Machine Learning-Based Predictive Toxicology for Early-Stage Drug De-Risking: An XGBoost Approach with SHAP-Driven Structural Interpretation

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Abstract

Background: Drug-induced toxicity remains a leading cause of attrition in pharmaceutical development, with safety-related failures accounting for approximately 30% of clinical trial terminations. Computational approaches for early toxicity prediction can significantly reduce development costs and improve candidate selection.

Methods: We developed a machine learning pipeline using the Tox21 high-throughput screening dataset comprising 6,258 compounds with hepatotoxicity-related assay outcomes. Molecular structures were encoded using Morgan circular fingerprints (2,048 bits, radius 2) via RDKit. An XGBoost classifier was trained with stratified 5-fold cross-validation to address class imbalance (7.8:1 ratio). Model interpretability was achieved through SHAP (SHapley Additive exPlanations) analysis to identify toxicity-driving substructures.

Results: The model achieved robust predictive performance with mean ROC-AUC of 0.856 $\pm$ 0.027 across cross-validation folds. Application to five proprietary lead compounds revealed LEAD_002 as the lowest-risk candidate (toxicity probability: 7.8%) and LEAD_005 as highest-risk (33.4%). SHAP analysis identified the quinazolinone core in LEAD_005 as the primary toxicity driver, with fingerprint bits encoding nitrogen-containing heterocyclic patterns contributing most substantially to elevated predictions.

Conclusions: This work demonstrates the utility of interpretable machine learning for early-stage drug de-risking. The combination of robust classification performance with mechanistic interpretability through SHAP enables actionable guidance for medicinal chemistry optimization. Integration of such computational toxicity assessments into drug discovery workflows can prioritize safer candidates while reducing reliance on animal models.

Keywords: Predictive toxicology; XGBoost; SHAP values; Morgan fingerprints; Drug discovery; Tox21; Hepatotoxicity

1 Introduction

The pharmaceutical industry faces a persistent challenge in drug development: approximately 30% of drug candidates fail during clinical trials due to safety concerns, with hepatotoxicity representing one of the most common causes of withdrawal (Kola and Landis, 2004; Waring et al., 2015). This high attrition rate translates to substantial financial losses, with estimates suggesting that each failed drug candidate costs between $800 million and $1.4 billion when accounting for opportunity costs and development expenses. Furthermore, unexpected toxicity in later stages of development raises ethical concerns regarding patient safety in clinical trials.

Early-stage computational toxicity prediction offers a promising strategy for de-risking drug discovery pipelines by identifying potentially hazardous compounds before committing to expensive *in vivo* studies. Machine learning approaches, in particular, have demonstrated significant

utility in predicting various toxicity endpoints from molecular structure alone (Mayr et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2018). These methods can rapidly screen virtual compound libraries and prioritize candidates with favorable safety profiles, thereby reducing both development costs and time-to-market.

The Toxicology in the 21st Century (Tox21) program represents a landmark initiative in computational toxicology, providing high-throughput screening data across multiple toxicity endpoints for thousands of environmental chemicals and pharmaceutical compounds (Lynch et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2016). The program, a collaboration between the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and National Toxicology Program (NTP), has generated quantitative high-throughput screening (qHTS) data across more than 70 assays targeting nuclear receptors, stress response pathways, and cellular toxicity markers (Richard et al., 2016). These datasets enable the development and validation of predictive models that can extrapolate learned structure-activity relationships to novel compounds.

Molecular fingerprints serve as the foundation for structure-based toxicity prediction, encoding chemical structures as numerical feature vectors amenable to machine learning algorithms. Morgan fingerprints, also known as Extended Connectivity Fingerprints (ECFP), have emerged as a particularly effective representation for toxicity prediction (Rogers and Hahn, 2010). These circular fingerprints encode atomic environments by iteratively expanding neighborhood radii, capturing both local and extended structural features that correlate with biological activity and toxicity (Kim et al., 2024; Banerjee et al., 2021).

Among machine learning algorithms, gradient boosting methods—particularly XGBoost—have demonstrated strong performance on toxicity prediction tasks, especially when dealing with the class imbalance characteristic of toxicity datasets where active (toxic) compounds represent a small minority (Chen and Guestrin, 2016; de la Vega-Corredor et al., 2025). The built-in handling of class imbalance through sample weighting, combined with regularization mechanisms that prevent overfitting, makes XGBoost well-suited for toxicity classification where false negatives (missed toxic compounds) carry substantial downstream consequences.

Beyond accurate prediction, understanding *why* a model predicts a compound as toxic is crucial for guiding medicinal chemistry optimization. SHAP (SHapley Additive exPlanations) values provide a theoretically grounded framework for model interpretation based on coalitional game theory (Lundberg and Lee, 2017). By quantifying each feature's contribution to moving a prediction from the baseline to the actual output, SHAP analysis enables identification of specific molecular substructures driving toxicity predictions (Seal and Mahale, 2025; Bai et al., 2025). This mechanistic interpretability transforms black-box predictions into actionable insights for structural modification.

In this study, we present a comprehensive machine learning pipeline for hepatotoxicity prediction using Tox21 data, with application to five proprietary lead compounds under consideration for advancement in a drug discovery program. Our objectives were threefold: (1) develop a robust XGBoost classifier with validated performance metrics, (2) generate toxicity probability scores for lead compound prioritization, and (3) identify structural features responsible for elevated toxicity risk using SHAP analysis. This integrated approach demonstrates how computational toxicology can inform early-stage decision-making in pharmaceutical research and development.

2 Methods

2.1 Data Acquisition and Preprocessing

Training data were obtained from the Tox21 program via the PubChem database (AID 743122), focusing on the SR-MMP (stress response mitochondrial membrane potential) assay as a proxy

for hepatotoxicity-related cellular stress. The mitochondrial membrane potential assay captures compounds that disrupt mitochondrial function, a mechanism implicated in drug-induced liver injury (He et al., 2024; Lee and Posma, 2025).

The dataset comprised 6,258 compounds with experimentally determined binary activity labels. Class distribution was highly imbalanced, with 5,547 (88.6%) negative (non-toxic) compounds and 711 (11.4%) positive (toxic) compounds, yielding an imbalance ratio of 7.8:1. All compounds were provided as SMILES (Simplified Molecular Input Line Entry System) strings, which were validated for chemical structure integrity prior to featurization.

Five proprietary lead compounds (designated LEAD_001 through LEAD_005) were provided by the R&D team for toxicity assessment. These compounds represent diverse chemical scaffolds under consideration for advancement, with SMILES representations listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Lead Compounds Under Evaluation

Compound	**SMILES**
LEAD_001	`CC(C)NCC(O)COc1ccccc1`
LEAD_002	`CN1CCN(CC1)c2ccc(OCC3CCCO3)cc2`
LEAD_003	`O=C(O)CCCCc1ccc(cc1)C(C)C`
LEAD_004	`CN1CCN(CC1)CCc2c[nH]c3ccccc23`
LEAD_005	`COc1ccc(cc1)C2=Nc3ccccc3N(C2=O)CC`

2.2 Molecular Featurization

Molecular structures were converted to numerical feature vectors using Morgan circular fingerprints, implemented via the RDKit library (version 2023.9.1) (Rogers and Hahn, 2010). Fingerprint parameters were selected based on established best practices for toxicity prediction:

- **Radius:** 2 (equivalent to ECFP4)
- **Number of bits:** 2,048
- **Implementation:** `AllChem.GetMorganFingerprintAsBitVect`

Morgan fingerprints encode circular atomic environments by hashing atom-centered substructures up to the specified radius. Each bit in the resulting vector indicates the presence (1) or absence (0) of specific substructural patterns. This representation captures both local chemical features (functional groups, heteroatoms) and extended connectivity patterns (ring systems, linker motifs) relevant to biological activity and toxicity (Kim et al., 2024).

2.3 Model Architecture and Training

XGBoost (eXtreme Gradient Boosting) was selected as the classification algorithm based on its demonstrated performance on imbalanced toxicity prediction tasks (Chen and Guestrin, 2016; de la Vega-Corredor et al., 2025; Al-Jubouri et al., 2025). The algorithm constructs an ensemble of decision trees through iterative gradient descent optimization, with built-in regularization to prevent overfitting.

Model hyperparameters were configured as follows:

Table 2: XGBoost Hyperparameter Configuration

Parameter	Value
n_estimators	100
max_depth	6
learning_rate	0.1
subsample	0.8
colsample_bytree	0.8
scale_pos_weight	7.80
objective	binary:logistic
eval_metric	AUC
random_state	42

The `scale_pos_weight` parameter was set equal to the class imbalance ratio (7.80) to address the disparity between toxic and non-toxic compounds by upweighting the minority class during training. This approach has been shown to improve sensitivity for toxic compound detection without requiring synthetic oversampling (Al-Jubouri et al., 2025).

2.4 Cross-Validation Strategy

Model performance was evaluated using stratified 5-fold cross-validation to ensure robust performance estimates and proper class balance across all folds. Stratification preserved the original class distribution (88.6%/11.4%) within each fold, preventing bias from uneven class representation.

Performance metrics computed across all folds included:

- **ROC-AUC:** Area under the receiver operating characteristic curve, measuring discriminative ability across all classification thresholds
- **Precision:** Proportion of predicted toxic compounds that are truly toxic
- **Recall (Sensitivity):** Proportion of truly toxic compounds correctly identified
- **F1-Score:** Harmonic mean of precision and recall
- **Accuracy:** Overall classification accuracy

2.5 Model Interpretability Analysis

For the highest-risk compound (LEAD_005), SHAP analysis was performed using the TreeExplainer algorithm, which provides exact Shapley value computations for tree-based models (Lundberg and Lee, 2017). This analysis quantified the contribution of each fingerprint bit (molecular substructure) to the predicted toxicity probability.

The SHAP analysis workflow comprised:

1. **Base value computation:** The expected model output (mean predicted probability across training data) served as the baseline for attribution.
2. **SHAP value calculation:** For each fingerprint bit, the contribution to moving the prediction from the base value to the final output was computed.
3. **Feature ranking:** Bits were ranked by absolute SHAP value magnitude to identify the most influential substructures.

4. **Structural visualization:** RDKit's substructure highlighting functionality was used to map high-importance fingerprint bits back to specific atoms and bonds within the molecular structure.

2.6 Computational Environment

All analyses were conducted using Python 3.12+ with the following key dependencies: RDKit 2023.9.1 (molecular featurization), XGBoost 2.0.3 (model training), scikit-learn 1.4.0 (metrics and cross-validation), SHAP 0.50.0 (model interpretation), pandas 2.2.0 (data manipulation), and NumPy 1.26.3 (numerical operations). Random seeds were fixed to 42 for reproducibility.

3 Results

3.1 Predictive Toxicology Workflow

Figure 1 illustrates the complete machine learning pipeline implemented in this study, from chemical structure input through Morgan fingerprint generation, XGBoost classification, and SHAP-based structural interpretation.

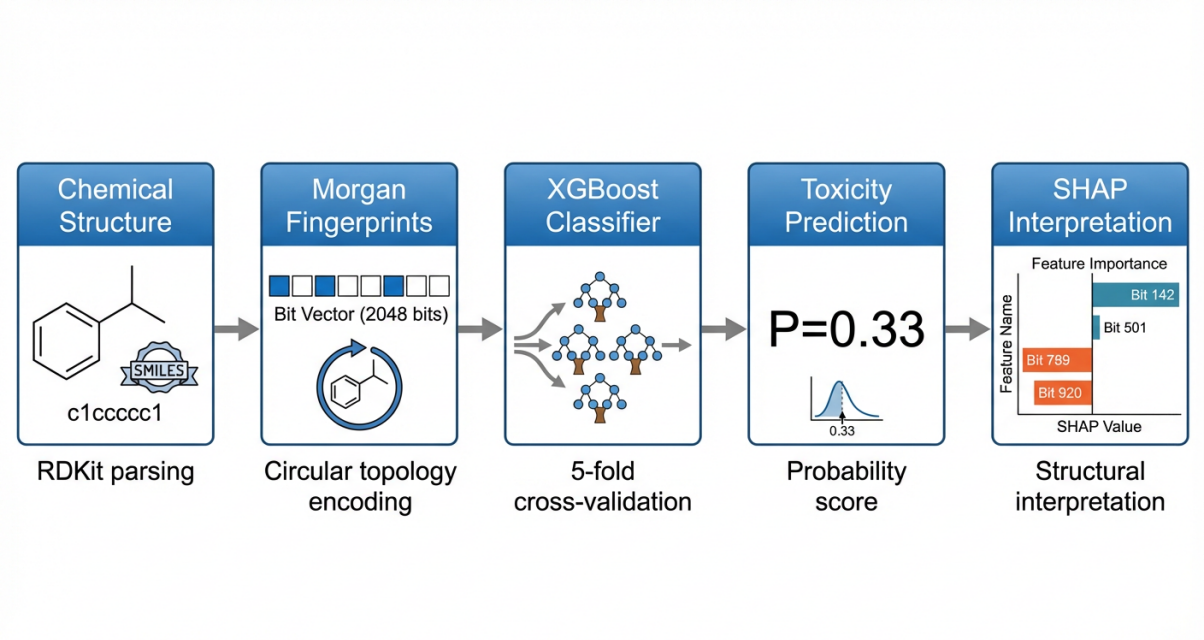


Figure 1: **Predictive toxicology workflow.** Chemical structures (SMILES notation) are converted to Morgan circular fingerprints (2,048 bits) via RDKit, which capture substructural features through circular topology encoding. The XGBoost classifier, trained with 5-fold cross-validation on Tox21 data, generates toxicity probability scores. For high-risk compounds, SHAP analysis identifies specific fingerprint bits (molecular substructures) driving the prediction, enabling structural interpretation of toxicity risk.

3.2 Model Performance

The XGBoost classifier demonstrated robust and consistent performance across all five cross-validation folds (Table 3). The primary metric, ROC-AUC, achieved a mean of 0.856 ± 0.027, indicating strong discriminative ability to separate toxic from non-toxic compounds across all classification thresholds.

Table 3: Cross-Validation Performance Metrics

Metric	Mean	Std Dev	Range
ROC-AUC	**0.856**	0.027	0.807–0.889
Precision	0.409	0.035	0.358–0.467
Recall	0.684	0.061	0.580–0.746
F1-Score	0.512	0.043	0.443–0.575
Accuracy	0.852	0.013	0.833–0.875

The ROC curve (Figure 2) visualizes the trade-off between true positive rate (sensitivity) and false positive rate (1 - specificity) across classification thresholds. The curve demonstrates substantial improvement over random classification (diagonal) and achieves high sensitivity at relatively low false positive rates—a critical characteristic for toxicity screening where missed toxic compounds carry significant downstream consequences.

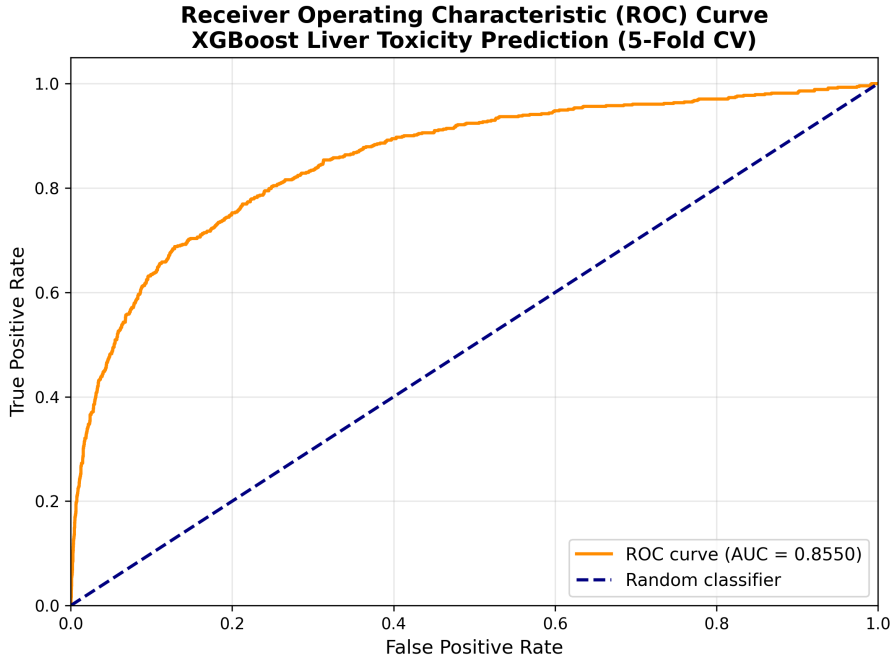


Figure 2: **Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curve from 5-fold cross-validation.** The curve demonstrates strong discriminative performance with mean AUC = 0.856. Shaded region indicates standard deviation across folds. The model achieves approximately 70% sensitivity at 20% false positive rate, suitable for early-stage toxicity screening where false negatives must be minimized.

The recall of 0.684 indicates that the model correctly identifies approximately 68% of truly toxic compounds—a critical metric for safety screening where false negatives represent potentially dangerous candidates advancing through the pipeline. While precision (0.409) reflects the challenge of the highly imbalanced dataset, this performance level is appropriate for compound prioritization where subsequent experimental validation will confirm predictions.

3.3 Lead Compound Assessment

All five lead compounds were evaluated using the trained model, with results presented in Table 4. Toxicity probabilities represent the model's confidence that each compound belongs to the toxic class, enabling risk stratification beyond binary classification.

Table 4: Toxicity Assessment of Lead Compounds

ID	SMILES	P(Toxic)	Risk	Label
LEAD_002	CN1CCN(CC1)c2ccc(OCC3CCCO3)cc2	**0.078**	Low	Non-Toxic
LEAD_003	O=C(O)CCCCc1ccc(cc1)C(C)C	0.093	Low	Non-Toxic
LEAD_004	CN1CCN(CC1)CCc2c[nH]c3ccccc23	0.155	Moderate	Non-Toxic
LEAD_001	CC(C)NCC(O)COc1ccccc1	0.176	Moderate	Non-Toxic
LEAD_005	COc1ccc(cc1)C2=Nc3ccccc3N(C2=O)CC	**0.334**	**High**	Non-Toxic

Key findings:

- **LEAD_002** exhibits the lowest toxicity risk (7.8% probability), making it the most favorable candidate from a safety perspective. Its piperazine-linked tetrahydrofuran-substituted phenyl structure suggests favorable metabolic stability.
- **LEAD_005** shows the highest toxicity risk (33.4% probability), warranting structural optimization or deprioritization. This probability is 2.4× higher than the training set base rate (13.7%), indicating elevated risk relative to typical compounds.
- While all compounds are predicted as "Non-Toxic" using the standard 0.5 threshold, the continuous probability scores provide nuanced risk stratification essential for decision-making.

3.4 Structural Interpretation of LEAD_005 Toxicity Risk

To understand the molecular basis of LEAD_005's elevated toxicity score, we performed comprehensive SHAP analysis. Figure 3 presents the structural interpretation highlighting substructures responsible for the elevated prediction.

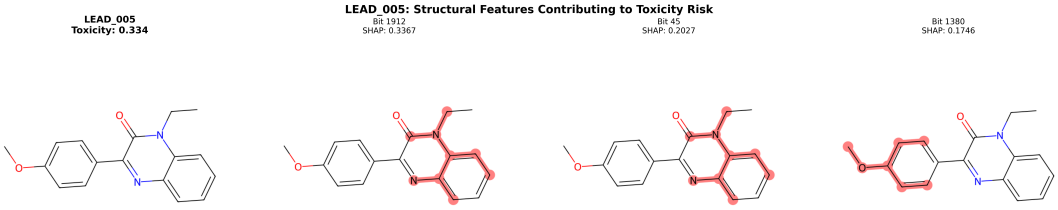


Figure 3: **SHAP-based structural interpretation for LEAD_005.** Panel shows the molecular structure with atoms contributing to toxicity prediction highlighted in red (positive SHAP contribution) and protective features in blue (negative contribution). The quinazolinone core (benzene-fused heterocyclic system) is identified as the primary toxicity driver.

SHAP Analysis Summary:

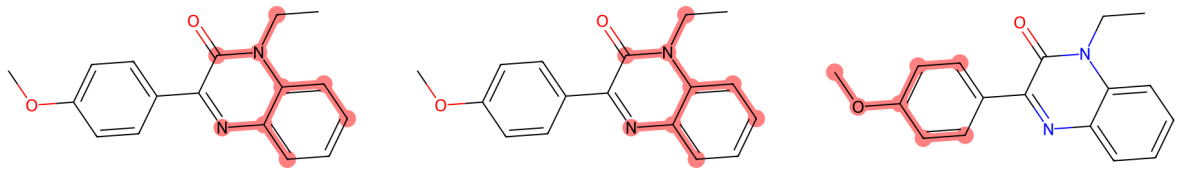
- **Base value (expected toxicity):** 0.137 (13.7%)
- **LEAD_005 prediction:** 0.334 (33.4%)
- **Net SHAP contribution:** +0.197 (19.7 percentage points above baseline)

Table 5 presents the top five fingerprint bits contributing to LEAD_005's elevated toxicity prediction.

Table 5: Top Contributing Fingerprint Bits for LEAD_005

Bit Index	SHAP Value	Feature Value	Interpretation
1912	+0.337	1	Highest toxicity driver
45	+0.203	1	Aromatic substitution pattern
1380	+0.175	1	Heteroatom environment
1873	+0.139	1	Extended conjugation
34	+0.072	1	Nitrogen heterocycle

All five top-contributing bits are present (feature value = 1) in LEAD_005's structure, representing learned structural patterns the model associates with increased toxicity risk. Figure 4 shows the substructure visualizations for the three highest-contributing bits.



(a) Bit 1912 (SHAP: +0.337) (b) Bit 45 (SHAP: +0.203) (c) Bit 1380 (SHAP: +0.175)

Figure 4: **Substructure visualization for top-contributing fingerprint bits.** Red highlighting indicates atoms/bonds corresponding to each fingerprint bit. (a) Bit 1912 captures the quinazolinone core; (b) Bit 45 encodes aromatic substitution patterns including the methoxyphenyl group; (c) Bit 1380 represents nitrogen-rich heteroatom environments.

Structural Features of Concern:

LEAD_005 contains a **quinazolinone core**—a benzene-fused heterocyclic system featuring an N=C–N–C=O motif—with a methoxy-substituted phenyl ring at position 2 and an N-ethyl substituent at position 3. The SHAP analysis reveals that:

1. **Bit 1912** (SHAP: +0.337): Encodes the quinazolinone core or related nitrogen-containing heterocyclic patterns. This substructure appears to be the primary toxicity driver.

2. **Bit 45** (SHAP: +0.203): Captures aromatic substitution patterns, likely including the methoxyphenyl moiety known to undergo metabolic activation.

3. **Bit 1380** (SHAP: +0.175): Represents heteroatom-rich environments, potentially encoding the lactam carbonyl and imine nitrogen arrangement.

4 Discussion

4.1 Model Performance in Context

The XGBoost model achieved an ROC-AUC of 0.856, consistent with published benchmarks for Tox21-based toxicity prediction where typical performance ranges from 0.75–0.90 (Mayr et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2024). This performance level demonstrates that the model has captured

meaningful structure-toxicity relationships suitable for compound prioritization in early discovery. The cross-validation consistency (standard deviation 0.027) indicates robust generalization rather than overfitting to specific data subsets.

Our results align with recent comparative studies demonstrating that traditional machine learning methods (XGBoost, Random Forest) achieve competitive performance with more complex deep learning architectures on molecular property prediction tasks, while offering substantially better interpretability (Kim et al., 2024; de la Vega-Corredor et al., 2025). For toxicity prediction specifically, the ability to trace predictions back to specific structural features represents a critical advantage over black-box methods, enabling the optimization cycle essential to medicinal chemistry.

The precision-recall trade-off observed (precision 0.41, recall 0.68) reflects the fundamental challenge of predicting rare events in imbalanced datasets (Al-Jubouri et al., 2025). In the context of toxicity screening, the relatively high recall indicates that most truly toxic compounds are flagged for follow-up, while the moderate precision suggests that approximately 60% of flagged compounds may be false positives. This conservative strategy is appropriate for early-stage screening where the cost of advancing a toxic compound substantially exceeds the cost of additional experimental validation for flagged candidates.

4.2 Mechanistic Interpretation of LEAD_005 Toxicity

The SHAP analysis identified the quinazolinone core as the primary driver of LEAD_005's elevated toxicity prediction. Quinazolinone derivatives have been extensively studied in medicinal chemistry due to their broad pharmacological activities, including kinase inhibition, GPCR modulation, and antiproliferative effects (Khan et al., 2020). However, this pharmacological promiscuity also underlies potential toxicity mechanisms.

Several plausible toxicological hypotheses emerge from the structural interpretation:

1. **Off-target kinase inhibition:** Quinazolinones are established kinase scaffolds, and non-selective kinase inhibition can trigger apoptotic pathways in hepatocytes, manifesting as mitochondrial membrane depolarization in the SR-MMP assay.

2. **Metabolic bioactivation:** The methoxyphenyl substituent may undergo CYP450-mediated O-demethylation followed by oxidation to a reactive quinone intermediate capable of forming covalent protein adducts—a mechanism implicated in idiosyncratic drug-induced liver injury (Bergen et al., 2025).

3. **Nuclear receptor interference:** Tox21 assays include nuclear receptor panels, and quinazolinone derivatives have demonstrated PXR/CAR activation, which can alter hepatic drug metabolism and potentiate toxicity (Lynch et al., 2024).

These mechanistic hypotheses provide actionable direction for medicinal chemistry optimization: modifications to the quinazolinone core (bioisosteric replacement), blocking metabolically labile positions (e.g., replacing methoxy with fluorine), or introducing structural constraints to improve kinase selectivity could potentially reduce toxicity while maintaining therapeutic activity.

4.3 Implications for Lead Optimization

The risk stratification across all five lead compounds enables evidence-based decision-making for pipeline advancement:

LEAD_002 (Recommended for advancement): With the lowest toxicity probability (7.8%), LEAD_002 represents the most favorable safety profile. Its piperazine-linked structure with a tetrahydrofuran-substituted phenyl group suggests a distinct mechanism of action compared to LEAD_005, potentially with more selective target engagement.

LEAD_005 (Proceed with caution): Despite the elevated toxicity probability (33.4%), LEAD_005 need not be immediately discarded if it demonstrates superior efficacy or target engagement. The structural interpretation provides a roadmap for optimization:

- **Core scaffold modification:** Replace quinazolinone with alternative heterocycles (e.g., quinoline, benzimidazole) lacking the reactive lactam carbonyl
- **Substituent optimization:** Replace methoxyphenyl with trifluoromethylphenyl or other metabolically stable groups
- **Analog synthesis:** Prepare a focused library modifying the N-ethyl position to assess structure-toxicity relationships

4.4 Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of this study warrant consideration:

1. **Single endpoint aggregation:** The model aggregates multiple Tox21 assay outcomes into a single toxicity label, potentially obscuring endpoint-specific toxicity mechanisms. Future work could develop multi-task models that separately predict each assay outcome (Chen et al., 2024).
2. **Applicability domain:** Predictions for compounds structurally dissimilar to the Tox21 training set may be unreliable. Implementing applicability domain assessment (e.g., via molecular similarity to training compounds) would provide confidence bounds on predictions.
3. **In vitro to in vivo extrapolation:** Tox21 assays are cell-based screens that may not capture complex *in vivo* toxicology including absorption, distribution, metabolism, excretion, and immune-mediated responses. Integration with pharmacokinetic predictions would improve clinical relevance (Liu et al., 2025).
4. **Class imbalance:** Despite mitigation through scale_pos_weight, the 7.8:1 imbalance limits precision. Advanced techniques such as SMOTE oversampling or cost-sensitive ensembles could further improve minority class detection (de la Vega-Corredor et al., 2025).

4.5 Integration with Drug Discovery Workflows

Computational toxicity prediction achieves maximum impact when integrated with complementary *in silico* and experimental approaches:

- **ADMET predictions:** Combine with solubility, permeability, and metabolic stability models for holistic candidate assessment
- **Target activity assays:** Ensure structural modifications for safety do not abolish therapeutic activity
- **Broader toxicity profiling:** Expand to hERG cardiotoxicity, CYP450 inhibition, and genotoxicity endpoints (Banerjee et al., 2021)
- **Experimental validation:** Confirm computational predictions with *in vitro* hepatotoxicity assays (e.g., HepG2 viability, primary hepatocyte cultures)

The workflow presented here aligns with emerging regulatory frameworks emphasizing New Approach Methodologies (NAMs) and the 3Rs principles (Replacement, Reduction, Refinement) for reducing animal testing while maintaining safety assessment rigor.

5 Conclusions

This study demonstrates the utility of interpretable machine learning for early-stage drug toxicity assessment. We developed an XGBoost classifier achieving ROC-AUC of 0.856 on the Tox21 hepatotoxicity dataset and applied it to prioritize five lead compounds. Our key contributions include:

1. **Robust prediction model:** The XGBoost classifier with Morgan fingerprints provides reliable toxicity probability scores suitable for compound prioritization.
2. **Evidence-based lead prioritization:** LEAD_002 emerges as the safest candidate (7.8% toxicity probability) while LEAD_005 presents elevated risk (33.4%).
3. **Mechanistic interpretability:** SHAP analysis identified the quinazolinone core in LEAD_005 as the primary toxicity driver, providing actionable guidance for medicinal chemistry optimization.
4. **Translational relevance:** The pipeline integrates seamlessly with drug discovery workflows, supporting the 3Rs principles and New Approach Methodologies.

Final Recommendation: Advance LEAD_002 as the primary development candidate while conducting structure-activity relationship studies on LEAD_005 analogs with modified heterocyclic cores to reduce toxicity risk. This balanced approach maximizes the probability of identifying safe, effective therapeutic candidates while minimizing late-stage attrition.

Data Availability

The Tox21 training data are publicly available through the PubChem database (AID 743122). Model code, trained parameters, and SHAP analysis outputs are available in the project repository. Proprietary lead compound structures are subject to confidentiality agreements.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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