Journal of Advances in Drug Research

ISSN: 2230-7761
www.jadr.co.in

Volume 17, Issue 04 | Received 17.09.2026 | Accepted 18.09.2026 | Online 22.09.2026

MOLECULAR MECHANISMS OF DRUG–RECEPTOR INTERACTIONS AND THEIR ROLE IN THERAPEUTIC RESPONSE

Li Wei Zhang
Department of Molecular Pharmacology, Eastern Biomedical Research Institute, China
liwei.zhang@ebri-research.cn

Abstract.

Drug–receptor interactions constitute the molecular starting point for many pharmacological effects, yet therapeutic response cannot be predicted from binding affinity alone. Receptors exist as dynamic conformational ensembles whose behavior is shaped by ligand structure, binding kinetics, efficacy, allosteric communication, receptor density, coupling efficiency, subcellular localization, desensitization, and downstream network context. This structured literature-based study synthesizes mechanistic principles that connect molecular recognition to clinically meaningful pharmacodynamics. Evidence from receptor theory, structural pharmacology, G protein-coupled receptor (GPCR) signaling, nuclear receptors, and kinetic pharmacology was integrated using an IMRAD framework. The analysis shows that orthosteric affinity determines the probability of target engagement, whereas efficacy and conformational selection determine how that engagement is converted into signaling. Partial agonism, inverse agonism, biased agonism, and allosteric modulation provide mechanistic explanations for drugs that bind the same receptor but produce different physiological outcomes. In addition, association and dissociation kinetics, especially drug–target residence time, can modify the magnitude and persistence of therapeutic effects independently of equilibrium affinity. These concepts help explain inter-drug differences in efficacy, safety, tolerance, tissue selectivity, and duration of action. Modern therapeutic optimization therefore requires an integrated view of affinity, kinetics, conformational dynamics, signaling bias, and biological context rather than a single-parameter model of receptor occupancy.

Keywords: drug–receptor interaction; receptor pharmacology; affinity; efficacy; biased agonism; allosteric modulation; residence time; therapeutic response.

1. INTRODUCTION

Receptors translate chemical information into biological action. Classical receptor theory established that drug effects depend on reversible interaction between a ligand and a receptor, but later work demonstrated that receptor occupancy and response are not equivalent. The operational model of agonism formalized the distinction between affinity and efficacy and introduced the concept of transduction efficiency, allowing the same ligand to generate different maximal responses in different tissues because receptor density and coupling efficiency differ (1). This distinction remains fundamental for understanding why an apparently high-affinity ligand can be a weak agonist, why a partial agonist may

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antagonize a full agonist, and why dose–response relationships vary between experimental systems.

Structural and biophysical studies have since replaced the idea of receptors as simple binary switches with a dynamic ensemble model. Particularly for GPCRs, receptors continuously sample multiple inactive and active conformations, and ligands alter the relative probability of those states rather than producing a single rigid structure (2,3). Similar allosteric principles apply to ligand-gated ion channels, receptor tyrosine kinases, and nuclear receptors. In this framework, the molecular consequences of drug binding depend on where the ligand binds, how it changes receptor conformation, which intracellular partners are recruited, and how long the drug remains bound (4–6).

This more complete view has major therapeutic implications. Orthosteric agonists may strongly activate several signaling pathways simultaneously, producing both desired and adverse effects. By contrast, partial agonists, biased agonists, or allosteric modulators can favor selected signaling outputs or preserve physiological spatial and temporal patterns of receptor activation (3,5,6). Likewise, two compounds with similar equilibrium affinity may produce different durations of action because their association and dissociation kinetics differ substantially (7–9). The aim of this study was to synthesize the molecular mechanisms of drug–receptor interaction and evaluate how affinity, efficacy, kinetics, allostery, and signaling context collectively determine therapeutic response.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A structured narrative literature synthesis was conducted to integrate established receptor theory with contemporary molecular and structural pharmacology. International peer-reviewed literature was selected from pharmacology and drug-discovery sources, with emphasis on foundational receptor models, GPCR conformational dynamics, biased agonism, allosteric modulation, nuclear receptor pharmacology, and drug–target binding kinetics. Priority was given to mechanistic reviews and landmark primary theoretical papers that directly linked receptor behavior to pharmacodynamic outcome. Fifteen core references were used for the formal synthesis, including recent consensus-oriented pharmacology resources and reviews alongside historically important receptor theory papers (1–15).

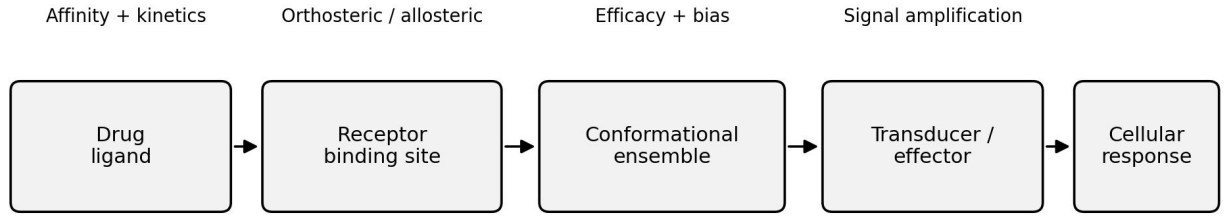
The analytical framework classified receptor-mediated drug action into five mechanistic domains: (i) equilibrium binding and affinity; (ii) intrinsic efficacy and receptor reserve; (iii) conformational selection and signaling bias; (iv) orthosteric–allosteric interactions; and (v) kinetic determinants of target engagement. Findings were compared across major receptor classes, with GPCRs used as the principal mechanistic example because they provide the most developed experimental framework for conformational signaling and biased pharmacology. No new human, animal, or laboratory experiment was performed; therefore, the Results section reports an evidence synthesis rather than original patient- or animal-level data.

3. RESULTS

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The literature synthesis identified a consistent multistep relationship between ligand binding and therapeutic response. First, affinity governs the probability of receptor occupancy at a given free drug concentration. Second, efficacy determines the capacity of the ligand-bound receptor to generate a stimulus. Third, the receptor's conformational landscape and available transducers determine which signaling pathways are activated. Fourth, receptor density, compartmentalization, signal amplification, feedback, and desensitization convert molecular signaling into tissue-level response. Finally, pharmacokinetic exposure and binding kinetics determine how long these molecular events persist. Thus, the clinically observed effect is an emergent product of molecular binding plus system-level transduction rather than a direct readout of affinity alone (1–4,7–9).

Figure 1. Mechanistic chain linking drug–receptor binding to therapeutic response.



Therapeutic response emerges from the full chain, not from affinity alone.

Affinity is commonly summarized by equilibrium measures such as Kd or Ki, but these quantities do not specify the functional consequence of occupancy. In the operational model, agonist behavior depends on both affinity and an efficacy/transduction term; this explains receptor reserve, in which a maximal tissue response can occur without full receptor occupancy (1). Full agonists efficiently stabilize signaling-competent receptor states, whereas partial agonists generate lower maximal responses in a given system. Inverse agonists preferentially stabilize inactive receptor conformations and can reduce constitutive signaling, while neutral antagonists primarily block agonist action without necessarily suppressing basal activity (2,3).

Table 1. Major molecular determinants of drug–receptor response.

Determinant	Molecular meaning	Pharmacological consequence	Refs.
Affinity	Strength of equilibrium interaction; commonly expressed as Kd/Ki	Determines occupancy at a given free concentration, but not maximal effect	(1,7)

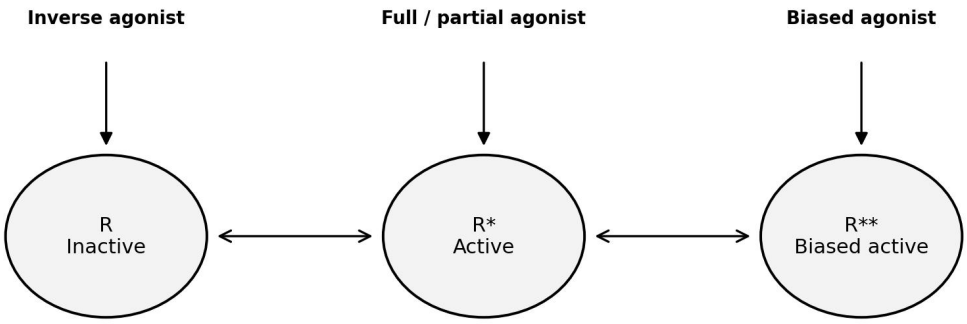
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Determinant	Molecular meaning	Pharmacological consequence	Refs.
Efficacy	Ability of the ligand–receptor complex to generate signaling	Distinguishes full, partial, and inverse agonism	(1–3)
Conformational selection	Ligand stabilization of specific receptor states	Changes transducer coupling and downstream pathway pattern	(2–4)
Allostery	Binding at a site distinct from the endogenous orthosteric site	Can enhance or reduce affinity/efficacy and improve subtype selectivity	(4–6)
Binding kinetics	Rates of association (kon) and dissociation (koff)	Influence onset, persistence, and sometimes selectivity of action	(7–9)
Receptor reserve / density	Amount of receptor relative to signaling capacity	Allows strong tissue response at partial occupancy; alters apparent agonism	(1,10)
Desensitization / trafficking	Phosphorylation, arrestin recruitment, internalization, recycling	Shapes tolerance, duration, resensitization, and compartmental signaling	(3,10)

Conformational selectivity is especially important in GPCR pharmacology. A ligand can stabilize receptor states that preferentially engage G proteins, β-arrestins, or other effectors, producing "biased" signaling even when another ligand at the same receptor activates a broader pathway profile (3). Because efficacy is pathway- and system-dependent, biased agonism is not simply a new label for strong or weak agonism; it reflects relative preference for signaling outputs after accounting for system amplification. Structural studies show that distinct ligand contacts can propagate through receptor microswitches and intracellular coupling surfaces, providing a molecular basis for functional selectivity (2,3).

Figure 2. Conceptual receptor conformational states stabilized by major ligand classes.

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Antagonists primarily block agonist access or signaling without necessarily changing basal activity.

Allosteric modulators shift affinity and/or efficacy by stabilizing linked conformations at a distinct site.

Allosteric modulation adds another layer of control. Orthosteric ligands bind the site used by an endogenous transmitter or hormone, whereas allosteric ligands bind topographically distinct sites that are conformationally linked to the orthosteric pocket. Positive allosteric modulators can increase orthosteric ligand affinity and/or efficacy, while negative allosteric modulators decrease them. Because allosteric sites are often less evolutionarily conserved than orthosteric sites, they may offer greater receptor-subtype selectivity. They can also preserve physiological timing because some modulators have little effect in the absence of endogenous agonist (4–6). These properties are attractive when continuous direct receptor activation would produce excessive adverse effects or rapid desensitization.

Binding kinetics further modifies pharmacodynamic behavior. Traditional equilibrium affinity collapses association and dissociation into a single ratio, whereas target residence time focuses on the lifetime of the drug–receptor complex, commonly approximated by 1/koff. A slowly dissociating ligand may sustain target occupancy after plasma concentration has fallen, prolonging pharmacological response; in other settings, shorter residence time may reduce mechanism-based toxicity by allowing more rapid recovery of physiological signaling (7–9). Consequently, optimization of drug action increasingly considers both thermodynamic affinity and kinetic selectivity.

Table 2. Receptor interaction patterns and typical therapeutic implications.

Ligand / mechanism	Receptor-level effect	Potential therapeutic advantage	Important limitation
Full agonist	Strong stabilization of active state(s)	High efficacy; useful when maximal receptor activation is desired	Higher risk of mechanism-related adverse effects or desensitization in some systems

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Ligand / mechanism	Receptor-level effect	Potential therapeutic advantage	Important limitation
Partial agonist	Moderate activation despite occupancy	Can provide a ceiling effect and stabilize signaling tone	May antagonize endogenous/full agonist under high-agonist conditions
Inverse agonist	Preferential stabilization of inactive states	Reduces constitutive receptor activity	Benefit depends on presence and disease relevance of basal signaling
Competitive antagonist	Orthosteric occupancy without activation	Reversible blockade that can be overcome by high agonist concentration	Effect depends on agonist concentration and receptor reserve
Allosteric modulator	Binding at a distinct but coupled site	Potential subtype selectivity and preservation of physiological signal timing	Effect can show probe dependence and signaling bias
Biased agonist	Preferential stabilization of pathway-selective active states	Potential separation of therapeutic from adverse signaling	Bias can vary by assay, tissue, receptor expression, and comparator ligand
Long-residence ligand	Slow dissociation from target	Potential prolonged action and kinetic selectivity	Excessive persistence may increase on-target toxicity

4. DISCUSSION

The central finding of this synthesis is that therapeutic response cannot be reduced to a single drug–receptor binding constant. Affinity determines whether a receptor is likely to be occupied, but efficacy determines what the occupied receptor does. The operational model of agonism remains useful because it explicitly separates ligand-dependent properties from system-dependent amplification (1). This explains why one compound may behave as a strong agonist in a tissue with high receptor reserve but as a partial agonist in another tissue with limited receptor expression or weaker coupling. It also explains why in vitro potency should not be interpreted as a direct measure of clinical efficacy.

Modern structural pharmacology further shows that receptor activation is multidimensional. GPCRs can engage several G-protein families, β-arrestins, kinases, and scaffolding proteins, often from different cellular compartments (2,3,10). Ligands can

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modify the probability of these signaling states in different ways, so the clinically relevant question is not only whether the receptor is activated, but which signaling architecture is produced. This principle has driven interest in biased agonists intended to retain therapeutic signaling while limiting pathways associated with adverse effects. However, signaling bias is context-dependent: estimates can change with receptor density, assay amplification, ligand concentration, reference agonist, and time of observation. Therefore, claims of therapeutically useful bias require careful validation across physiologically relevant models rather than reliance on a single assay (3,10).

Allostery provides a complementary strategy. Receptors are intrinsically allosteric proteins: binding at one region changes the energetic landscape of distant functional sites (4). Pharmacological exploitation of this property allows modulators to enhance or suppress endogenous signaling without necessarily replacing it. For CNS receptors and other families in which orthosteric sites are highly conserved, allosteric pockets may improve subtype selectivity and reduce off-target activity (5,6). Yet allosteric pharmacology is also more complex than simple competitive blockade. Modulators may show probe dependence, meaning that their effect differs according to the orthosteric ligand present, and may alter efficacy independently of affinity. These properties can be therapeutically valuable but complicate translation between screening assays and clinical systems.

Kinetic pharmacology is equally important for linking molecular interaction to time-dependent therapeutic response. Equilibrium measures such as Kd describe the final distribution of bound and unbound states but not the speed with which those states are reached or reversed. Residence-time models emphasize that slow dissociation can produce durable pharmacodynamics after systemic drug levels decline (7–9). The most recent reviews continue to support integrating kon, koff, and residence time with conventional affinity during lead optimization, because the same equilibrium affinity can arise from very different kinetic combinations (8,9). This framework is particularly relevant when sustained target coverage is beneficial, when plasma exposure fluctuates, or when prolonged occupancy of an off-target receptor would be hazardous.

Receptor class also shapes how drug binding is translated into response. Nuclear receptors are ligand-regulated transcription factors, so binding changes coactivator/corepressor recruitment and gene-expression programs rather than producing only rapid second-messenger signaling. Selective nuclear receptor modulators illustrate how the same receptor can support tissue-specific agonist or antagonist behavior depending on coregulator expression and promoter context (11,12). Receptor tyrosine kinases and ligand-gated ion channels similarly convert ligand binding through class-specific mechanisms such as phosphorylation networks or ion flux. Thus, a unified receptor model must retain general principles—affinity, efficacy, allostery, kinetics—while recognizing receptor-specific transduction architectures.

From a therapeutic perspective, these mechanisms explain several clinically important phenomena. Partial agonists can stabilize receptor signaling within a bounded range; antagonists can be surmountable or effectively insurmountable depending on kinetics and receptor turnover; allosteric modulators can preserve endogenous spatial and temporal control; and biased ligands may alter the balance between efficacy and adverse signaling.

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The Concise Guide to PHARMACOLOGY 2023/24 documents the extensive diversity of GPCR targets and ligand interactions, underscoring why mechanistic classification is essential for rational interpretation of drug action (10). Likewise, target-based drug discovery increasingly combines structural data, kinetic measurements, functional assays, and systems pharmacology rather than relying exclusively on endpoint potency (7–10,13).

Several limitations should be acknowledged. This work is a structured literature synthesis, not a quantitative meta-analysis, and the mechanistic literature is richest for GPCRs. In addition, simplified labels such as agonist, antagonist, or biased agonist can conceal assay- and tissue-specific behavior. Translation from molecular assays to human therapy also depends on pharmacokinetics, target expression, disease biology, genetics, comorbidities, and concurrent drugs. Nevertheless, the integrated framework is useful because it clarifies which molecular parameters should be measured when a drug produces unexpected potency, duration, selectivity, or safety outcomes.

5. CONCLUSION

Drug–receptor interactions are dynamic, multidimensional processes in which affinity is only the first determinant of therapeutic response. The biological effect of receptor engagement depends on intrinsic efficacy, receptor reserve, conformational selection, transducer coupling, allosteric communication, desensitization, trafficking, and binding kinetics. Full agonism, partial agonism, inverse agonism, biased signaling, and allosteric modulation can therefore generate distinct therapeutic profiles even at the same receptor. Drug–target residence time further explains why duration of action may diverge from equilibrium affinity or plasma exposure. Rational pharmacotherapy and drug design should integrate thermodynamic, kinetic, structural, and systems-level information to predict efficacy and safety more accurately. Future receptor pharmacology is likely to focus increasingly on pathway-selective and kinetically optimized ligands that control not only whether a receptor is occupied, but how, where, and for how long it signals.

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