

Research Article

Identification of Novel Neurotensin Receptor 1 Inhibitors by Combinatorial Support Vector Machine

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Abstract

Neurotensin (NT) contributes to pathophysiology of neurodegenerative and psychiatric diseases, and the signal of NT and neurotensin receptor 1 (NTR1) is closely associated with cancer, inflammation and immunomodulatory disease. So far, drug targeting NTR1 has not reached any primary endpoint in clinical trial or approval, and the number of reported active compounds against NTR1 is too small to provide any novel scaffold in facilitating NTR1-based lead identification. Thus, the search for new inhibitors is of great interest to current drug discovery. This work explored the use of support vector machine (SVM) combined with putative non-inhibitor generation method as a virtual screening (VS) tool. SVM developed by NTR1 inhibitors published before 2011 was verified by cross validation and by 20 independent test inhibitors published after 2011. By scanning large chemical libraries, low false-hit rates of 0.026% (3,452 out of 13.56M PubChem chemicals) and 0.065% (109 out of 168K MDDR chemicals) were identified. A further investigation of 115 compounds identified by this work found 17 novel scaffolds against NTR1, 29% of which have been reported to show CNS and cancer-related therapeutic effects. Therefore, SVM is effective in identifying novel NTR1 inhibitors, which can be a good starting point to facilitate CNS and anticancer drug discovery in the near future.

INTRODUCTION

Neurotensin (NT) is an endogenous tridecapeptide found in the central nervous system (CNS), which acts in brain as a primary neurotransmitter or neuromodulator [1]. Physiological functions of NT are predominantly mediated through its cognate high-affinity receptor, neurotensin receptor 1 (NTR1) [2]. In spite of extensive exploration on its physiologic roles in both the central nervous system and periphery [3-6], NTR1 was reported to show significant stimulatory activity in human neoplastic tissues [7] and closely associated with proliferation, apoptosis, invasion, and metastasis of multiple malignancies including prostate cancer [8], head and neck squamous cell carcinoma [9] and breast cancer [10]. This provides a great potential to

exploit novel targeted therapeutics based on NTR1, which may contribute to the discovery of new CNS and anticancer drugs.

However, no drug targeting NTR1 was approved by FDA due to poor pharmacokinetic properties and/or side effects induced in human subjects. Only a few candidates were in clinical trial, but none of them met their therapeutic expectations so far. For example, SR-48692 (a nonpeptide antagonist that binds preferentially to NTR1) and CGX-1160 (a potent NTR1 activator) have completed Phase III trial for lung cancer [11] and Phase I trial for acute pain [12] respectively, but none of them shows any positive clinical trial results [13]. Currently, reported bioactive molecules against NTR1 are in small amount and sparsely distributed in the chemical space [14,15]. In particular, only 300

bioactive compounds were so far reported as NTR1 antagonists [14], and just 14 are described in the Therapeutic Target Database (TTD) [16,17]. Therefore, there is a strong need for searching new NTR1 inhibitors to provide more candidates for developing CNS and anticancer drugs.

In order to find novel active compound, efforts have been directed at expanded search of larger chemical space [18,19]. As a rapid and effective strategy for lead identification, virtual screening (VS) has long been applied to predict lead from large chemical libraries [20]. As reported, the prediction performance of VS is often constrained by the small number of known active compounds sparsely distributed in the active regions of chemical space [21]. However, one of the tools, support vector machine (SVM), was reported to have substantial capability in identifying novel active compounds from sparse active data sets at low false-hit rates [21]. So far, SVM has already been used to discover inhibitors of ERK [22], RAF [23], HIV-1 protease [24], ABL [19], mGluR1 [25], dopamine receptor [26] for treating infectious disease, nervous disorder and many cancers.

In this work, we used the most comprehensive set of NTR1 inhibitors to develop a SVM model for discovering new lead scaffolds. First of all, inhibitors were divided into two groups by their publication date. Data published before 2011 were used to construct SVM model via 5-fold cross validation, while post-2011 data were used as independent testing. The discovery performance of the constructed model was evaluated by independent test and a screening of large chemical libraries. Finally, scaffolds of new leads identified were further analyzed based on their reported therapeutic effects.

In the cross validation, inhibitors and non-inhibitors were randomly divided into 5 groups of approximately equal size with 4 groups as training data and the remaining as testing. This process was conducted for all five possible training-testing compositions, and their average accuracy was calculated to determine the best parameters for constructing SVM model. By screening large chemical libraries (PubChem and MDDR), yield and false hit rate of the constructed model are further evaluated [27]. PubChem and MDDR contain high percentages of inactive compounds significantly different from the reported NTR1 inhibitors, which may artificially enhance the prediction enrichments. Therefore, a more strict test of the SVM model is applied by using a subset of true NTR1 non-inhibitors structurally similar to the known inhibitors, so that enrichment is not simply a separation of easily distinguishable features [28].

METHODS

Compound collection and construction of training and testing data sets

A total of 382 NTR1 inhibitors with structure information were collected from ChEMBL [14] and TTD [16]. In this work, 119 inhibitors with $IC_{50}/K_i \leq 10\mu M$ were considered as active, which includes 99 and 20 inhibitors published before and after 2011. These known inhibitors cover a diverse set of compound scaffolds, which is very feasible for constructing SVM model. As illustrated in Figure 1, 12 scaffolds representing all 119 structures are ranked in descending order according to the number of known active inhibitors within each scaffold. In Figure 2, 12 examples out of 84 inhibitors within scaffold 1 together with their inhibitory activities (IC_{50} or K_i) against NTR1 are shown.

Sufficient negative data (non-inhibitors) are vital for reducing false-hits in constructing SVM model [29], but so far only a small amount of them were reported. Thus, putative non-inhibitors were generated by applying the same method as suggested by Liu et al [19] to represent the whole non-inhibitor chemical space. In this work, 67,054 putative non-inhibitors were generated by choosing representatives from families without active compounds, and virtual hit and false-hit rate in searching large chemical libraries were evaluated by using 13.56M PubChem and 168K MDDR compounds together with 322 MDDR compounds structurally similar to the known NTR1 inhibitors. Molecular similarity matching together with visual inspection were used to distinguish whether compounds are similar or not [21].

Molecular descriptor

Molecular descriptors are quantitative representations of structural and physicochemical features of molecules, which have been extensively used in deriving quantitative structure activity relationships (QSAR) and VS tools [19,24-26,30,31]. A total of 98 molecular descriptors listed in Supplementary Table 1 were used in this work, which include 18 descriptors in the class of simple molecular properties, 3 descriptors in the class of chemical properties, 35 descriptors in the class of molecular connectivity and shape, 42 descriptors in the class of electro-topological state.

SVM modeling and molecular similarity matching

SVM is a supervised learning and classification method used for distinguishing NTR1 inhibitors from non-inhibitors. Given a set of training data, SVM training algorithm constructs a model assigning new compound into the class of either inhibitors or non-inhibitors, which makes SVM a binary classifier [19].

Molecular similarity matching method used in this work is the Tanimoto similarity searching. Compounds similar to at least one known NTR1 inhibitor in the training set can be identified by calculating the Tanimoto similarity coefficient as list blow [32].

$$sim(i, j) = \frac{\sum_{d=1}^l x_{di} x_{dj}}{\sum_{d=1}^l (x_{di})^2 + \sum_{d=1}^l (x_{dj})^2 - \sum_{d=1}^l x_{di} x_{dj}}$$

Two compounds can be defined as similar to each other, when the similarity coefficient is larger than 0.9. More detail descriptions of the SVM modeling and similarity matching methods used in this work can be found in Supplementary Methods 1.

Measurement of VS performance in screening large libraries

VS performance in screening large chemical libraries is measured by several indicators [33], including yield (percentage of known positives predicted as virtual hits), hit-rate (percentage of virtual hits that are known positives), false-hit rate (percentage of virtual hits that are known negatives) and enrichment factor (magnitude of hit-rate improvement over random selection from chemical libraries).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SVM model construction via 5-fold cross validation

5-fold cross validation was conducted to test SVM model in identifying NTR1 inhibitors. The accuracies for predicting

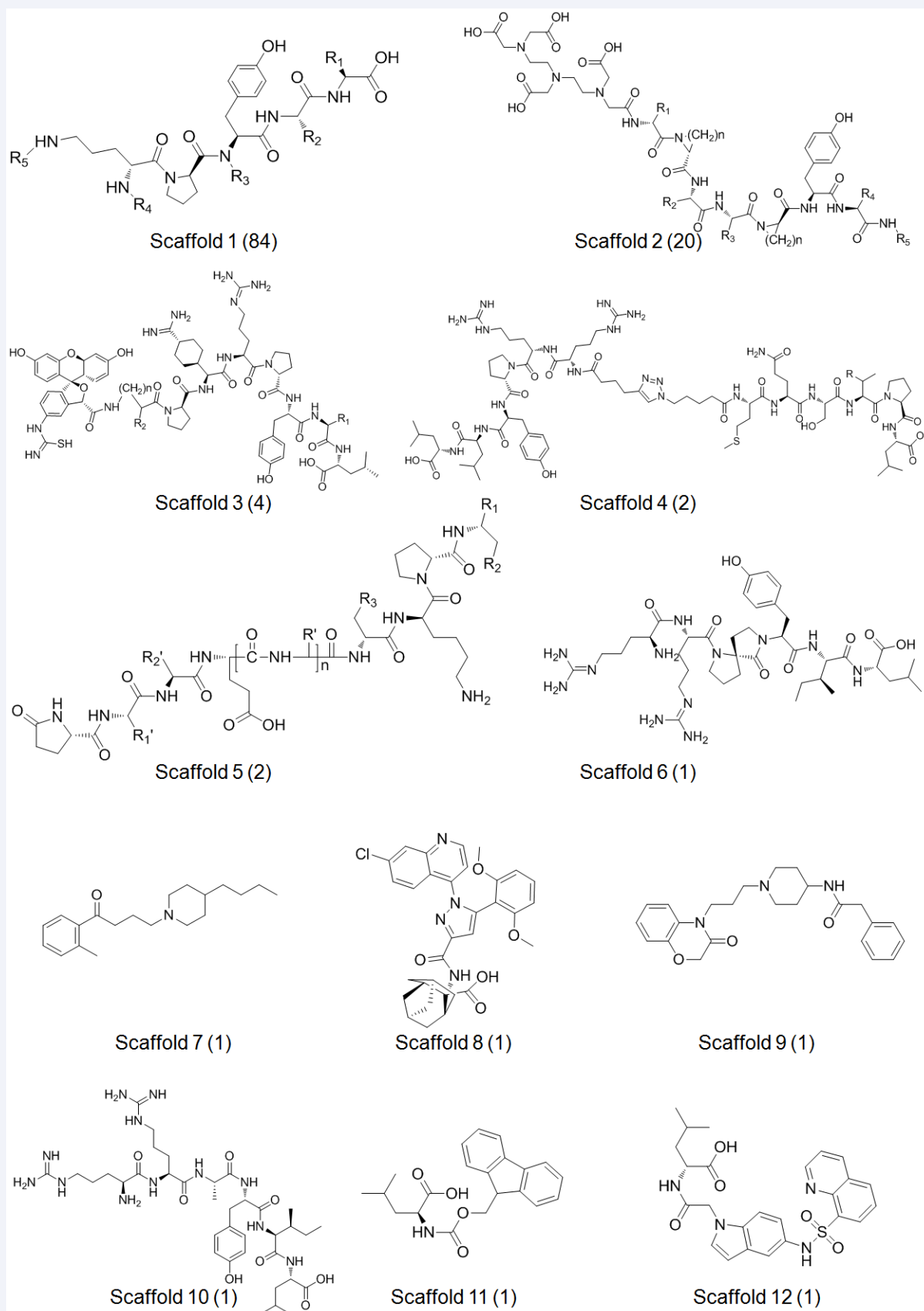


Figure 1 12 molecular scaffolds representing 119 known NTR1 inhibitors and the corresponding number of inhibitors within each scaffold (in bracket).

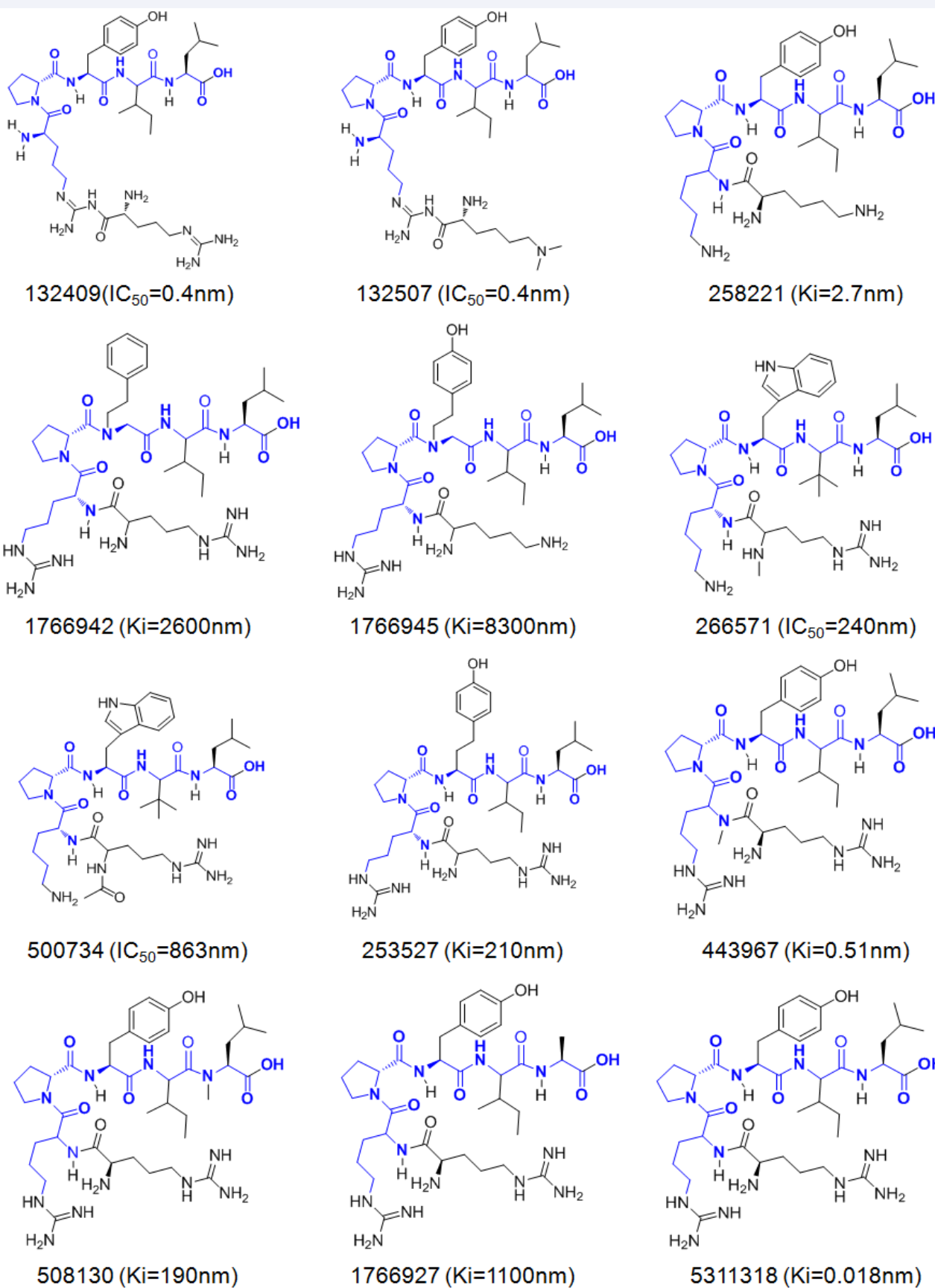


Figure 2 12 representative structures in scaffold 1 of known NTR1 inhibitors (blue color indicate the common structure shared by all inhibitors).

inhibitors and non-inhibitors in each fold are 75~95% and 99.9776~100% respectively, and the average accuracies are 84.8% and 99.9911% for inhibitor and non-inhibitors. According to a comprehensive literature review, no VS study was conducted to identify NTR1 inhibitors so far, therefore it is difficult to evaluate the prediction performance of SVM model by comparing to that of existing study. However, the prediction accuracy of NTR1 inhibitor is comparable to or better than that of studies of other targets [19,29, 32,34,35]. Moreover, prediction accuracy of non-inhibitor (99.9911%) statistically indicates a very low false-hit rate, which is key to guarantee the success rate of *in vitro* and *in vivo* inhibitor identification. Thus, SVM constructed in this work shows good prediction capability for indentifying known NTR1 inhibitor.

Independent test and virtual screening of large compound libraries

The SVM developed by pre-2011 NTR1 inhibitors were used to independently test 20 post-2011 inhibitors. The yield of independent testing data is 90% (18 out of 20), which is comparable to the reported 50~94% yields of various VS tools [36]. It may be inappropriate to directly compare the testing percentage of this work with that of the reported literatures, because the differences in molecular types, descriptors and parameters can lead to fluctuated results. However, among those 20 independent testing inhibitors, all 16 structurally similar to known NTR1 inhibitors and 2 out of 4 novel inhibitors are correctly predicted, which shows certain level of capacity in indentifying novel NTR1 inhibitors.

In addition to good hit identification performance reflected by 5-fold cross validation and independent test, the constructed SVM model demonstrates a substantially low false-hit rate. 3,452

compounds are identified as active in screening 13.56M PubChem compounds that exclude the known NTR1 inhibitors, representing only 0.0255% of all compounds in PubChem. In screening 168K MDDR compounds of protein families other than NTR1 related one (G-protein coupled receptor family), the estimated false-hit rate is 0.0684%. According to the substantially low false-hit rate in screening large chemical libraries, the constructed SVM model is like to show good capacity in reducing false-positive inhibitors.

Moreover, false-hit rate of the constructed model was further evaluated by using 62 true NTR1 non-inhibitors indicated in ChEMBL, 6 of which are structurally similar to known inhibitor. All non-inhibitors, especially those 6, are correctly predicted as inactive, which suggests that SVM is capable of distinguishing NTR1 inhibitors from non-inhibitors that are structurally similar to know inhibitors.

Novel NTR1 inhibitors identified by SVM model

Studies suggested that SVM shows the capability of indentifying novel lead candidates rather than membership of compound families covered by the known active compounds [19,30]. In this work, the constructed SVM model identified 115 compounds from MDDR as active inhibitor, 96 of which are structurally similar to know NTR1 inhibitors. These 96 inhibitors can be grouped to scaffold 1, 2, 7, 10 and 11 in Figure 1 with 30, 1, 2, 62 and 1 compounds respectively.

17 novel scaffolds were identified in this study. Although no direct inhibitory activity against NTR1 has been reported, 5 of these scaffolds have already shown therapeutic effects on CNS disease or cancer. As shown in Table 1, Scaffold N1 (4-(cycloalkylalkyl) piperidine derivatives) was found to demonstrate neurotrophic and neuroprotective properties *in vivo* by regenerating

Table 1: 5 novel scaffolds with reported therapeutic effects on CNS disease or cancer together with a representative compound of the scaffold.

Index	Novel scaffold identified	Representative compound of the scaffold	Reported therapeutic effects of the scaffold
N1			Possess anti-allergic activity by facilitating the passage of active substances through physiological barriers (CNS related)
N2			Show <i>in vivo</i> neurotrophic and neuroprotective properties by the regeneration of animal sciatic nerve (CNS related)
N3			Affect the central nervous system and have sedative, tranquilizing, neuroleptic and/or antidepressant actions (CNS related)
N4			Treat CNS and gastrointestinal disorders which is primarily modulated by neurotensin and its corresponding receptor (CNS related)
N5			Demonstrate μM cytotoxic activities against several cancer cell lines, including HL60, N87, H460 and Hep G2 (cancer related)

animal sciatic nerve [37]. Scaffold N2 (N-substituted aliphatic heterocyclic compounds) was reported to possess anti-allergic activity by facilitating the passage of active substances through physiological barriers, which is similar to the mechanism of NTR1 agonist NT8-13 in increasing CNS penetration and metabolic stability [38]. Scaffold N3 (piperidinylmethyloxazolidin-2-one derivatives) was proposed to affect central nervous system and have sedative, tranquillizing, neuroleptic and/or antidepressant actions without a noticeable cataleptic action [39]. Scaffold N4 (N-((1-substituentpiperidin-4-yl)methyl)-3,4-dihydro-2H-[1,3]oxazino[3,2-a]indole-10-carboxamide derivatives) was used as pharmaceuticals in the treatment of CNS and gastrointestinal disorders which is primarily modulated by neurotensin[40]. Scaffold N5 (quinolone alkaloids) provided a serial of compounds with μM cytotoxic activities against several cancer cell lines, including HL60, N87, H460 and Hep G₂ [41].

Besides their therapeutic effect on CNS disease and cancer,

the identified novel inhibitors demonstrate certain level of correlation to other NT-related indications like inflammation and immunomodulatory disease [42-53], as shown in Figure 3. Involvement in multiple indications reflects the sophisticated nature of biological signaling networks affected by NTR1 [54-57]. In sum, some identified novel NTR1 inhibitors have already shown effects on NT-related diseases, but more predicted candidates are waiting for further evaluation. Large chemical libraries like PubChem provides a comprehensive pool of candidates in identifying more novel lead scaffolds, which asks for more effective VS tool with robustness and low false-hit rate to facilitate novel drug discovery.

CONCLUSION

Combinatorial SVM was used as a VS tool to identify NTR1 inhibitors and showed good prediction performance. SVM model developed by NTR1 inhibitors found before 2011 successfully

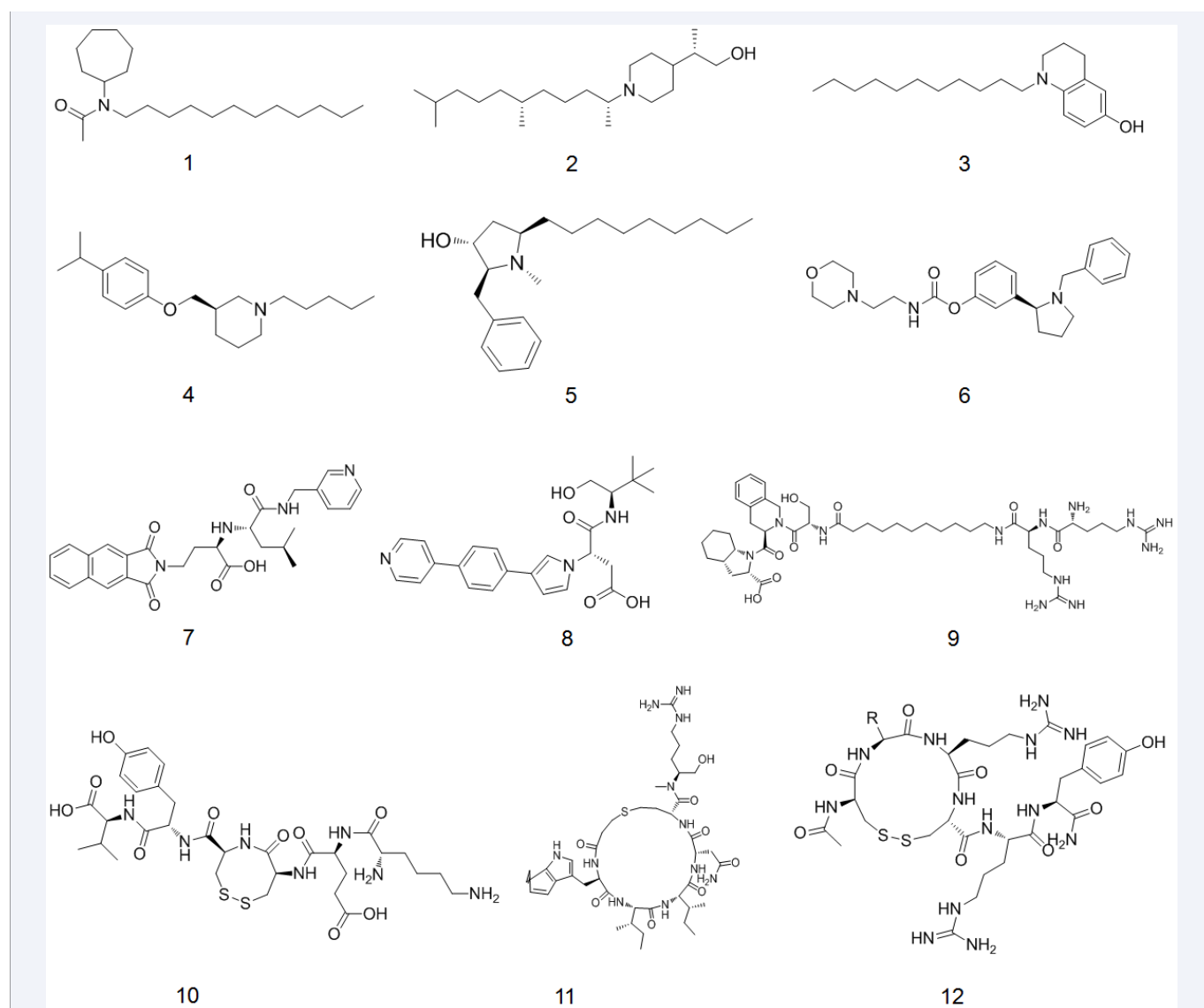


Figure 3 12 molecular examples identified as novel NTR1 inhibitor in this work with no effects on CNS disease and cancer reported so far, but with effects on other NT-related indications like inflammation and immunomodulatory disease.

identified 90% of post-2011 inhibitors, which demonstrates its capacity in indentifying novel NTR1 inhibitors. Virtual screening of large chemical libraries shows substantially low false-hit rates of 0.0255% and 0.0684% of 13.56M PubChem and 168K MDDR compounds. 62 experimentally verified NTR1 non-inhibitors were all correctly predicted as inactive, which suggests the capacity of SVM model in distinguishing NTR1 inhibitors from non-inhibitors. Some novel inhibitors proposed in this work have already shown clear therapeutic effect on both CNS disease and cancer, which raises urgent needs on conducting more comprehensive screening of a even larger chemical space to identify more inhibitors targeting NTR1.

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