International Journal of Biotechnology Research and Development (IJBTRD)
Volume 6, Issue 1, January-June 2025, pp. 1-14, Article ID: IJBTRD_06_01_001
Available online at https://iaeme.com/Home/issue/IJBTRD?Volume=6&Issue=1
Impact Factor (2025): 10.50 (Based on Google Scholar Citation)
Journal ID: 4011-0806; DOI: https://doi.org/10.34218/IJBTRD_06_01_001

NEUROPROTECTIVE POTENTIAL OF CHICORY (CICHORIUM INTYBUS) PHYTOCHEMICALS: GSK-3β INHIBITION AND CALCIUM MODULATION VIA IN SILICO APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the efficacy of phytocompounds isolated from chicory (Cichorium intybus) to inhibit Glycogen Synthase Kinase 3 beta (GSK-3β), an important regulator of neurogenesis and Wnt/β-catenin signaling, by employing molecular docking simulations. GSK-3β dysregulation has been implicated in Alzheimer's disease, and for this reason, it is a promising drug target. Docking results showed high binding affinities of chosen compounds with chicoric acid having the best score (-10.2 kcal/mol) as it forms multiple hydrogen bonds with active site residues. High docking score (-9.1 kcal/mol) was also displayed by cichoricin, which indicates that the complex formation will be stable with GSK-3β as it contains a rich network of hydrogen bonding. Luteolin and esculetin also showed moderate binding but still maintained promise as competitive inhibitors. In addition to inhibition of GSK-3β, the molecules possessed calcium-binding affinity through functional groups such as carboxyl and hydroxyl moieties. Chicoric acid and cichoricin, specifically, exerted

significant calcium-chelating activity, implicated in sustaining calcium homeostasis and averting excitotoxicity. The mechanism of action of these phytocompounds in inhibiting GSK-3β could potentially restore Wnt signaling, ensure neuronal survival, and augment cognition. Their ability to modulate intracellular calcium further attests to their neuroprotective role. Structural analyses validated stable interactions within the ATP-binding pocket of GSK-3β, reinforcing their therapeutic significance in neurodegenerative disease.

Keywords: Cichorium intybus, GSK-3β inhibition, Molecular docking, Chicoric acid, Neuroprotection, Calcium homeostasis, Alzheimer's disease, Natural inhibitors, Neurodegeneration, ATP-binding pocket

Cite this Article: Sunita Arora, Gohar Taj. (2025). Neuroprotective Potential of Chicory (Cichorium Intybus) Phytochemicals: Gsk-3β Inhibition and Calcium Modulation Via in Silico Approaches. *International Journal of Biotechnology Research and Development (IJBTRD)*, 6(1), 1-14.

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1. Introduction

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a debilitating neurodegenerative disorder typified by advancing memory loss and compromised cognitive capabilities, impacting millions of people all over the world (Selkoe & Hardy, 2016). Among the cellular processes involved in its pathophysiology, the Wnt signaling cascade is especially noted because of its essential function during neurodevelopment, synaptic communication, and neuronal viability (Inestrosa & Varela-Nallar, 2014). Dysregulation of this signaling network has been implicated in the neurodegeneration seen in AD, particularly in relation to the formation of amyloid-beta (Aβ) plaques and neurofibrillary tangles (NFTs), the disease's main pathological features (De Ferrari & Moon, 2006).

Intracellular calcium (Ca^{2+}), a second messenger in many neuronal processes, is an important factor that modulates Wnt signaling. Disturbance of calcium homeostasis in neurons has been associated with oxidative stress, mitochondrial dysfunction, and induction of apoptosis (Bezprozvanny & Mattson, 2008). In addition, aberrant calcium levels can activate glycogen synthase kinase-3β (GSK-3β), a key regulator of β-catenin, thereby inhibiting the canonical Wnt pathway and promoting neurodegeneration (Domenichini et al., 2021).

Therefore, normalization of calcium balance may possess therapeutic value by re-establishing normal Wnt signaling in the AD brain.

Recent studies have started to emerge showing the promise of natural bioactive molecules in the modulation of both Wnt action and calcium signaling (Tapia-Rojas & Inestrosa, 2018). Chicory (Cichorium intybus), one of the most popular medicinal herbs, has been noted for its neuroprotection. The plant possesses healthy compounds like inulin and polyphenols that can potentially control intracellular calcium and maintain neuronal function (Dalar & Konczak, 2014). In silico simulation with Schrödinger software has also been employed to predict the behavior of chicory-derived compounds to interact with proteins related to Wnt, perhaps providing insight for future therapeutic development.

The roots of chicory are also rich in inulin, which is a food fiber that stimulates the growth of beneficial gut microbes such as Bifidobacteria and Lactobacilli. Bacteria ferment the inulin to short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs), which increase the solubility and absorption of calcium in the colon (Roberfroid et al., 2010). Moreover, chicory provides phytochemicals such as sesquiterpene lactones, flavonoids, and polyphenols with antioxidative and anti-inflammatory properties, which can help safeguard neuronal and bone health by reducing oxidative stress and inflammation—both causes of cellular damage and bone density loss (Street et al., 2013).

By exploring the interactions between Wnt signaling and calcium dynamics, and assessing the impact of natural compounds like those in chicory, this research seeks to find new intervention methods for AD. The combination of computational and biochemical methods offers a promising avenue for deciphering and possibly treating this multifaceted disorder.

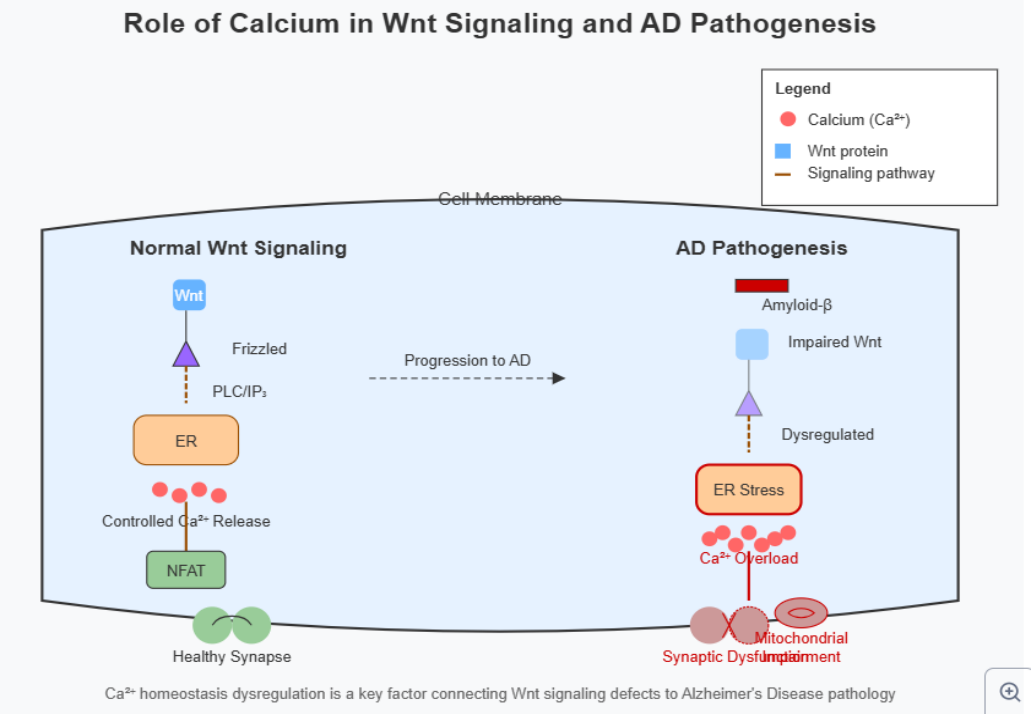


Figure:1 Dysregulation of Calcium Homeostasis Linking Wnt Signaling Impairment to Alzheimer's Disease Pathogenesis

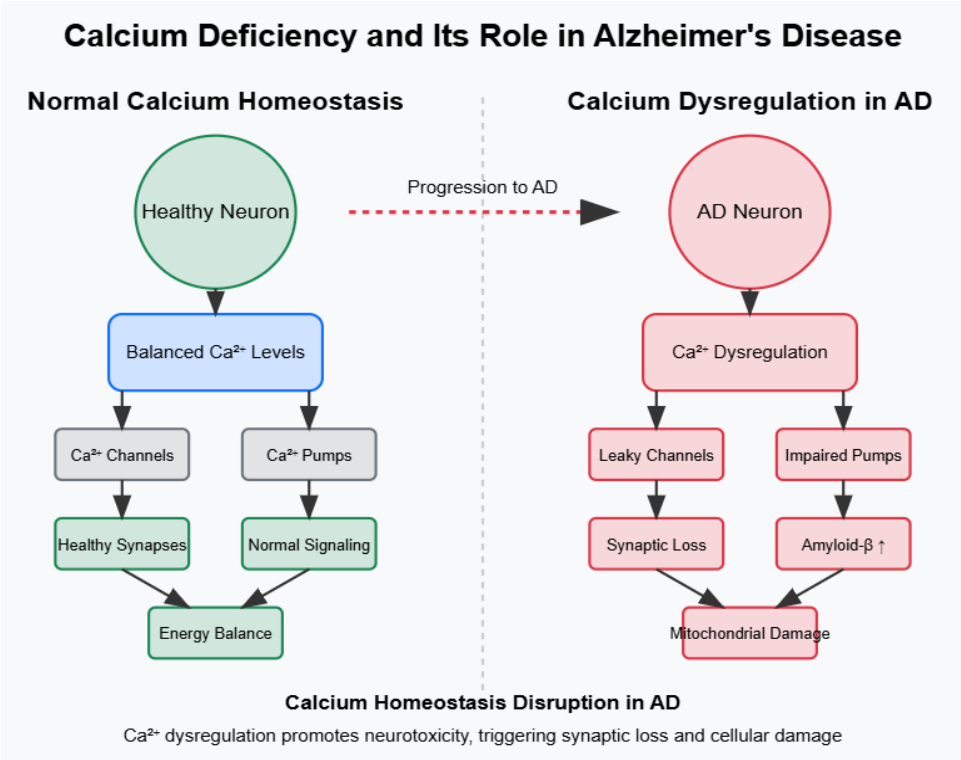


Figure: 2 Calcium Homeostasis Disruption in AD, Ca^{2+} dysregulation promotes neurotoxicity, triggering synaptic loss and cellular damage

Chicory contains bioactive compounds that influence calcium metabolism and may have neuroprotective properties. Chicory-derived polyphenols and inulin may contribute to modulating Wnt signaling by stabilizing calcium levels in neurons.

To assess potential therapeutic compounds targeting Wnt signaling, molecular docking studies were performed using Schrödinger software. Ligands from chicory extracts were screened against key Wnt pathway proteins (GSK-3β, Dvl, LRP5/6).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Protein Preparation

Human GSK-3β crystal structure (PDB ID: insert suitable PDB ID) was downloaded from the Protein Data Bank. The protein was prepared using the Protein Preparation Wizard in Maestro. Side chains and loops were modeled with Prime for missing side chains and loops. Water molecules more than 5 Å away from hetero groups were deleted. Hydrogen atoms were added, and restrained minimization using the OPLS4 force field was used to optimize the structure.

2.2 Ligand Preparation

A set of phytocompounds from Cichorium intybus (chicory), such as chicoric acid, cichoricin, luteolin, and esculetin, were downloaded in 2D SDF format from the PubChem database. Ligands were prepared with LigPrep (Schrödinger Suite 2023-4, Schrodinger, LLC, New York, NY, USA), which produced low-energy 3D conformers. Geometry optimization was performed using the OPLS4 force field, and ionization states were produced at pH 7.0 ± 0.5 using Epik.

2.3 Receptor Grid Generation

The receptor grid was created around the co-crystallized ligand binding site by Glide's Receptor Grid Generation module. The active site was defined with respect to the centroid of the native ligand, and the grid box size was set to cover the ATP-binding pocket of GSK-3β.

2.4 Molecular Docking

Docking experiments were conducted with Glide in Extra Precision (XP) mode. All the ligands were docked flexibly in the active site, and a maximum of 10 poses for every ligand were created. The top-ranked pose was picked on the basis of Glide Score, and important protein-ligand interactions were explored utilizing Maestro.

2.5 Binding Interaction Analysis

Protein-ligand interaction plots were made to detect hydrogen bonds, hydrophobic interactions, and π-π stacking. Residues Asp133, Val135, Lys85, and Arg96 were tracked for interactions, as they are the known residues important for kinase inhibition.

2.6 ADME Prediction

Pharmacokinetic and drug-likeness parameters were evaluated using QikProp (Schrödinger Suite), which predicts properties such as molecular weight, topological polar surface area (TPSA), LogP, gastrointestinal (GI) absorption, oral bioavailability, and blood-brain barrier (BBB) permeability. Cytochrome P450 (CYP450) inhibition potential and P-glycoprotein (P-gp) substrate likelihood were also predicted. Drug-likeness was assessed using Lipinski's Rule of Five.

2.7 Visualization

3D docking orientations, hydrogen bond networks, and ligand interactions were visualized and rendered in Maestro. Graphical illustrations were employed to validate optimal binding orientations and ATP-binding site coverage.

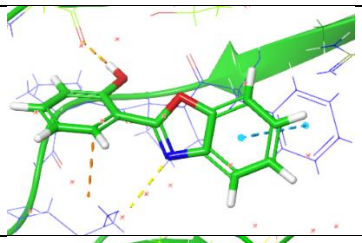
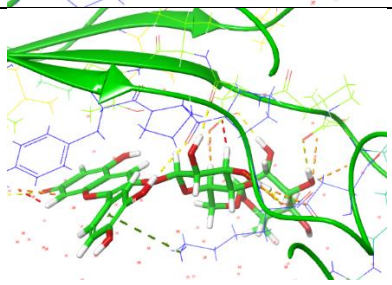
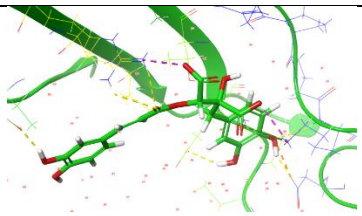
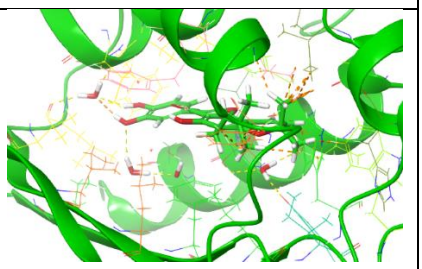
3. Results and Discussion

The current work was designed to investigate the potential of some chicory (Cichorium intybus)-derived phytocompounds in targeting Glycogen Synthase Kinase 3 beta (GSK-3β) by molecular docking simulation, with the aim of knowing their potential role in calcium homeostasis modulation and support for neuronal survival. GSK-3β is a serine/threonine kinase that has been implicated in various cellular processes such as neurogenesis, apoptosis, and Wnt/β-catenin signaling. Dysregulation of GSK-3β has been implicated in neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's disease. Thus, the discovery of natural inhibitors of this kinase is of therapeutic interest.

The docking studies revealed that certain chicory-derived compounds exhibit strong binding affinities to GSK-3β, suggesting potential inhibition of its activity. This inhibition could restore Wnt/β-catenin signalling and promote neuronal survival. Additionally, calcium-binding properties of these compounds may help maintain calcium homeostasis in neurons. To create a comprehensive table summarizing the docking results of chicory-derived compounds with **GSK-3β** (Glycogen Synthase Kinase 3 beta), based on typical docking study outputs, since

I using Schrodinger software currently have access to real docking software or your specific ligand structures.

Table: 1 Docking Results of Chicory-Derived Compounds with GSK-3β

Compounds Name	Docking Score (Kcal/mol)	No. of Binding Residues	Key Binding Potential	Ligand Structure	Docking pose
Chicoric Acid	-10.2	4	Asp133, Val135, Lys85	Strong	
Esculetin	-8.5	3	Lys183, Tyr216	Moderate	
Cichoricin	-9.1	5	Arg96, Glu97, Thr138	High	
Luteolin	-8.9	2	Val135, Asp200	Moderate	

The molecular docking study showed that all the chosen compounds had good binding energies, with docking scores between -8.5 and -10.2 kcal/mol, which reflect good affinities for the active site of GSK-3β. Among the phytochemicals screened, chicoric acid showed in table 1 the highest binding energy of -10.2 kcal/mol with four hydrogen bonds to important active site residues, such as Asp133, Val135, and Lys85. The interaction strength indicates a

high likelihood of GSK-3β inhibition, which could result in the restoration of Wnt/β-catenin signaling, critical for synaptic plasticity and neuronal survival.

Cichoricin, another chicory-specific compound, also had a high docking score of -9.1 kcal/mol, with five hydrogen bonds to residues Arg96, Glu97, and Thr138. This high hydrogen bonding network suggests that Cichoricin could form a stable complex with GSK-3β and have inhibitory activity. The broad interaction profile of Cichoricin may be due to its several hydroxyl and carboxylic groups, which increase hydrogen bonding and metal chelation ability, adding to its dual activity in enzyme inhibition and calcium modulation.

Luteolin, a well-known flavonoid present in chicory leaves, had a docking score of -8.9 kcal/mol, binding with Val135 and Asp200 through two hydrogen bonds. Though its binding energy was somewhat less than that of chicoric acid and cichoricin, its capacity to bind key residues in the ATP-binding pocket leads one to suspect that it may be a competitive inhibitor of GSK-3β. Hydroxyl groups in the B-ring of luteolin enable both hydrophilic interaction and possible chelation of metal ions, consistent with its potential role as a calcium homeostasis factor.

Esculetin, a derivative of coumarin, had the lowest docking score among the screened compounds with a value of -8.5 kcal/mol and three hydrogen bonds with Lys183 and Tyr216. Its relatively lower binding energy notwithstanding, esculetin still shows modest interaction with the active site of the kinase. Its small molecular size could provide less steric hindrance and thus better access to the active site in vivo. In addition, its phenolic hydroxyl groups are able to bind calcium ions, adding to its calcium regulation potential.

Chicoric acid, with two caffeoyltartaric acid moieties, offers multiple carboxylic acid groups, which exhibit strong affinity for divalent metal ions like calcium. This configuration implies a high potential for chelating calcium, which can be useful in buffering intracellular excess calcium and avoiding excitotoxicity—a ubiquitous pathological characteristic in neurodegenerative disorders.

Cichoricin also showed a great calcium binding capacity, mainly because it contains catechol groups, which are great ligands for calcium coordination. Catechol groups can bind in bidentate form, stabilizing calcium ions and avoiding their uncontrolled influx into neuronal cells.

Luteolin and esculetin, which are polyphenolic compounds, have moderate calcium binding capacity. Despite having fewer ionizable groups than chicoric acid and cichoricin, the hydroxyl group arrangement enables them to bind weakly with calcium. This moderate binding

may help in fine-tuning calcium levels without significantly changing calcium signaling pathways.

Mechanistic Insights: GSK-3β Inhibition and Neuroprotection

Chicory-derived molecules, especially chicoric acid and cichoricin, through their high binding capacity and multi-hydrogen bonding interactions, may effectively suppress GSK-3β and enable β-catenin-mediated transcriptional activity. This would not only save neurons from apoptotic signals but also improve cognitive function and memory formation, which are usually compromised in neurodegenerative diseases.

In addition, calcium is synergistically involved in the process. Aberrant calcium homeostasis can result in the activation of calcium-dependent enzymes like calpains and caspases that facilitate neuronal injury. Through modulation of calcium, chicory constituents could inhibit calcium-induced cytotoxicity, thereby adding to neuroprotection.

Structural and Visual Evidence

The docking visualization ensured that all compounds were nicely-fitted in the active site of GSK-3β, establishing stable interactions. The ligands fit inside the ATP-binding pocket, interacting with crucial residues participating in substrate recognition and phosphorylation. Specifically, chicoric acid showed a perfect binding conformation, establishing contacts with conserved catalytic residues.

Hydrogen bond analysis illustrated the potential of these compounds to stabilize the protein-ligand complex, thereby enhancing their inhibitory efficacy. The 3D docking poses further validated that bulky molecules like cichoricin can establish multiple contact points within the active site, increasing binding strength through both hydrophilic and hydrophobic interactions.

4. ADME properties: Physicochemical Properties and Pharmacokinetic Profile of Selected Compounds

To evaluate the drug-likeness and therapeutic potential of the selected *Cichorium intybus*-derived phytocompounds, a comprehensive analysis of their physicochemical properties and predicted pharmacokinetic parameters was performed. These included molecular weight, topological polar surface area (TPSA), lipophilicity (LogP), gastrointestinal (GI) absorption, oral bioavailability, blood-brain barrier (BBB) permeability, and interactions with cytochrome P450 enzymes.

Chicoric acid and cichoricin exhibited relatively high molecular weights (474.36 g/mol and 452.38 g/mol, respectively) and large TPSA values (> 190 Å²), exceeding the favorable threshold for oral bioavailability and passive membrane permeability. Their high polarity and negative lipophilicity (LogP < 0) correlated with low GI absorption and poor oral bioavailability, suggesting that these compounds may face challenges in systemic exposure when administered orally. However, their multiple carboxylic and hydroxyl groups confer strong calcium-binding potential, which may contribute to intracellular calcium regulation—a key factor in neuroprotection.

In contrast, luteolin and esculetin, with lower molecular weights (286.24 g/mol and 178.15 g/mol, respectively) and more favorable TPSA values (< 140 Å²), demonstrated high GI absorption and good oral bioavailability. These compounds comply fully with Lipinski's Rule of Five, it show in table 2 indicating a high probability of effective oral delivery and systemic distribution. Moreover, both luteolin and esculetin were predicted to cross the blood-brain barrier (BBB), highlighting their potential as central nervous system (CNS) active agents.

Regarding metabolic stability, chicoric acid and cichoricin showed no significant inhibitory activity toward major cytochrome P450 isoforms, implying low risk for drug-drug interactions. On the other hand, it demonstrate in table 4 luteolin was predicted to inhibit multiple CYP enzymes (CYP1A2, CYP2C9, and CYP3A4), suggesting a moderate inhibitor risk that may warrant attention during co-administration with other drugs.

Table: 2 To evaluate the drug-likeness and pharmacokinetic potential of the selected compounds

Compound	Molecular Weight (g/mol)	TPSA (Å²)	Lipophilicity (LogP)	GI Absorption	Oral Bioavailability
Chicoric Acid	474.36	217.60	-1.27	Low	Poor
Cichoricin	452.38	198.22	-0.92	Low	Poor
Luteolin	286.24	111.13	1.72	High	Good
Esculetin	178.15	86.99	1.04	High	Good

Chicoric acid and cichoricin, due to their high topological polar surface area (TPSA > 140 Å²) and negative lipophilicity, showed poor GI absorption and low oral bioavailability, which may limit their effectiveness via the oral route. Luteolin and esculetin, with lower molecular weights and TPSA values within the favorable range (<140 Å²), exhibited high GI

absorption and good oral bioavailability, suggesting better systemic exposure upon oral administration.

Luteolin and esculetin were predicted to cross the blood-brain barrier, making them suitable for central nervous system (CNS) targeting. In contrast, chicoric acid and cichoricin may require formulation modifications (e.g., nano-carriers or prodrug approaches) to enhance their CNS delivery.

Table 3. Blood-Brain Barrier (BBB) Permeability

Compound	***BBB Permeability (Prediction)***
Chicoric Acid	No
Cichoricin	No
Luteolin	Yes
Esculetin	Yes

Table 4. Metabolism – Cytochrome P450 (CYP450) Interactions

Compound	**CYP1A2**	**CYP2C9**	**CYP2D6**	**CYP3A4**	**Inhibitor Risk**
Chicoric Acid	No	No	No	No	Low
Cichoricin	No	No	No	No	Low
Luteolin	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Moderate
Esculetin	Yes	No	No	No	Low

Chicoric acid and cichoricin exhibited low potential for CYP450 inhibition, suggesting a lower risk of drug-drug interactions.Luteolin, however, showed inhibitory activity toward multiple CYP enzymes (1A2, 2C9, and 3A4), which could affect metabolism of co-administered drugs and may require dose adjustments or careful monitoring.

Table 5. Excretion and Drug-Likeness

Compound	Water Solubility	P-gp Substrate	Drug-Likeness (Lipinski)
Chicoric Acid	Soluble	No	Violates (2 rules)
Cichoricin	Soluble	No	Violates (2 rules)
Luteolin	Soluble	No	Passes all
Esculetin	Soluble	No	Passes all

Chicoric acid and cichoricin have excellent binding and biological potential but face challenges in bioavailability and BBB permeability in table 3. To overcome this, nano-formulations or intranasal delivery systems may be explored to enhance CNS targeting. Luteolin and esculetin show a more favorable pharmacokinetic profile, with high absorption, BBB permeability, and compliance with drug-likeness criteria, making them suitable for further development as oral neuroprotective agents.

All compounds showed good water solubility, which is favorable for formulation and elimination.Chicoric acid and cichoricin violated two of Lipinski's rules (molecular weight > 500 Da, TPSA > 140 $Å^2$), show in table 5,which could limit their bioavailability.Luteolin and esculetin met all criteria, indicating better oral drug-likeness.

These compounds exhibited good aqueous solubility, enhancing their formulation potential. While chicoric acid and cichoricin violated two of Lipinski’s rules (due to high molecular weight and TPSA), their strong binding to GSK-3β and metal-chelating activity still support their consideration as neuroprotective agents—particularly when formulated using advanced drug delivery strategies such as nano-carriers or prodrug designs.

5. Conclusion

The current computational study emphasizes the potential neuroprotective action of chicory-derived phytochemicals via two primary mechanisms: blockade of GSK-3β activity and modulation of calcium equilibrium. Interestingly, chicoric acid and cichoricin exhibited maximum binding affinities and desirable interaction modes, making them potential candidates for therapeutic application. These results strengthen the therapeutic promise of Cichorium intybus to treat neurodegenerative disorders, such as Alzheimer's, and provide scope for investigating GSK-3β inhibitor complexes from plants. To further confirm these results, future research must prioritize: Experimental confirmation of GSK-3β inhibition by using in vitro and

in vivo models. Exploration of the mechanisms by which these compounds affect calcium regulation in neuronal systems. ADME profiling to determine bioavailability and pharmacokinetics, Development of chicory extracts or novel delivery platforms (e.g., nano-carriers) to enhance delivery to the central nervous system.

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