A Review on Molecular Docking

[1]Mr. Rugved K. Paramane, [2]Mr.Omkar J. Beldar,[3]Mr. Shivraj S. Pol,[4]Ms. Trupti M.Waydande

[1,2,3,4]Yashoda Technical Campus, Faculty Of Pharmacy, Satara,

[1,2,3,4]Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry

Corresponding author: Mr. Rugved K. Paramane

Email id: rugvedparamane1436@gmail.com

Abstract

Molecular docking is a computational method used to predict the interaction between a small molecule (ligand) and a protein (receptor). This technique is pivotal in drug design, as it helps identify potential drug candidates by simulating how they bind to their target proteins. By assessing binding affinities and conformational changes, researchers can prioritize compounds for further experimental validation. The significance of molecular docking lies in its ability to streamline the drug discovery process, reducing time and costs associated with traditional experimental methods.

❖ Introduction

Molecular Docking: A Computational Tool For Drug Discovery

Molecular docking is a cornerstone in computational drug discovery, predicting the preferred orientation of one molecule (ligand) to another (receptor) upon binding. This process aims to identify how small molecules, like potential drug candidates, interact with biological targets, such as proteins or nucleic acids. The core principle is to simulate and score the binding affinity and mode, effectively "docking" the ligand into the receptor's active site. This virtual screening accelerates the identification of promising lead compounds by prioritizing those with favorable interactions. By predicting binding strength and identifying key binding residues, molecular docking significantly reduces the time and cost associated with traditional experimental methods, paving the way for more efficient drug development.

❖ The Lock And Key Analogy: A Foundation For Molecular Docking

The "lock and key" model, proposed by Emil Fischer in 1894, provides a fundamental conceptual framework for understanding molecular docking. This analogy likens an enzyme (the lock) to a specific receptor with a precisely shaped active site, and a substrate or ligand (the key) to a molecule that fits this site. For binding to occur and for the biological process to initiate, the key must have the correct shape and chemical properties to fit perfectly into the lock's mechanism.

binding site.

- **Why Molecular Docking? Accelerating Discovery With Virtual Screening**

Molecular docking is a crucial computational technique primarily employed in the early stages of drug discovery and development. Its fundamental purpose is to **predict how a small molecule (ligand) will bind to a larger biological molecule (receptor), typically a protein or nucleic acid.** This prediction helps researchers understand the potential interaction, including the orientation of binding and the strength of the attraction.

The "why" behind molecular docking is multifold:

1.Virtual Screening and Lead Identification: Docking allows researchers to computationally screen vast libraries of chemical compounds (millions of them) against a target molecule. This virtual screening process rapidly identifies a subset of molecules that are likely to bind to the target, thus acting as potential "lead compounds" for further investigation.

2. Understanding Binding Mechanisms: Docking simulations provide insights into the specific interactions occurring at the molecular level. Researchers can visualize how the ligand fits into the receptor's binding site, identify key amino acid residues involved in binding, and understand the forces (like hydrogen bonds, van der Waals forces, electrostatic interactions) that contribute to the binding. This understanding is vital for optimizing drug efficacy and minimizing side effects.

3.Drug Design and Optimization: Based on docking results, medicinal chemists can design new molecules or modify existing ones to improve their binding affinity, specificity, and pharmacokinetic properties. This iterative process of docking, designing, and synthesizing helps in refining lead compounds into drug candidates.

4.Repurposing Existing Drugs: Docking can be used to identify new therapeutic uses for existing drugs by testing them against different biological targets.

In essence, molecular docking acts as a powerful virtual microscope, allowing scientists to explore molecular interactions without the need for expensive and time-consuming laboratory experiments, thereby accelerating the entire drug discovery pipeline.

 The Indispensable Role Of Molecular Docking In Modern Research

Molecular docking has evolved from a niche computational tool to an indispensable component in various scientific disciplines, primarily driven by its ability to predict and analyze molecular interactions. Its significance can be understood through several key areas where it plays a pivotal role.

1. Accelerating Drug Discovery and Development

The most prominent application of molecular docking lies in the pharmaceutical industry for drug discovery.

- Virtual Screening: Docking allows for the rapid screening of vast virtual libraries of compounds against a specific biological target (e.g., a protein implicated in a disease).
- Lead Identification and Optimization: Once potential lead compounds are identified through virtual screening, docking helps in understanding their binding modes. This information is crucial for optimizing their efficacy, selectivity, and reducing potential off- target effects. Researchers can then computationally modify the lead compounds to improve their binding affinity and drug-like properties.
- Drug Repurposing: Docking can identify new therapeutic applications for existing drugs by screening them against different targets.

2. Understanding Biological Mechanisms

Beyond drug discovery, molecular docking is vital for fundamental biological research.

- Protein-Ligand Interactions: It helps elucidate the specific interactions between proteins and their natural ligands or other molecules that might modulate their function. This can reveal new insights into biological pathways and cellular processes.
- Enzyme Inhibition Studies: Docking can predict how inhibitors bind to enzymes, explaining their mechanism of action and aiding in the design of more potent inhibitors.
- Protein-Protein Interactions: While more complex, docking can also be applied to study protein-protein interactions, which are critical for many cellular functions.

3. Material Science and Engineering

Molecular docking is also finding applications in material science.

- Designing New Materials: It can be used to predict how small molecules will interact with surfaces or within material matrices. This aids in designing materials with specific properties, such as catalysts, sensors, or advanced polymers.
- Understanding Material-Biomolecule Interactions: Docking can help predict how biomolecules interact with material surfaces, which is important in areas like biomaterials development and understanding the behavior of nanomaterials in biological systems.

Types Of Molecular Docking

Molecular docking, the computational prediction of ligand-receptor interactions, employs a diverse range of techniques, each with its unique strengths and applications. These methods can be broadly categorized based on how they handle the flexibility of the interacting molecules.

1. Rigid Docking

This is the simplest and historically the earliest approach to molecular docking.

- Concept: In rigid docking, both the ligand and the receptor are treated as entirely inflexible structures. The docking algorithm focuses solely on finding the optimal orientation and position of the ligand within the receptor's binding site without considering any conformational changes in either molecule.

- Methodology: Typically involves algorithms that systematically explore translational and rotational degrees of freedom of the ligand within a predefined binding pocket.
- Applications: Primarily used for initial screening of large compound libraries or when the binding site is known to be relatively rigid. It's computationally less demanding but can be less accurate if flexibility plays a significant role in binding.

2. Flexible Ligand Docking

This approach acknowledges that ligands often undergo conformational changes upon binding.

- Concept: Here, the ligand is treated as flexible, meaning its internal bond rotations can be explored during the docking process. The receptor, however, is typically kept rigid.
- Methodology: Docking algorithms search for the best fit by allowing the ligand to adopt various conformations within the binding site. This significantly increases the accuracy compared to rigid docking, as it accounts for induced fit at the ligand level.
- Applications: Widely used for docking drug-like molecules where ligand flexibility is common.

3.Flexible Receptor Docking

This is the most sophisticated approach, recognizing that both the ligand and the receptor can change their conformations upon binding.

- Concept: Induced fit docking accounts for the fact that the binding site of a receptor can also undergo conformational changes to accommodate the ligand.
- Methodology: These methods typically involve a multi-step process. Initially, the
ceptor might be treated rigidly or with limited flexibility. Then, based on the docked poses of the ligand, the receptor's binding site is allowed to reorient or change its conformation to achieve a better fit.
- Applications: Crucial for systems where induced fit is known or suspected to play a significant role in binding. It offers higher accuracy but is computationally more intensive.

4.Protein-Protein Docking

This specialized area of docking focuses on predicting the interaction complex between two or more proteins.

- Concept: Similar to ligand-protein docking, it aims to determine the binding interface and orientation of two proteins when they associate.
- Methodology: Due to the larger size and higher flexibility of proteins, this is a more computationally challenging task. It often involves rigid-body docking followed by refinement to account for flexibility at the interface.
- Applications: Essential for understanding protein signaling pathways, enzyme complexes, and designing drugs that disrupt or

stabilize protein-protein interactions.

These different types of molecular docking, each with its own strengths and limitations, provide a powerful toolkit for researchers to understand and manipulate molecular interactions, driving progress across numerous scientific fields.

The Journey Of Molecular Docking: Key Stages And Their Significance

Molecular docking is a sophisticated computational technique that plays a pivotal role in various research fields, particularly in drug discovery. This process involves a series of well-defined stages, each contributing to the accuracy and utility of the final predictions. Understanding these stages is crucial for appreciating the power and limitations of molecular docking.

1. Target/Receptor Selection and Preparation

The success of any docking study hinges on the appropriate selection and meticulous preparation of the biological target, often a protein or nucleic acid.

Target Selection:

The first step involves identifying the biological molecule that is believed to be involved in a disease process or a biological function of interest. This target could be an enzyme, a receptor, a channel, or a protein involved in a signaling pathway.

- Disease Relevance: The target's role in the disease or biological process must be well- established.
- Druggability: The target should possess a binding site that can accommodate small molecules and that can be modulated by ligand binding to achieve a therapeutic effect.
- Availability of Structural Data: For docking, a high-resolution three-dimensional structure of the target is essential.

Receptor Preparation:

Once selected, the target structure requires thorough preparation:

- Protonation States: Atoms need to be assigned appropriate protonation states at a given pH.
- Adding Hydrogens: Missing hydrogen atoms are added, as they are crucial for hydrogen bonding interactions.
- Removing Water Molecules and Other Ligands: Unless water molecules are known to be essential for binding (bridging water), they are usually removed. Any co-crystallized ligands or ions are also removed, unless their role is to be specifically studied.
- Assigning Charges: Partial atomic charges are assigned to atoms, which are critical for electrostatic interactions.
- Defining the Binding Site: The region of the receptor where the ligand is expected to bind (the active site or allosteric site) needs to be accurately defined.

2. Ligand Selection and Preparation

Similar to the receptor, the ligand (the molecule being docked) also requires careful selection and preparation.

Ligand Selection:

The choice of ligands depends on the stage of the re search:

- Virtual Screening Libraries: These can be large, diverse collections of compounds from databases (e.g., ZINC, PubChem) or custom-designed libraries. The diversity of chemical structures is key to finding novel interactions.

Ligand Preparation:
Ligands also need to be prepared for docking:

- 3D Structure Generation: Ligands are typically prepared from 2D structures or databases, ensuring their correct 3D conformation.
- Protonation States and Tautomers: Determining the correct protonation state and most relevant tautomeric form at physiological pH is crucial, as these can significantly affect binding.
- Adding Hydrogens and Charges: Similar to receptors, hydrogens and partial atomic charges are added.
- Conformational Search (for flexible docking): If flexible ligand docking is employed, a relevant range of low-energy conformations for the ligand needs to be generated.

3. Docking

This is the core computational step where the prepared ligand is computationally "docked" into the prepared receptor.

Methodology:
Docking algorithms employ two main components:

- Search Algorithm: This component explores the conformational space of the ligand within the receptor's binding site. Various search algorithms exist, including:
- Systematic search: Explores all possible orientations and positions.
- Monte Carlo methods: Uses random sampling to explore the space.
- Genetic algorithms: Mimics evolutionary processes to find optimal poses.
- Fragment-based docking: Pieces of the ligand are docked and then assembled.
- Scoring Function: Once a pose (the ligand's position and orientation) is generated, a scoring function evaluates its potential binding affinity. Scoring functions are mathematical models that estimate the strength of the interaction based on various physico-chemical properties (e.g., van der Waals forces, electrostatic interactions, hydrogen bonding, desolvation effects).

Types of Docking based on Flexibility:

- Rigid Docking: Both receptor and ligand are rigid.
- Flexible Ligand Docking: Ligand is flexible, receptor is rigid.
- Flexible Receptor Docking (Induced Fit Docking): Both ligand and receptor can change their conformation.
- Protein-Protein Docking: Special algorithms are used for the large size of protein interfaces.

4.Evaluating Docking Results
After the docking process generates multiple potential binding poses, rigorous evaluation is essential to select the most plausible ones.

Pose Selection:

- Scoring Function Ranking: Poses are initially ranked based on their scores. However, scoring functions are not perfect, and a high score doesn't always guarantee a correct binding pose.
- Visual Inspection: Manual inspection of the top-ranked poses is crucial. Researchers look for chemically sensible interactions, complementarity between the ligand and receptor, and agreement with known experimental data (if available).
- Clustering: Poses with similar conformations are clustered, and representative poses from the largest clusters are often considered.
- Fit into the Binding Site: The pose should physically fit within the defined binding pocket without unrealistic steric

clashes.

Validation:

- Rescoring: Using different or more sophisticated scoring functions to re-evaluate the top poses.
- Comparison with Experimental Data: If experimental binding data (e.g., IC50 values, Ki values) or structural information of known binders exists, the docking results are compared against it.
- Molecular Dynamics (MD) Simulations: For a more dynamic and realistic assessment, the top poses can be subjected to MD simulations to observe their stability and interactions over time.

Molecular docking is a multi-stage process that requires careful planning, execution, and critical evaluation. Each stage builds upon the previous one, and attention to detail at every step is paramount for obtaining reliable and meaningful results that can guide further research and development.

Software Tools For Molecular Docking

Molecular docking is a computational technique used to predict the preferred orientation of one molecule (the ligand) when bound to another (the target protein). This method is vital in drug discovery, enabling researchers to screen compounds and identify potential drug candidates efficiently. Various software tools have been developed for molecular docking, each with its unique features, strengths, and limitations. Below is an overview of some prominent software tools used in molecular d 1. AutoDock Vina

Overview:

1.AutoDock Vina is an open-source program that provides a high-performance docking engine. It is known for its speed and accuracy in predicting ligand-binding conformations.

Key Features:

- Scoring Function: Vina employs a scoring function that considers both the energy of the ligand-protein interaction and the ligand's conformational flexibility.
- User-Friendly Interface: It offers a simplified command-line interface and can be used with graphical user interfaces like AutoDockTools.
- Parallel Processing: Vina supports parallel execution, allowing for faster processing of multiple docking simulations.

2.Glide

Overview:

Schrödinger’s Glide is a commercial molecular docking software that provides high-
quality predictions of ligand binding modes and affinities.

Key Features:

- Scoring Functions: Glide offers multiple scoring functions, including SP (standard precision) and XP (extra precision), to cater to different needs in virtual screening.
- Flexible Ligand Docking: It allows for the flexibility of ligands during docking, which enhances the accuracy of binding mode predictions.
- Integration with Other Tools: Glide integrates seamlessly with other Schrödinger tools for comprehensive drug design workflows.

3. GOLD (Genetic Optimisation for Ligand Docking) Overview:

GOLD is a commercial software that uses genetic algorithms to explore ligand binding modes within a protein's active site.

Key Features: • Genetic Algorithm: GOLD employs a genetic algorithm to optimize ligand conformations and orientations, which enhances exploration of the binding site.

- Scoring Functions: It includes

various scoring functions that account for different aspects of ligand-protein interactions.

- User Customization: Users can customize search parameters and scoring functions based on specific research needs.(81-85)docking.

4.MOE (Molecular Operating Environment)

Overview:
MOE is a comprehensive software platform that integrates molecular modeling, simulation, and cheminformatics tools, including molecular docking capabilities.

Key Features:

- Versatile Docking Options: MOE supports various docking protocols, including rigid and flexible docking approaches.
- Visualization Tools: It provides advanced visualization tools to analyze docking results comprehensively.
- Integration with Other Workflows: MOE can be integrated into larger workflows involving molecular dynamics simulations and quantitative structure-activity relationship (QSAR) analysis

5.DockingServer

Overview:
DockingServer is a web-based platform that provides tools for molecular docking without requiring local installation.

Key Features:

- Accessibility: Being web-based makes it easily accessible from any device with internet connectivity.
- User-Friendly Interface: It offers a straightforward interface for users to upload their protein and ligand structures.
- Batch Processing: Users can perform batch docking simulations efficiently.

Applications Of Molecular Docking

Molecular docking is a powerful computational technique widely used in drug discovery and development. It helps predict the preferred orientation of a ligand when bound to a target protein, providing insights into binding affinities and interaction modes. Here are ten notable applications of molecular docking, along with references for further reading.

1. Drug Discovery

Molecular docking plays a crucial role in the early stages of drug discovery by enabling virtual screening of large compound libraries against biological targets. This approach

accelerates the identification of potential drug candidates.

2. Lead Optimization

Once potential drug candidates are identified, molecular docking assists in lead optimization by predicting how modifications to the ligand structure can enhance binding affinity and selectivity.

3. Understanding Enzyme Mechanisms

Molecular docking helps elucidate enzyme mechanisms by modeling substrate binding and identifying key residues involved in catalysis, providing insights into enzyme function.

4. Structure-Based Drug Design

Molecular docking is integral to structure-based drug design (SBDD), where the three- dimensional structure of a target protein guides the design of new ligands with improved binding properties.

5. Predicting Drug Resistance

Molecular docking can help predict mutations that confer drug resistance in pathogens or cancer cells by modeling how these mutations affect ligand binding.(108)

6. Identifying Natural Products as Leads

Molecular docking is extensively used to screen natural products for potential therapeutic effects by predicting their binding affinities to target proteins.

7. Targeting Protein-Protein Interactions

Molecular docking can be employed to explore and inhibit protein-protein interactions (PPIs), which are critical in various biological processes and disease pathways.

8. Vaccine Design

Molecular docking is increasingly utilized in vaccine design by predicting epitopes that can elicit an immune response when bound to Major Histocompatibility Complex (MHC) molecules.

9 .Understanding Allosteric Regulation

Molecular docking helps elucidate allosteric sites on proteins and aids in the design of allosteric modulators that can enhance or inhibit protein function.

10 .Studying Protein Folding and Stability

Molecular docking can be used to investigate the stability of protein structures and predict how ligands influence protein folding processes.

Limitations And Challenges In Molecular Docking

Despite its widespread utility, molecular docking faces several inherent limitations and challenges that impact its accuracy and reliability. Addressing these issues is an ongoing area of research.

1. Scoring Function Inaccuracy: A primary challenge lies in the inaccuracy of scoring functions, which often struggle to precisely rank true binding poses and predict experimental binding affinities. They simplify complex intermolecular forces, sometimes failing to capture critical factors like desolvation effects, entropy, and quantum mechanical interactions, leading to false positives or incorrect pose predictions.

2.Receptor Flexibility: While some advanced docking methods account for receptor flexibility, it remains a significant challenge. Most algorithms struggle to accurately model large-scale conformational changes in the receptor's binding site induced by ligand binding (induced fit),

3. Ligand Preparation and Protonation States: The correct preparation of ligands, including accurate assignment of protonation states and tautomeric forms at a given physiological pH, is crucial but often difficult.

4. Handling Water Molecules: The role of explicit water molecules in the binding site is often simplified or ignored in docking, yet water can play crucial roles in mediating interactions or stabilizing particular conformations.

5. Computational Cost and Sampling Efficiency: While faster than experimental methods, achieving high accuracy in docking, especially with flexible receptor models, incurs significant computational cost.

Future Directions For Molecular Docking

1. AI and machine-learning integration

Machine learning and deep learning increasingly augment docking by improving scoring, pose prediction, and virtual screening throughput. AI models can learn complex non-linear patterns from large bioactivity datasets, enabling better prioritization of compounds and integration with ligand-based methods for hybrid workflows.

2. Improved scoring and rigorous free-energy methods

Future work will combine fast empirical scoring with more rigorous end-point and alchemical free-energy calculations to reduce false positives. Hybrid pipelines will use docking for screening and free-energy methods for reliable prioritization of leads.

3. Ensemble docking and enhanced sampling for receptor flexibility

Accounting for protein dynamics via ensemble docking, MD-derived receptor conformations, and enhanced sampling will improve recognition of cryptic pockets and induced-fit effects, increasing biological relevance of predicted poses.

4. Explicit solvent, water networks, and QM/MM approaches

Better modeling of water mediation, ions, and short-range quantum effects (e.g., charge transfer, polarization) via explicit solvent treatment and QM/MM will refine interaction energy estimates and explain challenging binding modes High-throughput, cloud-enabled workflows and integrative structural sources

Scalable cloud and GPU resources, automated pipelines, and integration with cryo-EM/AlphaFold models

Conclusion

Molecular docking serves as a cornerstone technique in modern drug design by enabling researchers to predict how small molecules interact with target proteins effectively. Despite its limitations, advancements in computational methods continue to enhance its accuracy and applicability across various therapeutic areas. Molecular docking has firmly established itself as an indispensable computational methodology, profoundly transforming the landscape of drug discovery and fundamental biological research. This review has highlighted its journey from initial conceptualization, rooted in the elegant "lock and key" analogy, through its diverse

methodologies and critical stages, to its current pivotal role in accelerating scientific breakthroughs.

Its utility spans rapid virtual screening for lead identification, intricate elucidation of molecular binding mechanisms, and iterative optimization of potential drug candidates. From rigid-body approximations to sophisticated flexible receptor models and specialized protein-protein docking, the field continually strives for greater biological realism and predictive accuracy. Each stage, from the meticulous preparation of target and ligand to the final rigorous evaluation of results, underscores the complexity and scientific rigor inherent in a successful docking study.

Despite its profound advantages, docking is not without its limitations. Challenges in developing universally accurate scoring functions, effectively modeling extensive receptor flexibility, precisely handling solvent effects, and ensuring optimal ligand preparation remain active areas of research. However, the trajectory of molecular docking is one of continuous innovation. The seamless integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning promises unprecedented accuracy and throughput, while advancements in enhanced sampling techniques for protein dynamics and explicit solvent models will lead to more physically realistic and biologically relevant predictions.

As computational power grows exponentially and algorithms mature, molecular docking will undoubtedly remain a cornerstone of rational drug design, offering ever more precise insights into the intricate dance of molecules and accelerating the development of novel therapeutics and a deeper understanding of biological systems.

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