BioNexus Bulletin
Content Available at www.saap.org.in
(An International Online Peer-Reviewed Journal) ISSN (O): 3139-2407

Review Article
OPEN ACCESS

NOVEL HETEROCYCLIC SCAFFOLDS IN DRUG DISCOVERY: DESIGN STRATEGIES AND THERAPEUTIC APPLICATIONS

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Article History: Received: 25 Aug 2025, Revised: 19 Oct 2025, Accepted: 09 Nov 2025

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Abstract
Heterocyclic compounds constitute a cornerstone of modern medicinal chemistry due to their structural diversity, tunable physicochemical properties, and broad biological activity. A significant proportion of approved drugs contain one or more heterocyclic rings, underscoring their importance in drug discovery and development. Recent advances in synthetic chemistry, computational design, and biological screening have enabled the identification of novel heterocyclic scaffolds with enhanced therapeutic potential. This review highlights contemporary strategies for the design and synthesis of novel heterocyclic frameworks and discusses their applications across major therapeutic areas, including oncology, infectious diseases, and central nervous system disorders. Emerging trends such as scaffold hopping, bioisosteric replacement, and privileged structure exploration are examined, along with current challenges and future perspectives in heterocycle-based drug discovery.

Keywords: *Heterocyclic compounds; Drug discovery; Medicinal chemistry; Scaffold design; Bioisosterism; Therapeutic agents*

INTRODUCTION

Heterocyclic chemistry plays a pivotal role in pharmaceutical research, as heterocycles offer unique electronic and steric features that enhance molecular recognition and biological activity. More than half of all small-molecule drugs contain heterocyclic moieties, reflecting their versatility in modulating potency, selectivity, and pharmacokinetic properties [1].

The continuous demand for safer and more effective therapeutics has driven the exploration of novel heterocyclic scaffolds. Advances in synthetic methodologies and computational tools have expanded access to structurally diverse heterocycles, enabling the rational design of molecules tailored to specific biological targets [2].

IMPORTANCE OF HETEROCYCLIC SCAFFOLDS IN MEDICINAL CHEMISTRY

Heterocycles provide multiple interaction points for binding to biological macromolecules through hydrogen bonding, π–π stacking, and electrostatic interactions [3]. The incorporation of heteroatoms such as nitrogen, oxygen, and sulfur allows fine-tuning of lipophilicity, polarity, and metabolic stability.

Privileged heterocyclic structures, including indoles, pyridines, quinazolines, and triazoles, frequently appear in bioactive compounds and marketed drugs [4]. Modifying these scaffolds has proven effective in optimizing lead compounds and overcoming resistance mechanisms.

DESIGN STRATEGIES FOR NOVEL HETEROCYCLIC SCAFFOLDS

1. Scaffold Hopping and Bioisosteric Replacement

Scaffold hopping involves replacing the core structure of a bioactive molecule with an alternative heterocyclic framework while retaining biological activity [5]. Bioisosteric replacement of functional groups or ring systems improves selectivity, reduces toxicity, and enhances pharmacokinetic profiles [6].

2. Structure-Based and Ligand-Based Design

Structure-based drug design (SBDD) leverages three-dimensional target structures to guide heterocycle selection and optimization [7]. Ligand-based approaches, including quantitative structure–activity relationship (QSAR) modeling, assist in identifying heterocyclic motifs associated with enhanced biological activity [8].

3. Diversity-Oriented and Multicomponent Synthesis

Diversity-oriented synthesis (DOS) enables the rapid generation of structurally diverse heterocyclic libraries for biological screening [9]. Multicomponent reactions provide efficient access to complex heterocycles with

high atom economy and structural variation, supporting rapid lead identification [10].

THERAPEUTIC APPLICATIONS OF NOVEL HETEROCYCLES

1. Anticancer Agents

Heterocyclic scaffolds such as quinazolines, indazoles, and pyrimidines are widely used in anticancer drug design due to their ability to inhibit kinases and other cancer-related enzymes [11]. Novel heterocycles continue to emerge as potent and selective anticancer agents.

2. Antimicrobial and Antiviral Drugs

The rise of drug-resistant pathogens has intensified interest in heterocyclic compounds with novel mechanisms of action. Nitrogen-containing heterocycles, including imidazoles and triazoles, have shown broad-spectrum antimicrobial and antiviral activity [12].

3. Central Nervous System Disorders

Heterocycles such as benzodiazepines, indoles, and pyridines play a crucial role in CNS drug development by interacting with neurotransmitter receptors and ion channels [13]. Rational scaffold modification has led to improved brain penetration and reduced side effects.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Despite their advantages, heterocyclic compounds may present challenges related to synthetic complexity, metabolic instability, and off-target effects [14]. Future research is expected to focus on greener synthetic methods, AI-assisted scaffold design, and integrated pharmacokinetic optimization.

The convergence of computational chemistry, high-throughput screening, and advanced synthesis will continue to accelerate the discovery of novel heterocyclic drugs [15].

CONCLUSION

Novel heterocyclic scaffolds remain indispensable in drug discovery due to their structural diversity and broad therapeutic potential. Advances in design strategies, synthetic methodologies, and biological evaluation have significantly expanded the heterocyclic chemical space available to medicinal chemists. Continued innovation in this field is expected to yield next-generation therapeutics addressing unmet medical needs across multiple disease areas.

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