Molecular Mechanism of Huanglian Jiedu Decoction in Treat ment of Alzheimer's Disease based on Network Pharmacology

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study was to investigate the pharmacological mechanism of Huanglian Jiedu Decoction (HLJDD) in treating Alzheimer's disease through network pharmacology. HLJDD is a classic Chinese medicine prescription that is recommended in the Chinese Alzheimer's disease diagnosis and treatment guidelines. However, the mechanism of HLJDD treatment for Alzheimer's disease (AD) remains unclear because of its complicated components.

Methods: The related ingredients and targets of HLJDD in treating AD were screened by Traditional Chinese Medicine Systems Pharmacology Database and Analysis platform (TCMSP), TTD, OMIM, GeneCards, and DrugBank. The data of the protein-protein interaction (PPI) network was constructed using STRING. The Metascape database was adopted for Gene Ontology (GO) functional annotation and Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and

Genomes (KEGG) enrichment analysis. AutoDockTools was used for molecular docking verification.

Results: In the treatment of AD, HLJDD demonstrated strong efficacy with its core active components including were quercetin, β-sitosterol, stigmasterol, targeting key proteins such as AKT1, TNF, and IL6. Molecular docking tests confirmed the significant binding affinity between these components and the aforementioned targets. The biological pathway of HLJDD in treating AD primarily involves the modulation of IL-17, TNF, and other inflammatory cytokines to regulate their impact on nerve functions.

Conclusions: HLJDD may treat AD by inhibiting neuroinflammation through a comprehensive, multi-component, multi-target, and multi-pathway method.

Introduction

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is the most common type of senile dementia and is characterized by an insidious and progressive degenerative process of the central nervous system. Memory dysfunction, thinking, and behavioral issues are the primary clinical features. The pathogenesis of AD is highly complex and remains inconclusive, with mainstream hypotheses including the Aβ cascade reaction, Tau protein abnormality hypothesis, cholinergic hypothesis, neuroinflammation, metabolic disorders, and vascular injury [1]. Currently, FDA-approved

clinical drugs for AD primarily consist of acetylcholinesterase inhibitors (AchE) and

N-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA) receptor antagonists. However, these drugs target a single

factor, exhibit low drug resistance, and often lead to adverse effects, resulting in

unsatisfactory clinical outcomes for AD treatment. Chinese medicine compound therapy has

the advantages of multiple targets, multiple components and multiple pathways of action.

Therefore, traditional Chinese medicine possesses unique benefits for the treatment of AD.

Huanglian Jiedu decoction (HLJDD) was initially documented in *The Handbook of*

Prescriptions for Emergencies. It consists of four herbs: Coptidis rhizome (Huanglian or HL),

Scutellariae radix (Huangqin or HQ), Phellodendri chinensis cortex (Huangbo or HB), and

Gardeniae fructus (Zhizi or ZZ) in Chinese. HL serves as the sovereign medical, while HQ

and HB, the minister medicinals, are responsible for clearing the heat of triple energizers. ZZ

acts as both assistant medicinal and courier medicinal, aiding in clearing the heat of triple

energizers and directing heat downward. Several studies have revealed the primary active

components of HLJDD, including cognitive improvement [2], anti-inflammatory [3],

anti-endotoxin [4], anti-atherosclerosis [5], and other effects. HLJDD is recognized as a

classical heat-clearing medicinal agent and is   widely employed in treating moderate and

severe dementia because of its beneficial effects.

Network pharmacology is a comprehensive discipline that integrates the theories of systems

biology, pharmacology, information networks and computer science. Using computer

simulation and various databases, network pharmacology screens drug molecular targets and

disease-related targets. By employing network visualization and network analysis systems, it

sheds light on the complex network connections among drugs, targets, and diseases. It

constructs a "drug-target" system to analyze and predict the action mechanism of drugs at

multiple levels. The systematic and holistic features of network pharmacology align with the

principle of holistic thinking emphasized by traditional Chinese medicine [6].

This study employs network pharmacological methods to determine the molecular mechanism

of HLJDD in treating AD, because of its complex composition and multi-level effects.

HLJDD shows multi-target effects in addressing AD, however the specific active components

and mechanism of action remain unclear. The goal is to establish a theoretical foundation for

future investigations. The workflow of the study is illustrated in **Figure 1**.

Materials and Methods

Collection and screening the active components of HLJDD

The components and targets of the four herbs in HLJDD were obtained from Traditional

Chinese Medicine Systems Pharmacology Database and Analysis platform (TCMSP,

https://old.tcmsp-e.com/tcmsp.php) [7]. Following TCMSP recommendations, the

components were screened based on 2 thresholds of ADME: Oral bioavailability (OB) ≥30%

and Drug-likeness (DL) ≥0.18. At the same time, the published literature was reviewed and

organized to supplement the known targets of the undetected active components. The Uniprot

database (https://www.uniprot.org/uniprot/) was used to translate the targets of the active

components into gene symbols.

Searching for potential AD-related targets of HLJDD

We conducted a search using "Alzheimer's disease" as keyword to identify *Homo sapiens*

genes associated with Alzheimer's disease . AD-related targets for the treatment of AD were

extracted from the TTD (https://db.idrblab.net/ttd/) [8], OMIM (http://www.omim.org/),

GeneCards (https://www.genecards.org/) and DrugBank (https://go.drugbank.com/) databases.

After consolidating all targets and removing duplicate entries, we compiled a list of targets

related to AD by Venny (https://bioinfogp.cnb.csic.es/tools/venny/).

Constructing the protein-protein interaction (PPI) network

We constructed the PPI by the STRING database (https://string-db.org) [9]. The biological

species selected was *Homo sapiens (human)*, with the minimum interaction threshold set to

"highest confidence" (>0.9).

Topological analysis

Cytoscape3.9.1 was employed to build the network diagram encompassing the

components,targets and pathways. Subsequently, CytoHubba, an embedded tool in Cytoscape,

was used to analyze the network topology parameters of potential components. Screening was

performed by Degree Centrality (DC) to determine the hub genes.

Gene Ontology (GO) Functional Annotation and Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and

Genomes (KEGG) Pathway Analysis

Input potential targets into Metascape, setting the threshold at P＜0.01 and selecting *Homo*

sapiens as the biological species for both GO enrichment analysis and KEGG pathway

analysis. Saved the data results and visualized them using bubble charts, mapped with

micro-biosis (https://cn.bing.com).

Molecular Docking Validation

Molecular docking is a method used to evaluate the ability of an active drug ingredient to bind

to a target. The PDB database (https://www.rcsb.org/) was used to obtain the structural

formulae of small molecules in PDB format. The docking of receptor proteins and small

ligand molecules was performed using AutoDockTools, and the docking results were

visualized through Pymol.

Results

1. Active components of HLJDD

A total of 58 chemical components were identified through TCMSP active components

screening, meeting the criteria of ADME (OB≥30%, DL≥0.18). Specifically, these

components encompassed 11 species of HL, 28 species of HQ, 24 species of HB, and 9

species of ZZ. Notably, there were overlaps in the components, with 4 types common to both

HL and HB, 1 shared among HL, HB, and ZZ, 2 present in both HL and HQ, and 2 shared

across HQ, HB, and ZZ (**Table 1**). The analysis further revealed 128 targets for HL, 72 targets

for HQ, 122 targets for HB, and 120 targets for ZZ. Upon consolidation and elimination of

duplicates, a total of 138 unique targets were identified.

2. Prediction of potential anti-AD targets of HLJDD

A total of 2462 Alzheimer's disease (AD)-related targets were obtained by combining data

from the GeneCards database (targets with a score > 10) with information from the OMIM,

TTD, and DrugBank databases. Duplicate targets were removed through a merging process.

Subsequently, 137 overlapping targets were identified as potential targets for Huli Jingdan

Decoction (HLJDD) in AD treatment. Consequently, a final set of 137 potential targets for

HLJDD in the context of AD treatment was established (**Fig. 2**).

3. PPI network construction

The potential targets were analyzed using STRING to construct the PPI network (**Fig. 3**). The

network contained 137 nodes and 337 edges, with an average node degree of 4.92 and an

average local clustering coefficient of 0.511. Therefore, it can be seen from Figure.2 that the

targets of HLJDD are closely related to each other in the treatment of AD, indicating that

HLJDD may exert its efficacy by acting on multiple targets.

4. The "Components-Targets-Pathways" network diagram construction

CytoScape 3.9.1 was used to construct the network diagram of the

"Components-Targets-Pathways" (**Fig. 4**), in which the top 10 active components (ranked by

degree) were quercetin (MOL000098, A1), β-sitosterol (MOL000358, B1), stigmasterol

(MOL000449, B2), kaempferol (MOL000422, ZZ1), wogonin (MOL000173, HQ2),

isocorypalmine (MOL000790, HB2), palmatine (MOL000785, A3), (S)-Canadine

(MOL001455, HB4), (R)-Canadine (MOL002903, HL1), coptisine (MOL001458, A5).

CytoHubba was then used for network topology analysis, with darker node colors indicating

higher DC and more interaction. The results revealed top 10 core targets in AD treatment with

HLJDD: TP53, AKT1, TNF, IL6, MAPK1, IL1B, ESR1, IFNG, FN1 andCCND1 (**Fig. 5**),

with TP53 having a high DC of 29 (**Table 2**).

5. GO enrichment and KEGG Pathway analysis

The top 20 results obtained from the analysis using Metascape for the treatment of AD with

HLJDD included the enrichment of the GO **(Fig. 6)** and KEGG pathways (**Fig. 7**),

respectively. The analysis revealed significant involvement in potential biological processes

such as response to oxidative stress and reactive oxygen species. Moreover, molecular

functions were identified, including neurotransmitter receptor activity and postsynaptic

neurotransmitter receptor activity. The cellular components linked to these processes were

found to be synapses, dendrites, and neuronal cell bodies. Additionally, the enriched pathways

encompassed IL-17 signaling pathways and neurodegenerative pathways. Detailed results of

the target pathway enrichment can be found in **Table 3**, providing a comprehensive overview

of the findings.

6. Molecular docking validation

To analyze the top 5 active components and core targets, molecular docking was conducted

using AutoDockTools 1.5.7 software. In this process, a lower binding energy indicates a more

effective docking interaction between the component and the target. The docking results

revealed that all binding energies were less than or equal to -4 KJ/mol, demonstrating superior

binding between the components and targets (**Table 4**). The binding energies of the first 5

interactions were visualized using PyMol 2.2.0 software, as shown in (**Fig. 8**).

Discussion

AD, as the most common form of dementia and a prominent neurodegenerative disease

requiring attention, has imposed significant burdens on patients, their families, and society at

large. The disease's pathological mechanism is intricate, with previous studies highlighting

the beneficial role of Chinese medicine compound prescriptions in its treatment [10,

11]. HLJDD, a renowned classic prescription, is known for its efficacy in clearing heat,

detoxifying, and facilitating fire purging, specifically targeting dementia arising from phlegm,

stasis, and heat. Baicalin can reduce neuroinflammation and oxidative stress in rats with

Alzheimer's disease by inhibiting microglial activation. It also regulates the levels of

neurotransmitters such as methionine and glutamine, correcting imbalances and addressing

energy metabolism disordersl [12, 13]. This was demonstrated by changes in peripheral

system biomarkers SOD, GSH-Px, AMPK, SIRT-1, and MDA, indicating that HLJDD can

improve cognitive function. Moreover, a 70% ethanol extract from gardenia can boost serum

catalase activity, lower acetylcholinesterase levels, and improve rats' spatial learning and

memory [14]. These findings underscore the potential neuroprotective effects of HLJDD and

its medicinal components in combating AD and enhancing cognitive function across various

biological pathways.

In this study, the significant role of HLJDD in the treatment of AD was investigated through

the employment of network pharmacology to screen its active components, which include

quercetin, β-sitosterol, and stigmasterol. Quercetin, a compound found in HLJDD, has been

shown to inhibit the neuroinflammatory process by downregulating pro-inflammatory

cytokines. Additionally, quercetin has the ability to stimulate neuronal regeneration, exerting

its neuroprotective role by antagonizing cytotoxicity induced by oxidative stress in neurons

[15]. Beta-sitosterol has been demonstrated to decrease the deposition of Aβ in the brains of

AD mice and partially restore synaptic function [16]. Furthermore, AMPK triggers the NF-κB

and NLRP3 pathways. Stigmasterol inhibits the microglial inflammation response to Aβ42

oligomers and lessen neuroinflammation in AD mice [17]. Molecular docking results also

suggested that active components such as quercetin, β-sitosterol, and stigmasterol exhibit

strong binding with core targets, indicating their potential therapeutic efficacy in the treatment

of AD within the context of HLJDD.

In this study, AKT1, TNF, and IL-6 were identified as the primary targets for AD treatment.

AKT, a protein kinase, plays a crucial role in various biological processes and pathologies

such as cell growth, proliferation, and neurodegenerative diseases [18]. Among the isoforms

of AKT, AKT1 is highlighted, and elevated levels of AKT1 phosphorylation have been

associated with Aβ deposition and Tau protopathy, impacting neuronal and synaptic damage

[19]. Neuroinflammation, characterized by elevated levels of proinflammatory cytokines in

the cerebrospinal fluid of AD patients, is closely linked to disease progression. TNF,

comprising TNF-α and TNF-β subtypes, along with IL-6, contributes to this inflammatory

response. Upon stimulation by Aβ, microglia are overactivated, leading to the release of

pro-inflammatory cytokines like TNF-α and IL-6, exacerbating neuroinflammation and

neurotoxicity in AD progression [20]. Pathway enrichment analysis revealed that HLJDD may

influence AD treatment through its impact on IL-17, TNF, and other signaling pathways. The

IL-17 signaling pathway, which promotes an inflammatory response, has been found to be

associated with AD progression, affecting Aβ deposition, tau protein phosphorylation, and

blood-brain barrier integrity in the early stages of AD. The involvement of IL-17 in cognitive

dysfunction and neuroinflammation has been established [21, 22]. TNF, as a key mediator of

neuroinflammation, can activate either neuroprotective or neurodegenerative cell responses

through its receptors TNFR1 and TNFR2 [23]. Thus, HLJDD may have a therapeutic impact

on AD by regulating IL-17, TNF, and other signaling pathways.

This study utilized network pharmacology and molecular docking as research methods to

investigate the potential active components, targets, and pathways of HLJDD for treating AD.

The research findings indicated that individual compounds in HLJDD could target multiple

proteins, and the same protein could be involved in various signaling pathways. These results

suggest that the therapeutic effects of HLJDD on AD may stem from the synergistic

interactions among its multiple components, targets, and pathways. By integrating network

pharmacology and molecular docking approaches, this study lays the groundwork for the

clinical application of HLJDD in AD treatment, providing a preliminary scientific rationale.

Moreover, it presents a promising avenue for further elucidating the specific mechanisms of

HLJDD in treating AD and for exploring novel clinical strategies for managing the disease.

Key Points:

1. Huanglian Jiedu Decoction can alleviate Alzheimer's disease's symptoms.

2. Huanglian Jiedu Decoction can alleviate the pathological damage caused by Alzheimer's disease through multiple ways and multiple targets.

3. It is necessary to further verify the mechanism of Huanglian Jiedu Decoction in treating Alzheimer's disease.

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The authors have nothing to disclose.

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Table 1. The active components of HLJDD.

NO	MOL ID	Molecule Name	OB（%）	DL
A1	MOL000098	quercetin	46.43	0.28
A2	MOL000622	magnograndiolide	63.71	0.19
A3	MOL000785	palmatine	64.6	0.65
A4	MOL001454	berberine	36.86	0.78
A5	MOL001458	coptisine	30.67	0.86
A6	MOL002668	worenine	45.83	0.87
A7	MOL002894	berberrubine	35.74	0.73
A8	MOL002897	epiberberine	43.09	0.78
HL1	MOL002903	(R)-Canadine	55.37	0.77
HL2	MOL002904	berlambine	36.68	0.82
HL3	MOL002907	corchoroside A_qt	104.95	0.78
HQ1	MOL000073	ent-Epicatechin	48.96	0.24
HQ2	MOL000173	wogonin	30.68	0.23
HQ3	MOL000228	(2R)-7-hydroxy-5-methoxy-2-phenylchroman-4-one	55.23	0.2
B1	MOL000358	β-sitosterol	36.91	0.75
B2	MOL000449	stigmasterol	43.83	0.76
HQ4	MOL000359	sitosterol	36.91	0.75
HQ5	MOL000525	norwogonin	39.4	0.21
HQ6	MOL000552	5,2'-Dihydroxy-6,7,8-trimethoxyflavone	31.71	0.35
HQ7	MOL001689	acacetin	34.97	0.24
HQ8	MOL002714	baicalein	33.52	0.21
HQ9	MOL002879	diop	43.59	0.39
HQ10	MOL002909	5,7,2,5-tetrahydroxy-8,6-dimethoxyflavone	33.82	0.45
HQ11	MOL002914	eriodyctiol (flavanone)	41.35	0.24
HQ12	MOL002915	salvigenin	49.07	0.33
HQ13	MOL002917	5,2',6'-Trihydroxy-7,8-dimethoxyflavone	45.05	0.33
HQ14	MOL002925	5,7,2',6'-Tetrahydroxyflavone	37.01	0.24
HQ15	MOL002927	skullcapflavone II	69.51	0.44
HQ16	MOL002928	oroxylin a	41.37	0.23
HQ17	MOL002932	panicolin	76.26	0.29
HQ18	MOL002933	5,7,4'-Trihydroxy-8-methoxyflavone	36.56	0.27
HQ19	MOL002934	neobaicalein	104.34	0.44
HQ20	MOL002937	dihydrooroxylin	66.06	0.23
HQ21	MOL008206	moslosooflavone	44.09	0.25

HQ22	MOL012245	5,7,4'-trihydroxy-6-methoxyflavanone	36.63	0.27
HQ23	MOL012246	5,7,4'-trihydroxy-8-methoxyflavanone	74.24	0.26
HQ24	MOL012266	rivularin	37.94	0.37
HB1	MOL000787	fumarine	59.26	23.46
HB2	MOL000790	isocorypalmine	35.77	2.47
HB3	MOL001131	phellamurin_qt	56.6	14.89
HB4	MOL001455	(S)-Canadine	53.83	6.56
HB5	MOL001771	poriferast-5-en-3β-ol	36.91	5.07
HB6	MOL002641	phellavin_qt	35.86	15.81
HB7	MOL002643	delta 7-stigmastenol	37.42	5.27
HB8	MOL002644	phellopterin	40.19	-1.64
HB9	MOL002651	dehydrotanshinone II A	43.76	23.71
HB10	MOL002662	rutaecarpine	40.3	8.21
HB11	MOL002663	skimmianin	40.14	-2.43
HB12	MOL002666	chelerythrine	34.18	6.32
HB13	MOL002670	cavidine	35.64	5.78
HB14	MOL005438	campesterol	37.58	4.83
HB15	MOL006422	thalifendine	44.41	5.99
ZZ1	MOL000422	kaempferol	41.88	0.24
ZZ2	MOL001406	crocetin	35.3	0.26
ZZ3	MOL001941	ammidin	34.55	0.22
ZZ4	MOL003095	5-hydroxy-7-methoxy-2-(3,4,5-trimethoxyphenyl)chromone	51.96	0.41
ZZ5	MOL004561	sudan III	84.07	0.59
ZZ6	MOL007245	3-Methylkempferol	60.16	0.26

Herb

HL, HB, ZZ
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Table 2. Top 10 core targets in AD treatment with HLJDD.

NO	Hub Gene	Degree
1	TP53	29
2	AKT1	27
3	TNF	23
4	IL6	19
5	MAPK1	16
6	IL1B	15
7	ESR1	15
8	IFNG	14
9	FN1	13
10	CCND1	12

Table 3. Enrichment results of AD target pat

GO	Description	Count
hsa05200	Pathways in cancer	49
hsa05417	Lipid and atherosclerosis	37
hsa05161	Hepatitis B	26
hsa05160	Hepatitis C	23
hsa05164	Influenza A	23
hsa04657	IL-17 signaling pathway	19
hsa05167	Kaposi sarcoma-associated herpesvirus infection	23
hsa05163	Human cytomegalovirus infection	24
hsa05145	Toxoplasmosis	19
hsa05162	Measles	20
hsa05142	Chagas disease	18
hsa04668	TNF signaling pathway	18
hsa05152	Tuberculosis	20
hsa05165	Human papillomavirus infection	24
hsa04932	Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease	19
hsa05169	Epstein-Barr virus infection	20
hsa05140	Leishmaniasis	15
hsa05022	Pathways of neurodegeneration - multiple diseases	26
hsa04210	Apoptosis	16
hsa05170	Human immunodeficiency virus 1 infection	18

LogP
-49.95292154
-47.56139879
-32.32697146
-27.61024615
-26.71596954
-25.66472621
-25.40864786
-25.38720219
-24.10338032
-23.84925454
-23.17567175
-22.24865244
-21.52248748
-21.34905467
-21.28826547
-20.50271665
-20.05713349
-20.02463744
-17.67616364
-17.26562441

Table 4. Docking results of core components and key target molecules.

Target	Component quercetin	β-sitosterol	stigmasterol	kaempferol	wogonin
TP53	-5.49	-6.78	-7.7	-5.43	-5.56
AKT1	-5.46	-7.31	-7.79	-6.13	-4.89
TNF	-5.52	-6.7	-7.24	-6.81	-5.5
IL6	-5.28	-6.88	-7.1	-5.74	-5.48
MAPK1	-6.45	-6.89	-7.32	-6.18	-5.99