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Research Article

# STRUCTURAL PREDICTION AND MOLECULAR DOCKING WORKFLOW FOR T-CELL RECEPTORS

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## ABSTRACT

T-cell receptors (TCRs) play a central role in adaptive immunity by recognizing antigenic peptides presented by major histocompatibility complex (MHC) molecules. Accurate prediction of TCR three-dimensional structures and the assessment of their binding interactions with target antigens are essential for rational immunotherapy design, vaccine development, and TCR-based diagnostics. In this study, a comprehensive computational workflow integrating structural prediction and molecular docking was employed to model TCR architecture and evaluate its binding affinity toward antigen–MHC complexes. State-of-the-art structure prediction tools were utilized to generate high-confidence TCR models, followed by refinement and validation through stereochemical assessments. Molecular docking simulations were conducted to analyze interaction profiles, hotspot residues, and binding energies. The results revealed stable TCR–peptide–MHC interfaces characterized by significant hydrogen bonding networks and complementary surface interactions, thereby highlighting the predictive power of in-silico modeling for understanding TCR recognition patterns. This integrated workflow provides a robust platform for guiding experimental immunology studies and accelerating the development of targeted immune therapies.

**Keywords:** T-cell receptor (TCR), Structure prediction, Molecular docking, Antigen, MHC complex.

## INTRODUCTION

T-cell receptors (TCRs) are essential components of the adaptive immune system, responsible for recognizing antigenic peptides presented by major histocompatibility complex (MHC) molecules on the surface of antigen-presenting cells. This recognition event triggers downstream immune responses that govern pathogen clearance, tumor surveillance, and immune regulation. Due to their high specificity and ability to discriminate subtle molecular differences, TCRs have emerged as attractive targets for developing personalized cancer immunotherapies, peptide vaccines, and engineered T-cell therapies. Understanding TCR–peptide–MHC interactions require detailed insights into the structural organization of TCRs, particularly the complementarity-determining regions (CDRs) that mediate molecular recognition. However, experimental determination of TCR structures through X-ray crystallography or NMR remains challenging, time-consuming, and often limited by protein stability and expression constraints. As a result, computational structure prediction and molecular docking have become indispensable tools for characterizing TCR binding mechanisms.

Advances in immunoinformatics, particularly the development of high-accuracy prediction tools such as AlphaFold-based models and specialized TCR modeling platforms, now allow reliable reconstruction of TCR variable domains. Coupling these models with molecular

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docking techniques enables systematic evaluation of TCR interactions with antigenic peptides and MHC molecules. Such integrated approaches not only help identify critical binding determinants but also facilitate the rational design of TCR variants with enhanced specificity and therapeutic potential.

This study presents a comprehensive computational workflow that combines structural prediction and molecular docking to model TCR architecture and investigate its binding interactions with antigen–MHC complexes. The workflow aims to provide a reproducible framework that can assist researchers in immunotherapy development, epitope prediction, and TCR engineering. Several studies have elucidated the molecular principles governing T-cell receptor (TCR) recognition of peptide–MHC (pMHC) complexes. Rudolph *et al*. (2006) provided one of the most comprehensive analyses of how TCRs engage MHC molecules, peptides, and coreceptors, highlighting conserved docking orientations and germline-encoded contacts. Gras *et al*. (2018) further expanded this understanding by demonstrating how TCR–pMHC interactions rely on the coordinated positioning of complementarity-determining regions (CDRs). Mareeva *et al*. (2022) offered advanced insights using high-resolution structural analysis to show how TCRs discriminate between similar peptides through subtle conformational adjustments. Collectively, these works underline that TCR specificity is a blend of germline constraints and peptide-driven fine-tuning. TCR cross-reactivity remains a critical factor in immune recognition, enabling a limited TCR repertoire to detect a vast antigenic landscape. Bentzen and Hadrup (2017) described how structural flexibility in CDR loops promotes broad specificity. Hassan (2021) demonstrated that molecular mimicry and structural degeneracy contribute significantly to TCR cross-reactivity. Ishizuka *et al*. (2017) identified common docking "signatures" that explain how TCRs maintain both specificity and cross-reactivity. These studies emphasize that cross-reactivity is intrinsic to TCR functionality.

The advent of computational modeling has drastically improved the ability to predict TCR structures. Jung and Alt (2014) unraveled the dynamic features of CDR loops, providing foundational insights into TCR folding and variability. Leem *et al*. (2016) contributed an automated pipeline for immune receptor modeling, which paved the way for antibody and TCR structure prediction. Jumper (2021) revolutionized the field through AlphaFold, demonstrating unprecedented accuracy in protein structure prediction. Sowdhamini and Surolia (2018) applied immunoinformatics strategies specifically to TCR prediction, emphasizing domain-level structural accuracy. These tools have collectively transformed in-silico TCR research. Protein–protein docking has become a cornerstone for analyzing TCR–pMHC interactions. ClusPro and HADDOCK are among the most widely used tools. Kozakov (2017) described ClusPro's clustering-based docking approach, while Van Zundert *et al*. (2016) demonstrated HADDOCK's integrative, data-driven capabilities, especially for biomolecular complexes. Pierce *et al*. (2018) applied RosettaDock to model TCR–pMHC interfaces, highlighting hotspot residues and interaction energetics. Jones and Thornton (2020) reviewed shape complementarity principles crucial for accurate docking predictions.

Recent computational efforts have focused on generating high-resolution TCR–pMHC models. Gowthaman and Pierce (2019) introduced TCRmodel, a specialized platform for TCR prediction from sequence alone. Borrman *et al*. (2020) demonstrated accurate modeling of TCR–pMHC complexes using hybrid approaches, providing structural insights into TCR affinity and specificity. Reiser *et al*. (2003) provided early crystallographic evidence showing how TCRs dock diagonally onto the pMHC surface. These studies collectively advance high-definition modeling crucial for immunotherapy design. Studies have investigated how molecular forces influence TCR recognition. Huang *et al*. (2010) showed that the TCR–pMHC bond exhibits dynamic instability, impacting antigen discrimination thresholds. Adams *et al*. (2016) explored the balance between germline-encoded recognition and adaptive affinity maturation. Kato *et al*. (2019) provided structural mechanisms showing how TCR binding can induce conformational adjustments in both receptor and ligand. These findings highlight the complexity of molecular forces governing immune activation.

Accurately predicting TCR specificity remains a major challenge. Bakers *et al*. (2020) used structural modeling to identify common motifs associated with specificity. Quigley and Almeida (2020) reviewed computational frameworks for predicting TCR recognition patterns. Racle *et al*. (2019) used statistical and structural approaches to model entire TCR repertoires. These computational strategies are vital for advancing personalized immunotherapies. TCR engineering for immunotherapy relies heavily on computational modeling. Menez *et al*. (2017) applied modeling to assess TCR cross-reactivity, a key factor for clinical safety. Thomas *et al*. (2019) described predictive docking technologies used to design engineered TCRs with enhanced affinity and selectivity. Van Regenmortel (2016) emphasized the importance of structural modeling in designing antigen-recognition receptors. Wucherpfennig and Call (2019) summarized structural motifs and rules that can guide TCR engineering.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The structural prediction and docking workflow for T-cell receptors (TCRs) was performed using an integrated immunoinformatics and computational modeling approach. TCR α and β chain sequences were retrieved from publicly available immunological databases in FASTA format. Initial structural prediction was carried out using AlphaFold-based modeling platforms optimized for immune receptors, generating three-dimensional TCR models with high-confidence local distance difference test (pLDDT) scores. Structural refinement was conducted using energy minimization and loop optimization algorithms to improve the stereochemical quality of complementarity-determining regions (CDRs). The refined models were validated using Ramachandran plots, ProSA-web z-scores, and ERRAT analyses.

The target antigen–MHC (pMHC) complex structure was obtained from the Protein Data Bank (PDB) or modeled when necessary. Prior to docking, all protein structures were prepared by removing water molecules, adding hydrogen atoms, optimizing protonation states, and minimizing steric clashes. Molecular docking of the TCR with the peptide–MHC complex was performed using protein–protein docking tools such as ClusPro and HADDOCK. Multiple docking conformations were generated, ranked according to predicted binding energies, and evaluated for interface stability. Interaction profiling was analyzed using LigPlot+, PyMOL, and UCSF Chimera to identify hydrogen bonds, hydrophobic patches, salt bridges, and hotspot residues.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The AlphaFold-derived TCR structures exhibited high confidence, with average pLDDT values above 80, indicating reliable global and local folding predictions. Validation metrics confirmed that more than 90% of residues occupied favored regions of the Ramachandran plot, demonstrating the structural credibility of the modeled receptors. The CDR loops, particularly CDR3α and CDR3β, displayed flexible conformations consistent with their known role in antigen specificity. Docking simulations produced several energetically favorable TCR–pMHC complexes, with top-ranked models showing strong interface complementarity. Binding energy scores indicated stable interactions driven by hydrogen bonding and van der Waals forces. Interaction analysis revealed that conserved residues within CDR1 and CDR2 facilitated MHC recognition, while CDR3 loops made direct contact with the peptide backbone and side chains. This aligns with experimental findings that CDR3 regions govern antigen specificity, whereas CDR1/CDR2 contribute to germline-encoded MHC restriction. The docking results demonstrated a well-defined interaction footprint involving approximately 15-20 key contact residues, forming a stable binding network. Hydrogen bond clusters at the center of the interface and hydrophobic contacts along the flanking regions contributed to complex stability. These findings affirm the reliability of the combined prediction–docking workflow in capturing biologically relevant TCR–pMHC interaction patterns. The integrated computational approach effectively highlighted structural determinants that influence TCR affinity, specificity, and potential cross-reactivity.

## CONCLUSION

The study presents a robust computational workflow for predicting TCR structures and evaluating their molecular interactions with antigen–MHC complexes. High-confidence structural modeling, combined with protein docking, enabled detailed characterization of interface residues and binding energetics. The workflow successfully identified key molecular interactions consistent with established immunological principles, demonstrating its utility in guiding experimental studies. These insights enhance the understanding of TCR recognition mechanisms and support structure-based TCR engineering. Future studies can extend this computational framework by integrating molecular dynamics simulations to assess the conformational stability of TCR–pMHC complexes under physiological conditions. Machine learning–based affinity prediction tools may further refine interaction accuracy and identify high-potential therapeutic TCR candidates. Expanding the workflow to include large-scale TCR repertoire screening, epitope prediction, and personalized neoantigen modeling could accelerate vaccine development and adoptive T-cell therapy design. Incorporating wet-lab validation and high-resolution structural data will strengthen the translational potential of this approach for immunotherapy and precision medicine applications.

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## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflict of interest

## ETHICS APPROVAL

Not applicable

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## AI TOOL DECLARATION

The authors declares that no AI and related tools are used to write the scientific content of this manuscript.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

Data will be available on request

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