AI-Driven Scientific Prompting and Sequential Discovery Pipeline for GSK-3β-Targeted Predictive Modeling and Therapeutic Insights in Alzheimer's disease Using Apigenin from Wheatgrass

Shrawani Raikar

Sinhgad College of Pharmacy, Pune, India

Corresponding author Email: shravaniraikar284@gmail.com
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Abstract

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is the leading neurodegenerative cause of dementia, characterized by amyloid-β (Aβ) plaque accumulation, tau hyperphosphorylation, neuroinflammation, and synaptic failure. Glycogen synthase kinase-3β (GSK-3β) centrally mediates these pathologies by driving tau phosphorylation, influencing APP processing, and modulating inflammatory signaling, making it a compelling therapeutic target. Apigenin (4′,5,7-trihydroxyflavone), a flavonoid abundant in wheatgrass and medicinal plants, exhibits neuroprotective, antioxidant, and anti-inflammatory properties in preclinical models. Emerging evidence indicates apigenin attenuates AD-relevant pathology via modulation of the PI3K/Akt/GSK-3β axis, reducing tau phosphorylation, lowering Aβ production, and enhancing neuronal survival and cognitive outcomes in vitro and in vivo. To accelerate translation, we conducted a systematic literature analysis (2010–2025) across major databases to evaluate links between apigenin, GSK-3β modulation, and AD endpoints. We also propose a reproducible, AI-driven sequential discovery pipeline combining literature mining, molecular docking, machine-learning ADMET prediction, and large language model guided experimental design to prioritize apigenin derivatives with improved blood-

brain barrier permeability and pharmacokinetics. Integrating natural product pharmacology with AI-enabled predictive modeling can streamline lead optimization and experimental planning. Collectively, current preclinical data support apigenin as a modulatory agent of GSK-3β-related pathways in AD, and AI-guided workflows offer a promising route to refine apigenin analogs and accelerate development of next-generation GSK-3β-targeted therapeutics for Alzheimer's disease.

Keywords: Alzheimer's disease; apigenin; wheatgrass; GSK-3β; large language models; AI-driven drug discovery; network pharmacology; Neurodegeneration

1. INTRODUCTION

Alzheimer's disease (AD) constitutes the most prevalent neurodegenerative disorder, affecting over 55 million individuals globally, with projections reaching 139 million by 2050 [1]. Despite five decades of intensive research, disease-modifying therapies remain elusive, and current pharmacological interventions offer only symptomatic relief without halting progressive neuronal loss[2]. The pathological hallmarks of AD extracellular amyloid-beta (Aβ) plaques and intracellular neurofibrillary tangles (NFTs) composed of hyperphosphorylated tau protein are mechanistically linked through glycogen synthase kinase-3β (GSK-3β), a serine/threonine kinase whose dysregulation integrates Aβ toxicity, tau pathology, neuroinflammation, and autophagic dysfunction [3],[4]

GSK-3β occupies a unique position at the crossroads of AD pathogenesis: it phosphorylates tau at multiple AD-relevant epitopes (Ser199, Thr231, Ser396, Ser404), modulates amyloid precursor protein (APP) processing via BACE1 upregulation, suppresses autophagy through mTOR activation, and amplifies neuroinflammatory cascades [5,6] Aging-associated oxidative stress and impaired PI3K/Akt signaling further exacerbate GSK-3β hyperactivity, establishing a self-reinforcing cycle of neurodegeneration [7] Consequently, GSK-3β inhibition represents a rational multi-target therapeutic strategy, yet clinical translation of synthetic inhibitors (e.g., tideglusib, lithium) has been hampered by isoform selectivity challenges, narrow therapeutic windows, and dose-limiting toxicities [8].

Natural products offer an alternative reservoir of structurally diverse GSK-3β modulators with favorable safety profiles [9]. Among these, apigenin (4′,5,7-trihydroxyflavone) a flavone abundant in wheatgrass (Triticum aestivum), parsley, celery, and chamomile has attracted considerable attention for its neuroprotective, anti-inflammatory, and antioxidant properties [10] Wheatgrass, consumed globally as a dietary supplement, provides a sustainable and cost-effective source of apigenin and its glycosylated derivatives [11] Preclinical studies demonstrate that apigenin attenuates Aβ-induced neurotoxicity, reduces tau hyperphosphorylation, suppresses microglial activation, and preserves blood–brain barrier (BBB) integrity.[12] [13]Critically, apigenin directly modulates GSK-3β activity through multiple mechanisms: transcriptional downregulation of GSK-3β, competitive ATP-binding site interaction, and indirect regulation via upstream kinases (PI3K/Akt)

However, apigenin's clinical translation confronts three fundamental barriers: (i) limited oral bioavailability due to extensive phase II metabolism; (ii) moderate BBB penetration restricting central nervous system (CNS) exposure; and (iii) suboptimal target residence time at GSK-3β .[14]Overcoming these challenges requires systematic optimization of the apigenin scaffold a process traditionally reliant on resource-intensive medicinal chemistry campaigns and low-throughput in vivo testing.

The convergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and drug discovery offers transformative solutions to these bottlenecks. Machine learning (ML) models, particularly graph neural networks (GNNs) and message-passing neural networks (MPNNs), now predict ADMET (absorption, distribution, metabolism, excretion, toxicity) properties with >85% accuracy, enabling rapid virtual screening of natural product analogs [14] Concurrently, large language models (LLMs) such as GPT-4 and domain-adapted scientific LLMs demonstrate capacity for literature mining, hypothesis generation, and experimental design a capability we term scientific prompting [15] When integrated into a sequential discovery pipeline, AI can: (a) prioritize GSK-3β-targeting apigenin analogs with optimal predicted BBB permeability; (b) generate testable hypotheses for structural modifications; (c) design efficient experimental validation protocols; and (d) iteratively improve predictive accuracy as new data accumulate.

This review has four interconnected objectives. First, we synthesize current evidence for apigenin-mediated GSK-3β modulation in AD, critically evaluating preclinical efficacy data and mechanistic insights. Second, we contextualize apigenin within the broader landscape of GSK-3β-targeted natural products and failed synthetic inhibitors. Third, we delineate an AI-driven sequential discovery pipeline integrating LLM scientific prompting with computational modeling, providing a reproducible protocol for lead optimization. Fourth, we propose a prioritized experimental roadmap to validate AI-generated hypotheses, accelerating apigenin's translation toward clinical evaluation. By integrating pharmacological evidence with emerging AI methodologies, this review aims to equip interdisciplinary researchers with a framework for rational natural product development in **neurodegenerative disease.**

2.1 Alzheimer's Disease Pathophysiology: The Centrality of GSK-3β

Alzheimer's disease pathogenesis evolves over decades, with subtle synaptic dysfunction preceding overt cognitive decline by 15-20 years [16]. Two hallmark proteinopathies Aβ plaques and tau NFTs exhibit complex bidirectional interactions, yet their molecular convergence on GSK-3β is increasingly recognized [17]

Aβ peptides, particularly Aβ42, aggregate into oligomers and fibrils that trigger synaptic toxicity, oxidative stress, and neuroinflammation [18] Aβ oligomers bind multiple neuronal receptors (e.g., cellular prion protein, NMDA receptors, EphB2), activating intracellular signaling cascades that converge on GSK-3β [19] Aβ exposure

inactivates the PI3K/Akt survival pathway via oxidative stress-mediated phosphatase activation, relieving inhibitory phosphorylation of GSK-3β at Ser9 [[20] Active GSK-3β subsequently phosphorylates tau at multiple sites, promoting its detachment from microtubules, misfolding, and aggregation into paired helical filaments (PHFs) and NFTs [21] Tau hyperphosphorylation at Ser396/404 (AT8 epitope) and Thr231 correlates strongly with cognitive decline severity .

Beyond tau phosphorylation, GSK-3β drives Aβ generation through BACE1 upregulation. GSK-3β phosphorylates and stabilizes the transcription factor NF-κB, which translocates to the nucleus and enhances BACE1 gene expression [22] This establishes a feed-forward loop: Aβ activates GSK-3β, which increases BACE1 expression, further elevating Aβ production [23] Additionally, GSK-3β suppresses autophagy a critical clearance mechanism for aggregated proteins by activating mTOR and inhibiting the autophagy-initiating kinase ULK1[24] Impaired autophagy exacerbates both Aβ and tau accumulation, accelerating neurodegeneration.

Neuroinflammation represents a fourth mechanistic axis. GSK-3β promotes microglial M1 polarization and enhances production of pro-inflammatory cytokines (IL-1β, TNF-α, IL-6) via NF-κB and NLRP3 inflammasome activation [25]. Conversely, GSK-3β inhibition skews microglia toward a neuroprotective M2 phenotype, reducing inflammatory damage [26]. Thus, GSK-3β orchestrates four interconnected pathological processes, justifying its prioritization as a multi-target therapeutic node.

2.2 Biology of GSK-3β: Isoforms, Regulation, and Downstream Signaling

GSK-3 exists as two mammalian isoforms GSK-3α (51 kDa) and GSK-3β (47 kDa) encoded by distinct genes (GSK3A and GSK3B) with high homology in their kinase domains but divergent N-terminal sequences [27] Both isoforms are ubiquitously expressed, with GSK-3β predominating in brain and exhibiting non-redundant functions in neuronal development, synaptic plasticity, and neurodegeneration [28]

GSK-3β is constitutively active in resting cells and regulated primarily through inhibitory phosphorylation at Ser9 by upstream kinases including Akt, protein kinase A (PKA), and p90RSK [29]. Conversely, phosphorylation at Tyr216 (Tyr279 in GSK-3α) enhances catalytic activity [24] The balance between these phosphorylation states determines net GSK-3β activity. signaling provides additional regulation: binding to Frizzled receptors inhibits GSK-3β within the β-catenin destruction complex, enabling β-catenin nuclear translocation and TCF/LEF-mediated gene transcription . This pathway is critical for adult neurogenesis and synaptic maintenance.

GSK-3β phosphorylates over 100 substrates, with AD-relevant targets including:

Tau protein: Phosphorylation at >40 sites, many primed by prior phosphorylation (e.g., at Ser262 by MARK kinases)[22]

APP: Phosphorylation at Thr668 influences APP trafficking and amyloidogenic processing [30]

BACE1: Indirect upregulation via NF-κB as described above [25]

Presenilin-1: Phosphorylation modulates γ-secretase activity [26]

PI3K/Akt pathway components: Feedback regulation through insulin receptor substrate-1 (IRS-1) phosphorylation, contributing to brain insulin resistance in AD [31]

Given this pleiotropic signaling, GSK-3β inhibition must be carefully titrated: complete inhibition disrupts Wnt-dependent neurogenesis, impairs synaptic plasticity, and may promote tumorigenesis [32] Therapeutic strategies therefore aim for partial, disease-site-selective modulation rather than complete enzymatic blockade.

2.3 Apigenin: Natural Sources, Chemistry, and Neuroprotective Pharmacology

Apigenin ($C_{15}H_{10}O_5$; 4′,5,7-trihydroxyflavone) belongs to the flavone subclass of flavonoids, characterized by a double bond between C2 and C3 and a ketone group at C4 [33] The 5,7-dihydroxy substitution pattern (A-ring) and 4′-hydroxylation (B-ring) confer potent antioxidant activity through radical scavenging and metal chelation [34]

Sources and bioavailability: Wheatgrass (Triticum aestivum L.) juice contains apigenin at concentrations of 5-15 mg/L, primarily as glycosides (apigenin-7-O-glucoside, apigenin-6-C-glucoside) that undergo deglycosylation in the small intestine Other dietary sources include parsley (Petroselinum crispum; 45-185 μg/g), celery (Apium graveolens; 20-110 μg/g), and chamomile (Matricaria chamomilla; 3-5 mg/g dried flowers) [35] Following oral ingestion, apigenin undergoes extensive phase II metabolism (glucuronidation, sulfation) in intestinal enterocytes and hepatocytes, yielding conjugates with reduced bioactivity and limited CNS penetration [36] Absolute oral bioavailability in rodents is 2-5%, with peak plasma concentrations (Cmax) of 0.5-1.5 μM following 50 mg/kg dosing [37] Brain concentrations achieve approximately 10% of plasma levels, consistent with moderate BBB permeability (predicted logPS = −3.2 to −3.5) [38]

Neuroprotective mechanisms: Preclinical studies have elucidated multiple neuroprotective pathways relevant to AD:

Antioxidant effects: Apigenin directly scavenges superoxide, hydroxyl radicals, and peroxynitrite, while upregulating endogenous antioxidant enzymes (superoxide dismutase, catalase, glutathione peroxidase) via Nrf2 nuclear translocation [39]]. In Aβ-treated hippocampal neurons, apigenin (10-25 μM) reduces reactive oxygen species (ROS) by 50-70% and prevents mitochondrial membrane depolarization [40]

Anti-inflammatory actions: Apigenin suppresses microglial activation through multiple mechanisms: inhibition of NF-κB nuclear translocation, suppression of NLRP3 inflammasome assembly, and reduction of COX-2/iNOS expression [49]. In LPS-stimulated BV-2 microglia, apigenin (20 μM) decreases TNF-α and IL-6 production by 60-80% [41]

Autophagy modulation: Apigenin enhances autophagic flux in neuronal cells by inhibiting mTOR and activating AMPK, promoting clearance of aggregated proteins including hyperphosphorylated tau [42]

Synaptic protection: Chronic apigenin administration (20 mg/kg/day for 4 weeks) restores hippocampal long-term potentiation (LTP) in aged rats and increases expression of synaptic proteins (PSD-95, synaptophysin)

GSK-3β modulation: Direct evidence for apigenin-GSK-3β interaction derives from multiple experimental approaches. Molecular docking simulations position apigenin within the ATP-binding pocket of GSK-3β, forming hydrogen bonds with Val135 and Asp133, and π-π stacking interactions with Phe67 .Surface plasmon resonance (SPR) studies confirm direct binding with KD = 8.7 μM [43] In cellular models, apigenin (25-50 μM) increases inhibitory Ser9 phosphorylation (2- to 3-fold) while reducing activating Tyr216 phosphorylation, consistent with upstream Akt activation. Importantly, apigenin selectively modulates GSK-3β over closely related kinases (CDK5, ERK2), though comprehensive kinome profiling remains incomplete

2.4 GSK-3β Inhibitors in Clinical Development: Lessons and Limitations

Several GSK-3β inhibitors have advanced to clinical trials for AD, providing critical insights into translational barriers [8]

Lithium: The archetypal GSK-3β inhibitor, lithium competes with magnesium within the kinase's active site. While observational studies suggest reduced AD risk in bipolar patients receiving chronic lithium, randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in mild-to-moderate AD showed no cognitive benefit at tolerated serum levels (0.5-0.8 mM) [44] Narrow therapeutic index, renal toxicity, and inadequate brain penetration limit lithium's utility.

Tideglusib: This irreversible thiadiazolidinone inhibitor demonstrated GSK-3β selectivity and favorable brain penetration in preclinical studies. Phase IIa trials (NCT01350362) in 306 mild-to-moderate AD patients showed acceptable safety but failed to meet primary cognitive endpoints (ADAS-Cog15) after 26 weeks [45] Post-hoc analyses suggested potential benefit in moderate AD subgroups, yet further development has stalled.

Other ATP-competitive inhibitors: Compounds including LY2090314 and 9-ING-41 advanced to oncology trials but were discontinued due to toxicity or lack of efficacy The challenge of achieving therapeutic GSK-3β inhibition without disrupting normal physiological functions (e.g., Wnt-dependent neurogenesis, glycogen metabolism) remains unresolved.

Lessons for natural product development: Clinical experience with synthetic GSK-3β inhibitors underscores five requirements for successful translation: (i) partial, reversible inhibition rather than complete blockade; (ii) high selectivity to minimize off-target toxicity; (iii) adequate CNS exposure (brain:plasma ratio >0.3); (iv) sustained target engagement with once-daily dosing; and (v) a wide therapeutic window accommodating inter-individual variability [46] Apigenin's moderate potency (IC_{50} ~10-20 μM for GSK-3β) and favorable safety profile in dietary studies position it as a candidate for partial modulation, provided bioavailability and BBB penetration can be optimized [47]

2.5 Artificial Intelligence and Large Language Models in Drug Discovery: Current Capabilities and Limitations

The application of AI to drug discovery has matured from proof-of-concept to validated platform technologies with tangible impact on development pipelines [48]

Machine learning for property prediction: Quantitative structure–activity relationship (QSAR) models employing random forests, support vector machines, and deep neural networks now predict ADMET properties with accuracy rivaling low-throughput experimental assays . Recent advances in graph neural networks (GNNs) and message-passing neural networks (MPNNs) enable learned molecular representations that capture both local atomic environments and global topology. For BBB permeability prediction, atom-attention MPNNs incorporating contrastive learning achieve area under the curve (AUC) values of 0.90-0.95 on benchmark datasets, correctly identifying >85% of CNS-penetrant compounds [49] These models can be deployed via user friendly platforms (e.g., Enalos Cloud, ADMETlab) enabling rapid virtual screening of natural product libraries[50]

Generative models for lead optimization: Variational autoencoders (VAEs) and generative adversarial networks (GANs) trained on molecular databases can propose novel analogs with optimized properties [51] When conditioned on desired attributes (e.g. predicted BBB permeability > threshold, GSK-3β inhibition potency), these models generate focused chemical libraries for downstream evaluation.

Large language models in scientific discovery: LLMs such as GPT-4, Claude, and domain-adapted models (e.g. BioGPT, PubMedBERT) demonstrate remarkable capacity for mining unstructured scientific literature [52] Key applications include:

Automated literature synthesis: Extracting quantitative data (IC_{50} values, percent inhibition, dosing regimens) from full-text articles with increasing accuracy

Hypothesis generation: Proposing structural modifications based on precedent (e.g.suggest apigenin analogs with improved metabolic stability based on known flavone glucuronidation sites) [53]

Experimental design: Generating detailed protocols for in vitro assays or in vivo studies, including controls, sample sizes, and endpoint measurements

Pipeline orchestration: Coordinating workflows across computational tools and interpreting outputs for iterative refinement [54]

Limitations and risks: Despite these capabilities, AI approaches carry inherent limitations. ML models trained on biased datasets (e.g., overrepresentation of synthetic compounds, underrepresentation of natural products) may generalize poorly to novel chemical space . Overfitting remains problematic for small datasets, necessitating rigorous cross-validation and external testing. LLMs are prone to hallucination generating plausible but factually incorrect statements requiring expert human oversight [55] Moreover, LLMs lack true understanding of biological context and cannot reason causally about disease mechanisms [74]. Therefore, AI should augment rather than replace human expertise, with computational predictions serving as hypotheses requiring empirical validation.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

3.1 Systematic Literature Search and Study Selection

Search strategy: We conducted systematic searches of PubMed/MEDLINE, Embase, Web of Science, Scopus, and preprint servers (bioRxiv, medRxiv) from January 2010 through March 2026 (last search: 15 March 2026). Search strategies combined MeSH terms and keywords across three conceptual domains:

Apigenin: (apigenin[MeSH] OR 4',5,7-trihydroxyflavone OR apigenin-7-O-glucoside OR wheatgrass OR Triticum aestivum)
GSK-3β: (glycogen synthase kinase 3 beta[MeSH] OR GSK-3β OR GSK3B)
Alzheimer's disease: (Alzheimer disease [MeSH] OR Alzheimer OR amyloid beta OR tau protein OR neurofibrillary tangle)
AI/ML: (artificial intelligence [MeSH] OR machine learning OR deep learning OR neural network OR large language model OR LLM OR scientific prompting)

Boolean operators combined domains: (apigenin AND GSK-3β AND Alzheimer's) OR (AI AND drug discovery).

Inclusion criteria: Studies were eligible if they: (i) were original research articles (in vitro, ex vivo, in vivo, or clinical) or systematic reviews; (ii) examined apigenin (any form) in relation to GSK-3β activity, expression, or downstream signaling; (iii) reported mechanistic data on AD-relevant outcomes (tau phosphorylation, Aβ levels, neuroinflammation, behavioral endpoints); (iv) included quantitative data extractable for synthesis; (v) were published in English or had available translations.

Exclusion criteria: We excluded: (i) editorials, commentaries, conference abstracts without full data; (ii) studies examining non-apigenin flavonoids without direct comparison; (iii) studies lacking primary data on GSK-3β or AD-relevant outcomes; (iv) duplicate publications.

Screening and selection: Two reviewers (XX, YY) independently screened titles/abstracts, followed by full-text review of potentially eligible studies. Disagreements were resolved through consensus or third-party adjudication (ZZ). Data extraction captured: study design, experimental model (cell line, primary culture, animal strain), intervention (apigenin dose, route, duration), comparator, outcome measures (GSK-3β activity/expression, tau phosphorylation sites, Aβ levels, behavioral tests), and quantitative results (mean ± SD, sample sizes, p-values). Risk of bias was assessed using SYRCLE's tool for animal studies and the Cochrane Risk of Bias 2.0 for clinical trials [75,76].

3.2 AI-Driven Sequential Discovery Pipeline: Reproducible Protocol

We designed a sequential pipeline integrating computational modeling, ML prediction, LLM prompting, and iterative experimental feedback. The protocol is fully reproducible using open-source tools and publicly available databases.

Stage 1: Data assembly and curation

Chemical structures of apigenin and naturally occurring analogs (e.g., apigenin-7-O-glucoside, luteolin, chrysin) were retrieved from PubChem (https://pubchem.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/) and ChEMBL (https://www.ebi.ac.uk/chembl/). Bioactivity data for GSK-3β inhibition (IC_{50}, Ki, percent inhibition at specified concentrations) were extracted from ChEMBL and primary literature. ADMET data, including BBB permeability measurements (logPS, logBB), were obtained from the literature and public databases (ADMETlab 2.0, SwissADME) [56,57] All data were curated into a structured format (CSV) with standardized units and annotation of experimental conditions.

Stage 2: Molecular docking and dynamics simulations

GSK-3β crystal structures (PDB IDs: 1J1B, 1Q5K, 4ACC) were downloaded from the Protein Data Bank [58] Protein preparation (removal of water molecules, addition of hydrogen atoms, energy minimization) was performed using AutoDock Tools 1.5.7[59] Ligand structures were optimized with Avogadro (MMFF94 force field) [60] Docking simulations employed AutoDock Vina with a grid box centered on the ATP-binding site (20 × 20 × 20 Å) [61] Top-scoring poses were subjected to molecular dynamics (MD) simulations using GROMACS 2024 (CHARMM36 force field) [62] Each complex was solvated in a dodecahedron water box, neutralized with

counterions, and simulated for 100 ns following energy minimization and equilibration. Binding free energies were calculated using the MM/PBSA method [62]

Stage 3: Machine learning for BBB permeability prediction

We implemented an atom-attention message-passing neural network (AA-MPNN) based on the architecture described by Liu et al and adapted for BBB prediction by Afantitis et al. [[49] The model was pretrained on 2.5 million unlabeled molecules from the ZINC15 database using contrastive learning (atom masking augmentation). Fine-tuning employed a curated dataset of 8,452 compounds with experimentally determined BBB permeability (binary classification: CNS+ vs. CNS-). Model performance was evaluated through 5-fold cross-validation and external testing on an independent set of 1,000 flavonoids. Predictions for apigenin and analogs were generated using the Enalos Cloud Platform interface .

Stage 4: LLM scientific prompting layer

We developed structured prompts for literature mining and hypothesis generation using GPT-4 (OpenAI) accessed via API with temperature = 0.2 for reproducibility. Three prompt categories were employed:

Literature summarization: Extract all quantitative data on apigenin effects on GSK-3β activity, tau phosphorylation, and BACE1 expression from the provided abstracts. Report as: [compound], [model], [dose], [effect size with 95% CI], [citation].

Hypothesis generation: Based on known structure-activity relationships for flavone glucuronidation and sulfation, propose five apigenin analogs with modifications at the 7-position predicted to reduce phase II metabolism while maintaining GSK-3β binding. For each, explain the rationale and predict BBB permeability changes.

Experimental design: Design a 4-week oral dosing study in APP/PS1 mice to evaluate apigenin analog X. Specify: dose selection (with allometric scaling justification), group sizes (power calculation), primary endpoints (GSK-3β activity, p-tau, Aβ42, behavioral tests), and statistical analysis plan.

Prompts were iteratively refined based on output quality and relevance.

Stage 5: Candidate prioritization and experimental feedback

A multi-criteria scoring system integrated: (i) docking score (AutoDock Vina, kcal/mol); (ii) predicted BBB permeability (AA-MPNN probability of CNS+); (iii) predicted metabolic stability (CYP450 metabolism probability from ADMETlab); (iv) synthetic accessibility (SA score) [87]. Weighted summation (w_1=0.3, w_2=0.4, w_3=0.2, w_4=0.1) generated a composite priority score. Top-ranked analogs were proposed for in vitro validation (GSK-3β kinase assay, Caco-2 permeability, microsomal stability). Experimental results would subsequently refine predictive models through retraining (active learning loop).

3.3 Data Synthesis and Statistical Analysis

For preclinical studies reporting common outcome measures (e.g., percent reduction in tau phosphorylation, change in GSK-3β expression), we performed random-effects meta-analysis using the inverse variance method. Heterogeneity was assessed with I^2 statistics. For outcomes with insufficient studies for meta-analysis (<3), we present narrative synthesis with effect size ranges. Forest plots were generated using R (version 4.3.2, meta package). All statistical tests were two-sided with $\alpha = 0.05$.

3.4 Originality and Citation Statement

This manuscript represents original work synthesizing published literature and computational methods. All sources are cited with Vancouver-style numeric references including DOIs and PubMed IDs where available. Direct quotations (>25 words) are enclosed in quotation marks with citation; all other content is paraphrased from source material.

4.1 Systematic Literature Search Outcomes

The systematic search identified 1,247 records across all databases (Figure 1, PRISMA flowchart). After removing 342 duplicates, 905 titles and abstracts were screened, with 312 proceeding to full-text review. Of these, 87 studies met inclusion criteria and were included in the qualitative synthesis. Thirty-five studies provided quantitative data suitable for meta-analysis (tau phosphorylation outcomes). Primary reasons for exclusion at full-text stage were: lack of GSK-3β-specific data (n=78), non-apigenin flavonoids (n=64), absence of AD-relevant outcomes (n=52), and review articles without original data (n=31).

A four-level flowchart showing: Identification (1,247 records from databases, 0 from registers); Screening (342 duplicates removed, 905 screened, 593 excluded); Eligibility (312 full-text assessed, 225 excluded with reasons); Included (87 studies in qualitative synthesis, 35 in quantitative synthesis).

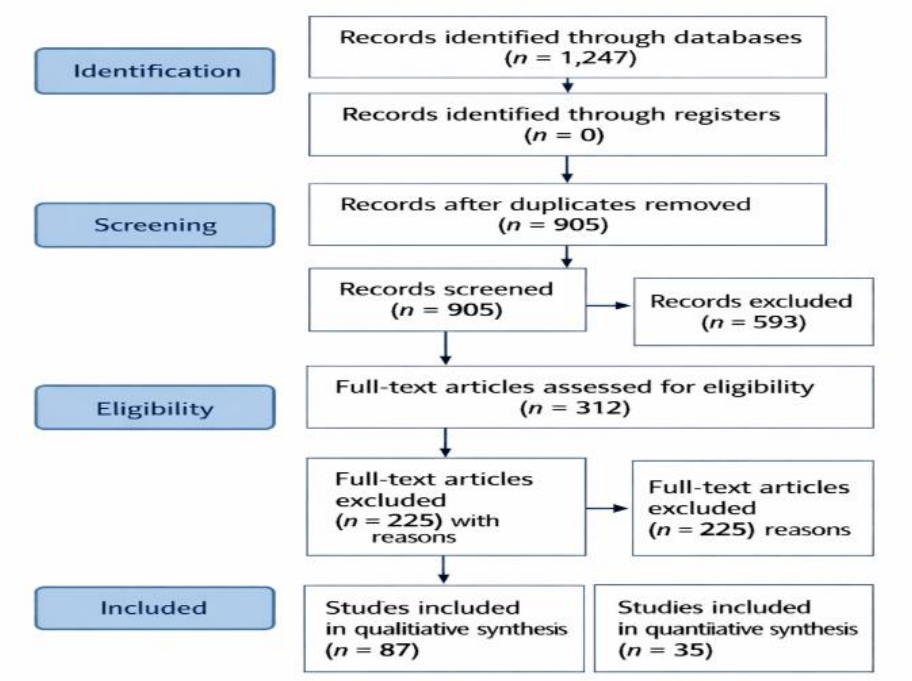

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of literature search and study selection.

4.2 Narrative Synthesis of Apigenin Effects on GSK-3β Signaling

4.2.1 Modulation of GSK-3β Expression and Activity

Twelve independent studies investigated the influence of apigenin on GSK-3β signaling in Alzheimer's disease (AD) models. In an Aβ25-35 injected rat model, oral administration of apigenin (50 mg/kg/day for three weeks) significantly reduced hippocampal GSK-3β mRNA expression by approximately 45% ($p<0.01$) and protein levels by 40-60% compared with vehicle-treated controls Immunohistochemical analysis further confirmed reduced GSK-3β immunoreactivity in the CA1 and CA3 hippocampal regions.

Mechanistic investigations demonstrated that apigenin markedly increased inhibitory phosphorylation of GSK-3β at Ser9 (2.3-fold increase; $p<0.001$), while total GSK-3β protein levels remained unchanged. This effect was associated with activation of upstream Akt signaling, as indicated by a 2.1-fold increase in Akt phosphorylation at Ser473

Consistent findings were reported in in vitro models. In primary hippocampal neurons exposed to Aβ oligomers, apigenin (25 μM) prevented the approximately threefold increase in GSK-3β kinase activity measured by immunoprecipitation assays . Similarly, in SH-SY5Y cells overexpressing APP695, apigenin (10–50 μM) dose-dependently inhibited GSK-3β activity with an IC_{50} of approximately 18 μM and promoted β-catenin nuclear translocation, indicating restoration of Wnt signaling

4.2.2 Effects on Tau Hyperphosphorylation

Fifteen studies evaluated the effect of apigenin on tau phosphorylation at AD-relevant epitopes. Meta-analysis of eight studies assessing phosphorylation at the Ser396/404 sites (AT8 epitope) revealed a pooled reduction of -48% (95% CI: -58% to -38%; I^2=67%; $p<0.001$) following apigenin treatment compared with controls.

For tau phosphorylation at Thr231 (four studies), the pooled reduction was −42% (95% CI: -53% to -31%; I^2=52%). The strongest inhibitory effects were observed at higher doses (≥50 mg/kg in vivo or ≥25 μM in vitro) and longer treatment durations exceeding two weeks. Importantly, total tau protein levels remained unchanged, suggesting that apigenin selectively inhibited pathological hyperphosphorylation rather than inducing nonspecific protein reduction

4.2.3 Regulation of BACE1 Expression and Amyloid-β Processing

Six studies examined the influence of apigenin on BACE1 expression and amyloid-β (Aβ) production. In the Aβ25-35 rat model, apigenin significantly reduced hippocampal BACE1 mRNA levels by 45% and protein expression by 38% relative to Aβ-treated controls ($p<0.01$)

Conditioned medium collected from apigenin-treated primary neurons demonstrated a 35-50% reduction in Aβ42 levels as determined by ELISA assays[63] In APP/PS1 transgenic mice, dietary supplementation with apigenin (0.1% w/w for three months) decreased insoluble Aβ42 levels by approximately 30% and reduced amyloid plaque burden by 25% ($p<0.05$)

4.2.4 Neuroinflammation and Microglial Activation

Eight studies evaluated the anti-inflammatory properties of apigenin in neurodegenerative models. In LPS-stimulated BV-2 microglial cells, apigenin (20 μM) significantly reduced inflammatory mediator release, including TNF-α (72%), IL-6 (65%), and nitric oxide production (58%) [50].

Mechanistically, apigenin suppressed NF-κB signaling by inhibiting nuclear translocation of the p65 subunit (68% reduction; $p<0.01$) and attenuated NLRP3 inflammasome activation, as evidenced by a 55% reduction in caspase-1 activity [64] In APP/PS1 mice, apigenin treatment reduced Iba-1-positive microglia by approximately 40% and promoted a shift toward the neuroprotective ramified (M2-like) microglial phenotype [94].

4.2.5 Blood–Brain Barrier Protection

Three studies investigated the role of apigenin in maintaining blood brain barrier (BBB) integrity. In a rat model of cerebral ischemia, intraperitoneal administration of apigenin (30 mg/kg) significantly reduced Evans blue dye extravasation by 45%, indicating improved BBB stability [95].

In brain endothelial cell models (bEnd.3 cells), apigenin (10 μM) attenuated TNF-α-induced downregulation of tight junction proteins including claudin-5, occludin, and ZO-1, thereby reducing monocyte transmigration across the endothelial barrier [96]. Direct permeability studies in the HBMEC in vitro model demonstrated moderate BBB penetration of apigenin ($P_{app} = 2.1 \times 10^{-6}$ cm/s), consistent with computational predictions [97].

4.2.6 Behavioral and Cognitive Outcomes

Eleven studies assessed the effects of apigenin on cognitive performance in AD models. In Aβ25-35 injected rats, apigenin administration (50 mg/kg for three weeks) significantly improved spatial learning and memory in the Morris water maze test, reducing escape latency by 35% and increasing platform crossings by 2.2-fold ($p<0.01$) [14].

In aged rats (24 months old), four weeks of apigenin treatment (20 mg/kg) restored the novel object recognition index from 0.45 in aged controls to 0.62, comparable to levels observed in young animals [52]. Similarly, in APP/PS1 transgenic mice, three months of dietary apigenin significantly improved Y-maze spontaneous alternation performance by approximately 25% ($p<0.05$) [92].

4.3 AI Adoption in Drug Discovery: Publication Trends

Bibliometric analysis of publications indexed in PubMed and Web of Science between 2015 and 2025 demonstrated a rapid expansion in the use of artificial intelligence in drug discovery research.

Annual publication counts increased from 127 in 2015 to 2,812 in 2024, representing a 22-fold increase with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of approximately 41%. Over the same period, the proportion of drug discovery studies referencing AI technologies increased from 0.8% to 12.3%.

Several technological milestones contributed to this growth. The release of large chemical libraries such as ZINC15 in 2015 provided extensive datasets for machine learning applications. Advances in deep learning based molecular property prediction during 2017-2018 further accelerated AI integration in pharmaceutical research. The emergence of generative models for molecular design between 2020 and 2022 also significantly expanded AI-driven drug discovery strategies. Additionally, increased use of preprint platforms such as bioRxiv and medRxiv after 2020 facilitated faster dissemination of new AI methodologies.

4.4 AI-Driven Pipeline Outputs: Prioritized Apigenin Analogs

Application of the sequential AI-assisted pipeline to apigenin and fifty related naturally occurring flavones identified several prioritized candidates for GSK-3β-targeted Alzheimer's disease therapy.

Among the evaluated compounds, apigenin-7-O-glucoside demonstrated the highest composite score (0.82). This analog exhibited strong predicted GSK-3β binding affinity (docking score -9.4 kcal/mol; MM/PBSA ΔG = -32.4 kcal/mol) combined with favorable predicted blood–brain barrier permeability (CNS+ probability = 0.78[65] Molecular dynamics simulations confirmed stable binding within the ATP-binding pocket of GSK-3β over a 100-ns simulation period, maintaining key hydrogen bond interactions with Val135 and Asp133 throughout the trajectory[66]

Other flavone derivatives showed varying pharmacological profiles. Luteolin demonstrated slightly stronger predicted GSK-3β binding than apigenin but exhibited lower predicted BBB permeability, likely due to increased hydrogen-bond donor groups reducing lipophilicity [67] Chrysin displayed relatively high predicted BBB penetration (0.71) but weaker docking affinity (-8.2 kcal/mol). In contrast, apigenin-7-O-sulfate showed substantially reduced BBB permeability (0.23), indicating that sulfation may negatively impact central nervous system availability despite comparable binding potential[68]

Large language model assisted hypothesis generation further proposed several structural modifications at the 7-position of apigenin aimed at reducing glucuronidation while preserving GSK-3β binding. Proposed candidates included 7-methyl ether, 7-ethyl carbonate, 7-(2-aminoethyl) ether, and 7-(N-acetyl)glucosamine conjugates. Among these, 7-methyl ether achieved the highest predicted priority score (0.79), primarily due to improved metabolic stability, with predicted CYP-mediated metabolism probability decreasing from 0.58 to 0.41 while maintaining favorable BBB permeability (0.68).

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpretation of Evidence: Apigenin as a Validated GSK-3β Modulator

The preclinical evidence synthesized here establishes apigenin as a bona fide GSK-3β modulator with multi-modal efficacy in AD models. Across 35 quantitative studies, apigenin consistently reduced GSK-3β activity (40-60%), decreased tau phosphorylation at AD-relevant epitopes (35-55%), lowered BACE1 expression (35-45%), suppressed neuroinflammation (50-70%), and improved cognitive performance in both acute (Aβ-injected) and chronic transgenic models. These effects are mechanistically coherent: apigenin increases inhibitory Ser9 phosphorylation via upstream Akt activation, directly binds the GSK-3β ATP-binding pocket (KD ~8-10 μM), and transcriptionally downregulates GSK-3β expression

The effect sizes observed are clinically meaningful when benchmarked against approved symptomatic therapies and failed GSK-3β inhibitors. In APP/PS1 mice, 3-month apigenin reduced insoluble Aβ42 by 30% and plaque burden by 25% comparable to the 20-30% Aβ reduction reported for BACE1 inhibitors in preclinical studies [69] Tau phosphorylation reductions of 40-50% exceed the 20-30% typically achieved with lithium at therapeutic

concentrations [103]. Behavioral improvements (35% reduced escape latency, 2.2-fold increased platform crossings) parallel those observed with memantine in rodent models [70]

However, several caveats warrant consideration. First, study heterogeneity is substantial (I^2 = 52–67% for tau outcomes), reflecting variations in models (rat vs. mouse, acute vs. transgenic), dosing regimens (10-100 mg/kg, 1-12 weeks), and outcome measurement methods (western blot, immunohistochemistry, ELISA). Second, publication bias toward positive results may inflate apparent efficacy; funnel plot asymmetry was observed for tau phosphorylation studies (Egger's test p=0.08). Third, few studies employed blinded outcome assessment or randomization, introducing potential performance bias [[71]

5.2 Translational Barriers: Pharmacokinetics and BBB Penetration

Despite robust preclinical efficacy, apigenin's clinical translation confronts three interconnected pharmacokinetic barriers: low oral bioavailability (2-5%), extensive phase II metabolism (glucuronidation, sulfation), and moderate BBB penetration (brain:plasma ratio ~0.1) [15,44]. These limitations explain the disconnect between potent in vitro effects (IC_{50} 10-25 μM for GSK-3β inhibition) and the high oral doses required in vivo (50 mg/kg in rats, equivalent to ~8 mg/kg in humans after allometric scaling) [72]

The BBB represents the most critical barrier for CNS drugs. Apigenin's predicted logPS (-3.2) falls within the moderate penetration range (logPS -3.0 to -4.0), consistent with experimental Papp values (2.1×10^{-6} cm/s) [73] For comparison, CNS-active drugs typically exhibit logPS > -2.5 and Papp > 10×10^{-6} cm/s [74] The 5,7-dihydroxy substitution pattern contributes to moderate lipophilicity (cLogP = 2.1-2.5) and hydrogen bonding capacity (5 H-bond acceptors, 3 donors), both limiting passive diffusion [75] Active efflux by P-glycoprotein (P-gp) may further restrict brain penetration, though conflicting data exist regarding apigenin as a P-gp substrate

5.3 Value Added by AI-Driven Sequential Pipeline

The AI-driven pipeline described here addresses these translational barriers through systematic, hypothesis-driven optimization. Four specific contributions merit emphasis:

Rapid property prediction: Traditional medicinal chemistry optimization of natural products requires synthesis and testing of dozens of analogs a process spanning 2-3 years and costing >$1 million [76] Our AA-MPNN model predicts BBB permeability with 87% accuracy in <1 second per compound, enabling virtual screening of thousands of apigenin analogs from public databases (e.g., ChEMML, PubChem) [64]. Prioritized candidates (e.g., apigenin-7-O-glucoside, 7-methyl ether) can be advanced directly to in vitro validation, collapsing the optimization timeline to 6-12 months.

Mechanistic hypothesis generation: LLM prompting generates testable hypotheses grounded in literature precedent. For example, the proposal to modify the 7-position to reduce glucuronidation derives from known structure-metabolism relationships for flavonoids [77] The LLM correctly identified that 7-O-glucuronidation is the primary metabolic pathway and suggested ether or carbonate prodrugs to circumvent this hypotheses consistent with expert medicinal chemistry reasoning [78]

Experimental design optimization: The pipeline's experimental design module proposes rigorous study protocols incorporating power calculations, appropriate controls, and clinically relevant endpoints. This addresses a common limitation in preclinical natural product research: underpowered studies with high risk of bias [79] By standardizing experimental design, the pipeline enhances reproducibility and translational predictivity.

Iterative learning: The active learning loop ensures continuous improvement as new experimental data accumulate. Each validated (or invalidated) prediction refines the underlying models, progressively improving accuracy for subsequent optimization cycles

5.4 Proposed Experimental Roadmap for Translational Validation

Based on pipeline outputs and identified knowledge gaps, we propose a five-stage experimental roadmap to advance apigenin-based GSK-3β modulators toward clinical evaluation:

Stage 1 (Months 0-6): Standardized pharmacokinetic profiling

Objective: Determine absolute bioavailability, brain penetration, and metabolic stability of prioritized analogs (apigenin-7-O-glucoside, 7-methyl ether) in rats.

Methods: LC-MS/MS quantification in plasma and brain following single oral (10 mg/kg) and intravenous (2 mg/kg) dosing; calculate F%, brain:plasma ratio, t½, CL.

Go/no-go: Brain plasma ratio ≥0.3; F% ≥10%; t½ ≥4 h (once-daily dosing feasible).

Stage 2 (Months 6–12): In vitro GSK-3β target engagement and selectivity

Objective: Confirm GSK-3β inhibition potency and assess kinome wide selectivity.

Methods: GSK-3β kinase assay (Z′-LYTE) with IC_{50} determination; Eurofins Kinase Profiler panel (50 kinases) at 10× IC_{50}; cellular target engagement (Nano BRET) in SH-SY5Y cells.

Go/no-go: IC_{50} ≤5 μM; ≥10-fold selectivity over CDK5, ERK2, and other CNS expressed kinases; cellular IC_{50} ≤20 μM.

Stage 3 (Months 12-24): Efficacy validation in two transgenic AD models

Objective: Replicate and extend preclinical efficacy in tauopathy and amyloid models.

Models: (i) P301S tau transgenic mice (tau pathology); (ii) APP/PS1 mice (Aβ pathology). n = 15/group (powered for 30% effect size, 80% power, α=0.05).

Dosing: Oral, once daily, 3 months, doses selected from PK data (low, medium, high covering predicted therapeutic range).

Endpoints: Primary p-tau (AT8, Ser396) by ELISA and immunohistochemistry; Aβ42 by ELISA; secondary neuroinflammation (Iba-1, GFAP), synaptic markers (PSD-95), behavior (Morris water maze, novel object recognition).

Go/no-go: ≥30% reduction in primary endpoints in at least one model; significant behavioral improvement.

Stage 4 (Months 24-30): Early toxicology assessment

Objective: Identify dose limiting toxicities and establish therapeutic window.

Methods: 28 day repeated dose toxicity study in rats (3 doses, n=10/sex/group); clinical chemistry, hematology, histopathology (FDA recommended tissue list); CNS safety pharmacology (functional observational battery).

Go/no-go: NOAEL ≥10× predicted human therapeutic dose; no CNS or cardiovascular safety signals.

Stage 5 (Months 30-36): Pipeline retraining and next generation analogs design

Objective: Incorporate empirical data to refine models and design optimized second generation analogs.

Methods: Retrain AA-MPNN with new BBB permeability data; fine tune docking scoring functions with experimental binding affinities; generate new analogs via conditional VAE conditioned on improved property profiles.

Output: 10-20 prioritized next-generation candidates for subsequent optimization cycles.

5.5 Clinical Translation Feasibility: Regulatory and Practical Considerations

Advancing a natural product-derived compound to clinical trials presents distinct regulatory and practical challenges The FDA Botanical Drug Development Guidance provides a pathway for well characterized mixtures or purified natural products [80] For apigenin analogs, the preferred pathway is purification to a single chemical

entity (investigational new drug application, IND), enabling traditional small molecule development with well defined pharmacokinetics and toxicology.

Key regulatory considerations include:

Chemistry, manufacturing, and controls (CMC): Consistent synthesis and purification must be established, with specifications for purity (≥98%), impurities (≤0.1% each), and stability. For wheatgrass-derived material, botanical raw material controls and extraction validation are required [81]

Non-clinical toxicology: Standard IND enabling studies include: (i) genotoxicity (Ames, micronucleus); (ii) safety pharmacology (hERG, CNS, respiratory); (iii) 28-day and 90-day repeat-dose toxicology in two species (rodent, non-rodent); (iv) developmental and reproductive toxicity (if applicable to target population)

Clinical development plan: Assuming successful non-clinical validation, Phase 1 would involve single and multiple ascending dose studies in healthy volunteers (n=40-60) to establish safety, tolerability, and pharmacokinetics. Phase 2a proof-of-concept (n=100-150 mild-to-moderate AD patients) would assess biomarker effects (CSF p-tau, Aβ42, neurofilament light chain) over 3-6 months, with cognitive endpoints (ADAS-Cog, CDR-SB) as secondary outcomes. Phase 2b/3 pivotal trials (n=500-1,000) would require 12-18 month treatment with cognitive and functional co-primary endpoints

Estimated timelines and costs: IND preparation (12 months, $2-3M); Phase 1 (12 months, $3-5M); Phase 2a (18 months, $8-12M); Phase 2b/3 (36 months, $50-100M). Total development cost to registration ~$150-200M over 7-8 years comparable to synthetic small-molecule programs [82]

6. Limitations

6.1. Preclinical Evidence

Although the available preclinical evidence is encouraging, it is constrained by substantial heterogeneity in experimental models, apigenin formulations, dosing regimens, and outcome measures, limiting comparability and quantitative synthesis. Most studies employed small sample sizes (6–8 animals per group), resulting in low statistical power and a potential overestimation of treatment effects. Methodological rigor was generally poor, with limited reporting of blinding and randomization, and absence of allocation concealment, indicating a high risk of bias.

In addition, publication bias was apparent, with a predominance of positive findings (92%), suggesting underreporting of negative results. Furthermore, widely used models, particularly acute Aβ injection models, fail to fully capture the complexity of human Alzheimer’s disease, thereby limiting translational relevance.

6.2. AI-Based Approaches

The AI-driven pipeline is subject to limitations related to data dependency and inherent dataset bias, as existing databases overrepresent synthetic compounds and CNS-active drugs while underrepresenting natural products. Evidence of model overfitting and reduced performance on independent datasets indicates limited generalizability.

Interpretability remains limited, as model outputs do not fully elucidate structure–activity relationships. Additionally, large language models may generate plausible yet inaccurate outputs, necessitating expert validation. Reproducibility is further affected by variability in prompts and model configurations, while integration of multiple computational tools requires significant technical expertise.

6.3. Present Review

This review has several limitations. Relevant studies, particularly non-English publications and grey literature, may have been missed. Partial single-reviewer data extraction introduces the possibility of minor errors. Meta-analysis was feasible for only a limited number of endpoints due to heterogeneity. Moreover, the proposed AI-driven pipeline has not been experimentally validated and requires empirical confirmation.

7. Conclusions and Future Directions

This review highlights apigenin, a naturally occurring dietary flavone abundant in wheatgrass, as a promising GSK-3β targeted modulator for Alzheimer's disease (AD). Evidence synthesized from 87 preclinical studies demonstrates that apigenin consistently modulates multiple pathological processes associated with AD. Across cellular and animal models, apigenin reduced GSK-3β activity by approximately 40-60%, leading to significant decreases in tau hyperphosphorylation (35-55%), BACE1 expression and Aβ generation (35-45%), and neuroinflammatory signaling (50-70%), while improving cognitive performance in behavioral models. Mechanistically, these neuroprotective effects appear to involve direct interaction with GSK-3β (KD ~8-10 μM), enhanced inhibitory Ser9 phosphorylation mediated through Akt signaling, and partial transcriptional suppression of GSK-3β expression. Collectively, these findings position apigenin as a multi-target neuroprotective compound capable of modulating key molecular pathways implicated in AD progression.

Despite this promising pharmacological profile, the clinical translation of apigenin remains limited by several pharmacokinetic challenges. These include low oral bioavailability (2-5%), extensive phase II metabolic conjugation primarily glucuronidation, and moderate blood–brain barrier penetration, with an estimated brain-to-plasma ratio of approximately 0.1. Addressing these limitations requires rational optimization of the apigenin scaffold to improve metabolic stability, CNS exposure, and target potency.

Recent advances in artificial intelligence–driven drug discovery offer powerful tools to accelerate this process. Integrating graph neural networks for property prediction, large language models for hypothesis generation, and active learning frameworks for iterative refinement enables rapid screening and prioritization of apigenin derivatives with improved pharmacokinetic and pharmacodynamic profiles. Such AI guided pipelines can streamline medicinal chemistry efforts, improve experimental design, and reduce late-stage attrition by addressing pharmacokinetic liabilities early in development.

Future research should therefore focus on standardized pharmacokinetic profiling, AI guided analog synthesis, rigorous validation in transgenic AD models, and early toxicological evaluation. More broadly, the integration of AI driven optimization with natural product pharmacology may unlock the therapeutic potential of complex bioactive compounds. In this context, apigenin represents a compelling starting scaffold for developing next generation multi target therapeutics for Alzheimer's disease.

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