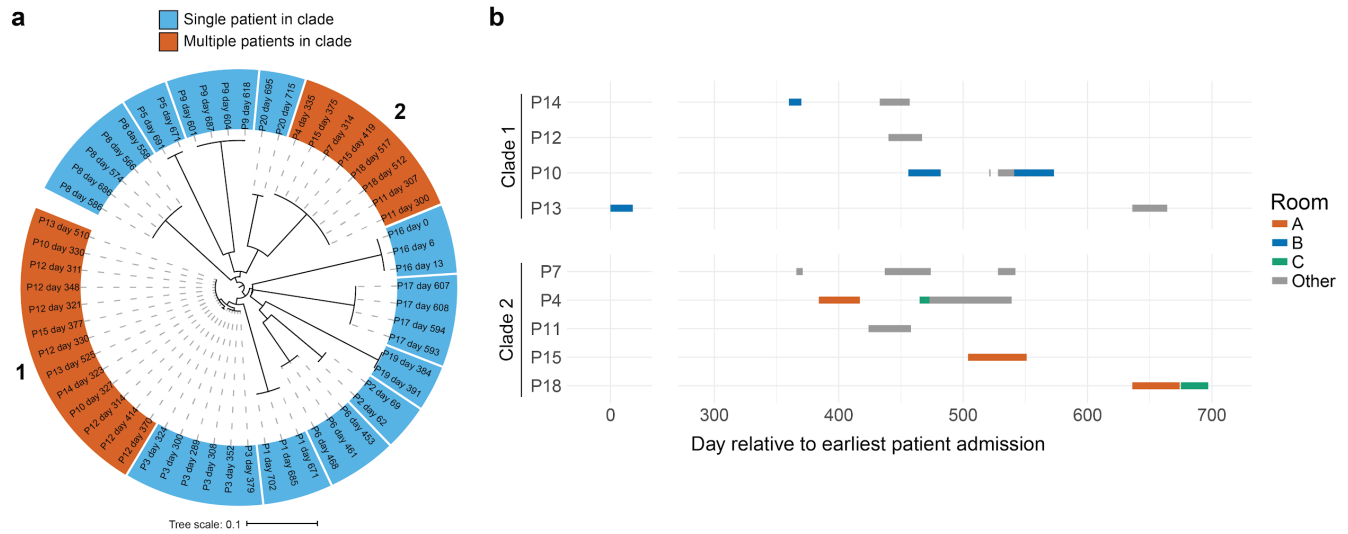
165  
 166 **a**, FMT recipient stool sampling relative to the date of the recipient's first FMT. Day of FMT  
 167 shown as a solid red line, stool samples shown as circles (black fill indicates crAssphage  
 168 detected, white fill indicates crAssphage not detected). Only recipients receiving stool  
 169 preparation from donor MGH03D shown, as recipients from other donors did not acquire  
 170 crAssphage. **b**, Phylogenetic tree showing strains from crAssphage-positive samples. Bold face  
 171 indicates samples from the donor in (a).

172  
 173 The long-term stability of the dominant crAssphage strain that we observed in maternal and  
 174 FMT recipient subjects suggested that this stability is a characteristic of crAssphage. To further  
 175 evaluate that model, we next analyzed the persistence of crAssphage strains in a biospecimen  
 176 collection of longitudinal samples from HCT recipients (Sequencing read counts in table S3).  
 177 We compared phylogenetic relatedness of crAssphage strains in the gut microbiomes of these  
 178 patients over the course of sampling (0 to 4 months), and found that in most cases, the  
 179 dominant crAssphage strain identified in samples from a given individual is identical or near-  
 180 identical over time, clustering together in a distinct clade (Figure 4a). This suggests that the  
 181 majority of individuals who were studied have a dominant, stable crAssphage strain over the  
 182 course of many days to months.



183

184 **Figure 4: Phylogeny of crAssphages in HCT patients**



185

186 **a**, Phylogenetic tree of crAssphage strains in the stool of HCT recipients. Clades containing  
 187 crAssphages from a single patient shown in blue, clades containing crAssphages from unrelated  
 188 patients shown in red with clades numbered 1 and 2 indicated. Days in are numbered relative to  
 189 the date of collection of first stool sample in the biospecimen collection. **b**, Hospital room  
 190 occupancy for patients in clades 1 and 2 from (a). Bars indicate the range of occupancy of a  
 191 patient in a given hospital room, colors of the bars indicate which room a patient inhabited  
 192 during that stay. Days are numbered relative to the earliest admission date of patients in clades  
 193 1 and 2 (P13).

194

195 While most HCT patients with crAssphage had stable colonization over time, there were some  
 196 notable exceptions. Specifically, we observed two clades which contain identical or near-  
 197 identical crAssphages from multiple patients (Figure 4a). Intriguingly, these samples were  
 198 collected at or around the same time, and the individuals' periods of hospitalization overlapped,  
 199 suggesting potential transmission of these phages from patient to patient, or acquisition from a  
 200 shared source or the built environment in the hospital. Unfortunately, sampling of the built  
 201 environment was not carried out during the collection of samples from this cohort. However, we  
 202 determined the specific hospital rooms that each patient was housed in during their time in the  
 203 hospital. We observe that three patients from each clade occupied the same room at different  
 204 times (Figure 4b), raising the possibility that individuals acquired crAssphage from a shared  
 205 source within that room, or that one individual's crAssphage was left behind and persisted in the  
 206 hospital room, and was acquired by subsequent occupants. These data suggest that



207 crAssphage may be acquired through environmental contact, and that crAssphage may be  
208 'viable' outside of its likely obligately anaerobic bacterial host or the human body. Furthermore,  
209 a substantial inoculum of crAssphage in stool may not be required to transmit a new strain of  
210 crAssphage to an individual. This level of exposure is more consistent with the amount that  
211 infants experience at birth, a much less dramatic and less direct exposure than FMT.

212

213 The results herein demonstrate various modes of acquisition and transmission of crAssphage.  
214 We show that crAssphage can be vertically transmitted, and that it is usually present in the gut  
215 as early as a few months after birth. We show that crAssphage persists through sampling on the  
216 scale of months, and perhaps even longer, indicating that the host immune system tolerates this  
217 phage and does not mount an immune response. This may provide an important clue toward  
218 the evolutionary history of host and microbe, as the human immune system may have evolved  
219 tolerance to this virus. Future work remains to determine precisely whether, and how,  
220 crAssphage influences the gut ecosystem. To do so, it will be necessary to determine the  
221 host(s) of these crAssphages through isolation and culture experiments. With this knowledge, it  
222 will be possible to design and test hypotheses that will help to elucidate the role of crAssphage  
223 in the biology of the human gut.

224

225

## 226 **Methods**

227

### 228 **Hematopoietic cell transplant patient samples**

#### 229 *Cohort selection*

230 Convenience samples were collected from autologous and allogeneic hematopoietic cell  
231 transplantation (HCT) patients at Stanford University Hospital under institutional review board  
232 protocol 42053 (Principal investigator: Dr. Ami Bhatt) or under protocol 37379 (Principal  
233 investigator: Dr. Andrew Rezvani; co-investigator: Ami Bhatt). Informed consent was obtained  
234 for all samples collected. Samples were stored at 4°C for up to 1 day after collection and were  
235 subsequently aliquoted and stored at -80°C.

236

#### 237 *DNA sequencing*

238 DNA was extracted from HCT patient stool samples using the QIAamp DNA Stool Mini Kit  
239 (QIAGEN) according to the manufacturer's instructions, plus a bead-beating step prior to  
240 extraction consisting of 7 rounds of 30 seconds of bead-beating followed by 30 seconds of  
241 cooling on ice, using the Mini-Beadbeater-16 (BioSpec Products) and 1 mm diameter  
242 Zirconia/Silica beads (BioSpec Products). DNA concentration was measured using Qubit  
243 Fluorometric Quantitation DS-DNA High Sensitivity Assay (Life Technologies). DNA sequencing  
244 libraries were prepared using the Nextera XT DNA Library Prep Kit (Illumina). Final library  
245 concentration was measured using Qubit Fluorometric Quantitation and library size distributions  
246 was analyzed with the Bioanalyzer 2100 system (Agilent). Libraries were multiplexed and 100-  
247 base pair paired-end reads were generated on the HiSeq 4000 platform (Illumina).

248

### 249 **Computational methods**

#### 250 *Sequence read preprocessing*

251 All sequence data were preprocessed as follows: PCR and optical duplicates were removed  
252 with Super Deduper v1.4<sup>24</sup> with the start location at 5 base pairs (-s 5) and minimum read length  
253 of 50 base pairs (-l 50). Deduplicated reads were trimmed using Trim Galore v0.4.4<sup>25</sup> with a  
254 minimum quality score of 30 for trimming (-q 30), minimum read length of 50 (--length 50) and  
255 the "--nextera" flag to remove Illumina Nextera adapter sequences.

256

#### 257 *CrAssphage SNV analysis*

258 Metagenomic reads were aligned to the crAssphage reference genome (NCBI RefSeq  
259 NC\_024711.1) and variants were identified using snippy with default parameters<sup>26</sup>. For multi-

260 allelic site analysis, the raw vcf output from snippy was filtered with bcftools<sup>27</sup> to include only  
261 SNVs with frequency between 0.1 and 0.9.

262

### 263 *Mother-baby and HCT phylogeny*

264 Phylogenetic trees were constructed using the StrainSifter pipeline as previously described<sup>16</sup>.  
265 Briefly, reads are aligned to the crAssphage reference genome using the Burrows-Wheeler  
266 Aligner v0.7.10<sup>28</sup> and to include only high-confidence alignments with mapping quality of 60  
267 using the SAMtools<sup>29</sup> view and filtered using BamTools<sup>29,30</sup> filter (v2.4.0) to include only reads  
268 with 5 or fewer mismatches. Samples in which reads cover at least 50% of the genome at a  
269 depth of 5X were included. Pileup files are created from BAM files using SAMtools mpileup, and  
270 SNVs with at least 0.8 frequency are identified and concatenated into a fasta file, from which a  
271 multiple sequence alignment is created using MUSCLE<sup>29-31</sup> and a phylogenetic tree is computed  
272 using FastTree v2.1.7<sup>32</sup>. Phylogenetic trees were midpoint rooted and visualized using the iTOL  
273 web tool<sup>33</sup>.

274

### 275 *FMT analysis*

276 Phylogenetic trees of crAssphage-containing samples were generated using StrainSifter with  
277 default parameters. Coverage of reads mapping to the crAssphage genome was determined  
278 from StrainSifter output. Plots were generated using the R programming language (v3.4.0) using  
279 the ggplot2 v2.2.1<sup>34</sup>, reshape2 v1.4.3<sup>35</sup>, and dplyr v0.7.4<sup>36</sup>. Sample MGH06R was excluded from  
280 the FMT cohort analysis as it could not be definitively determined whether sample designated  
281 as pre-FMT was actually collected prior to transplantation (personal communication with  
282 authors).

283

### 284 **Data availability**

285 Publicly available datasets analyzed herein are show in Table S1. Sequence data unique to this  
286 manuscript will be deposited in the NCBI SRA at the time of publication.

287

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298

299 **Author contributions**

300 F. B. T. performed computational analysis. G. S. designed the multi-allelic site analysis and  
301 edited the manuscript. F. B. T. and A. S. B designed the study and wrote and edited the  
302 manuscript.

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