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**Molecular Docking Analysis of Phytoconstituents as Potential EGFR Inhibitors:
Insights into Natural Scaffolds for Anticancer Drug Discovery**

(Running Title: Molecular Docking of Natural EGFR Scaffolds)

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ABSTRACT

Background: The epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) is a cell surface receptor that regulates cell proliferation and survival; its abnormal activation, which often occurs in non-small-cell lung cancer (NSCLC), causes tumor progression and resistance to tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs). Although next-generation TKIs have shown some improvements over previous treatments, there are still major challenges with resistance and toxicity. Natural phytoconstituents represent a potential reservoir of structurally diverse scaffolds for safer anticancer drug discovery. **Objective:** This study aimed to assess the binding ability of selected phytoconstituents against the EGFR kinase domain (PDB ID: 6JXT) by molecular docking. **Methods:** Seven phytoconstituents, including arjunolic acid, gallic acid, kaempferol, lupeol, quercetin, quiscalic acid, and rutin, were retrieved from PubChem and prepared using Open Babel (PyRx). The EGFR structure (PDB ID: 6JXT) was processed and docked with ligands using AutoDock Vina in PyRx 0.8. Results of docking were ranked by binding affinities (docking scores, kcal/mol), and receptor–ligand interactions were analyzed using BIOVIA Discovery Studio Visualizer. **Results:** Docking scores ranged from -5.6 to -9.7 kcal/mol. Arjunolic acid (-9.7) and quercetin (-9.6) had the highest affinities, with multiple stabilizing interactions, while lupeol (-8.6), rutin (-8.3), gallic acid, kaempferol, and quiscalic acid showed weaker interactions (-5.6). **Conclusion:** Arjunolic acid and quercetin appeared to be the most promising natural scaffolds for EGFR inhibition, with lupeol and rutin as secondary candidates, but further validation through molecular dynamics, ADMET

profiling, and biological assays is needed to confirm their therapeutic potential in EGFR-targeted cancer therapy.

Keywords: EGFR, molecular docking, phytoconstituents, arjunolic acid, quercetin, flavonoids, triterpenoids, NSCLC.

INTRODUCTION

The Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR), a transmembrane tyrosine kinase, is involved in the regulation of basic cellular processes such as proliferation, differentiation, and survival. Dysregulated EGFR signalling, often due to overexpression or activation mutations, is strongly involved in oncogenesis, particularly in non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC), breast cancer, and glioblastoma [1-5]. Mutations such as L858R, exon 19 deletions, and the gatekeeper T790M substitution drive tumor progression and therapeutic resistance, highlighting EGFR as a critical drug target [6-9].

Although several generations of EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) such as gefitinib, erlotinib, afatinib, osimertinib, and investigational compounds like sunvozertinib and asandeutertinib have demonstrated clinical utility, limitations persist due to acquired resistance, off-target toxicities, and tumor heterogeneity [10-14]. Consequently, attention has shifted toward the discovery of novel, safe, and selective EGFR modulators.

Natural products, particularly phytoconstituents such as flavonoids, triterpenoids, and phenolic acids, are promising sources of lead compounds owing to their structural diversity, relatively low toxicity, and multi-targeted bioactivity [15-19]. Quercetin, kaempferol, rutin, lupeol, and arjunolic acid are notable examples with reported anticancer potential through inhibition of EGFR and downstream pathways, including PI3K/AKT and MAPK signaling [20-24]. Recent computational investigations combining molecular docking, molecular dynamics (MD), and density functional theory (DFT) analysis have identified phytochemicals from *Moringa oleifera*, *Mangifera indica*, and other plants as effective EGFR modulators [25-29]. Moreover, phytoconstituents can act synergistically with synthetic TKIs or serve as templates for novel scaffold development [30-32].

Computational tools such as molecular docking, MD simulations, and ADMET profiling provide rapid and cost-effective strategies to screen natural compounds and predict their inhibitory potential against EGFR [33-36]. Such in silico methods are increasingly

recognized as essential in early-stage drug discovery, bridging the gap between traditional herbal pharmacology and modern targeted therapy [37-40].

This study assessed the binding affinity of seven phytoconstituted substances (arjunolic acid, gallic acid, kaempferol, lupeol, quercetin, quisqualic acid, and rutin) to the EGFR kinase domain (PDB ID 6JXT). This work aims to identify natural scaffolds with the potential for further optimization into new EGFR inhibitors through molecular docking and interaction analysis.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Selection and Preparation of Target Protein

The crystal structure of the target protein (PDB ID: 6JXT) was retrieved from the RCSB Protein Data Bank and prepared for docking using BIOVIA Discovery Studio Visualizer by removing co-crystallized ligands, water molecules, and heteroatoms, adding hydrogen atoms to correct valency, and identifying and selecting the active site based on literature reports and co-crystal references.

Ligand Selection and Preparation

Seven phytoconstituents (Arjunolic acid, Gallic acid, Kaempferol, Lupeol, Quercetin, Quisqualic acid, and Rutin) were selected based on reported biological activities, and their structures were retrieved from the PubChem database in SDF or Mol2 formats. Ligand preparation was performed in Open Babel (PyRx), involving energy minimization with the MMFF94 force field and conversion to PDBQT format for docking.

Molecular Docking Protocol

Molecular docking was carried out using AutoDock Vina integrated in PyRx 0.8. The prepared receptor (6JXT) and ligands were imported, and a grid box was defined around the active site to encompass all potential binding regions. Each ligand was docked independently with default Vina parameters and an exhaustiveness value of 8. Docking results were ranked by binding affinity (kcal/mol), with more negative values indicating stronger predicted interactions.

Visualization and Analysis

Post-docking analysis was conducted in BIOVIA Discovery Studio Visualizer to examine ligand–receptor interactions, including hydrogen bonding, hydrophobic contacts, and π – π stacking, and to evaluate ligand orientation within the binding site.

Data Interpretation

Docking scores were comparatively analyzed to evaluate the binding potential of each phytoconstituent, with Quisqualic acid showing relatively weak binding affinity, indicative of poor interaction with the 6JXT receptor [41-43].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Docking Result

The molecular docking results of the selected phytoconstituents with the 6JXT receptor are summarized in Table 1. Docking scores ranged from -5.6 to -9.7 kcal/mol, indicating differential binding potentials among the tested compounds.

Table 1: Docking scores (kcal/mol) of phytoconstituents with receptor **6JXT**, showing the strongest affinities for Arjunolic acid (-9.7) and Quercetin (-9.6).

S. No.	Receptor	Phytoconstituents	Class	Dock Score
1.	6JXT	Arjunolic Acid	Pentacyclic triterpenoid	-9.7
2.	6JXT	Gallic Acid	Phenolic compound	-5.6
3.	6JXT	Kaempferol	Flavonoid	-5.6
4.	6JXT	Lupeol	Triterpenoid	-8.6
5.	6JXT	Quercetin	Flavonoid	-9.6
6.	6JXT	Quisqualic acid	Flavonoid	-5.6
7.	6JXT	Rutin	Flavonoid	-8.3

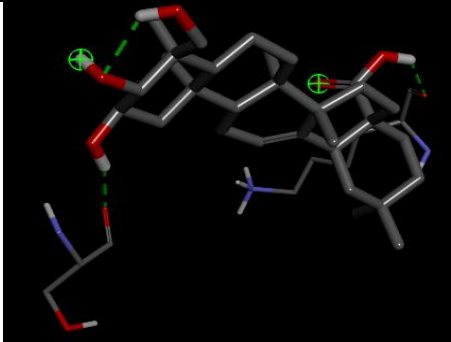
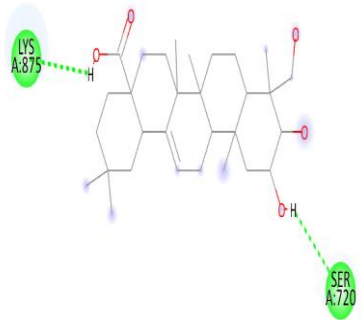
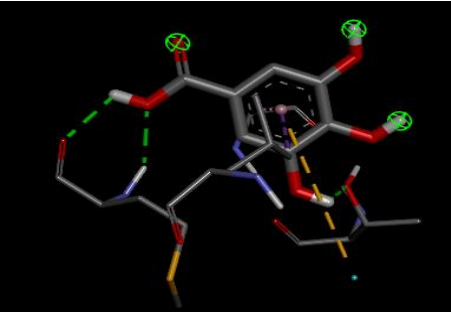
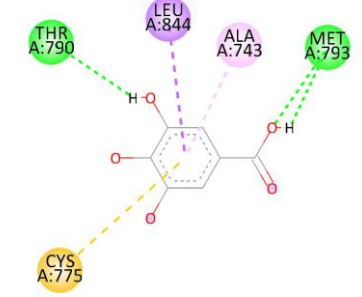
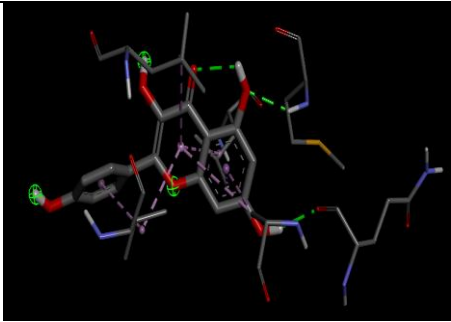
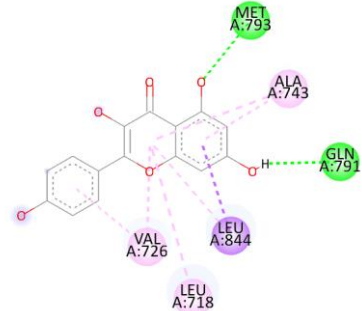
The molecular docking analysis of seven phytoconstituents with the 6JXT receptor—the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR; residues 696–1022 wild-type) in complex with the inhibitor AZD9291 (Osimertinib)—revealed a broad range of binding affinities, spanning from -5.6 to -9.7 kcal/mol. Among these, arjunolic acid (-9.7 kcal/mol) and quercetin (-9.6 kcal/mol) exhibited the strongest binding, suggesting a high potential for stable and robust interactions with the EGFR active site. Lupeol (-8.6 kcal/mol) and rutin (-8.3 kcal/mol) also demonstrated appreciable binding affinities, albeit slightly lower than the top-scoring ligands. In contrast, gallic acid, kaempferol, and quisqualic acid each displayed weaker binding scores (-5.6 kcal/mol), indicating suboptimal interactions and potentially limited stability within the EGFR binding pocket (Table 2).

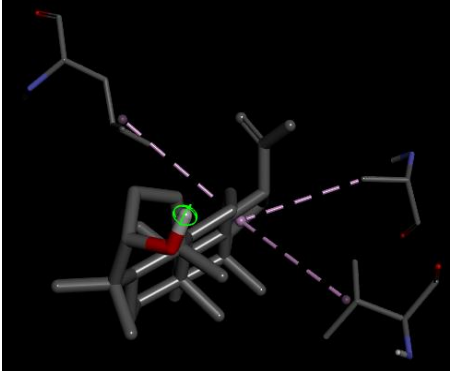
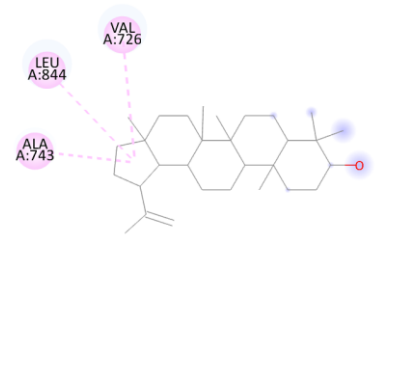
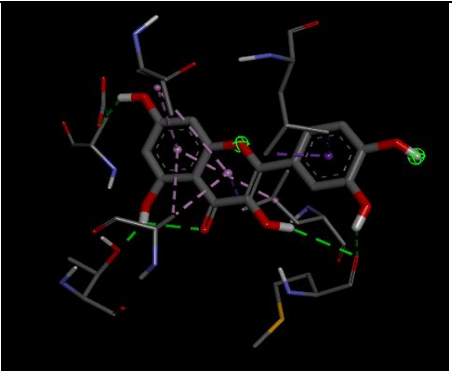
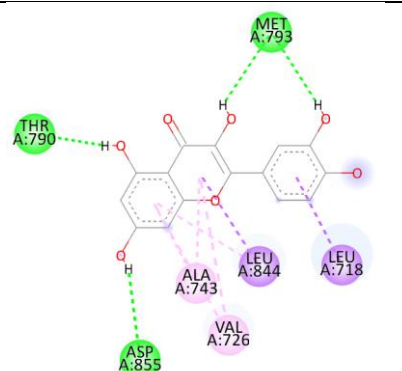
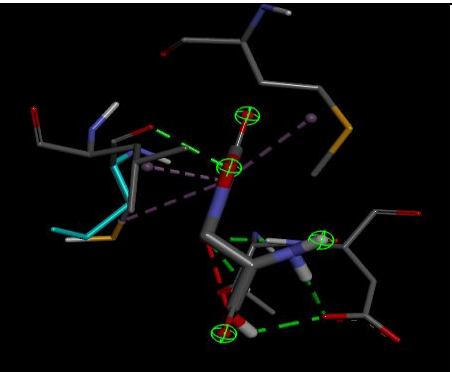
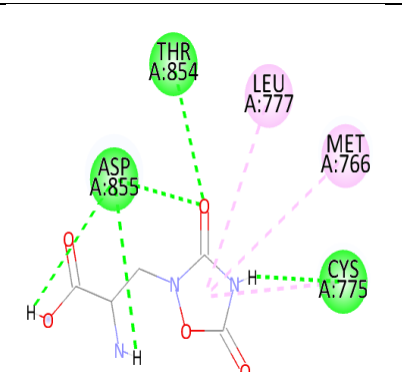
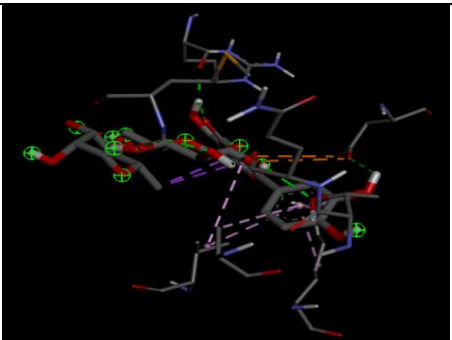
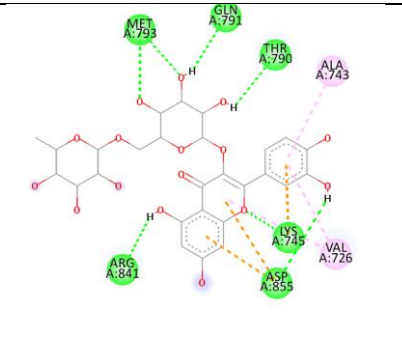
Post-docking analysis revealed that arjunolic acid and quercetin engage EGFR via multiple **hydrogen bonds, hydrophobic contacts, and π - π stacking interactions**, which likely account for their superior docking profiles. Arjunolic acid's pentacyclic triterpenoid core may establish numerous van der Waals and hydrophobic contacts, while its hydroxyl groups

facilitate hydrogen bonding [24]. Quercetin's flavonoid structure, with its polyhydroxylated aromatic rings, supports both hydrogen bonding and π - π -electron interactions [44]. Its strong docking score in this study corroborates earlier reports of its therapeutic potential.

Lupeol's moderate affinity aligns with its known anti-inflammatory and anticancer mechanisms, often involving receptor-mediated pathways [22]. Rutin's enhanced binding is presumably due to its glycosidic substituents, which offer additional hydrogen-bonding capacity within the EGFR binding pocket [21].

Table 2: Ligand-receptor interactions and 2D structures of selected phytoconstituents docked with 6JXT

Phytoconstituents	Ligand interaction	2d structure
Arjunolic Acid		
Gallic Acid		
Kaempferol		

Lupeol		
Quercetin		
Quisqualic acid		
Rutin		

The weaker interactions seen with gallic acid and kaempferol likely stem from their smaller molecular sizes and reduced binding complementarity, and quisqualic acid's poor affinity suggests unfavorable orientation or limited stabilizing contacts.

Mechanistic Implications Linked to EGFR Function

EGFR is a receptor tyrosine kinase that is central to the regulation of cell proliferation, differentiation, and survival, mediated by ligand-induced dimerisation and subsequent autophosphorylation. Dysregulated EGFR signaling is involved in many cancers, particularly non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), with drug resistance associated with T790M. The strong binding of arjunolic acid and quercetin to the EGFR kinase domain indicates that they may act as new modulators or inhibitors of EGFR activity, possibly blocking the ATP binding or stabilising the inactive conformations. Such binding could attenuate downstream oncogenic signaling pathways like PI3K/AKT or MAPK, aligning with their reported bioactivities. Indeed, flavonoids like quercetin are known to interfere with EGFR-mediated signaling, while triterpenoids such as arjunolic acid are recognized for targeting signaling proteins in cancer pathways.

Taken together, these findings highlight **arjunolic acid** and **quercetin** as lead scaffolds for further development into EGFR modulators. **Lupeol** and **rutin** also warrant further biochemical and biophysical evaluation. The weaker-scoring compounds may still hold value as structural templates for future optimization.

CONCLUSION

This study employed molecular docking to assess the inhibitory potential of seven phytoconstituents—arjunolic acid, gallic acid, kaempferol, lupeol, quercetin, quiscalic acid, and rutin—against the EGFR kinase domain (PDB ID: 6JXT). Among these, arjunolic acid and quercetin exhibited the strongest binding affinities, characterized by multiple hydrogen bonds, hydrophobic interactions, and π - π stacking, suggesting robust interaction within the EGFR active site. Lupeol and rutin demonstrated moderate binding, while gallic acid, kaempferol, and quiscalic acid showed relatively weaker affinities, indicating suboptimal receptor complementarity.

These findings are consistent with prior computational and experimental studies reporting the potent anti-EGFR activity of triterpenoids and flavonoids [6, 13, 20, 22, 23]. For example, quercetin has been extensively validated as an EGFR modulator through both docking and in vitro studies [20, 26, 40], while arjunolic acid and related triterpenoids are increasingly recognized as multi-target anticancer scaffolds [23, 24, 29]. Lupeol and rutin have also shown promising activity against EGFR-driven signaling pathways, reinforcing their potential for further optimization [21, 22].

What is important is that EGFR dysregulation remains a major driver of NSCLC and other cancers, and despite progress with new generation TKIs such as osimertinib and sunvaxertinib, acquired resistance remains a major challenge [10-14, 37]. Natural phytoconstituents, with their favorable safety profiles and multi-targeted mechanisms, could complement or inspire novel EGFR inhibitors that overcome resistance [6, 18, 30, 45].

While molecular docking provides rapid and cost-effective insights, it remains predictive in nature. Further validation through molecular dynamics simulations, ADMET profiling, biochemical kinase inhibition assays, and in vivo efficacy studies will be crucial to confirm the therapeutic relevance of these compounds [39, 46, 47]. Future work may also explore synergistic interactions of phytochemicals with approved TKIs to enhance efficacy and mitigate resistance [30, 32].

In conclusion, this study highlighted arjunolic acid and quercetin as promising natural scaffolds for EGFR-targeted cancer therapeutics, with lupeol and rutin as minor candidates. By combining computational screening with phytochemical drug discovery, this study adds to growing evidence that plant compounds may play a key role in the development of next-generation EGFR inhibitors.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest regarding this investigation.

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