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Repurposing Therapeutics for COVID-19: Supercomputer-Based Docking to the SARS-CoV-2 Viral Spike Protein and Viral Spike Protein-Human ACE2 Interface

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Abstract

The novel Wuhan coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) has been sequenced, and the virus shares substantial similarity with SARS-CoV. Here, using a computational model of the spike protein (S-protein) of SARS-CoV-2 interacting with the human ACE2 receptor, we made use of the world's most powerful supercomputer, SUMMIT, to enact an ensemble docking virtual high-throughput screening campaign and identify small-molecules predicted to bind to either the isolated Viral S-protein at its host receptor region or to the S protein-human ACE2 interface. We hypothesize the identified small-molecules may be repurposed to limit viral recognition of host cells or disrupt host-virus interactions. A ranked list of compounds is given that can be tested experimentally. 77 ligands were calculated to bind strongly to either the S-protein:ACE2 interface-ligand binding complex or the binding-interface of the isolated S-protein, with 24 having regulatory approval from the FDA or similar agencies. We hypothesize the identified small-molecules may be repurposed to limit viral recognition of host cells or disrupt host-virus interactions. The results presented are a first step towards the identification of small-molecule treatments against COVID-19.

Introduction

On the penultimate day of 2019, health officials at the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission (Hubei Province, China) reported an occurrence of concentrated pneumonia in the city of Wuhan¹⁻². Shortly after reporting the outbreak, the Chinese Center for Disease Control (Chinese CDC) and local Chinese health workers determined that the cause of the outbreak was a novel coronavirus denoted, initially, as the Wuhan Coronavirus or nCov-2019 (now referred to as

SARS-CoV-2)³. By Jan. 10th, 2020, the genome sequence of nCoV-2019 was released⁴. On Jan. 20th, 2020, Xu et al², compared the available sequences of those of other coronaviruses and demonstrated that the novel coronavirus was within the SARS family (SARS-CoV).

Human infections by the SARS coronavirus are known to be closely associated with interactions between the viral spike protein (S-protein) and specific human host receptors, such as the Angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2) receptor⁵⁻⁶. Using early SARS-CoV-2 genome data and standard template-based modeling techniques, Xu et al. constructed a 3D structural model of the SARS-CoV-2 S-protein². Further, after obtaining the structural model, protein-protein docking calculations were performed, indicating that although SARS-CoV and SARS-CoV-2 do have several differences in their sequences, both have favorable binding affinities for the human ACE2 receptor². Following this initial report, additional work has also provided evidence of the SARS-CoV-2 S-protein binding to the ACE2 receptor⁷⁻¹⁰.

The current model of the SARS-CoV-2 S-protein:human ACE2 complex facilitated infection suggests that a reasonable target for structure-based drug discovery might be to disrupt the viral S-protein-ACE2 interface. However, the development of novel small-molecule therapeutics (drugs) takes years, with trials and regulatory approval taking between 10 to 15 years in the US (on average)¹¹. Given that the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 may quickly become a global challenge¹², it would be of great benefit to identify and repurpose already well-characterized small-molecules, such as metabolites, illicit drug compounds, natural products, and previously approved drugs, for use in combating the virus.

Here we combine restrained temperature replica-exchange molecular dynamics (restrained T-REMD) simulations with virtual high-throughput screening in an ensemble docking campaign to identify well-characterized drugs, metabolites, or natural products that bind to either

the S-protein:ACE2 receptor interface or the receptor recognition region of the S-protein. We hypothesize that by binding to the viral-host interface and/or the isolated S-protein's host-recognition region, these small molecules will serve to disrupt the host-recognition and infection pathway of SARS-CoV-2. From this ensemble docking campaign, we provide a ranking of the predicted binding affinities of over 8000 drugs, metabolites, and natural products (and their isomers) with regards to the SARS-CoV-2 S-protein and the S-protein:ACE2 receptor. Further, we highlight seven of our top-ranked compounds, which are currently available and have had either regulatory approval as drugs or have had multiple prior studies that indicate high-potential for therapeutic use. The ranked list is available for incorporation into immediate experimental testing.

Methods

Ensemble docking is a strategy by which an ensemble of target (receptor), in this case, the SARS-CoV-2 S-protein:ACE2 interface, conformations are generated for use in molecular docking to implicitly account for the conformational flexibility of the target and its presumed ligand-binding site¹³⁻¹⁴. Typically the ensemble of target structures (conformations) is generated through the use of standard all-atom molecular dynamics (MD) simulations and structural clustering¹³⁻¹⁴. By accounting for the conformational diversity of the receptor, ensemble docking enhances the likelihood of identifying predicted hits (enrichment), which may be lost when screening against a single conformation of the target¹³. We have previously applied this technique to derive experimentally-verified hits for many protein targets involved in the treatment of diseases ranging from bacterial infections to osteoporosis¹⁵⁻²³. For this work, three phases of calculations were performed: structural modeling, molecular simulations (ensemble building), and small-molecule docking (*in silico* ligand screening)

Structural Modeling and Molecular Dynamics Preparation

Recent structural modeling work by Xu et al. and others have suggested that the S-protein from SARS-CoV-2 has a strong binding affinity with the ACE2 receptor^{2, 10}. However, at the time this work was initiated the three-dimensional coordinates of the structural model by Xu et al were not available nor were experimental structures yet resolved. Therefore, we generated a model of the SARS-CoV-2 S-protein-ACE2 complex (provided with the supplementary material). Using SWISS-MODEL²⁴⁻²⁵, the sequences for the COVID-19 S-protein (NCBI Reference Sequence: YP_009724390.1) and ACE2 receptor were used along with the crystal structure of the SARS-CoV S-protein in complex with ACE2 (PDB: 2AJF), as a template, to generate a model of the SARS-CoV-2 S-protein and ACE2 receptor complex. A rendering of the complex is provided in Figure 1.

To prepare the system for molecular dynamics simulations, the structural model was centered in a periodic simulation box of 9.895nm x 8.525nm x 17.415nm and solvated in the (CHARMM) TIP3P water model²⁶ using the gmx editconf and gmx solvate tools from the GROMACS molecular dynamics simulation suite²⁷. As the total charge of the S-protein-receptor complex was non-zero, 21 sodium ions were added to neutralize the system. To remove potential clashes between the solvent, ions, and S-protein-receptor complex, energy minimization calculations (using GROMACS with the CHARMM36 force-field²⁸) were performed with a convergence criterion of 1000 kJ/mol nm⁻¹. Following the energy minimization, a short, 1ns NPT relaxation simulation was performed to relax the box dimensions. For the NPT simulation, the pressure and temperature were controlled using the Berendsen baro/thermostat²⁹, and the simulation was performed using an integration time-step of 2fs. For both NPT relaxation simulation and energy minimization calculations, short-range interactions were treated with a

smooth force-switch cutoff of 1.2nm, and long-range electrostatics were treated using the PME (Particle-Mesh-Ewald) formalism, as implemented within GROMACS³⁰. For the relaxation simulation, hydrogen-bonds were restrained with the LINCS algorithm³¹⁻³².

Restrained Temperature Replica-Exchange Molecular Dynamics

The critical requirement of ensemble docking is the generation of an ensemble that captures a wide array of the conformational space of the target receptor. As we are most interested in the virus-host protein-protein interface (and subsequently the viral S-protein's host receptor recognition domain), we performed a restrained temperature replica-exchange molecular dynamics simulation (T-REMD), with 46 replicates at temperatures from 310K to 350K, of the S-protein:ACE2 receptor complex with residues more than 1.5 nm from the protein-protein interface held fixed by harmonic restraints (with force-constants of 1000 kJ/mol nm⁻¹). The T-REMD simulations generated trajectories that were 40ns in length and the last 35ns of each simulation used for analysis (35ns per replicate for a total of 1.61μs of sampling). Simulations were performed using the GROMACS simulation suite (compiled on the ORNL SUMMIT supercomputer) within the NPT ensemble with an integration time-step of 2fs, a frame-saving rate of 10ps, and with exchange attempts every 500ps (with an exchange rate of ~20% obtained throughout the simulation). Short-range interactions and long-range electrostatics were computed using the same cutoffs as those used in the NPT relaxation simulations (see Structural Modeling and Molecular Dynamics Preparation). The temperature was maintained with the V-rescale thermostat³³, while the pressure was maintained using the Berendsen barostat²⁹. The Berendsen barostat was used to accommodate the use of position restraints within the simulation. As with the NPT relaxation, all hydrogen-bonds were subjected to constraints, using the LINCS algorithm³¹⁻³².

Following the T-REMD simulation, frames from all replicates (regardless of temperature) were concatenated into a single file and used for structural clustering. Root-mean-squared (RMSD) based structural clustering of the conformations defined by the heavy-atoms of each side-chain within the S-protein:ACE2 receptor complex was performed with the gmx cluster tool of GROMACS using the GROMOS clustering algorithm³⁴ and a cutoff of 0.2nm. Six clusters were identified via this clustering method and are provided in the Supplementary Material (SI) for interested readers.

After identifying the six clusters noted above, the interface region (see figure 1) of each structure was extracted and converted, using Autodock Tools³⁵, into PDBQT formatted files for subsequent molecular docking calculations.

Ligand Library Choice

As the aim of this work is to identify previously approved small-molecules (along with metabolites, illicit drug compounds, and natural products) for repurposing in for the treatment of COVID-19 infections, we made use of the SWEETLEAD molecular library³⁶. Each ligand (small-molecule) within the SWEETLEAD library was converted from SDF format to the PDBQT format used in Autodock Vina (Vina) by first converting the SDF format to mol2 using MOE2016³⁷ and then Autodock tools³⁵. It is important to note that the library itself contains multiple “copies” of ligand entries with the same name; however, these repeat entries are isomers of the ligands within the library. For completeness, all isomers are considered as unique ligands and are also used in the docking calculations.

in Silico Screening/Molecular Docking

Molecular docking calculations were performed using a unique POWER9 build of Autodock Vina³⁸ for SUMMIT. Two sets of docking calculations were performed, one targeting the S-protein:ACE2 receptor interface (to identify small-molecules for interface disruption) and the second calculation focusing on preventing S-protein recognition by binding to the ACE2 recognition region of the isolated S-protein. For both calculations, the same structural clusters identified from the MD simulations were used; however, in the case of the isolated S-protein, atoms belonging to the ACE2 receptor were removed. Docking calculations made use of a search box of 1.2nm x 1.2nm x 1.2nm, which was centered for, both the isolated S-protein and S-protein-ACE2 receptor interface, at the coordinates (0, -2, -0.5) which roughly correspond to the location of the geometric center of the S-protein-ACE2-receptor interface. For all docking calculations, an exhaustiveness setting of 250 was used. To allow for the rapid evaluation of the SWEETLEAD library, while also making use of high search exhaustiveness, docking calculations were performed in parallel using a generic script-launching MPI wrapper compatible with SUMMIT.

Of the 9127 ligands within the SWEETLEAD library, only a subset could be successfully scored by Vina due to the imposed search box restriction and limits on rotatable bonds (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1 Number of successful docking calculations for each cluster (receptor conformation) for the combined S-protein-ACE2 interface target. The total number of successful docking calculations are also noted.

Cluster 0	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5	Total
8574	8587	8581	8578	8621	8634	51575

Table 2. The number of successful docking calculations for each cluster (receptor conformation) for the Isolated S-protein target. The total number of successful docking calculations are also noted.

Cluster 0	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5	Total
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8483	8510	8526	8561	8523	8214	50817
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As a practical matter, we focus the discussion of our results on ligands with Vina poses scores better than -7 kcal/mol (corresponding to the top ~0.09% of Vina pose scores) for the protein-protein interface target and -6.2 kcal/mol (also corresponding to the top ~0.09% Vina pose scores) for the isolated S-protein target. After scoring each of the ligand-protein/interface complex geometries generated from the docking calculations, the four ligand-interface and three ligand-isolated S-protein binding complexes were extracted for additional analysis using MOE³⁷. For these ligand-protein complexes, energy minimization was performed in MOE with default convergence setting and with the MMF94x force-field³⁹ to refine the bound poses of these ligands. The refined structures were then used to generate 2D interaction maps between the ligand and the protein residues of the S-protein-ACE2 receptor interface and the isolated S-protein.

Results & Discussion

Ensemble docking produces multiple scores and poses for each ligand-target conformation. As noted in Tables 1 and 2 (see *Methods*), over 100,000 docking calculations were performed with 51,575 ligand-target pose scores obtained for the S-protein:ACE2 receptor interface and 50,817 ligand-target pose scores for the ACE2 recognition region of the isolated S-protein. For ease of use in future studies, we provide complete tables of the top pose scores for the interface and isolated targets in the SI, with 8669 scores provided for ligands binding to the S-protein:ACE2 receptor interface and 8589 scores for ligands binding to the isolated S-protein's ACE2 recognition domain. Below we highlight seven ligands that we believe may be of special interest for experimental evaluation.

Docking Results for the Host-Virus Interface (S-protein-ACE2 Receptor Complex)

51575 docking calculations using the six conformations of the S-protein:ACE2 interface and 8669 ligands were performed and the top pose score for each ligand was recorded for ligand ranking (see SI for full ranking). From the ranking, 47 ligands were found to form S-protein:ACE2 interface-ligand binding complexes with scores equal to or better than the score threshold (Vina score better and -7 kcal/mol), and of these, 41 are reported (as noted in the ZINC15 database⁴⁰) to be available for purchase, with 21 denoted as having regulatory approvals (Table 3).

Table 3. Listing of top-scoring ligands for S-protein:ACE2 receptor interface that have undergone regulatory review in the USA or elsewhere (as annotated in the ZINC15 database). Repeat names correspond to alternate isomers. A complete ranking is provided in the SI

Name (Obtained from the SWEETLEAD)	Vina Score	ZincID
pemirolast	-7.4	ZINC5783214
benserazide	-7.4	ZINC3830273
Natural Product: luteolin-monoarabinoside	-7.4	ZINC18185774
pyruvic acid calcium isoniazid	-7.3	ZINC4974291
Natural Product: quercetol;quercitin	-7.3	ZINC3869685
protirelin	-7.3	ZINC4096261
carbazochrome	-7.2	ZINC100029428
nitrofurantoin	-7.2	ZINC3875368
benserazide	-7.2	ZINC3830273
carbazochrome	-7.1	ZINC100045148
sapropterin	-7.1	ZINC13585233
Vidarabine	-7.1	ZINC970363
Natural Product: eriodictyol	-7.1	ZINC58117
tazobactam	-7.1	ZINC3787060
phenformin hel	-7	ZINC5851063
carbazochrome	-7	ZINC100045148
carbazochrome	-7	ZINC100045148
vildagliptin	-7	ZINC100003507
Natural product: demethyl-coclaurine	-7	ZINC896041

Of the top 41 ranked compounds, we highlight four (with scores ranging from -7.4 to -7.1) based on their poses, which are represented in figure 2. These highlighted compounds are pemirolast⁴¹⁻⁴² (ZincID: 5783214), isoniazid pyruvate (ZincID: 4974291), nitrofurantoin (ZincID: 3875368), and eriodictyol (ZincID: 58117). Of the four small-molecules shown in figure 2, the top-ranked, pemirolast, is an anti-allergy medication or for use in treating chronic asthma⁴¹⁻⁴², while the second and third of the highlighted hits are related to well-known antibiotics, with nitrofurantoin an antibiotic for use against urinary tract infections⁴³ and isoniazid pyruvate being a metabolite of the tuberculous antibiotic Isoniazid⁴⁴. The last, Eriodictyol, is a flavanone found in Herba Santa and is a traditional herbal remedy used for asthma and treating colds⁴⁵.

Figures (3-6) provide a detailed two-dimensional accounting of the ligand-interface interactions and may be of interest to researchers interested in identifying novel small-molecule therapeutics. These interaction maps indicate that three of the four top hits (isoniazid pyruvate, nitrofurantoin, and eriodictyol) each contain twice as many interactions with the ACE2 receptor than the S-protein, while pemirolast has equal amounts of interactions between the two proteins. Further, the second through fourth top hits had 3 to 6 more ligand-residue interactions. As the binding of the S-protein to ACE2 is undesirable, it is preferable to diminish ligand-interface interactions that may bridge, and therefore stabilize, the interaction between the S-protein and the ACE2 receptor. While the top hit, pemirolast, has the strongest binding affinity, initial repurposing may be better suited to isoniazid pyruvate, nitrofurantoin, or eriodictyol.

Docking Results for the Isolated Virus S-protein Host Recognition Domain

As noted in the previous section, docking to the interface may unintentionally identify interface stabilizing compounds (which cannot be easily defined *a priori*). To avoid this potential pitfall,

we also performed docking calculations targeting the receptor recognition region of the S-protein itself. As the target is no longer a buried pocket (as was the case for the interface), we expect that therapeutic compounds that have not been optimized for the ‘shallow’ protein surface will have weaker binding affinities than the interface and as such, we adjusted the criteria for the selection of ligands for discussion to be those that have Vina scores better than -6.2 kcal/mol. Using the new score threshold, a total of 30 ligands were identified (see SI for complete ranking); however, of these 30, only three were annotated in the ZINC15 database to have regulatory data from the US FDA or similar agencies in other countries.

The three top-scoring ligands (with ZINC15 annotations denoting regulatory data available) for the isolated S-protein were: Cepharanthine, Ergoloid, and Hypericin.

Cepharanthine and Hypericin are both natural products with both having been the subject of multiple studies on their ability to act as antiviral⁴⁶⁻⁴⁹ agents (including against coronaviruses^{47, 49}), while Ergoloid is an FDA approved⁵⁰ drug component of interest in dementia therapies⁵¹⁻⁵³.

The docking poses for each of these compounds are presented in figure 7, and the associated interaction networks between these ligands and the isolated S-protein, are shown in figures 8-10. The renderings of the poses and interaction networks show favorable ring-protein interactions, which may be driving the ligand-binding interactions and may limit S-protein:ACE2 hydrogen-bonding and recognition.

Conclusion

Prior work has demonstrated that the COVID-19 associated SARS-CoV-2 virus shares the ACE2 receptor as an entry point for infection with the SARS-CoV. Here we made use of enhanced sampling molecular simulations of structural models of the S-protein of SARS-CoV-2 binding with the ACE2 receptor to generate an ensemble of configurations for ensemble docking.

Further, we have made use of this ensemble to screen the SWEETLEAD library against the interface and isolated viral S-protein. Our docking calculations have identified 47 potential hits for the interface, with 21 having regulatory data and 20 of these being available for purchase, and 30 for the S-protein alone, with 3 top hits having ZINC15 annotations indicating the existence of prior regulatory agency testing.

With regards to our interface docking results, we highlighted seven of our top compounds, namely those that have been previously used as drugs or as potential drugs. Of the highlight interface-binding compounds, three (nitrofurantoin, isoniazid pyruvate, and eriodictyol) were found to have a preference for residues belonging to the ACE2 receptor portion of the interface, and we hypothesize that these favorable interactions may in-turn limit the binding of the SARS-CoV-2 S-protein with the ACE2 receptor, thus restricting infection. With regards to screening against the isolated S-protein's receptor recognition region, the three identified compounds of interest were: Cepharanthine, Ergoloid, and Hypericin, with Cepharanthine and Hypericin having prior data suggesting their use as antiviral agents against other coronaviruses⁴⁷,⁴⁹. Given the results from both sets of docking calculations, our work indicates that at least the seven compounds identified here would be reasonable initial compounds for experimental investigations in limiting SARS-CoV-2's virus-host interactions. Furthermore, by providing an extensive ensemble-docking generated ranking of small-molecules, our results offer an important preliminary filtering of compounds for future experimental studies targeting the infection pathway of SARS-CoV-2.

That the results provided here are a starting point for the repurposing of known small-molecules against SARS-CoV-2 infection. Virtual high-throughput screening is an approximate early-stage drug discovery technique with a high failure rate. Although in all of our own previous

campaigns (against many different targets) experimentally-validated hits were identified, the hit rate is typically around 10%, meaning 9/10 compounds on average will fail. Moreover, the fact that we have been working so far with homology models, as opposed to high-resolution crystal structures may lead to additional uncertainties. However, by providing an extensive ensemble-docking generated ranking of small-molecules our results offer a preliminary filtering leaving compounds suitable for future experimental studies targeting the infection pathway of SARS-CoV-2.

Supplementary Information

Spreadsheets of our complete ranking of the ligands in this study for both the S-protein:ACE2 interface and isolated S-protein targets are provided as supplementary material. In addition, we also direct interested readers to DOI:[10.26434/chemrxiv.11871402](https://doi.org/10.26434/chemrxiv.11871402) where a tar-ball archive containing a substantial portion of our raw data, including the PDB structures of the complex generated from SWISSMODEL, spreadsheets containing the best-pose Vina scores for each ligand along with internal ligand ID, molecular dynamics input files, the molecular-dynamics derived clusters for docking, and all docked poses is available for download. The tar-ball archive also contains C code and accompanying bash-scripts used in this study to execute Vina over an arbitrary number of SUMMIT nodes are also provided for use in similar studies by interested readers.

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Figures.

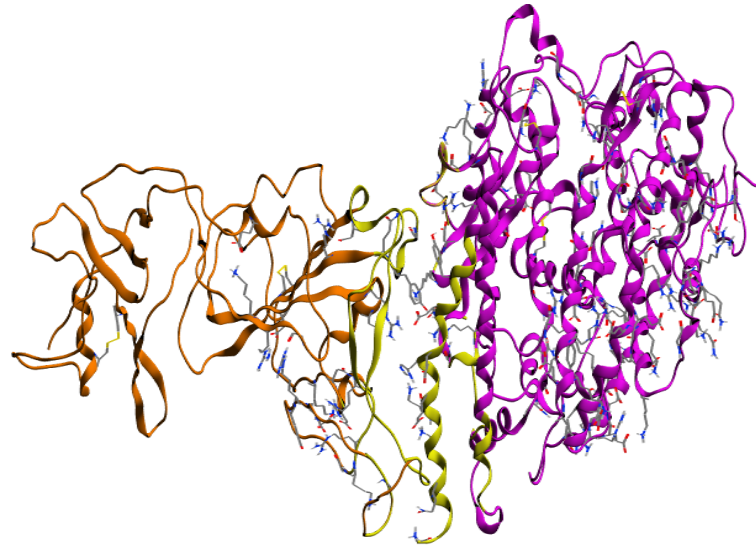


Figure 1) Rendering of nCoV-2019 S-protein and ACE2 receptor complex. Orange ribbons represent the S-protein, purple corresponds to ACE2, and yellow is a highlight of the interface targeted for docking.

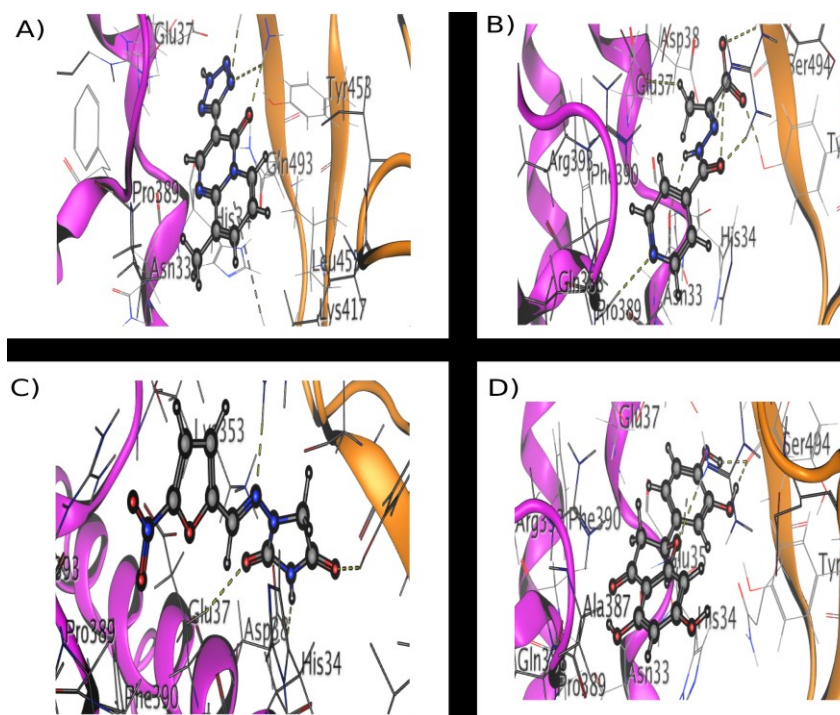


Figure 2) Renderings of four of the top scoring previously regulator approved small-molecules binding within the S-protein-ACE2 interface. A) pemirolast (ZincID: 5783214). B) isoniazid pyruvate (ZincID: 4974291). C) Nitrofurantoin (Zinc ID: 3875368). D) Eriodictyol (ZincID: 58117). Orange ribbons represent the S-protein and purple ribbons correspond to the ACE2 receptor

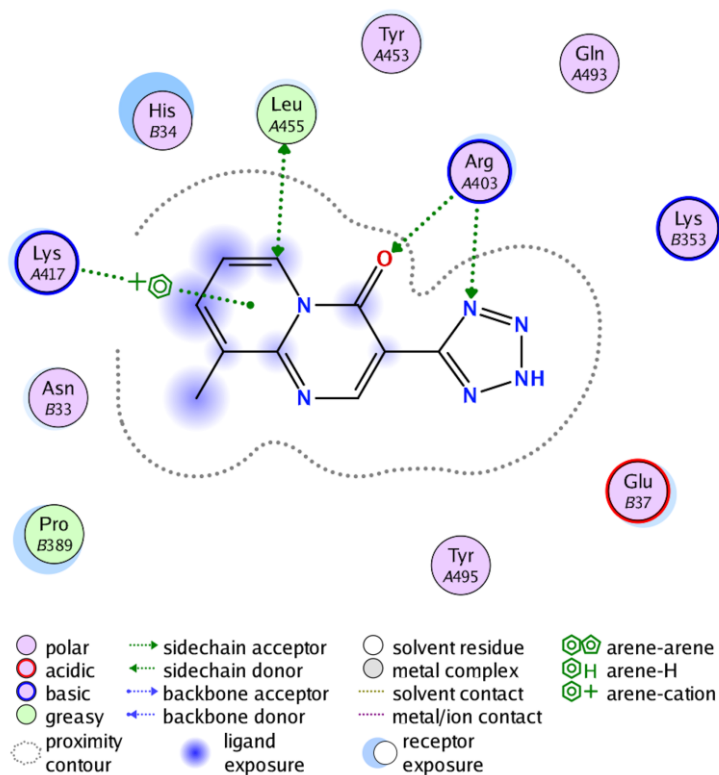


Figure 3) permirolast-protein Interface interaction diagram (generated from MOE2016). Residues with (A) correspond to the S-protein, while those with (B) correspond with the ACE2 receptor.

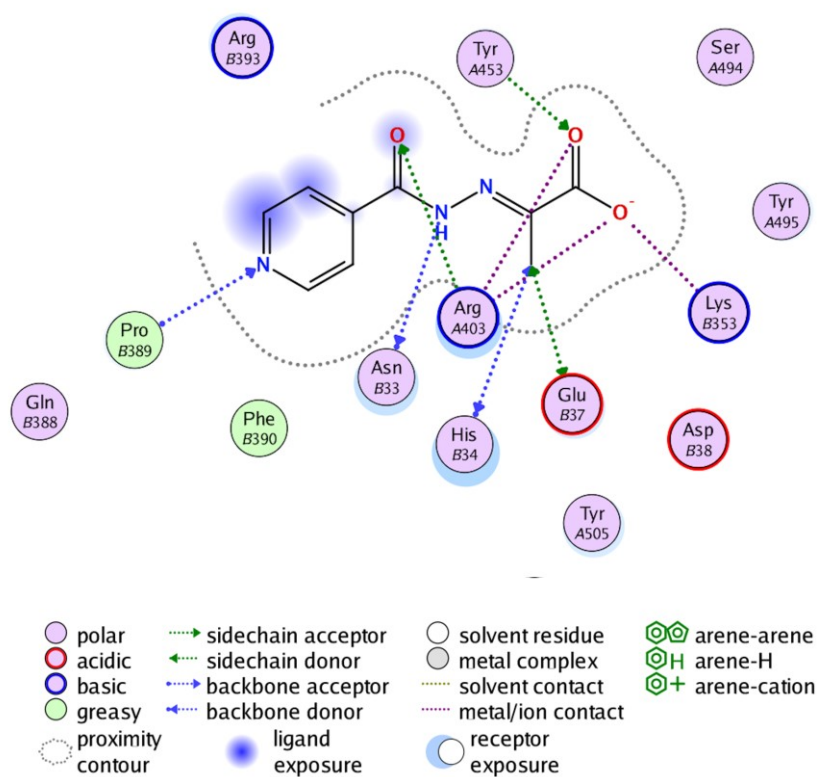


Figure 4) isoniazid pyruvate-protein Interface interaction diagram (generated from MOE2016). Residues with (A) correspond to the S-protein, while those with (B) correspond with the ACE2 receptor.

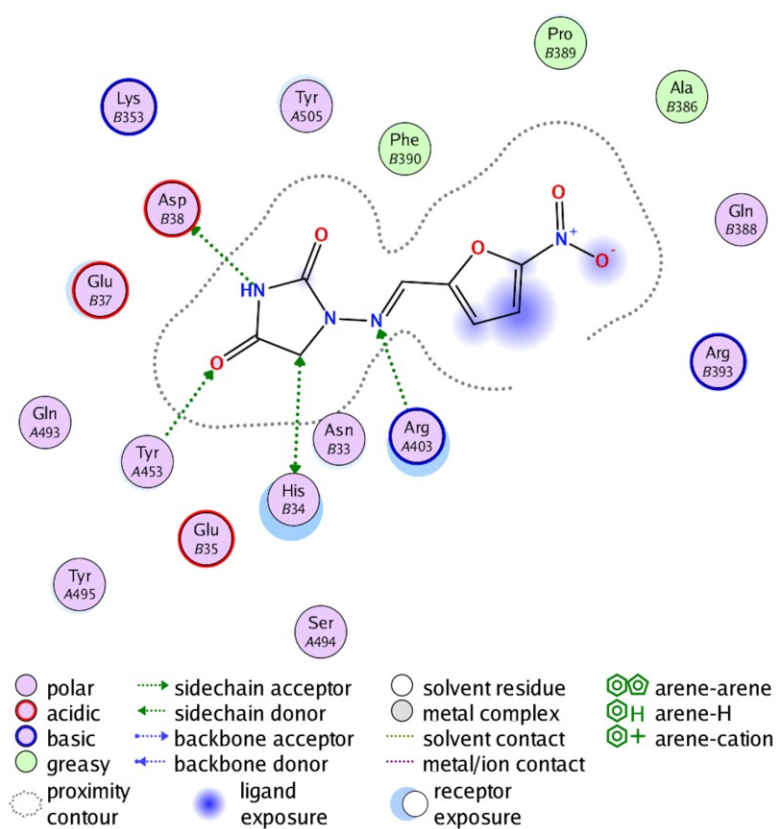


Figure 5) nitrofurantoin-protein Interface interaction diagram (generated from MOE2016). Residues with (A) correspond to the S-protein, while those with (B) correspond with the ACE2 receptor.

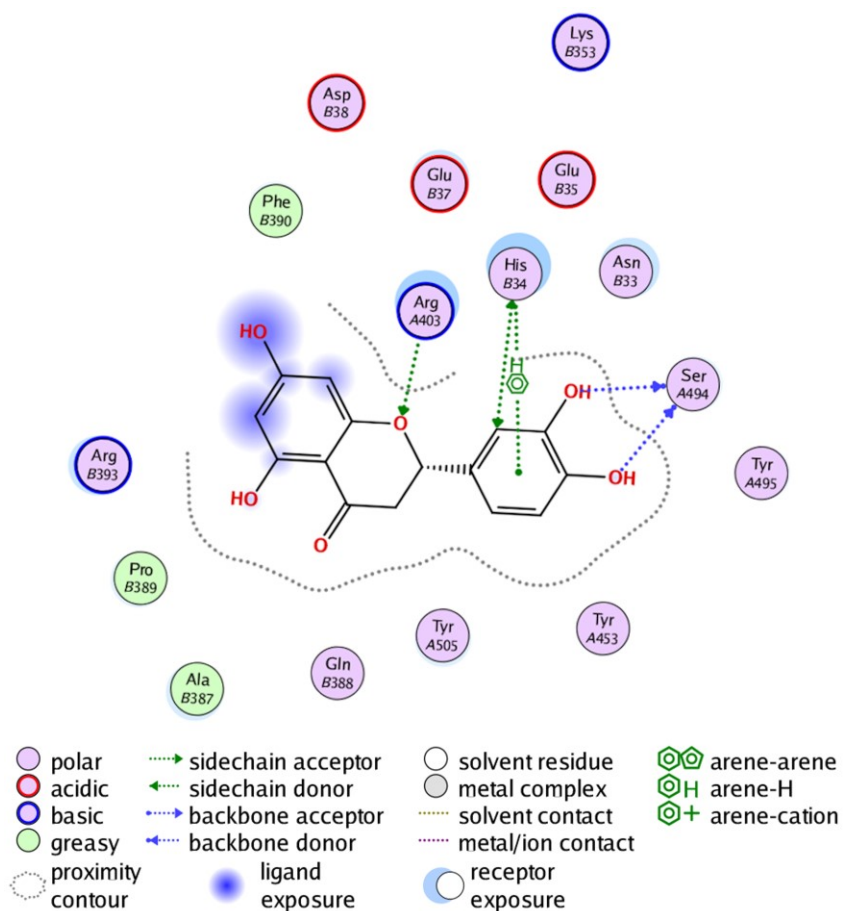


Figure 6 eriodictyol -protein Interface interaction diagram (generated from MOE2016). Residues with (A) correspond to the S-protein, while those with (B) correspond with the ACE2 receptor.

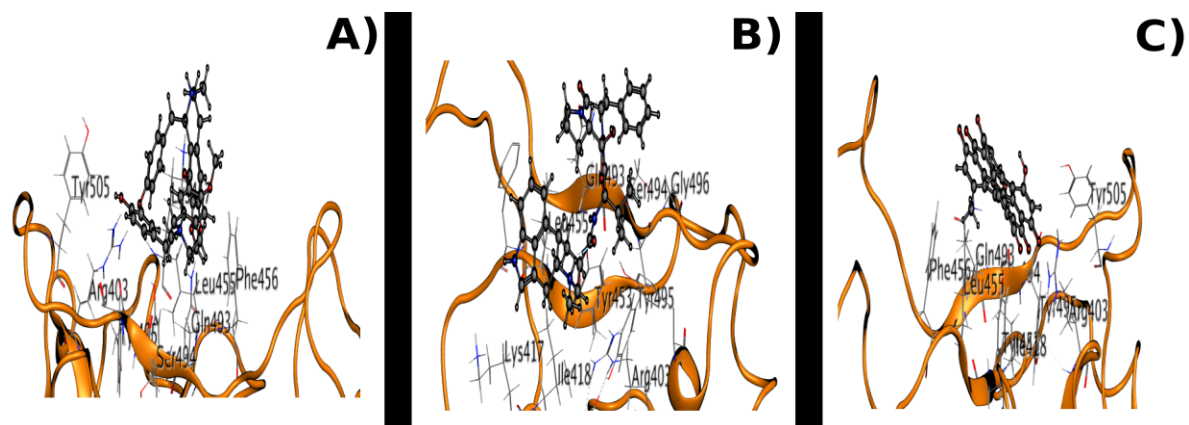


Figure 7) Renderings of three of the top scoring previously regulator approved small-molecules binding with the S-protein receptor recognition region. A) Cepharanthine (ZincID: 30726863). B) Ergoloid (ZincID: 3995616). C) Hypericin (Zinc ID: 3780340). Orange ribbons represent the S-protein.

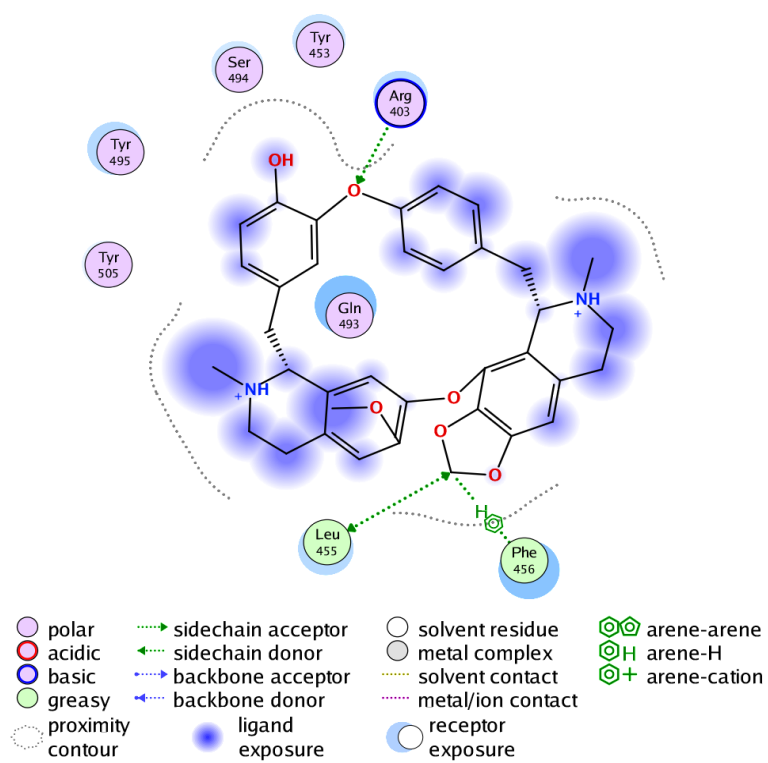


Figure 8) Cepharanthine-S-protein interaction diagram (generated from MOE2016).

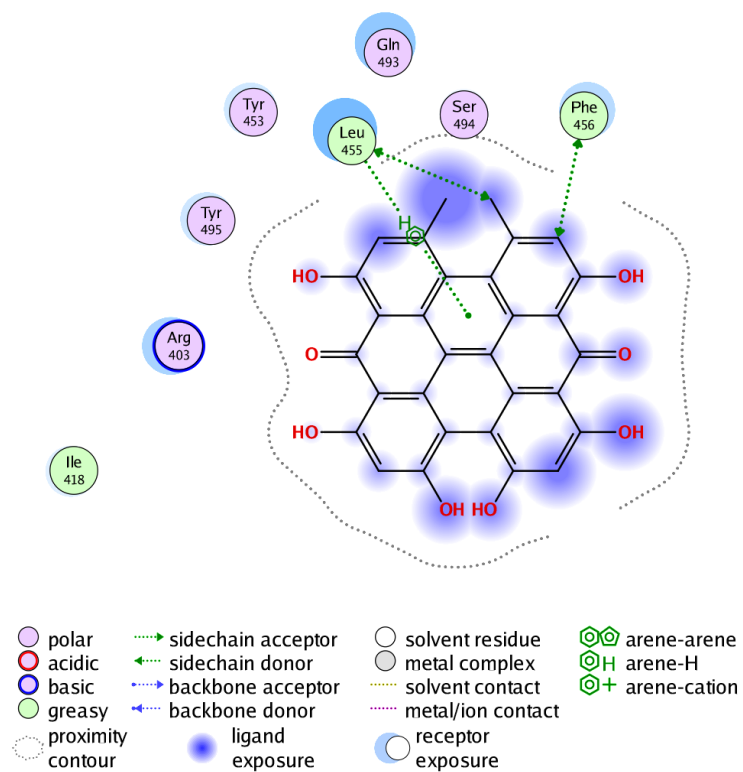


Figure 9) Hypericin-S-protein interaction diagram (generated from MOE2016).

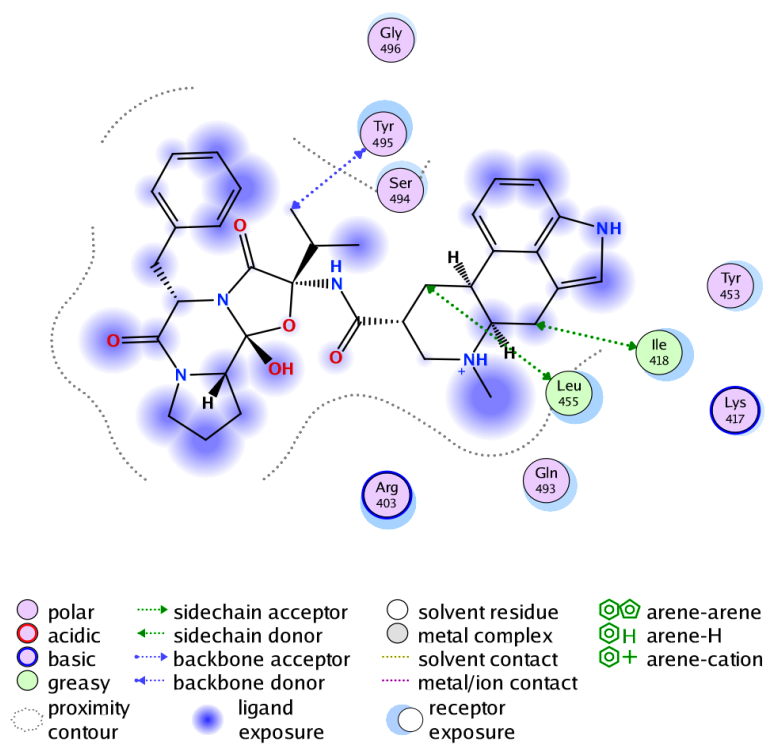


Figure 10) Ergoloid-S-protein interaction diagram (generated from MOE2016).

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