



# Applications of AI in Chemistry & Biology

**David Graber**

david.graber@sam.math.ethz.ch

ETH Zürich

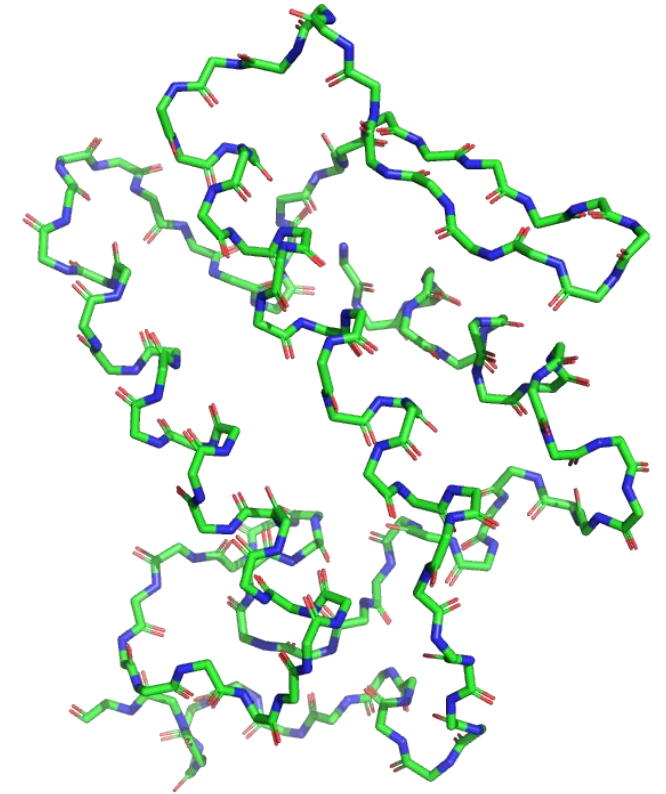
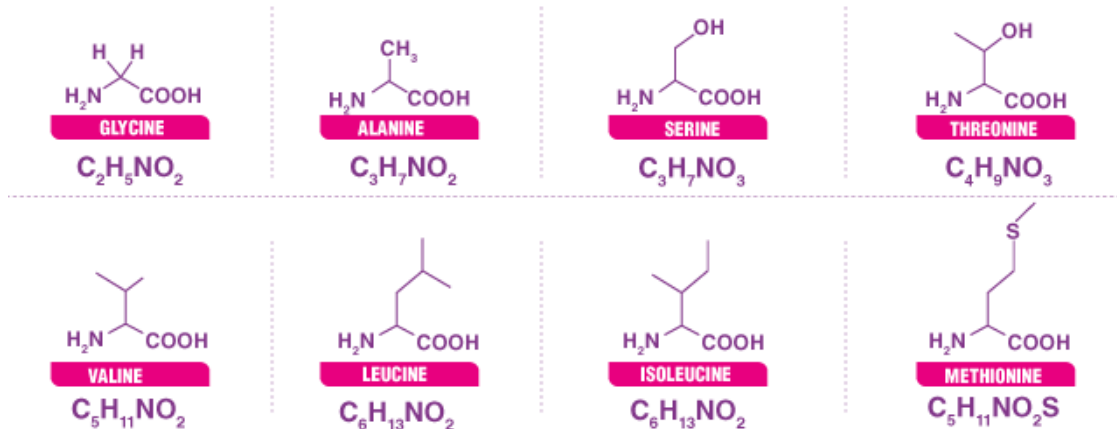
# Lecture Outline

- 1. Introduction - Proteins and Small Molecules**
- 2. Sequence-based models**
  - Protein Language Models (PLMs)
- 3. Protein Structure Prediction**
  - AlphaFold2
  - Evolutionary Scale Modelling (ESM)
  - Modelling of biomolecular assemblies
- 4. Structure-based models**
  - 3D-Convolutional Neural Networks
  - Introduction to Graphs and Graph Neural Networks
  - Graph-based models
- 5. Challenges of training on biological data**
- 6. Generative models for *de novo* design**

# Recap

## Proteins are chains of amino acids

- Fold into a complex 3D shape based on amino acid interactions
- Backbone consists of the linked N-C $\alpha$ -C triangles of all amino acids
- The difference between the 20 amino acids lies in their side chains



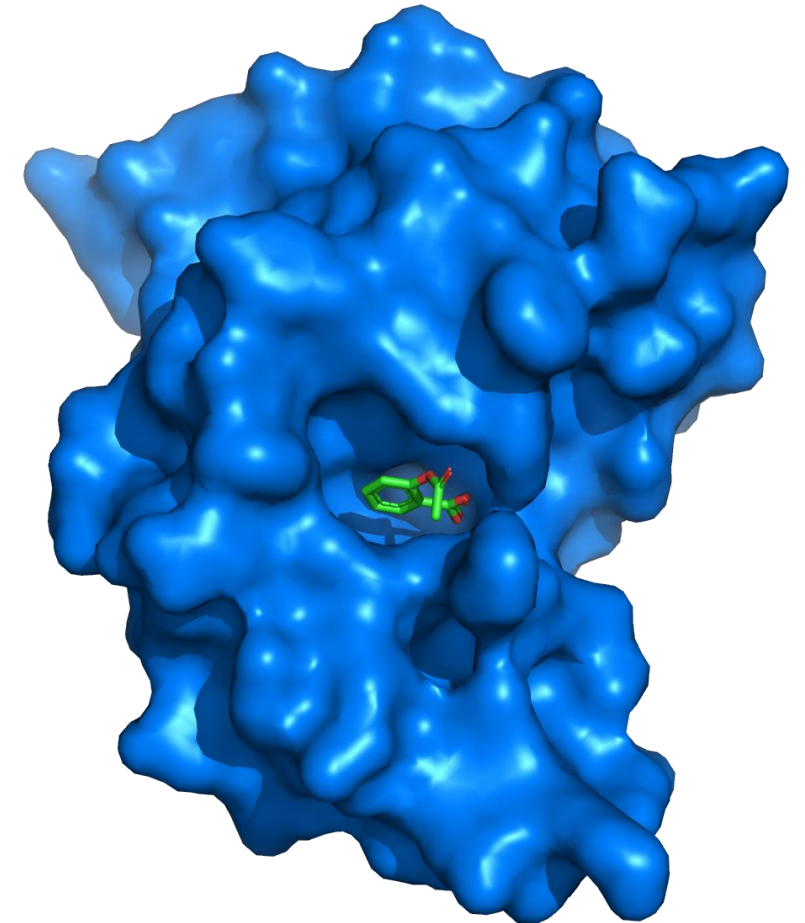
# Recap

## Small molecules

- Organic compounds with a low molecular weight, usually less than 100 atoms
- Their structure usually allows for **easy synthesis in the laboratory**

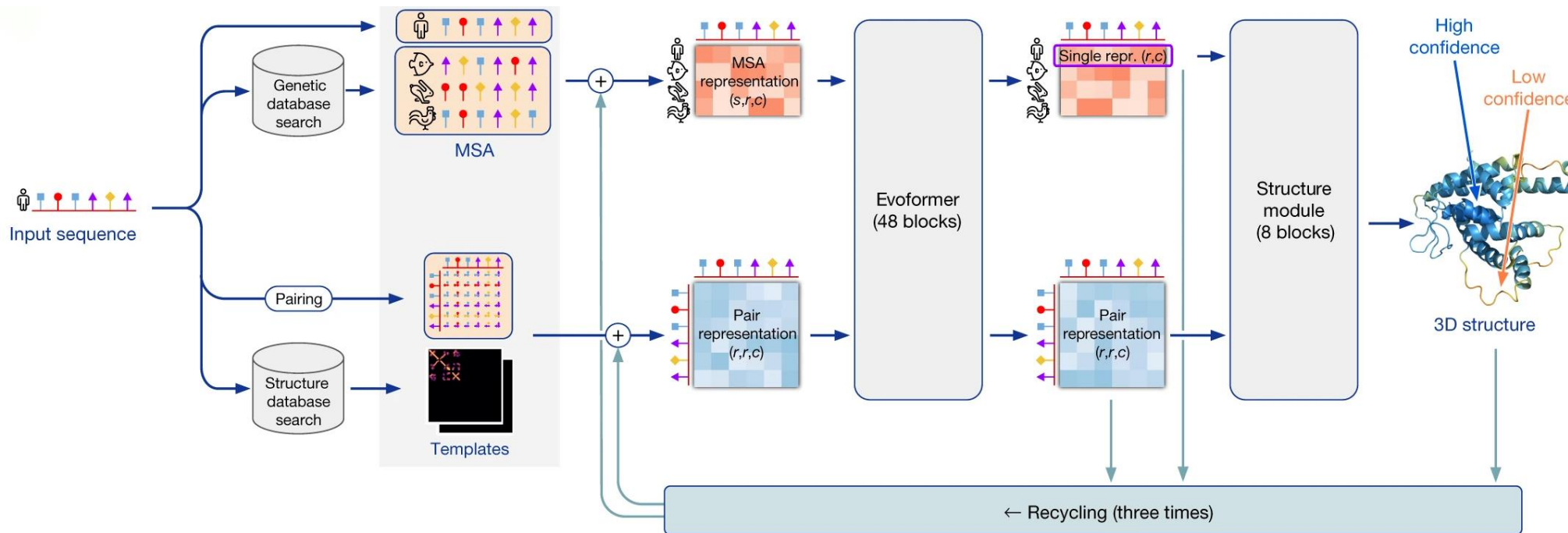
## Most drugs are small molecules

- Can bind to proteins and affect a biological process
- The chemical structure and composition of the small molecule defines its function and binding preferences
- Small molecule drugs are engineered to interact with a specific target to modulate disease pathways



**Aspirin** (in green and red) inhibits the activity of the enzyme cyclooxygenase (COX) which leads to the formation of prostaglandins (PGs) that cause inflammation, swelling, pain and fever (PDB 1OXR)

# Recap



**Figure:** AlphaFold model architecture. Arrows show the information flow among the various components. Array shapes are shown in parentheses with  $s$ , number of sequences,  $r$ , number of residues and  $c$ , number of channels

## AlphaFold2 predicts protein structures from amino acid sequences

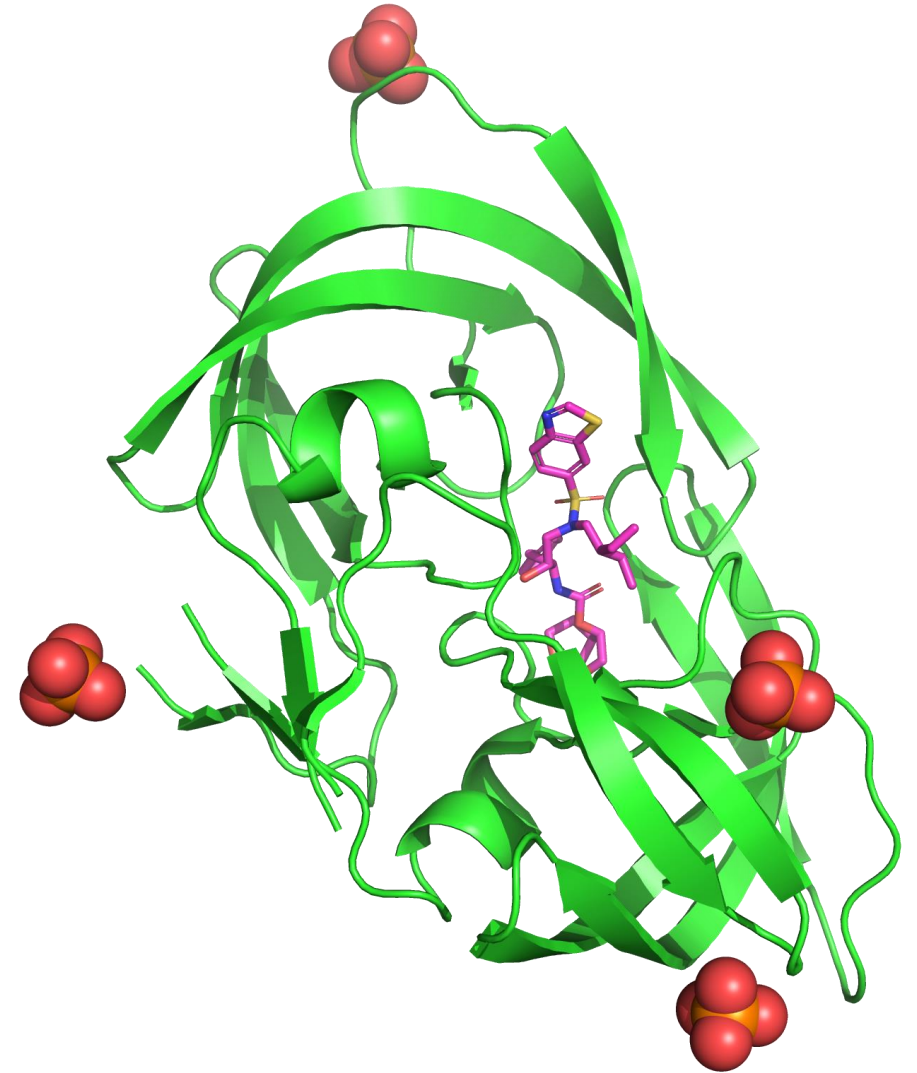
- Genetic database search to generate a multiple sequence alignment (MSA)
- Structure database search to generate first structure prediction from similar proteins (templates)
- Generate final refined structure prediction with model trained on experimental structures

# Recap

**Protein rarely act alone – they form complexes with other proteins, small molecules, DNA and RNA**

Recent folding models include other biomolecules and form unified structure prediction tools predicting the structure of assemblies of proteins with

- Nucleic Acid (DNA)
- Metal Ions
- Small Molecules



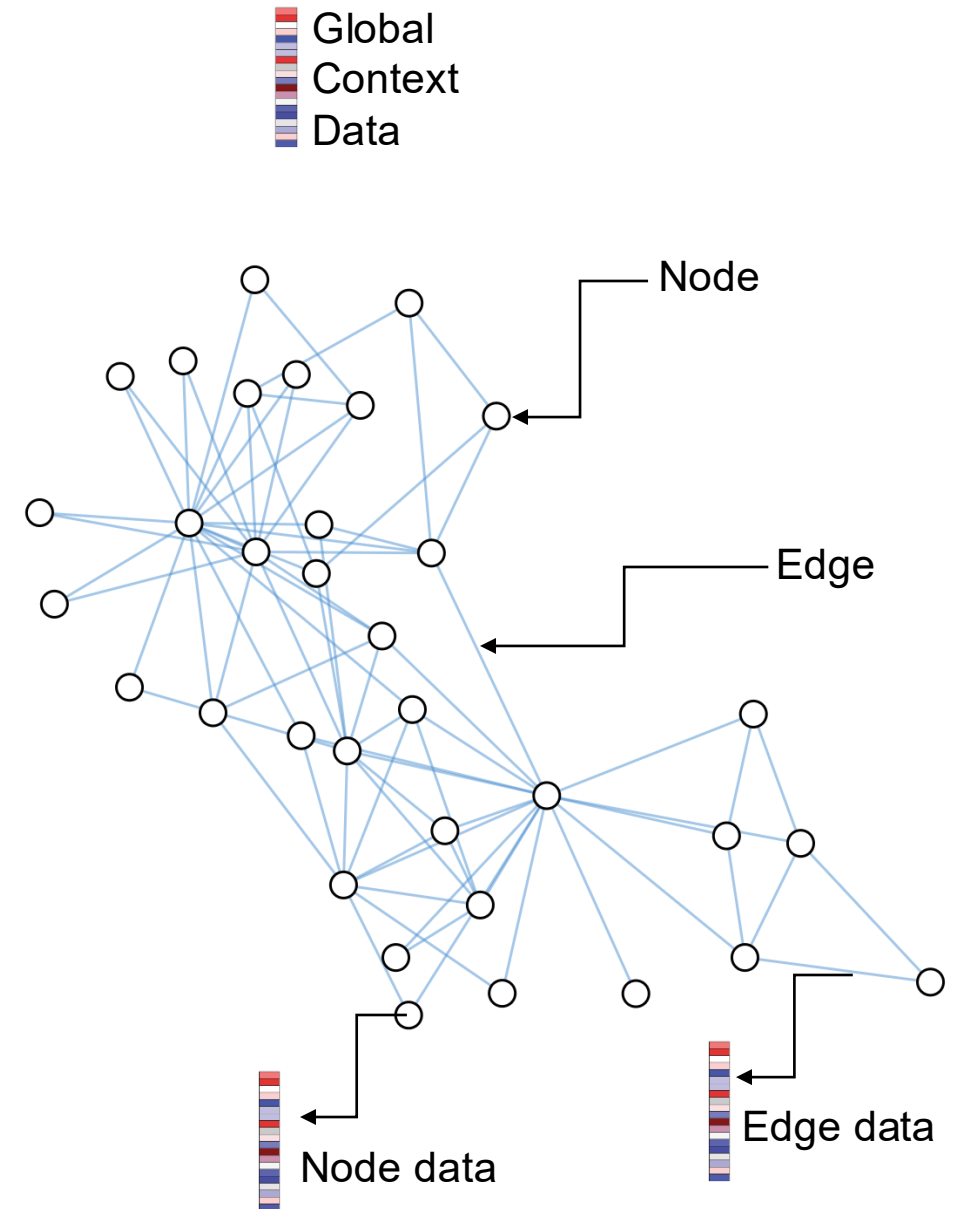
**HIV-1 Protease bound to peptidomimetic inhibitor**

Inhibitor binds to the active site of the HIV viral protease 1 without being cleaved, effectively blocking the active site and rendering the enzyme inactive.

# Recap

## Graph Convolutional Neural Networks

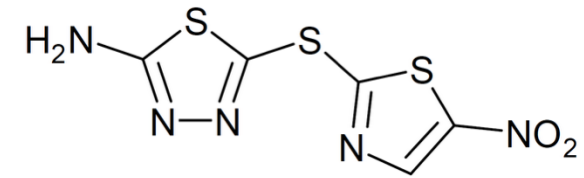
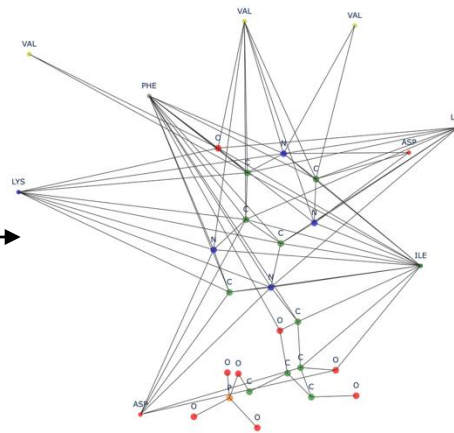
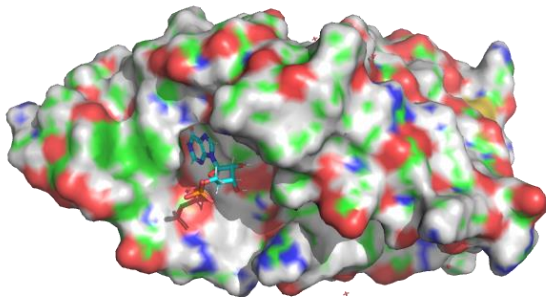
- Graphs are ideally suited to model unordered data such as social networks and molecules
- Graph Neural Networks transform node and edge embeddings of graphs through message-passing
- Resulting embeddings include information about the connectivity and the neighborhood of nodes and edges



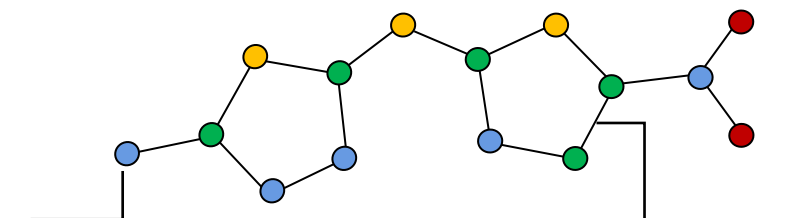
# Recap

**Graph Neural Networks are useful for modeling small molecules and proteins and are successful in predicting:**

- Properties of small molecules
- Protein function
- Protein-Ligand Binding Affinity



Modelling molecules as graphs



- Node data**
- atomic number
  - number of bonds
  - formal charge
  - chirality
  - number of hydrogens
  - ...

- Edge data**
- bond type
  - conjugation
  - ring membership
  - stereochemistry

# Challenges of Training on Biological Data

- Data Challenges in Machine Learning for Biology
- Examples

# Data Quality and Scarcity

**Common sources of biological data include many databases based on community contributions of biology and chemistry researchers.**

- **UniProt:** Database of protein sequences and functional annotation.
- **Protein Data Bank (PDB):** Database of protein and other macromolecular structures.
- **PubChem:** Chemicals database

## **Data Quality and Noise:**

Biological datasets often contain errors, missing values, or inconsistencies due to experimental variability, measurement errors, or incomplete annotations.

## **Data Scarcity and Imbalance:**

High-quality labelled biological data is often scarce and imbalanced, with overrepresentation of certain classes (e.g., well-studied proteins) and underrepresentation of others.

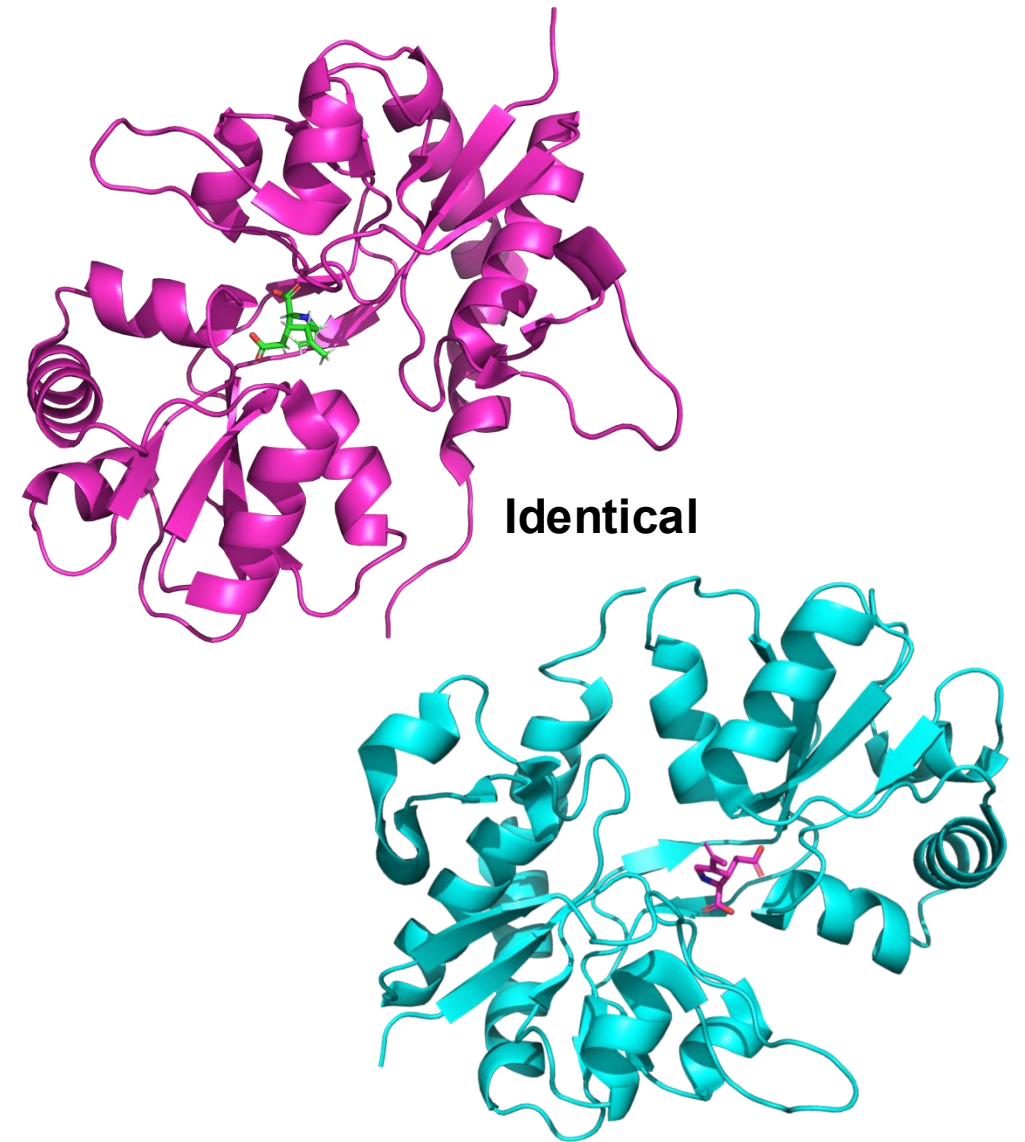
# Bias and Redundancy

**Datasets may be biased towards or well-studied proteins and contain significant redundancies**

Redundancies are often not recognized due to

- Complex data type
- Wrong proxies for similarity, such as sequence identity as a measure of protein-ligand complex similarity
- Complexes with low sequence identity can have identical interaction patterns

**→ Models are trained on highly redundant (but not very diverse) datasets, often with undetected overlap between training and testing data**



# Example 1: Structure-based binding affinity prediction

## Task: Protein Ligand Binding Affinity Prediction (Scoring Functions)

Predict interaction strength of protein-ligand complexes from their 3D structure

### Train

#### **PDBbind database** (n = 19'000)

- All affinity-labelled 3D protein-ligand complexes in the Protein Data Bank
- Many redundancies arising from multiple experiments on the same protein

### Test

#### **CASF2016 benchmark** (n=285, subset of PDBbind)

- initially designed to benchmark classical physics-based scoring algorithms
- sampled from sequence similarity clusters in PDBbind

**More than 20 peer-reviewed and published models** trained in this train-test setup (GNNs, 3D-CNNs)

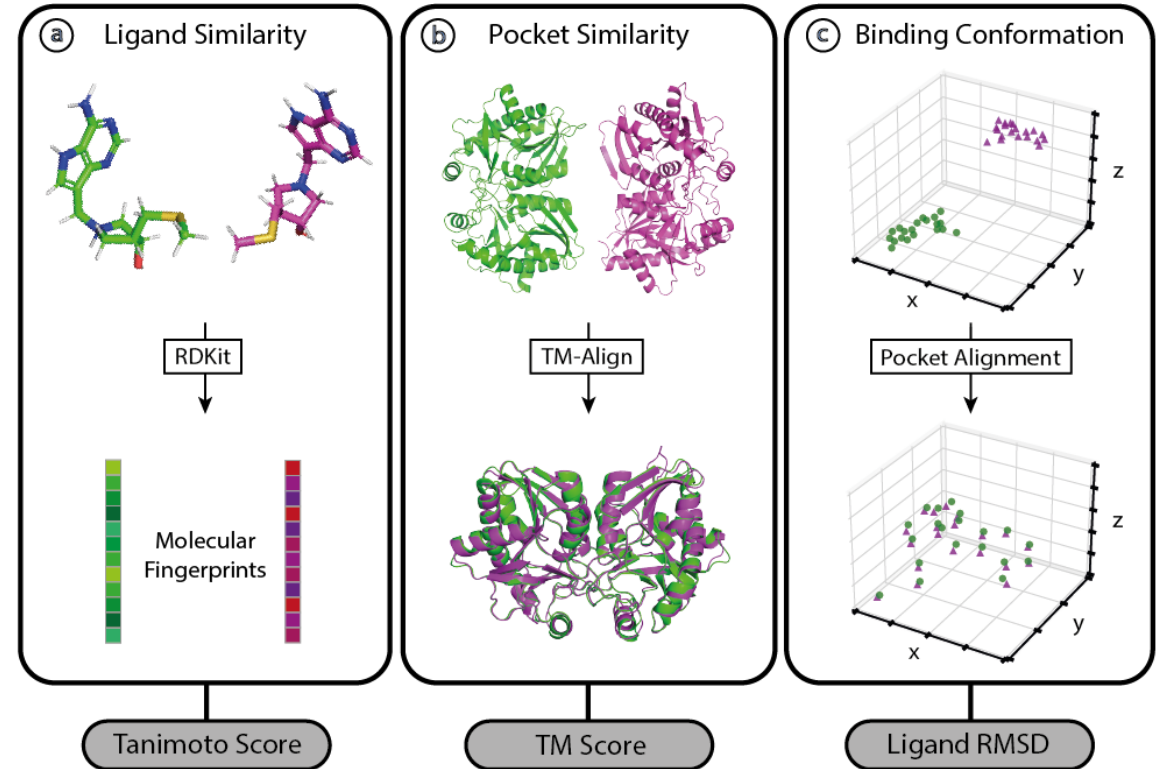
→ Data Leakage Concerns

# Example 1: Structure-based binding affinity prediction

## Computing three pairwise metrics for the entire PDBbind database (including CASF benchmark)

- **Ligand Similarity** - Tanimoto similarity between count-based molecular fingerprints
- **Protein Similarity** – TM Scores using TM-align (finding optimal alignment of 3D structures)
- **Binding Conformation** – RMSD of ligand atoms after pocket alignment (by TM-align)

Three pairwise similarity matrices, each based on 189mio computed comparisons.



# Example 1: Structure-based binding affinity prediction

## Using the pairwise similarity matrices to

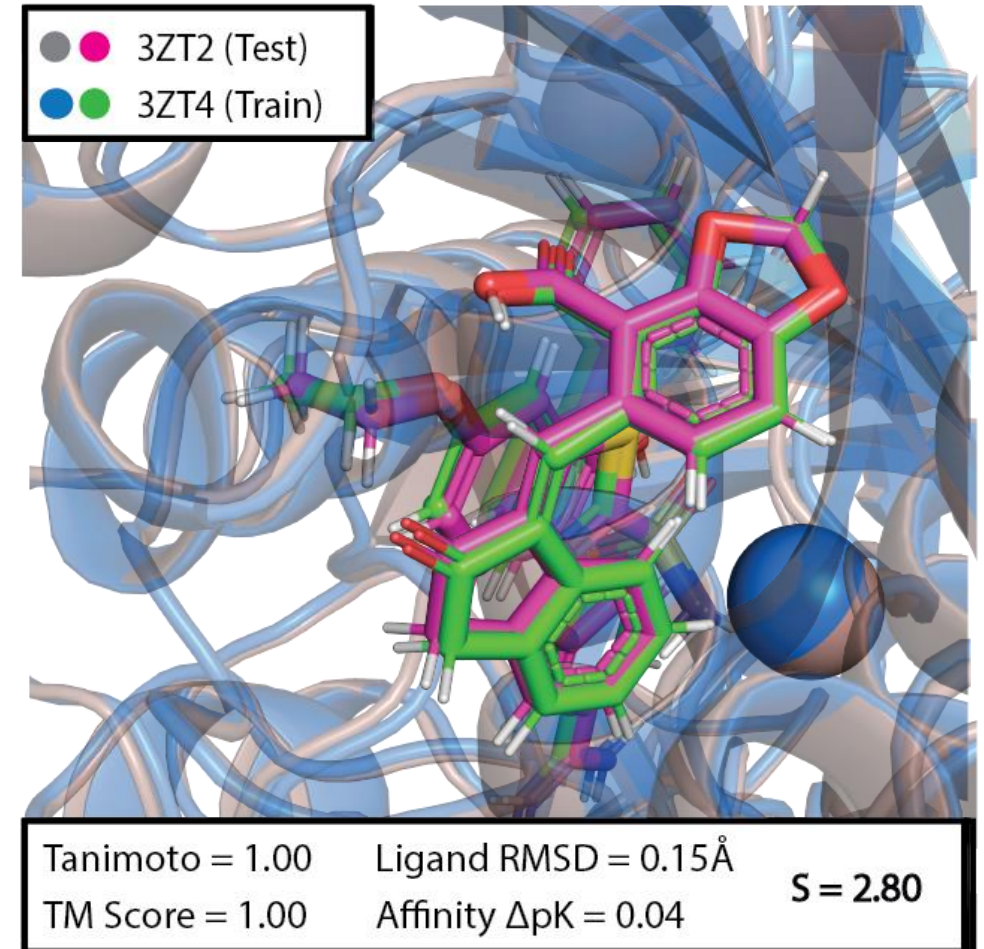
- find the **train-test** pairs that were most similar in terms of all three metrics
- Compare their binding affinity label

## Train-test data leakage between PDBbind and CASF

Almost 600 training complexes are nearly identical to a test complex in terms of

- Protein structure
- Ligand structure
- Ligand binding conformation
- Affinity label

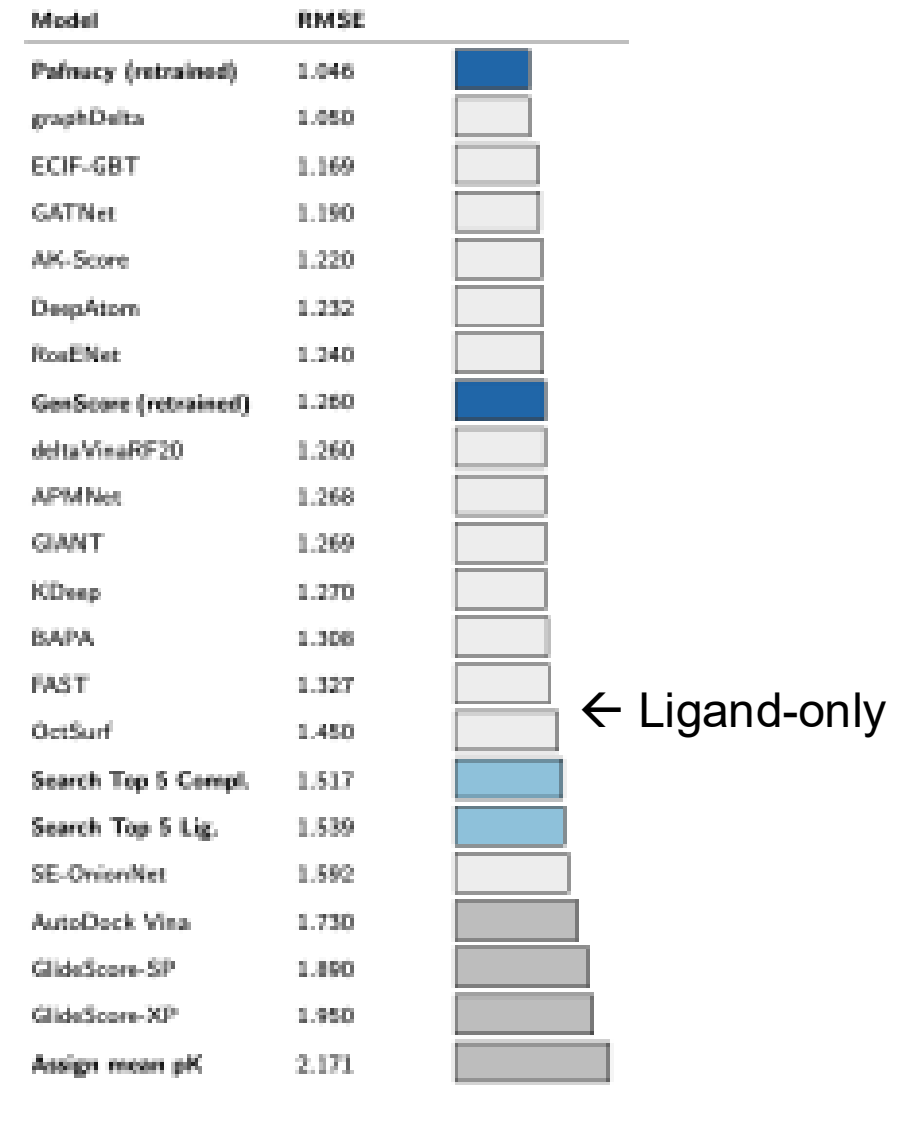
**Almost half of the test complexes are not presenting new challenge to models trained on PDBbind**



# Example 1: Structure-based binding affinity prediction

Almost all ML-based scoring functions were trained on PDBbind in recent years, using the CASF2016 benchmark to measure generalization and compare to other models

- All models are outperformed by the oldest model when it is retrained on the newest data (3D-CNN, Pafnucy, 2018)
- Some models are outperformed by models trained on PDBbind with all protein information removed from the input data (ligand-only)
- One model is outperformed by look-up algorithms, which...
  - Predict test set affinities by averaging the labels of the 5 most similar training **complexes**
  - Predict test set affinities by averaging the labels of the 5 training complexes with the most similar **ligand**

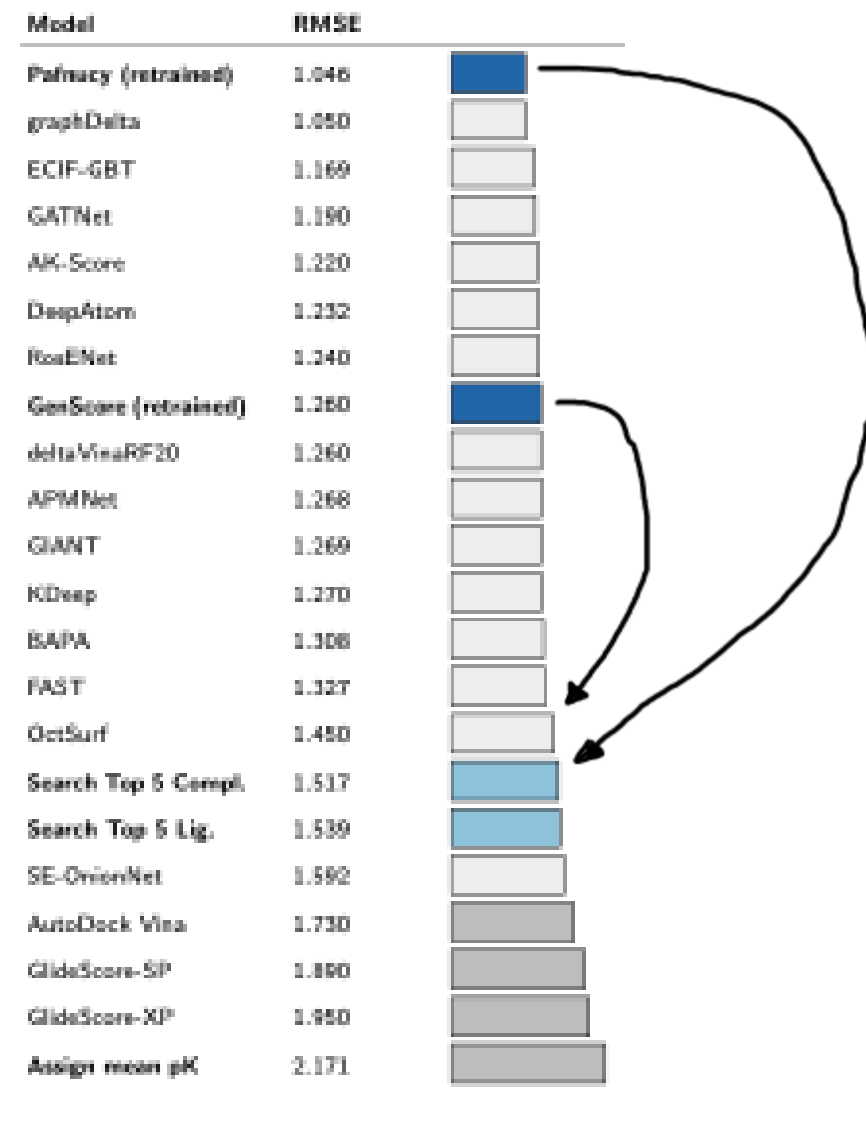


# Example 1: Structure-based binding affinity prediction

Filter training dataset (PDBbind) to remove train-test data leakage into CASF benchmark

Filter the training dataset until all **test** complexes contain unique ligands and are structurally distinct from all training complexes.

- Removes around 600/19'000 training complexes
- Retraining state-of-the-art models on this 4% smaller training dataset **causes considerable drops in CASF2016 performance.**



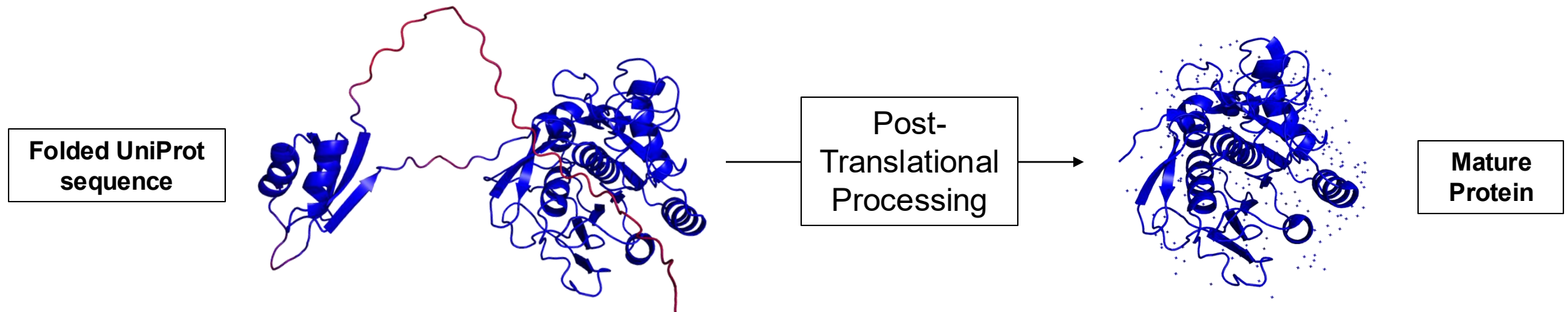
# Example 2: Protein Thermostability Prediction

**Task:** End-to-end protein melting point prediction from protein sequences

**Training Data:** Meltome Atlas – Experimental melting points for 48'000 proteins across 13 species. Corresponding protein sequences for model training are fetched from **UniProt** database.

## Problem 2 – Signalling Peptides:

Uniprot contains complete amino acid sequences from sequencing experiments, including regions that are cleaved off during post-translational processing.



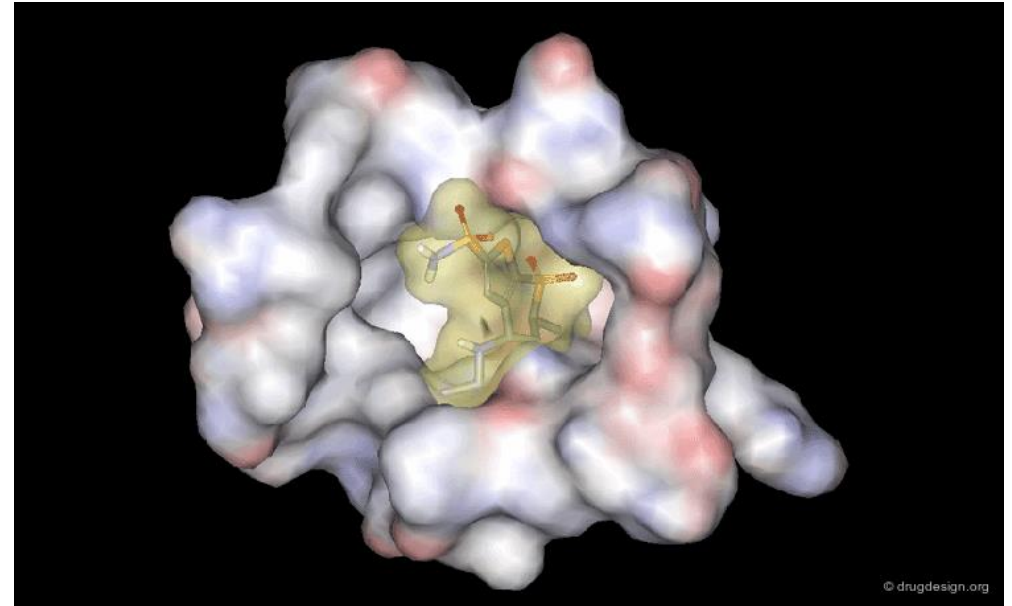
→ **Protein Stability is a property of the mature protein (signalling peptides cleaved off)**

# Example 3: Molecular Docking / Co-folding

**Task:** Predict the binding conformation of a small molecule to a protein

**Classical docking** algorithms are simulation-based

- Protein is static
- Scoring functions predict the binding free energy of the sampled binding poses
- Find the location of binding and the preferred orientation = Docking Pose



Drugdesign.org

# Example 3: Molecular Docking / Co-folding

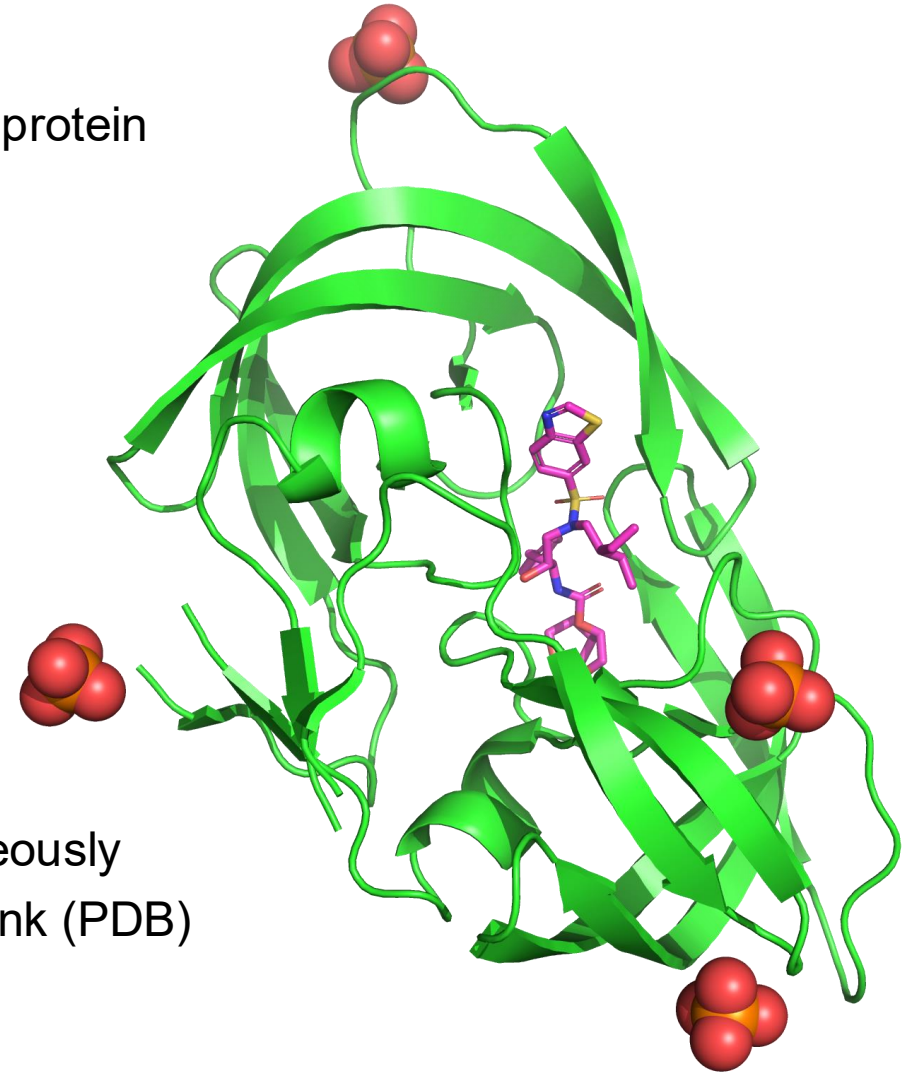
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**Classical docking** algorithms are simulation-based

- Protein is static
- Scoring functions predict the binding free energy of the sampled binding poses
- Find the location of binding and the preferred orientation = Docking Pose

**Co-folding models** are mostly diffusion-based

- Predict protein structure and ligand binding pose simultaneously
- Trained on all molecular complexes in the Protein Data Bank (PDB)
- Small-molecule ligands, DNA, metal ions



**HIV-1 Protease bound to peptidomimetic inhibitor**

Inhibitor binds to the active site of the HIV viral protease 1 without being cleaved, effectively blocking the active site and rendering the enzyme inactive.

# Example 3: Molecular Docking / Co-folding

## Co-folding models:

- AlphaFold3, RosettaFold All-atom, Chai-1, Boltz
- Protein folding performance similar to AlphaFold2

## Ligand Positioning:

- Co-folding models were shown to outperform classical physics-based docking algorithm (redocking)
- Models interpolate robustly, but struggle to extrapolate to inputs not present during training
- Artefacts such as steric clashes occur frequently
- Models are not sensitive to adversarial challenges

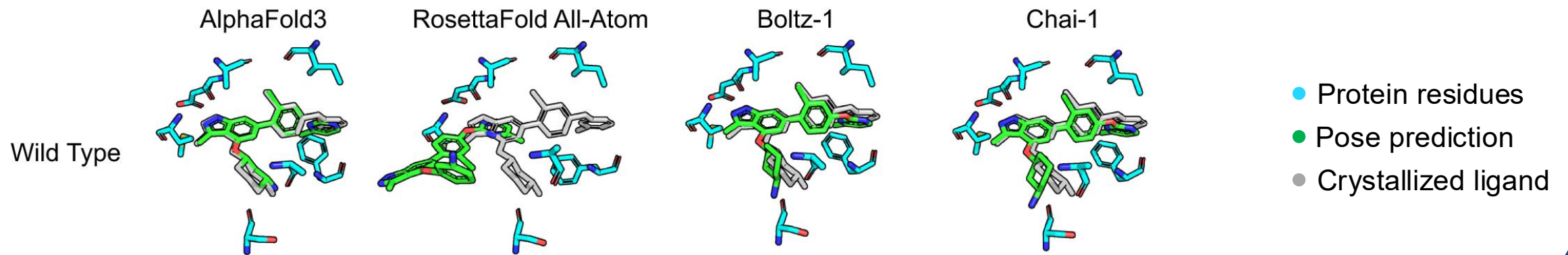
**Primarily rely on data-driven pattern recognition, not on an understanding of physics**

# Example 3: Molecular Docking / Co-folding

## Docking MEK1 inhibitor (binding to ATP-binding site)

### Challenge: Wild-type docking

- Most co-folding models are able to predict the native binding pose correctly

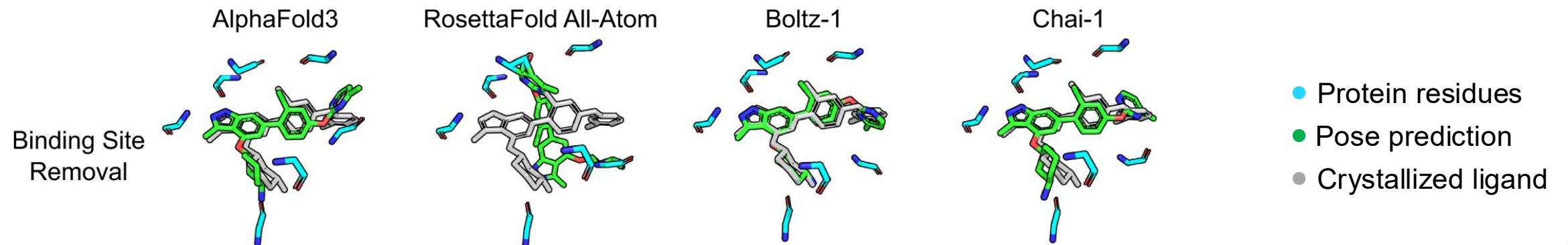


# Example 3: Molecular Docking / Co-folding

## Docking MEK1 inhibitor (binding to ATP-binding site)

### Challenge: Binding Site Removal

- All binding site residues are mutated to glycine, removing all possibility for ligand-protein interactions
- Most co-folding still predict the native binding pose

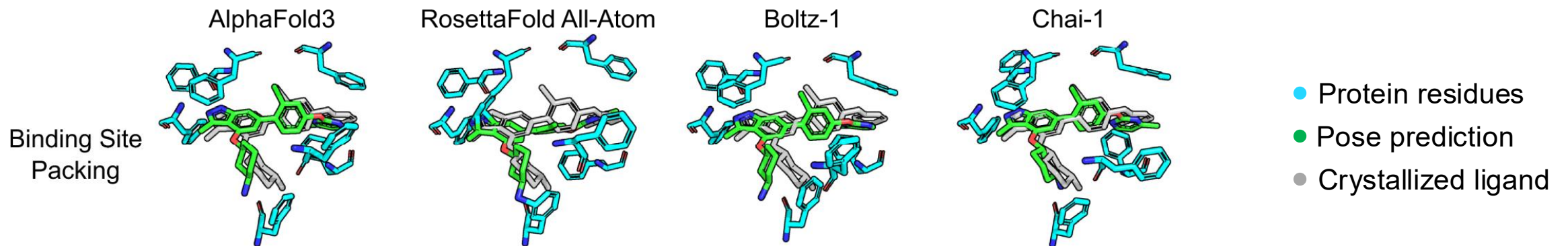


# Example 3: Molecular Docking / Co-folding

## Docking MEK1 inhibitor (binding to ATP-binding site)

### Challenge: Binding Site Packing

- All binding site residues are mutated to phenylalanine, removing all native interactions with side-chains and further occupying the pocket with bulky, hydrophobic groups.
- Most co-folding still predict the native binding pose
- Cases of unphysical overlapping atoms and large steric clashes



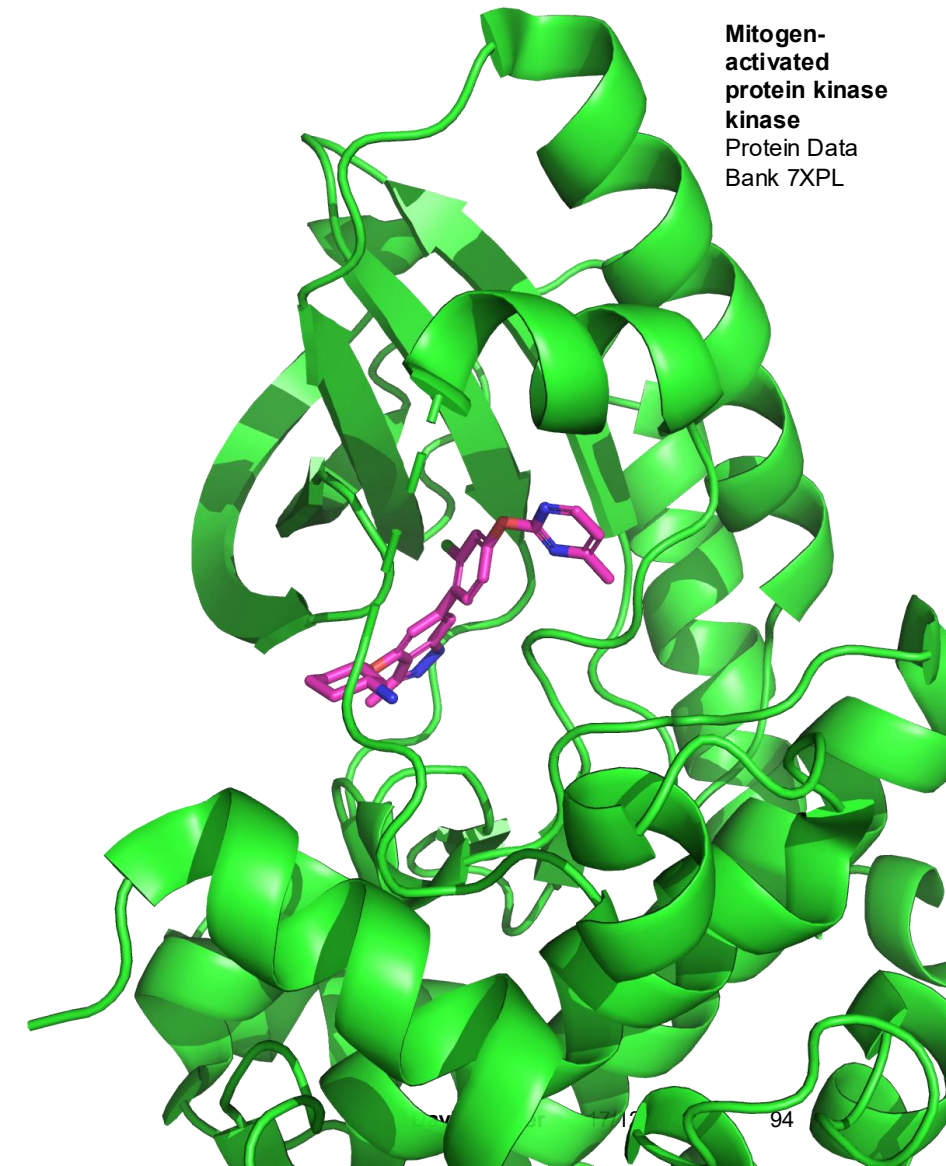
# Example 3: Molecular Docking / Co-folding

## Docking MEK1 inhibitor (binding to ATP-binding site)

- Results are based on only 2 protein-ligand systems
- Tendency for unphysical predictions, showing only partial capacity to adapt to disruptions
- Co-folding models are not predicting poses based on physics of interactions, but rather learning patterns in global protein structures and sequences.

**Traditional Benchmarks primarily measure how well these models capture structural patterns**

**Better physics integration is needed**



# Challenges of biological datasets - Conclusions

- **Lack of understanding of biological context**, e.g. failing to incorporate domain-specific preprocessing, which can lead to models learning irrelevant or misleading features.
- **Dataset redundancy**
  - Random or temporal splits are often insufficient due to intrinsic redundancies, which can lead to test sets that are not independent of the training data.
- **Lack of physical/chemical constraints**
  - Models tend to reproduce patterns observed during training, even when the results are unphysical
  - Validating model outputs against established scientific principles
  - We need to integrate robust chemical and physical priors into such tools

**We need better benchmarks that quantify generalization and test adherence to fundamental physical principles**

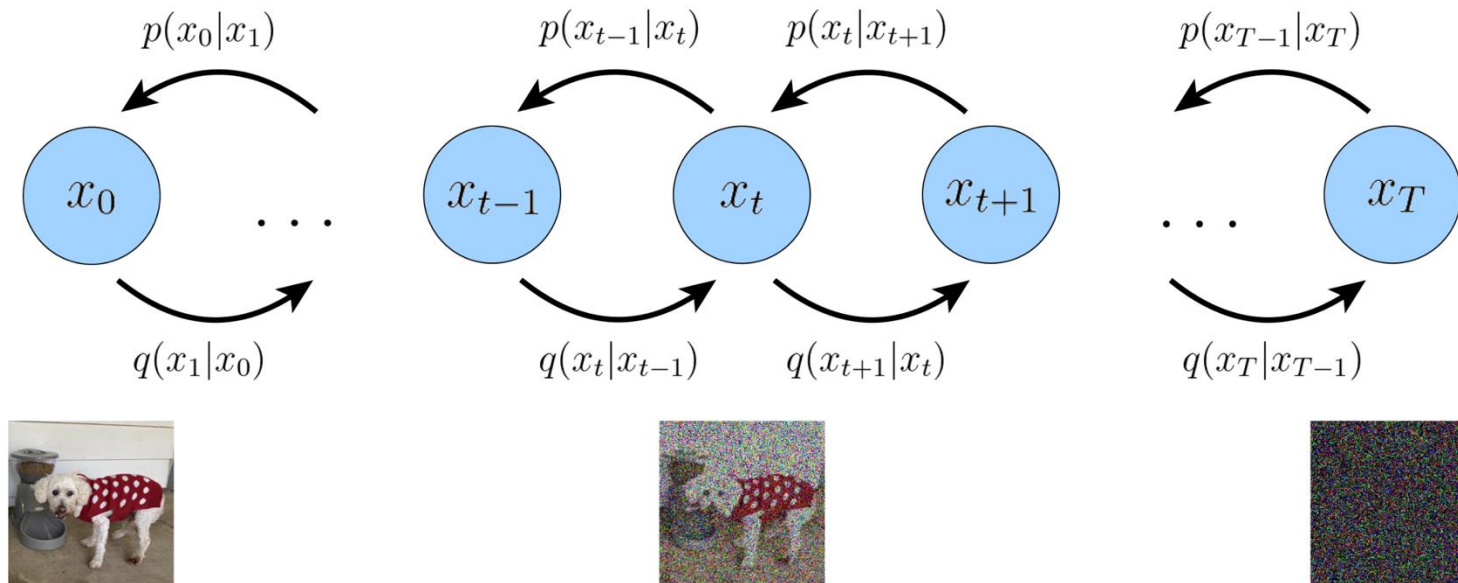
# Generative AI for *de novo* design

- *De novo* design of small molecules
- *De novo* design of proteins

# Diffusion Models

Probabilistic Diffusion Models achieve state of the art performance in image generation

- Add increasing amounts of gaussian noise over a certain number of timesteps
- Train a neural network to undo the steps of noise
- Sample from your known gaussian distribution and feed this pure noise to your models
- Realistic image from the distribution you trained on



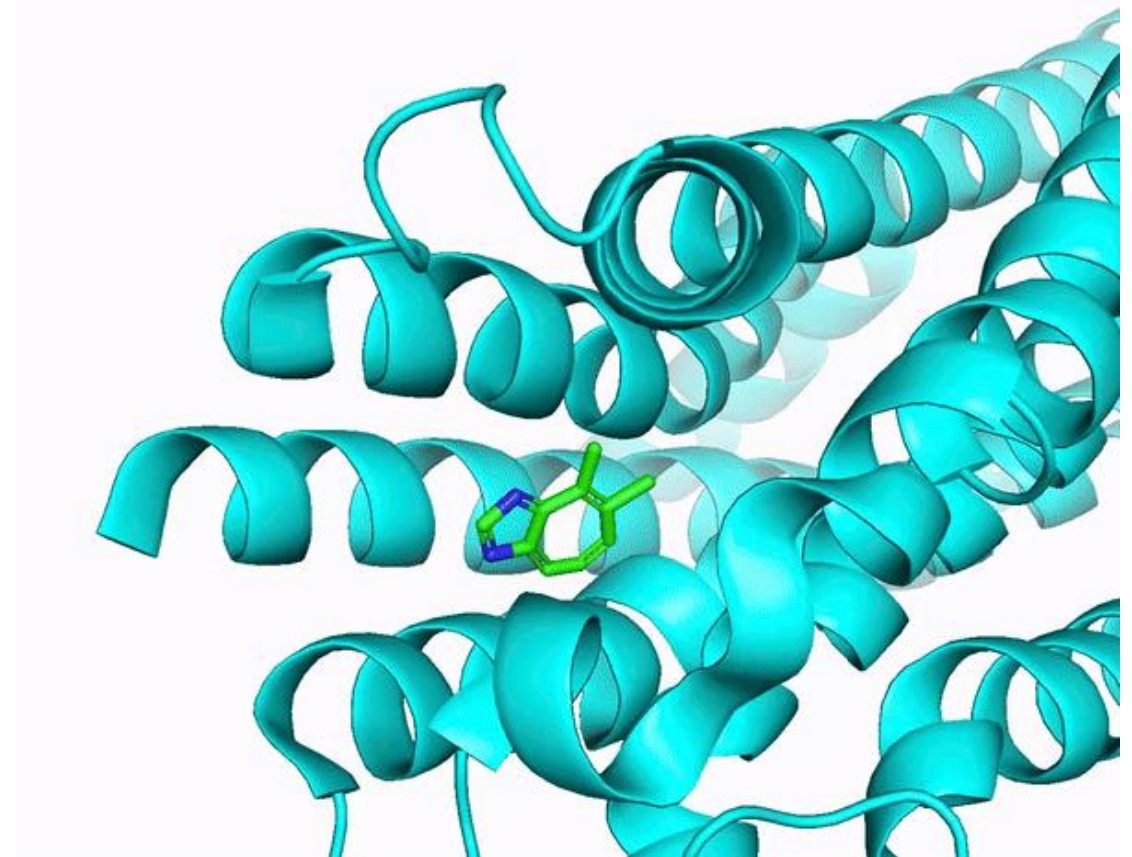
# DiffSBDD for design of small molecule binders

**Denoising diffusion probabilistic model (DDPM) that generates novel ligands conditioned on protein pockets**

- It aims to generate small molecule ligands that bind to a specific 3D protein structure
- Considers the protein pocket as a fixed context
- Ligands are novel, diverse, and match the shape of the protein's binding pocket

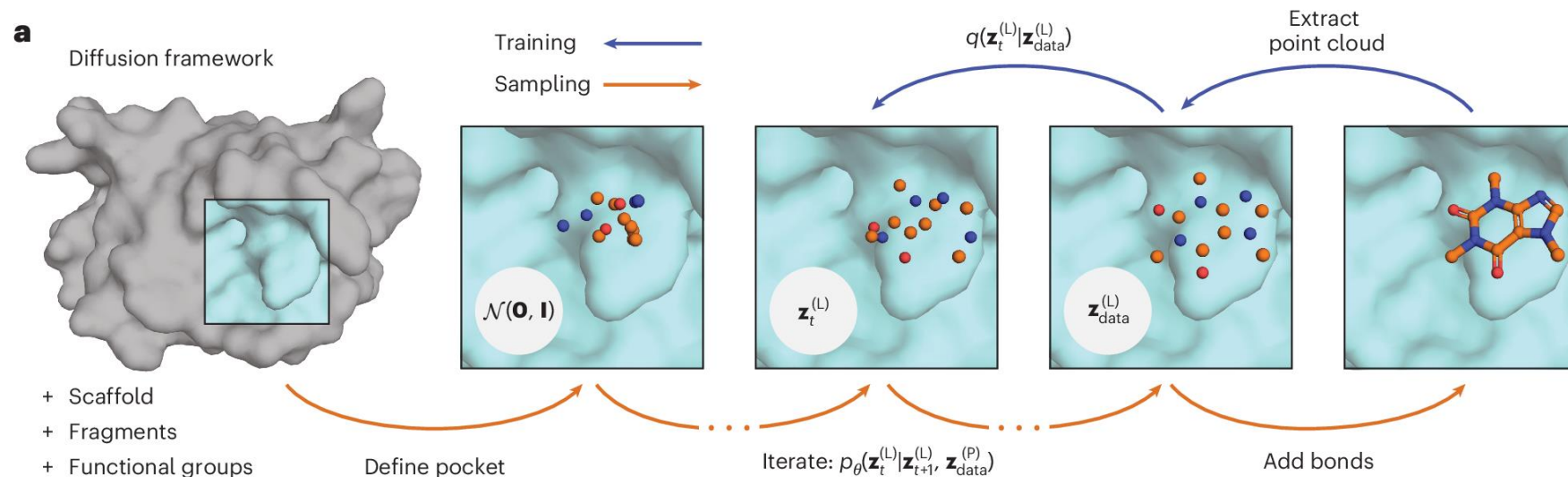
→ **Traditional drug screening is limited to the chemical space of previously studied molecules.**

→ **Diffusion can generate entirely new molecules**



# DiffSBDD for design of small molecule binders

## Denoising diffusion probabilistic model (DDPM) that generates novel ligands conditioned on protein pockets



- Generated training data by noising protein-ligand structures from the CrossDocked dataset
- Model is trained to recover ground-truth structures from noised inputs
- Generate new structures through iterative denoising of random noise

# DiffSBDD for design of small molecule binders

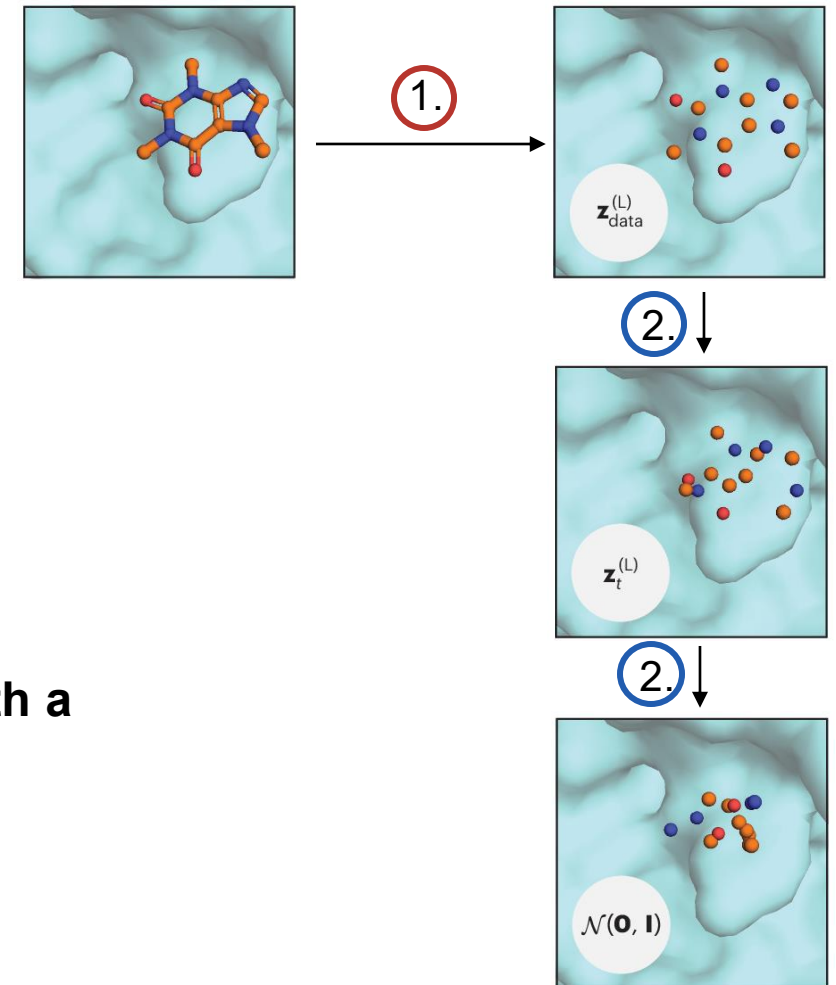
## How to add gaussian noise to small molecules bound to a protein?

1. Represent ligand as an atomic point cloud  $z_{data}^{(L)} = [x, h]$ 
  - 3D coordinates  $x$
  - Categorical features  $h$  (atom type)
  - Molecular bonds are neglected

2. Add noise to  $z_{data}^{(L)} = [x, h]$  for  $t$  noising steps to obtain  $z_t^{(L)} = [x, h]$ 
  - Noising of coordinates **and** atom types

**Noising process transforms atomic point cloud form aligned with a molecule structure into randomly distributed**

**→ Train a neural network to reverse this process**

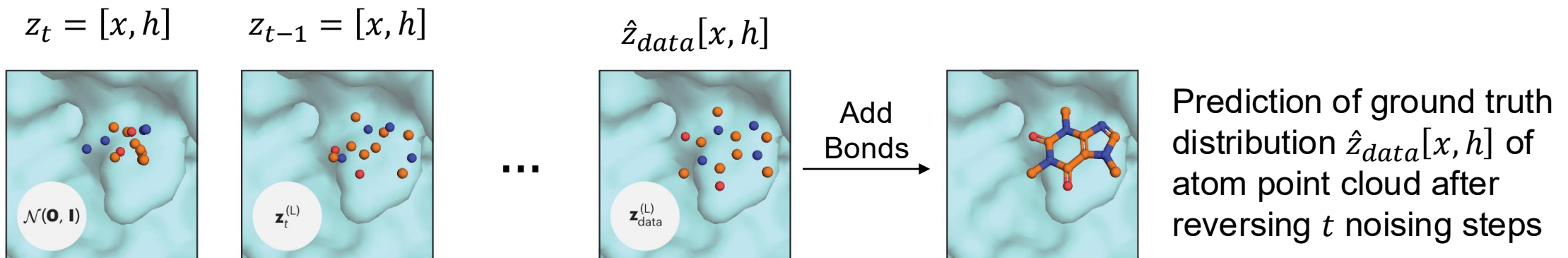


# DiffSBDD for design of small molecule binders

## Training of DiffSBDD to recover original ligand structure from noised atomic point clouds

1. Noised atomic cloud  $z_t^{(L)}[x, h]$  as a fully connected graph
2. Merged with a protein graph  $z_{data}^{(P)}$  (not noised)
3. GNN computes updates of the ligand's features  $h$  and coordinates  $x$  needed to reverse a noising step. Features of the protein graph  $z_{data}^{(P)}$  remain unchanged during the reverse diffusion process

$$z_t^{(L)} = [x_t, h_t] \rightarrow \mathbf{GNN} \rightarrow z_{t-1}^{(L)} = [x_{t-1}, h_{t-1}]$$



# Beyond today's scope

## Generative Modelling for Ligand Design (conditioned on target pocket)

- **TargetDiff:** Similar to DiffSBDD, but results in higher quality ligands
- **DrugFlow:** Flow-matching implementation of pocket-conditioned ligand design, using a virtual node type to allow the model to dynamically add or remove atoms and avoid steric clashes
- **FLOWR.root:** Flow-matching implementation of pocket-conditioned ligand design including binding affinity prediction and confidence estimation

# Generative AI for *de novo* design

- *De novo* design of small molecules
- *De novo* design of proteins

# *De novo* design of proteins

## **Protein engineering**

- Explore the protein space by modifying the sequence of a natural proteins to optimize its properties
- Resulting proteins share most of their sequence with the protein that served as starting point
- Resulting proteins are structurally similar to a natural proteins

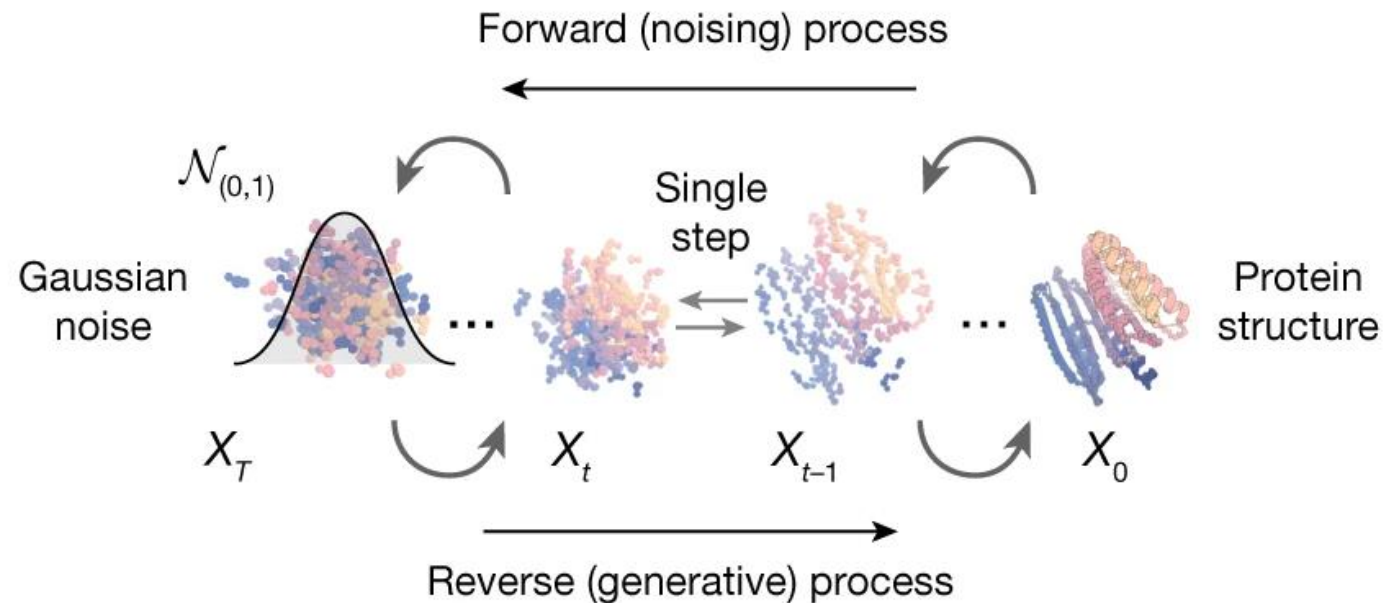
## ***De novo* protein design**

- Designing a novel sequence from scratch
- Does not rely on natural protein sequences, but uses computational methods to design sequences that are potentially very different from all existing sequences

**“Evolution has only explored a tiny subset of all proteins that could exist”**

# RFdiffusion for protein design

Diffusion models applied to proteins: Generate realistic protein backbones *de novo*



- Generated training data by noising structures from the Protein Data Bank (PDB)
- Model is trained to recover ground-truth structures from noised inputs
- Generate new structures  $X_0$  through iterative denoising of random noise  $X_T$

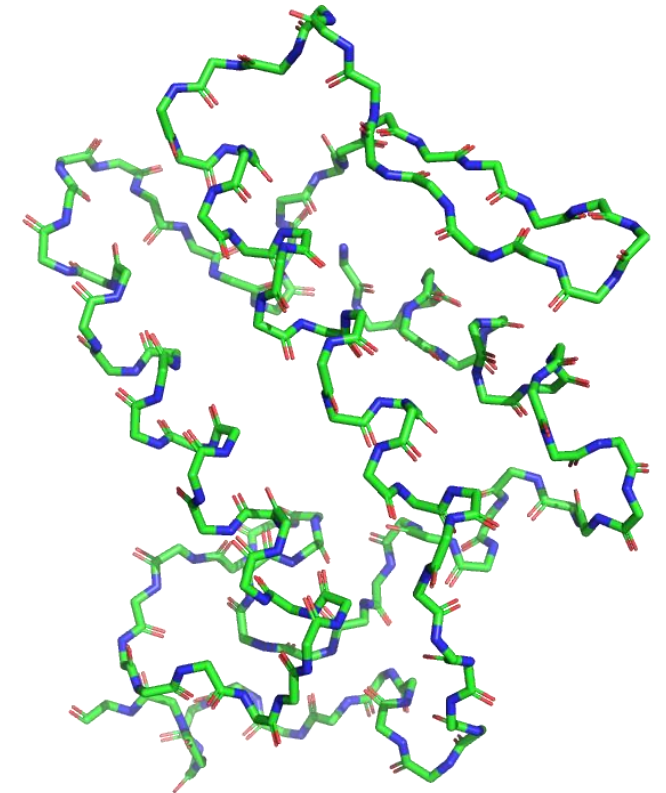
# RFdiffusion

## How to add gaussian noise to protein backbones

1. Frame-based representation of protein backbone with  $L$  residues
  - The atoms N,  $C\alpha$ , and C form a nearly planar, rigid triangle
  - Each triangle can be described by a translation and a rotation
  - **Protein Backbone Structure = Set of  $L$  translations and rotations**
2. Add 3D gaussian noise to translations (perturb  $C\alpha$  coordinates)
3. Use Brownian motion on the manifold of rotation matrices

**Noising process transforms set of triangles from neatly aligned along a protein backbone into randomly distributed and oriented**

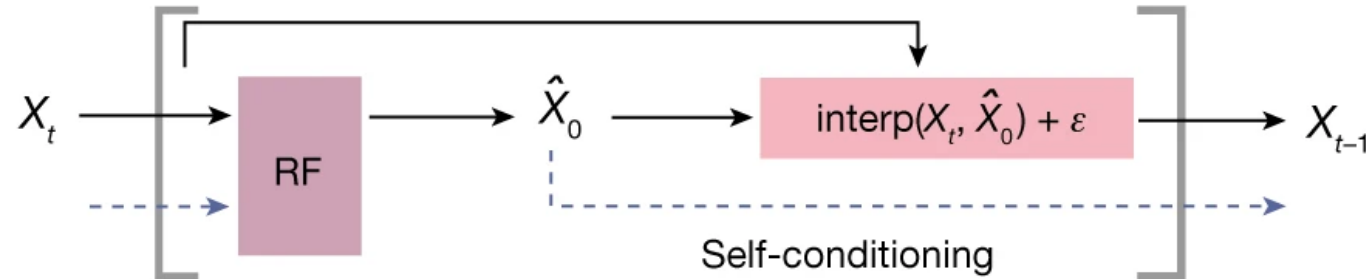
**→ Train neural network to reverse this process**



# RFdiffusion training

## Training of RFdiffusion to recover original protein structure from noised protein structures

Single RFdiffusion step



1. RFdiffusion takes the current coordinates  $X_t$  (initially random noise) and makes a prediction of the ground truth coordinates  $X_0$
2. The next coordinate input to the model ( $X_{t-1}$ ) is generated by a noisy interpolation towards  $X_0$
3. Ground-truth prediction  $X_0$  is not discarded but handed to the next timestep

**Self-conditioning:** The model can use the positions of the coordinates at the current timestep, and the predicted ground truth coordinates of the previous timestep

→ **Markedly improved performance of RFdiffusion**

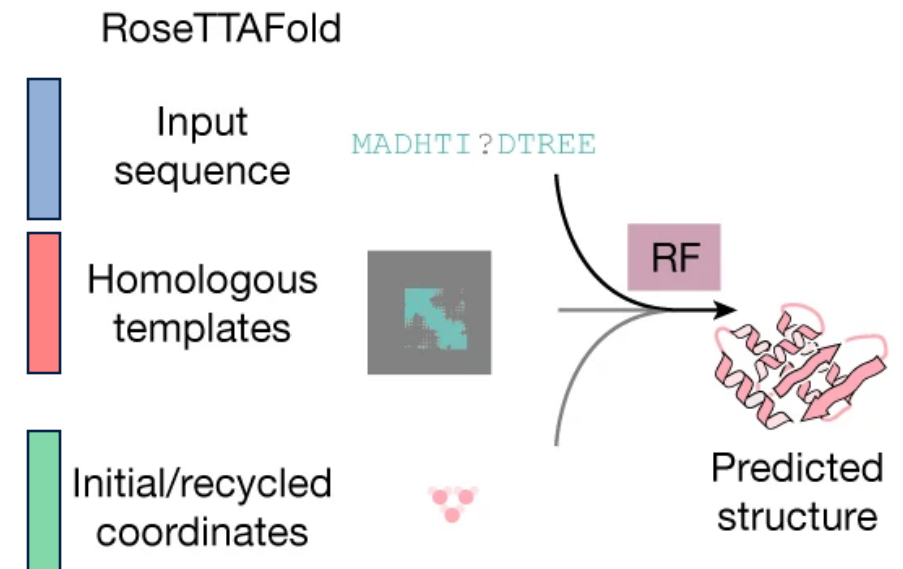
# RoseTTAFold → RFdiffusion

## RoseTTAFold (similar to AlphaFold) accurately predicts protein structures

- Improved diffusion models for protein design could be developed by taking advantage of the deep understanding of protein structure in structure prediction models
- RFdiffusion was developed through fine-tuning of the RoseTTAFold structure prediction network

## RoseTTAFold modelling pipeline

- Given **input sequence**
- Search for homologous proteins in a databases
- Creates a first structure prediction based on the homologous protein's structure
  - Create **pairwise residue distance matrix**
  - Create **frame-based representation** of protein backbone
- Output predicted structure



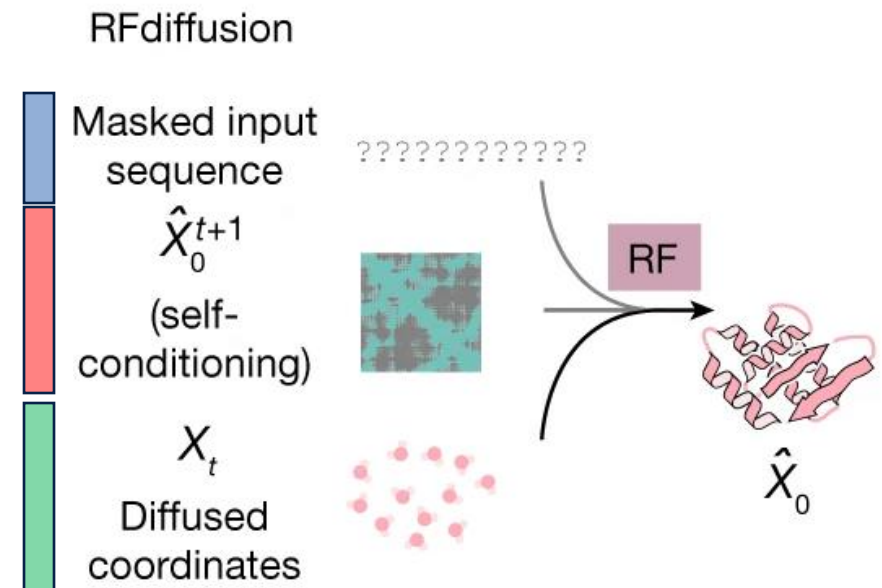
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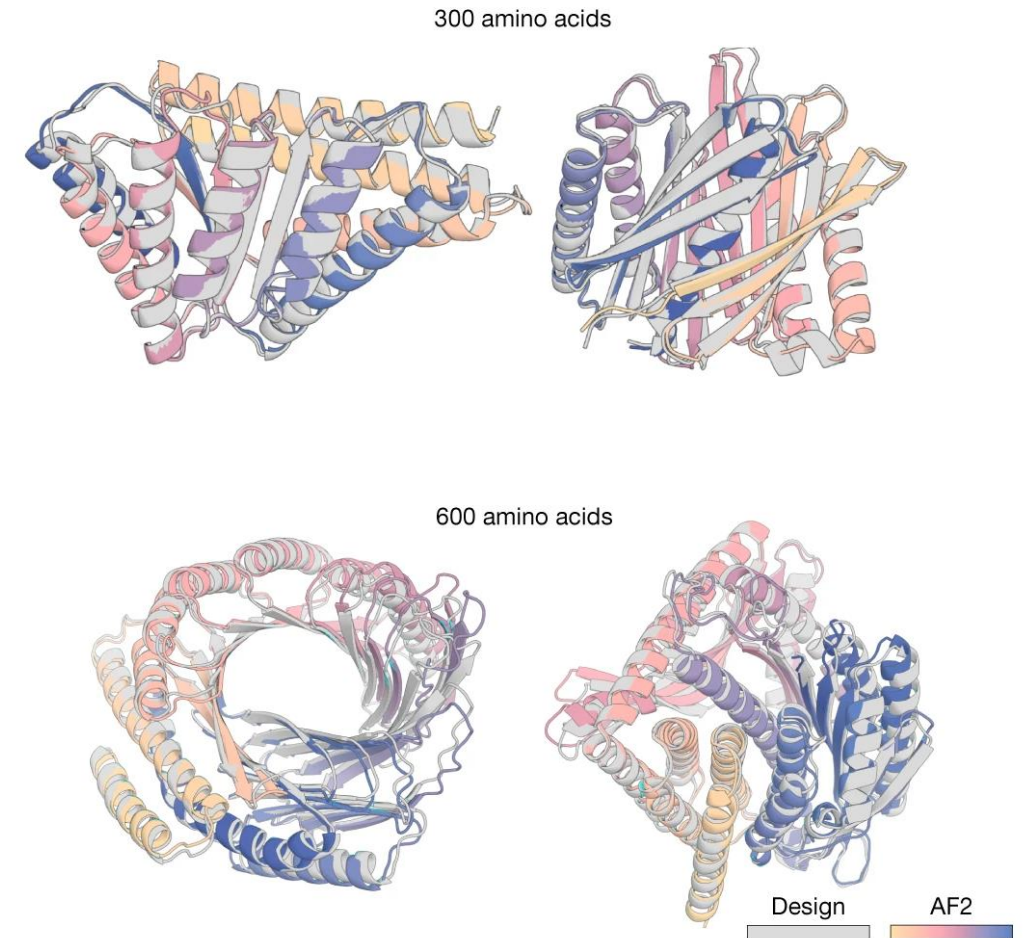
### RFdiffusion modelling pipeline inputs:

- The **sequence input** in masked
- Current **coordinate prediction** at this timestep
- Prediction of the **ground-truth coordinates**  $X_0^{(t+1)}$  of the previous timestep (self-conditioning)
- Output predicted structure



# RFdiffusion - Summary

- Starting from random noise, RFdiffusion can generate protein backbones that are highly diverse
- Many unconstrained designs show little overall similarity to structures seen during training, indicating that the model can generalize beyond its training data
- Experimental characterization showed that most generated proteins are stable and soluble



**RFdiffusion** can generate new monomeric proteins of different lengths with no conditioning information

# RFdiffusion - Summary

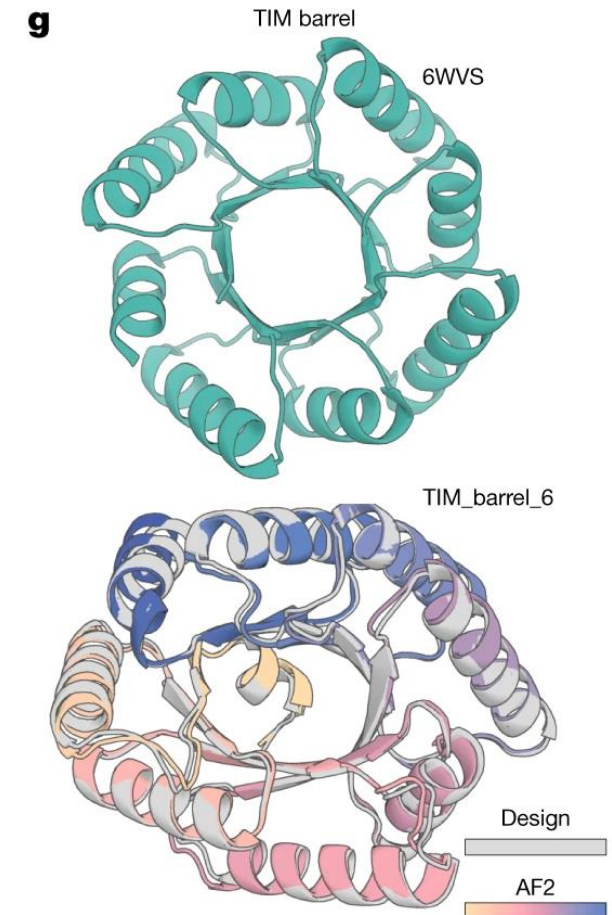
## Conditioning of RFdiffusion for specific designs

- RFdiffusion can be customized to specific design challenges by addition of external potentials and fine-tuning
- Guiding at each step of the iterative denoising process towards specific design objectives

# RFdiffusion - Summary

## Conditioning of RFdiffusion for specific designs

- RFdiffusion can be customized to specific design challenges by addition of external potentials and fine-tuning
- Guiding at each step of the iterative denoising process towards specific design objectives
- RFdiffusion conditioned with structure of TIM barrel protein 6WVS produced diverse designs with the desired topologies

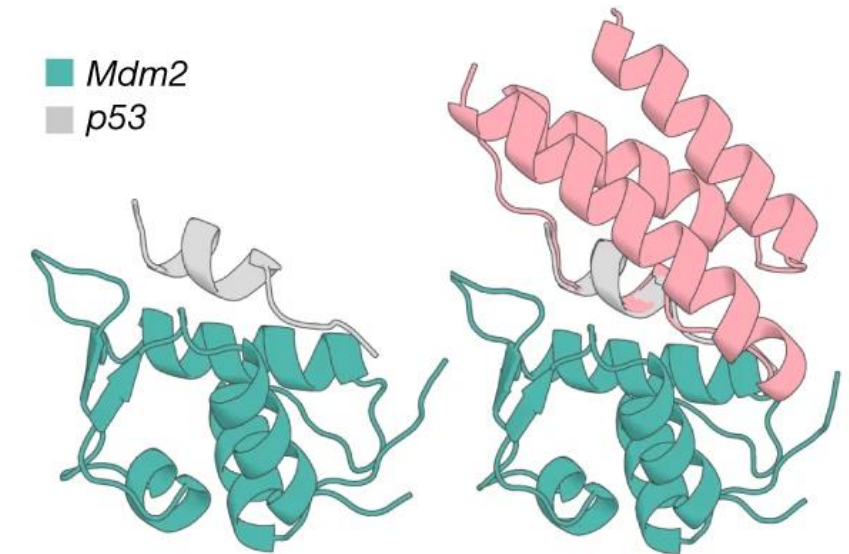


**RFdiffusion** can condition on fold information. An example TIM barrel is shown (bottom left), conditioned on the secondary structure and block adjacency of a previously designed TIM barrel, PDB 6WVS. Designs have very similar circular dichroism spectra to PDB 6WVS

# RFdiffusion - Summary

## Conditioning of RFdiffusion for specific designs

- RFdiffusion can be customized to specific design challenges by addition of external potentials and fine-tuning
- Guiding at each step of the iterative denoising process towards specific design objectives
- RFdiffusion conditioned with structure of TIM barrel protein 6WVS produced diverse designs with the desired topologies
- RFdiffusion can build scaffolds to hold a desired motif
  - In tumours, MDM2 is often overexpressed and binds to p53, preventing p53-mediated cell death
  - Designing a competitor protein to bind to MDM2 is attractive
  - Take the MDM2-binding helix of the p53 protein into new designs
  - RFdiffusion conditioned to include this helix generates designs that strongly bind to MDM2
  - Potential cancer drug candidate



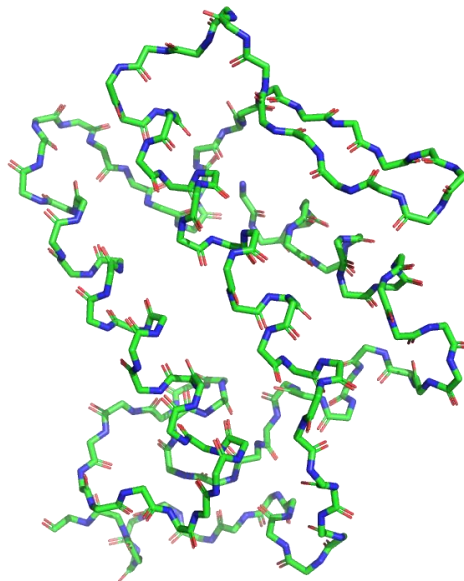
**RFdiffusion** has been used to design a MDM2-binding protein that can compete with p53 and thus prevent p53-MDM2 interaction, which is important for cell-death evasion in many tumours. To incorporate the MDM2-binding helix of p53 in a new design, RFdiffusion was conditioned to include this helix.

# From designed backbones to proteins

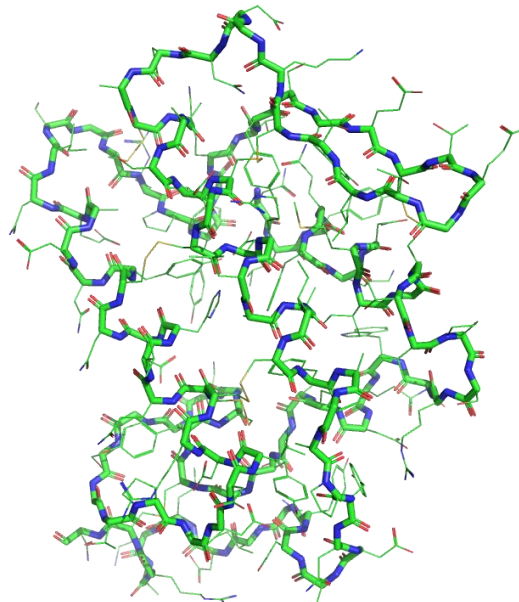
## Designed backbones need amino acids

- Protein backbone designs (e.g., using RFdiffusion) do not include specific amino acid sequences
- To complete the protein design, we need to identify an amino acid sequence that will correctly fold into the designed backbone

**Backbone Design**



**Sequence Design**

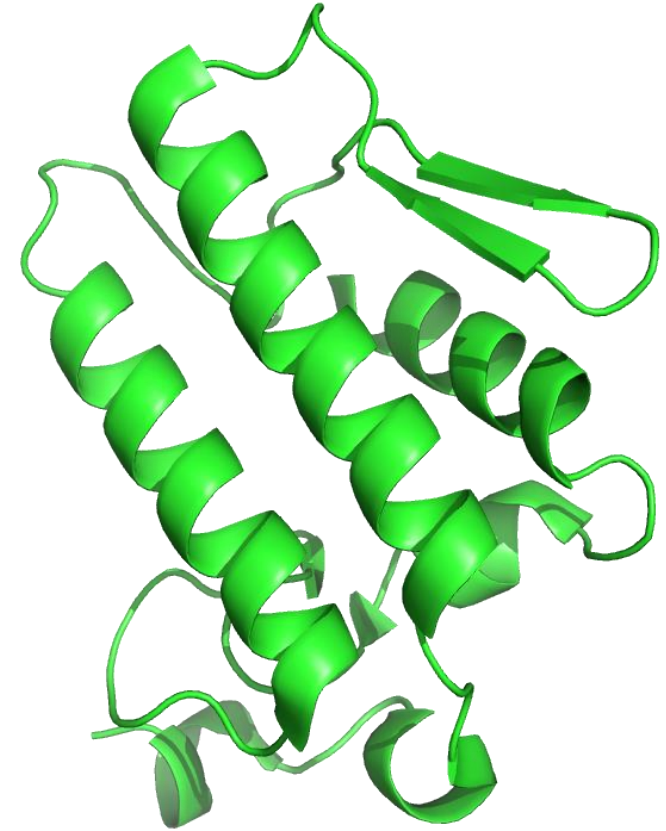


**Folding with AlphaFold2**  
Check if the generated  
sequence folds into the  
correct backbone design

# ProteinMPNN for sequence design

## Generative model for sequence design that integrates graph-based representations of protein structure

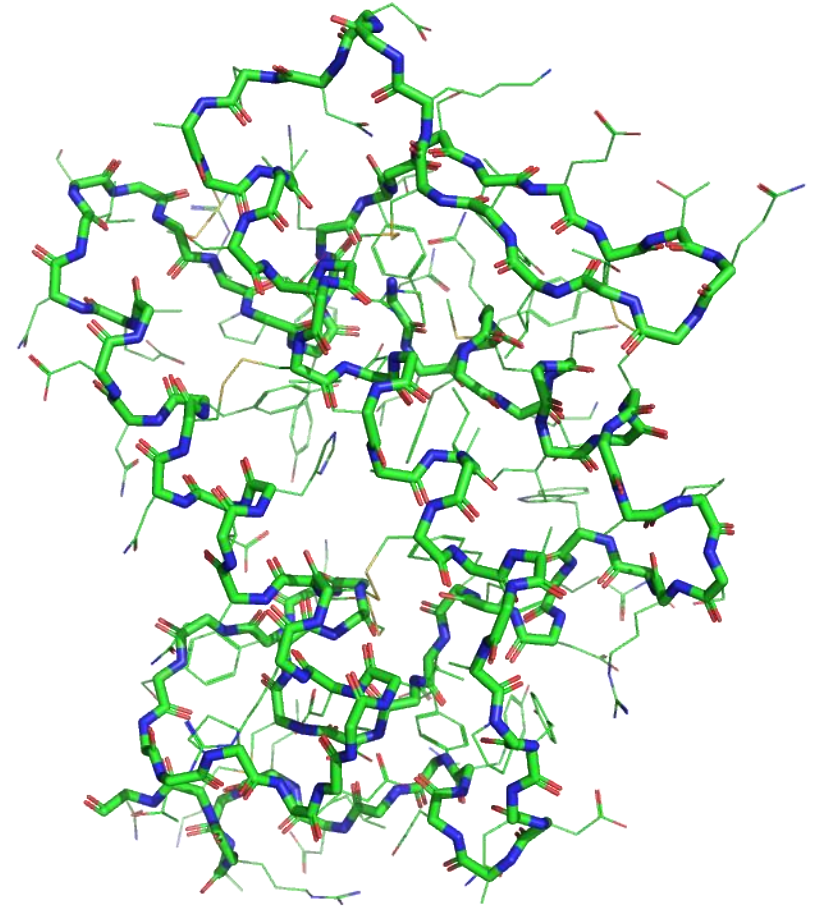
- Sequence-from-structure objective: Design a new sequence for a given fixed backbone
- Inverse Folding Problem
- Find a sequence that will fold into the given structure



# ProteinMPNN for sequence design

## Generative model for sequence design that integrates graph-based representations of protein structure

- Sequence-from-structure objective: Design a new sequence for a given fixed backbone
- Inverse Folding Problem
- Find a sequence that will fold into the given structure



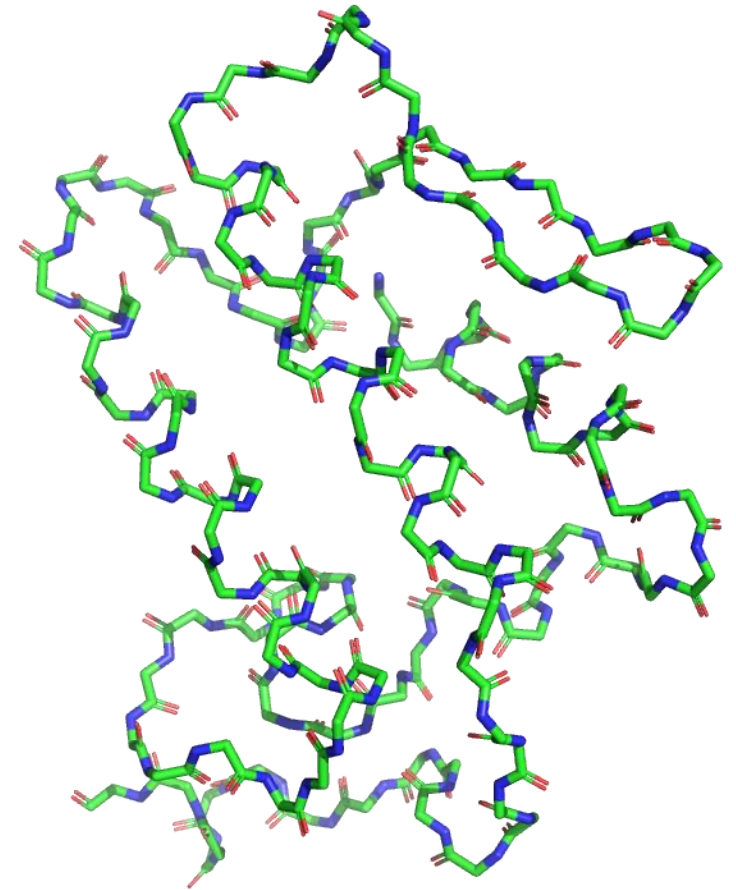
# ProteinMPNN for sequence design

## Generative model for sequence design that integrates graph-based representations of protein structure

- Sequence-from-structure objective: Design a new sequence for a given fixed backbone
- Inverse Folding Problem
- Find a sequence that will fold into the given structure

## Fixed protein structure is modelled as a graph:

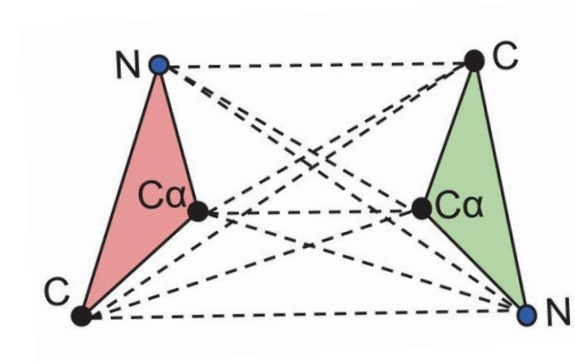
- **Nodes** = amino acids in the fixed structure (specifically the  $C\alpha$ -atom of the unknown amino acid)
- **Edges:** Each node is connected to its 32 nearest neighbor nodes by an edge (each amino acid is connected to its 32 neighboring amino acids)



# ProteinMPNN for sequence design

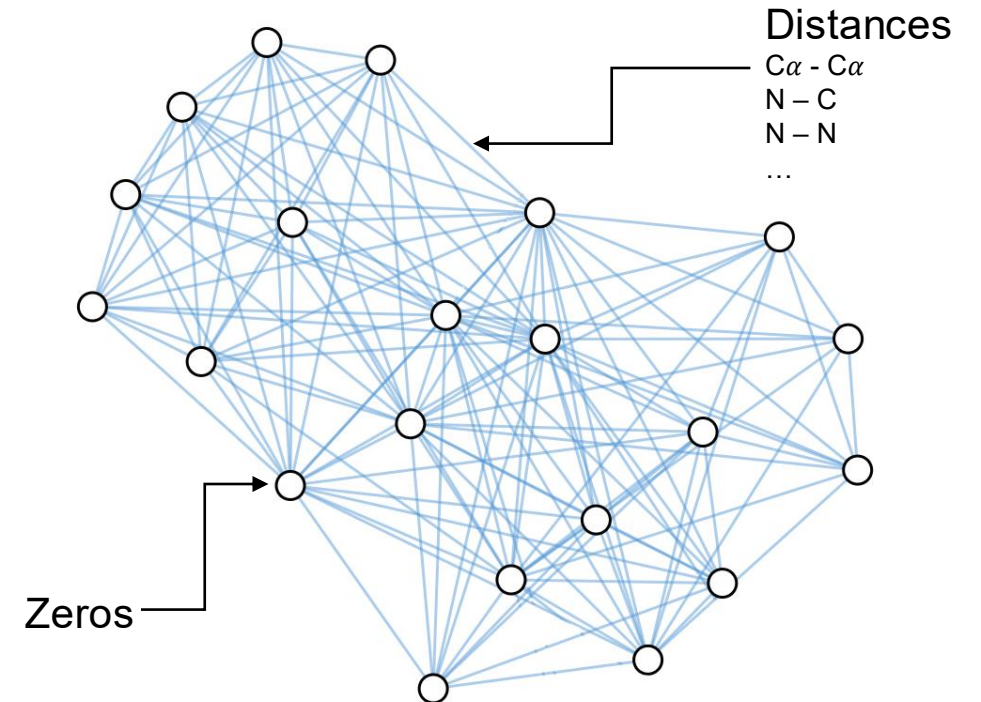
## Fixed Protein Structure is modelled as a graph:

- **Node features** = Zeros
- **Edge features** = All distances between the backbone atoms of both amino acids (to encode the spatial orientation of the amino acids)



## Encoder: Message-Passing Neural Network

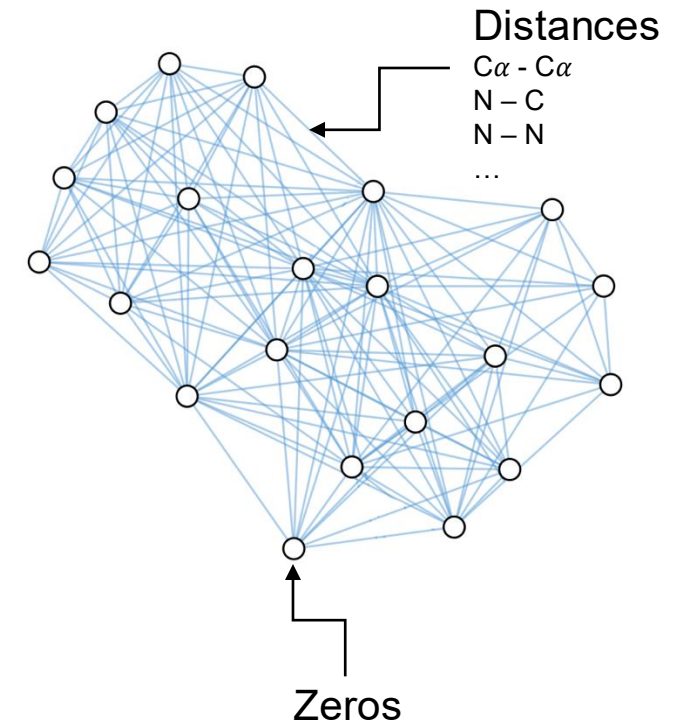
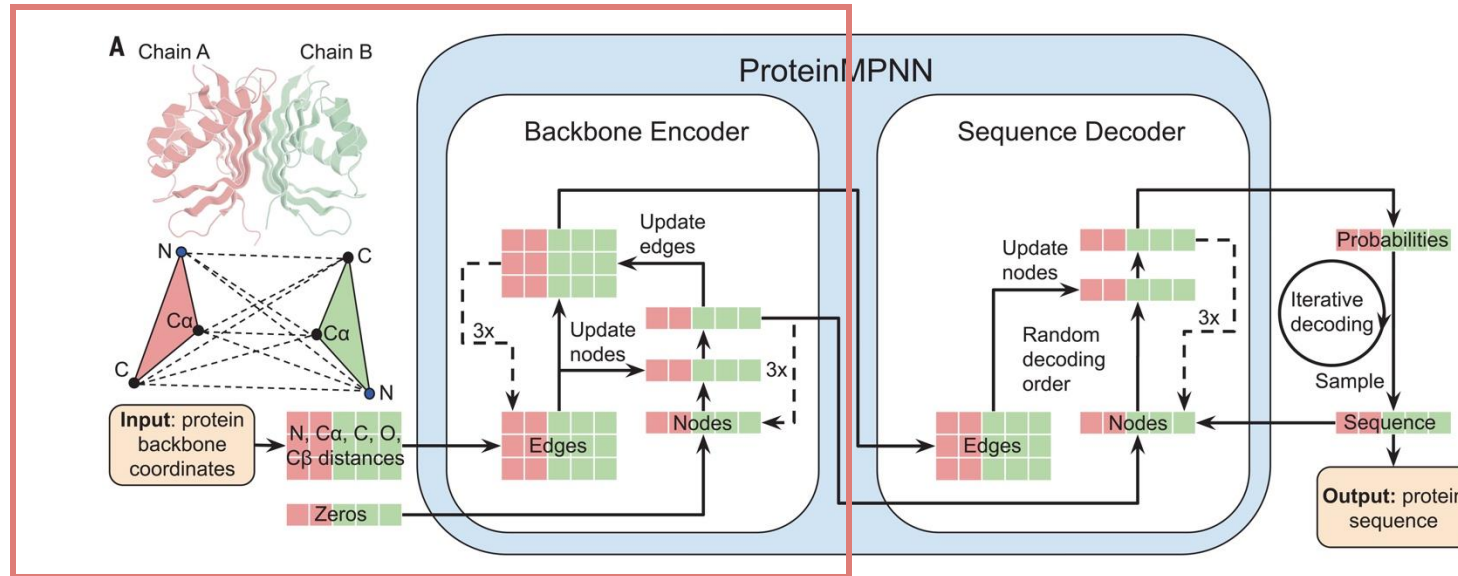
- Initial node features (zeros) and initial edge features (distances) are transformed with graph convolutions
- Information about the spatial environment of a node is encoded in its node features



# ProteinMPNN for sequence design

## Encoder: Message-Passing Neural Network

- Updates the nodes
- Updates the edges
- Repeat 3x

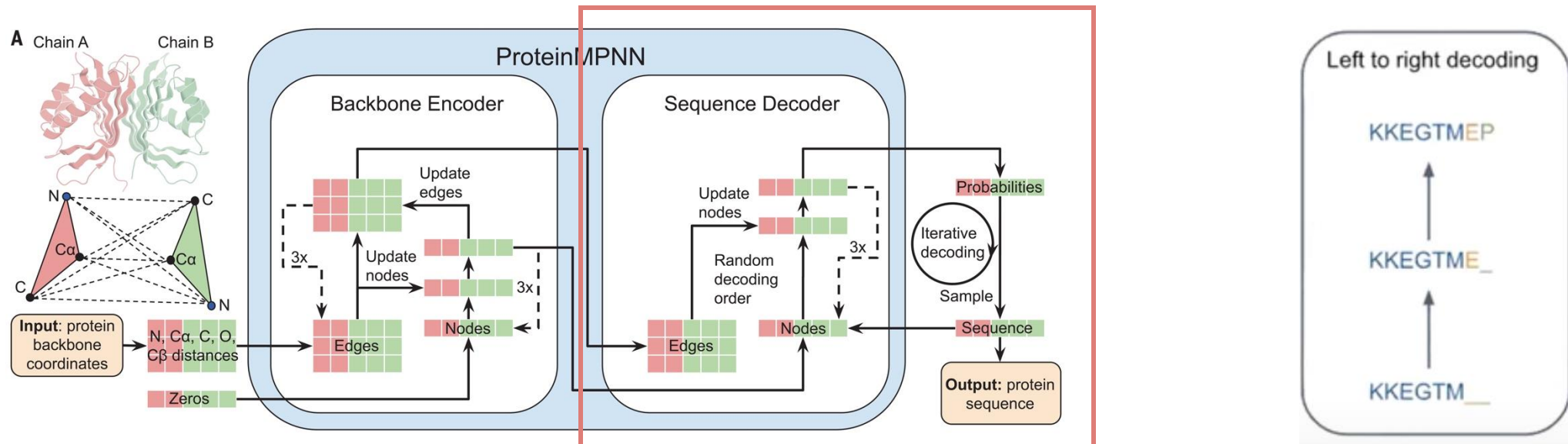


- Graph Convolution generates new edge and node embeddings
- Encoding information of the spatial neighborhood of an amino acid

# ProteinMPNN for sequence design

## Decoder: Transformer Model

- Autoregressive decomposition
- One amino acid at a time – Run decoder as many times as there are amino acids



For each amino acid:

- Input: Updated **edge and node embeddings** and **previously predicted sequence**
- Returns a categorical probability distribution from which the next amino acid is sampled

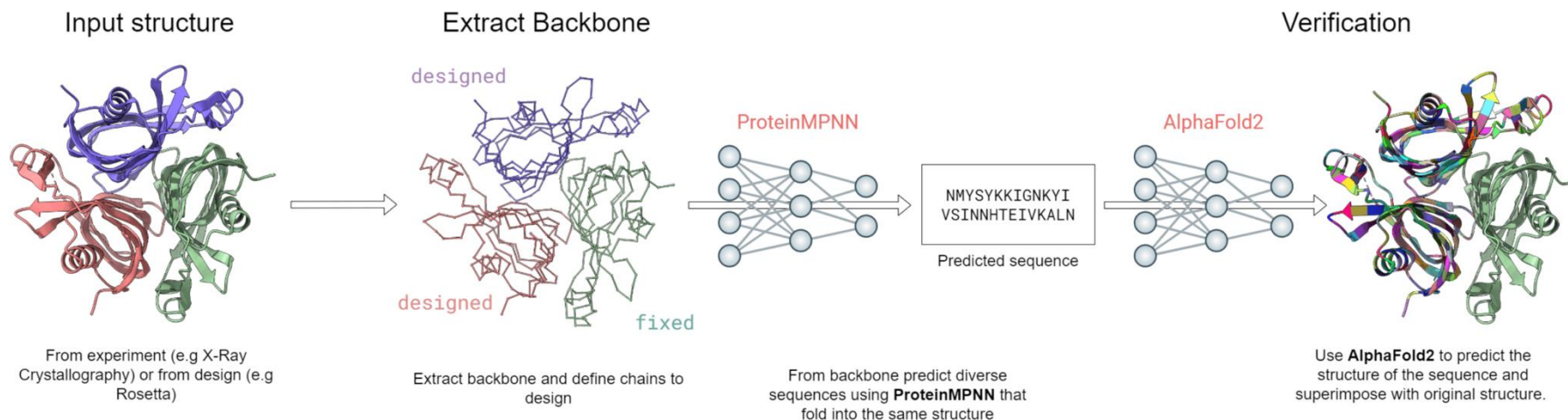
# ProteinMPNN for sequence design

**Training Data:** Proteins with known sequence and experimentally solved structure

- Amino acid side chains are removed and ProteinMPNN is required to rediscovered them
- Loss = Categorical cross entropy per amino acid  $CCE = -\sum_{i=1}^{20} p_i \log q_i$

**Training Performance:**

- Sequence recovery of  $\approx 50\%$  (Percentage of correct amino acids recovered from original sequence)
- Structure Validation – Do the predicted sequences fold into the right structure?



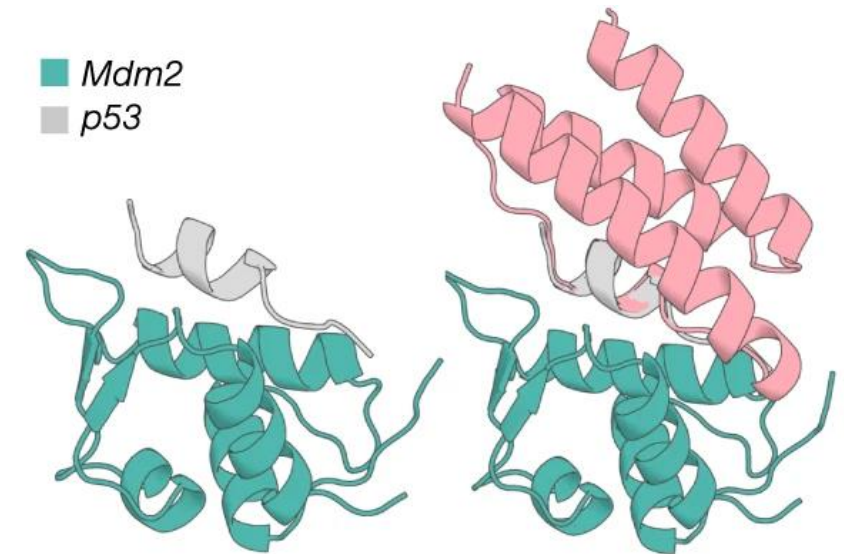
# ProteinMPNN - Summary

## ProteinMPNN solves sequence design problems, finding sequences that fold into specific backbone structures

- In silico and experimental validation show high accuracy
- Graph-based modelling of 3D backbone structures and MPNN-derived node features are crucial for model performance

## Desired motifs can be integrated by keeping a part of the sequence fixed during sequence generation

- For design of MDM2-binding protein with the p53 helix, one could keep the residues of the helix fixed as they are in p53
- ProteinMPNN then designs the sequence around the fixed motif



**Sequence design for backbones generated with RFdiffusion:** Given backbone coordinates of a MDM2-binding protein generated by RFdiffusion, ProteinMPNN can find sequences that fold into the desired structures. Knowing that the original sequence of the p53-helix binds to MDM2, we can fix these residues during sequence generation with ProteinMPNN, and the model will design a sequence around the fixed amino acids.

# Summary Generative AI for *de novo* design

**DiffSBDD is a diffusion model to generate novel small-molecule binders for specific binding pockets.**

**The combination of RFdiffusion and ProteinMPNN is one potential approach for *de novo* protein structures design**

- **RFdiffusion** is a generative model for protein backbones that generates highly diverse protein backbones from random noise
- **ProteinMPNN** is a generative model for sequence design, that finds sequences that fold into specific structures

Both models can be conditioned to include desired motifs/topologies, allowing to design proteins for specific applications.

**Thank you for your attention**