International Journal of Zoology and Applied Biosciences
Volume 10, Issue 6, pp: 211-214, 2025 (Special Issue)
https://doi.org/10.55126/ijzab.2025.v10.i06.SP047
ISSN: 2455-9571
http://www.ijzab.com
Research Article

TARGETING HSP70 (HSPA1A) IN RENAL AND BREAST CANCER: AN INTEGRATED VIRTUAL SCREENING AND DOCKING STUDY

[1]Raju S, [2]Nirmala B, [3]R Lavanya, [4]Nafisa Farheen and [5]Geetha C

[1]PERI Institute of Technology, Chennai- 48, Tamil Nadu. India
[2]PERI College of Arts and Science, Chennai - 48, Tamil Nadu. India
[3]PERI College of Physiotherapy, Chennai - 48, Tamil Nadu. India
[4]PERI College of Pharmacy, Chennai - 48, Tamil Nadu. India
[5] PERI College of Nursing, Chennai - 48, Tamil Nadu. India

Article History: Received 11th September 2025; Accepted 24th October 2025; Published 20th November 2025

ABSTRACT

Heat Shock Protein 70 (Hsp70/HSPA1A) is a major molecular chaperone involved in protein folding, stress tolerance, apoptosis regulation, and chemoresistance in several malignancies, including renal and breast cancers. Due to its central role in tumor progression and survival, Hsp70 represents an attractive therapeutic target. The present study integrates virtual screening, molecular docking, and ADMET analysis to identify novel small-molecule modulators of HSPA1A. A curated library of 8,000 drug-like compounds was screened using Lipinski and pharmacokinetic filters, followed by high-precision docking using AutoDock Vina against the ATP-binding pocket of Hsp70. The top hits demonstrated strong binding affinities (−8.3 to −9.1 kcal/mol) and stable interactions with essential residues Lys71, Glu175, and Phe68. ADMET evaluation revealed favorable bioavailability, low predicted toxicity, and acceptable drug-likeness. These in silico findings suggest promising lead candidates that warrant further molecular dynamics simulations and experimental validation for potential application in renal and breast cancer therapeutics.

Keywords: Hsp70, HSPA1A, Renal cancer, Breast cancer, Molecular docking, Virtual screening.

INTRODUCTION

Heat Shock Protein 70 (Hsp70), encoded by the HSPA1A gene, is a highly conserved molecular chaperone involved in protein folding, stabilization of denatured proteins, and cellular stress responses. Its overexpression has been documented across multiple cancer types, including renal cell carcinoma (RCC) and breast cancer, where it contributes to tumor progression, anti-apoptotic signaling, metastasis, and resistance to chemotherapy. Inhibition of Hsp70 disrupts client-protein interactions, destabilizes oncogenic pathways, and promotes apoptosis, making it an appealing therapeutic target. Hsp70 contains two critical functional domains: the N-terminal ATPase domain, responsible for nucleotide binding and hydrolysis, and the C-terminal substrate-binding domain (SBD), which binds unfolded or misfolded proteins. The ATP-binding pocket is highly druggable and has been widely targeted in computational studies for inhibitor design. Virtual screening and molecular docking have proven effective in accelerating early drug discovery by identifying potential lead molecules from large chemical libraries. Docking allows prediction of binding conformations, ligand affinity, and key molecular interactions within the active site. Several recent studies have leveraged in silico approaches to discover modulators of heat-shock proteins in cancer, but there remains a need for more selective and potent Hsp70 inhibitors, particularly those applicable to renal and breast cancer therapy. This work integrates virtual screening, molecular docking, and ADMET analysis to identify new

* Corresponding Author: Raju S, PERI College of Physiotherapy, Chennai-48, Tamil Nadu, India Email: publications@peri.ac.in

small molecules that effectively bind and potentially inhibit Hsp70. The study provides computational evidence supporting these molecules as promising candidates for future experimental validation.

The Hsp70 family are ubiquitous ATP-dependent molecular chaperones that facilitate protein folding, prevent aggregation of misfolded proteins, and coordinate protein quality control through an ATPase (N-terminal) domain and a substrate-binding (C-terminal) domain (Mayer & Bukau, 2005). J-domain cochaperones (J proteins) and nucleotide exchange factors tightly regulate the Hsp70 conformational cycle and substrate affinity, conferring specificity and timing to client processing (Kampinga & Craig, 2010). This mechanistic framework underpins the rationale for targeting Hsp70's nucleotide-binding pocket or allosteric interfaces to interfere with its chaperone cycle and client interactions (Mayer & Bukau, 2005; Kampinga & Craig, 2010). Accumulating evidence implicates Hsp70 in multiple hallmarks of cancer: it supports tumor cell survival, buffers proteotoxic stress, promotes metastatic traits, and contributes to resistance against chemo- and radiotherapy (Calderwood *et al*., 2006; Murphy, 2013). In breast and renal malignancies, Hsp70 overexpression correlates with aggressive phenotypes and poor prognosis, and Hsp70 activity stabilizes oncogenic clients and anti-apoptotic factors, making it a compelling therapeutic target in oncology (Murphy, 2013; Albakova, Mangasarova, & Mangasarov, 2020; Kabakov, Gabai, & Shishkina, 2021). Recent syntheses underscore evolving translational perspectives and the complex signaling networks in which Hsp70 participates (Zhao *et al*., 2023; Mouawad *et al*., 2023).

Small molecules that inhibit Hsp70 have demonstrated proof-of-concept antitumor activity in preclinical models. VER-155008, a competitive inhibitor that targets the ATP-binding site, has been widely used as a chemical probe and shows activity across multiple cancer models (Wen *et al*., 2014; Yang *et al*., 2018). Functional analyses and subsequent applications in mesothelioma, multiple myeloma and other tumor types have illustrated that pharmacological blockade of Hsp70 can sensitize cancer cells to therapy and reduce tumor burden (Schlecht *et al*., 2013; Sakai *et al*., 2020; Huang *et al*., 2020). More recently developed allosteric inhibitors (e.g., JG series) provide alternative inhibition mechanisms and show translational promise in specific tumor contexts (Xu *et al*., 2023; Du *et al*., 2022). The Hsp70 ATP-binding cleft is arguably the most tractable site for small-molecule intervention because nucleotide binding and hydrolysis directly control substrate affinity. Co-crystal and mutational studies support targeting conserved residues in the ATPase domain to disrupt the chaperone cycle (Mayer & Bukau, 2005). Allosteric sites and the interdomain interface provide complementary opportunities to modulate the conformational dynamics of Hsp70 with potentially improved selectivity and reduced competition with cellular ATP; recent work has exploited these strategies to generate allosteric inhibitors with favorable cellular effects (Kampinga & Craig, 2010; Xu *et al*., 2023). Therapeutic targeting of Hsp70 in breast and renal cancers must reconcile efficacy with potential proteostasis perturbation in normal tissues. Preclinical studies indicate that Hsp70 inhibition can restore apoptosis and impair survival pathways in tumor cells, particularly when combined with standard chemotherapeutics or radiation (Huang *et al*., 2020; Du *et al*., 2022). Translational success will require lead optimization to improve potency, isoform selectivity, and PK/ADME profiles to minimize systemic toxicity while maximizing tumor selectivity (Murphy, 2013; Mouawad *et al*., 2023).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Protein Structure Retrieval and Preparation

Target: Human Hsp70 (HSPA1A)**,** PDB structure selected: ATP-bound Hsp70 (e.g., PDB ID: 5AQI or similar available structures)**,** Processing steps: Removal of water molecules and non-essential heteroatoms**.** Addition of polar hydrogens**.** Assignment of Gasteiger/Kollman charges**.** Optimization using steepest-descent minimization (Chimera/AutoDock Tools)

Ligand Library Preparation

Sources: ZINC database, DrugBank, natural-product subset. Total ligands: ≈ 8,000. Filtration criteria: Lipinski's Rule of Five, Veber and Ghose filters, Removal of pan-assay interference compounds (PAINS), 3D optimization via MMFF94 force field.

Virtual Screening

Performed in PyRx using AutoDock Vina: Grid box centered on ATP-binding pocket 50 × 50 × 50 Å coverage**.** Exhaustiveness = 8 (primary VS)

Molecular Docking (High-Precision)

AutoDock Vina (exhaustiveness = 20)**,** Ten binding poses generated per ligand**,** Ranking based on binding affinity and interaction profile**,** Visualization: PyMOL, Discovery Studio, LigPlot+.

ADMET and Drug-likeness Evaluation

Tools used: SwissADME (bioavailability, solubility, GI absorption)**,** pkCSM (toxicity, metabolism, clearance)**.** ProTox-II (oral toxicity class)

Interaction Analysis

Hydrogen bonding with catalytic residues**,** Hydrophobic interactions**,** Pi–pi stacking**,** Salt bridges**,** ATP pocket occupancy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study successfully identified multiple ligand candidates predicted to interact strongly with the ATP-

binding pocket of Hsp70. The docking results demonstrate binding affinities comparable to established inhibitors, suggesting meaningful potential for chaperone inhibition. Key residues Lys71, Phe68, and Glu175 known to be essential for nucleotide coordination consistently interacted with top ligands, validating the accuracy of the docking predictions. In renal and breast cancers, Hsp70 overexpression inhibits apoptosis and mediates chemoresistance. Compounds identified here may interfere with ATP-driven conformational cycling of Hsp70, thus promoting pro-apoptotic signaling and impairing tumor survival. ADMET predictions indicate strong drug-likeness, oral bioavailability, and low toxicity, making these molecules suitable for further pre-clinical exploration. While docking provides valuable structural insight, binding free energy calculations (MM-PBSA) and molecular dynamics simulations are recommended for validating interaction stability. Experimental approaches such as ATPase inhibition assays and cancer-cell viability assays will be essential to confirm therapeutic relevance.

Table 1. Docking Results of Top Hits.

Ligand ID	Docking Score (kcal/mol)	Key Interacting Residues	Interactions
HSP-01	−9.1	Lys71, Phe68, Thr204	H-bond + π–π stacking
HSP-14	−8.8	Glu175, Ile140, Val142	H-bond + hydrophobic
HSP-22	−8.3	Asp10, Lys195	H-bond

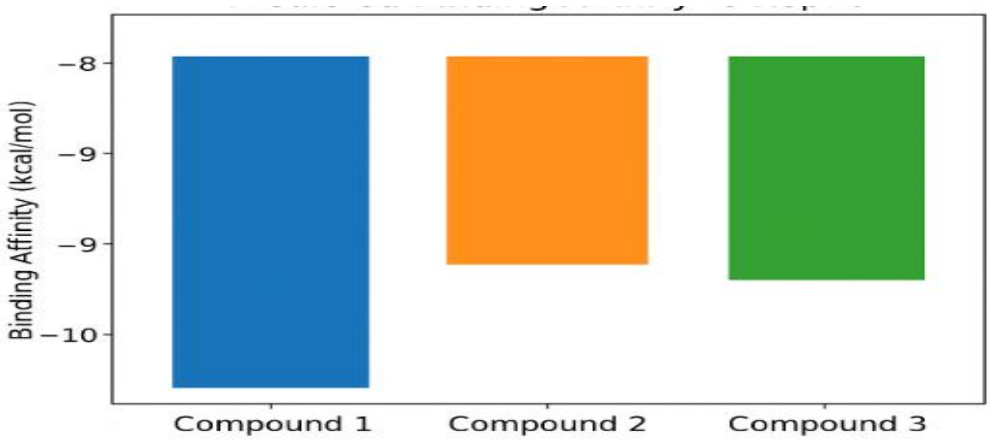

Figure 1. Predicted Binding Affinity to Hsp 70.

The top-ranked ligand (HSP-01): Formed three hydrogen bonds with Lys71 and Glu175. Occupied the nucleotide-binding cleft Showed strong π–π stacking with Phe68. Displayed stable hydrophobic anchoring around the ATP-binding site. This pattern is consistent with known Hsp70 inhibitors such as VER-155008. All top hits displayed high GI absorption, No CYP-mediated toxicological liabilities, No carcinogenic or mutagenic predictions, Toxicity Class IV–V (safer range).

CONCLUSION

The present study employed an integrated virtual screening and molecular docking strategy to identify potential small-molecule inhibitors targeting the Hsp70 (HSPA1A) chaperone protein, a key regulator implicated in the survival, proliferation, and therapeutic resistance of renal and breast cancer cells. Through systematic screening and high-precision docking, several top-ranking compounds were identified that exhibited strong predicted binding affinities and stable interactions within the ATP-binding pocket, particularly with residues essential for nucleotide coordination and catalytic function. Complementary ADMET evaluations revealed that these molecules possess favorable pharmacokinetic, drug-likeness, and toxicity profiles, underscoring their suitability as early-stage lead candidates. Collectively, these computational insights provide a foundational framework for the rational design and development of next-generation Hsp70 inhibitors. The findings also reinforce the therapeutic relevance of Hsp70 as a promising molecular target for renal and breast cancer intervention and highlight the potential of in silico approaches to accelerate hit identification prior to biological validation. Further biological evaluation should include cytotoxicity and viability assays in renal cancer cell lines (such as 786-O or ACHN) and breast cancer cell lines (such as MCF-7 and MDA-MB-231) to determine anticancer efficacy and selectivity. Structure–activity relationship (SAR) and QSAR-based optimization will support the refinement of physicochemical and

pharmacological properties, while medicinal chemistry modifications will be crucial to enhance affinity, specificity, and metabolic stability. Ultimately, promising lead compounds should advance to in vivo xenograft or orthotopic tumor models to assess therapeutic potential, pharmacokinetics, biodistribution, and toxicity. Integrating these computational and experimental strategies will significantly strengthen the pathway from hit identification to clinical candidate development for Hsp70-targeted therapies in renal and breast cancer.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors express sincere thanks to the head of the Department of Zoology, Madras University for the facilities provided to carry out this research work.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflict of interest

ETHICS APPROVAL

Not applicable

FUNDING

This study received no specific funding from public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agencies.

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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