



## Cyclohexanes in Drug Discovery

### Key Points

- May function as a bioisostere for the *t*-butyl group for a deeper hydrophilic pocket on target protein.
- May offer better affinity.
- May offer more contact points with target protein.

### Overview

The cyclohexyl fragment is a popular building in both natural and synthetic drugs, serving as either the core structure or as part of a peripheral side chain. The cyclohexyl group may function as a bioisostere for the *t*-butyl group for a deeper hydrophilic pocket on target protein. As a rigid version of floppy alkyl chain, the cyclohexyl replacement reduces entropy and may offer better affinity. As a bioisostere for the flat phenyl group, cyclohexyl substituent has the advantage of being three dimensional, which potentially offers more contact points with target protein. This concept has been proven in the discovery of venetoclax (Venclexta). In addition, the cyclohexenyl motif is a metabolically more stable bioisostere for furanose and this concept has been demonstrated by the success of oseltamivir (Tamiflu).

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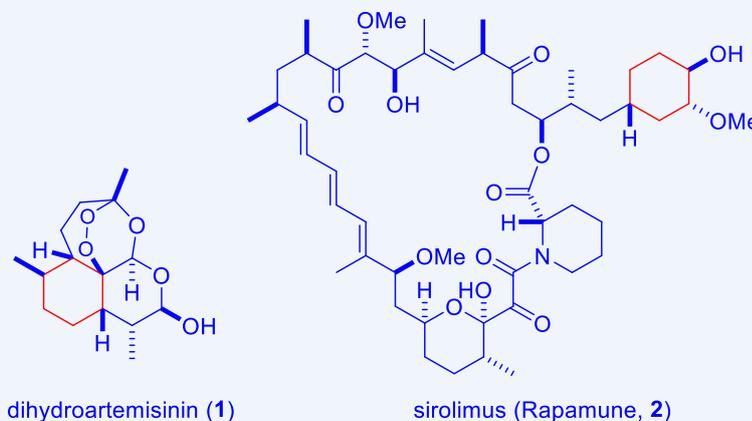
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As a bioisotere for the *t*-butyl moiety, cyclohexyl fragment occupies more space, which could be beneficial when binding to a deeper lipophilic pocket on the target protein. On the other hand, as a bioisotere for the flat phenyl group, cyclohexyl substituent has the advantage of being three dimensional, which potentially offers more contact points with target protein.



### Cyclohexane-containing Drugs

Many drugs isolated from Nature contain the cyclohexyl group either as the core structure such as in dihydroartemisinin (**1**) or on the side-chain such as in the case of sirolimus (rapamycin, Rapamune, **2**). Additional cyclohexane-containing drugs from Nature also include steroids, cocaine, FK506, lovastatin (Mevacor), simvastatin (Zocor), morphine and analogues, reserpine, streptomycin, taxol and its analogues.



Here we focus our attention on synthetic cyclohexane-containing drugs, which encompass nearly all therapeutic areas. Glimepiride (Amaryl, **3**) is a sulfonylurea anti-diabetic. Nateglinide (Starlix, **4**), although not a sulfonylurea *per se*, is an antagonist of sulfonylurea receptor. Both are used to treat type II diabetes mellitus. In terms of CNS drugs, Wyeth's venlafaxine (Effexor, **5**) and its metabolite desvenlafaxine (Pristiq, **6**) are selective serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SSNRIs), whereas Pfizer's sertraline (Zoloft, **7**) is a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI).

## PharmaBlock Products

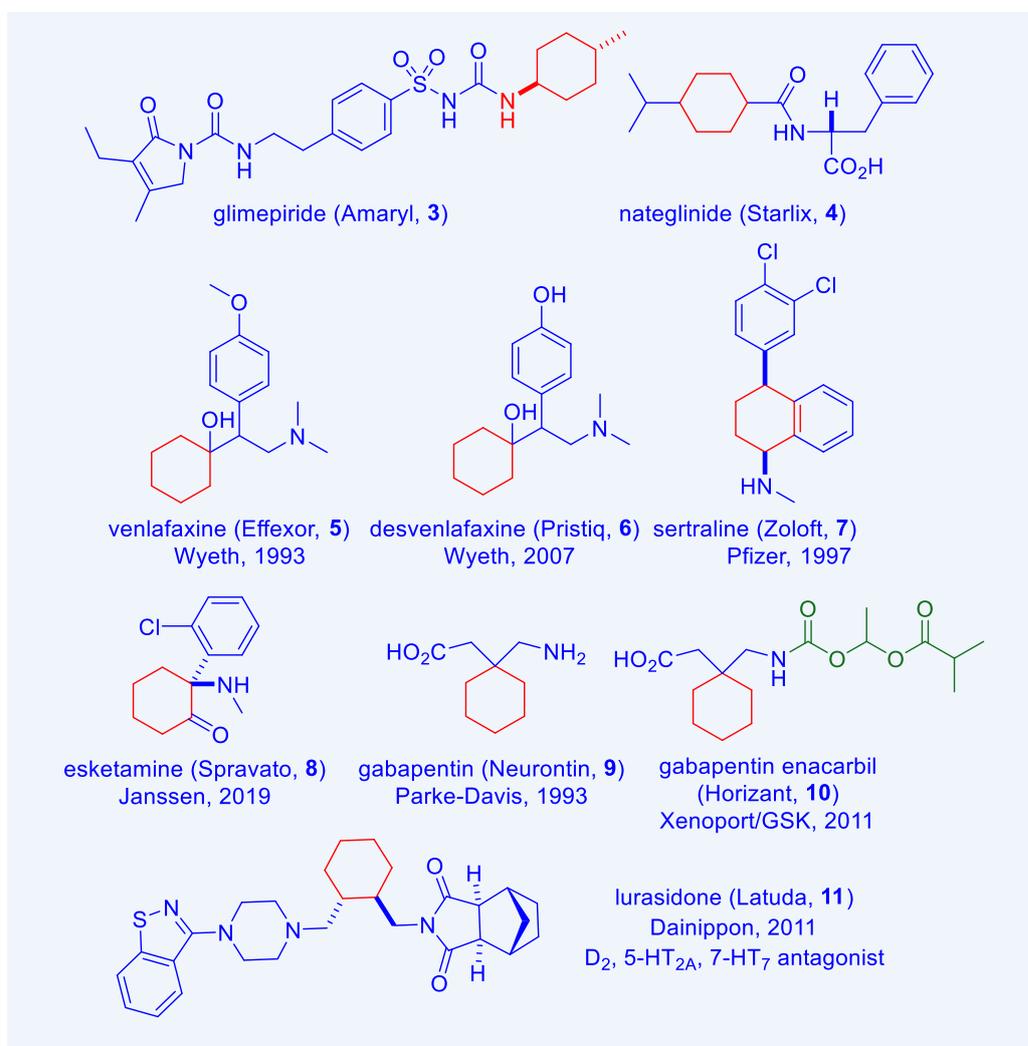


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PBZ3534

All three drugs **5–7** are antidepressants. The most recent entry to antidepressants is Janssen's esketamine (Spravato, **8**, as nasal spray), which modulates the glutamate/GABA neurotransmitter systems, for treatment-resistant depression (TRD). Parke–Davis' gabapentin (Neurontin, **9**) is a relatively older anticonvulsant (its mechanism of action is through inhibiting the  $\alpha 2\text{-}\delta$  subunit of calcium channel), Xenoport and GSK co-developed its prodrug, gabapentin enacarbil (Horizant, **10**), which gained the FDA approval for marketing in 2011. Also in 2011, the FDA approved Dainippon's lurasidone (Latuda, **11**), which exhibits significant antagonist effects at the  $D_2$ ,  $5\text{-HT}_{2A}$ ,  $7\text{-HT}_7$  receptors, for the treatment of schizophrenia.



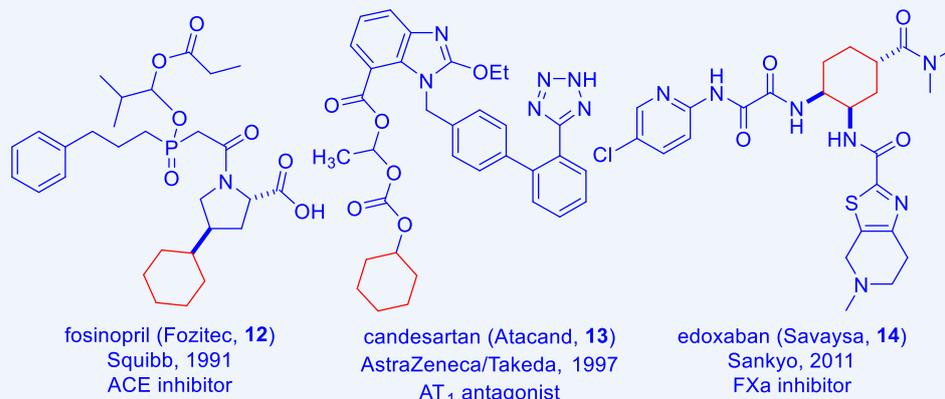
## PharmaBlock Products



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PBZ3148



Several cyclohexane-containing cardiovascular drugs exist on the market. Squibb's ACE inhibitor fosinopril (Fozitec, **12**) is one and AstraZeneca's AT<sub>1</sub> receptor antagonist candesartan (Atacand, **13**) is another. For the latter drug, the cyclohexyl group is part of the pro-drug, which is hydrolyzed by esterases *in vivo*. Sankyo's factor Xa inhibitor edoxaban (Savaysa, **14**) has a tri-substituted cyclohexyl moiety as its core structure.

In 1979, Janssen's H<sub>1</sub> receptor antagonist levocabastine (Livostin, **15**), an antihistamine eye drop, garnered regulatory approval for treating eye allergies. As far as cyclohexane-containing anticancer drugs are concerned, while cisplatin is plagued by renal toxicity, its analogue oxaliplatin (Eloxatin, **16**) is devoid of nephrotoxicity. Evidently, replacing the two ammonia ligands with a *trans*-diaminocyclohexane is instrumental to the reduction of the drugs' kidney toxicity. In the field of antiviral drugs, Pfizer's CCR5 receptor antagonist maraviroc (Selzentry, **15**) has been on the market to treat HIV infection since 2007.

In 2018, the FDA approved Achaogen's aminoglycoside antibiotic plazomicin (Zemdri, **18**). Regrettably, the drug is a commercial flop and the company went bankrupt recently. Success in science does not always translate to financial success, unfortunately.

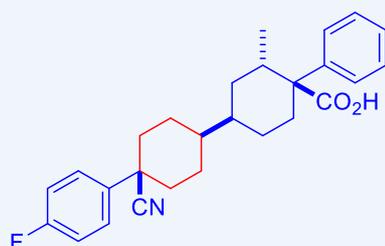
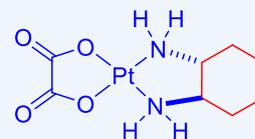
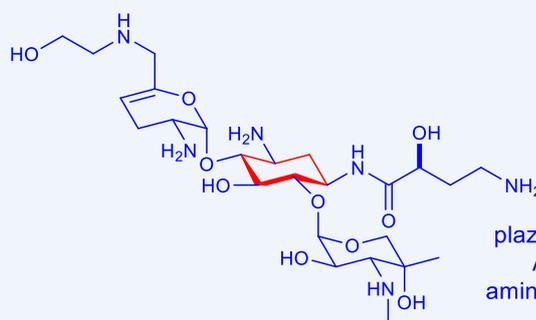
## PharmaBlock Products



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PBZ3146

levocabastine (Livostin, **15**)  
Janssen, 1979  
H1 receptor antagonistoxaliplatin (Eloxatin, **16**)  
Sanofi, 2002  
devoid of nephrotoxicitymaraviroc (Selzentry, **17**)  
Pfizer, 2007  
CCR5 receptor antagonistplazomicin (Zemdri, **18**)  
Achaogen, 2018  
aminoglycoside antibiotic

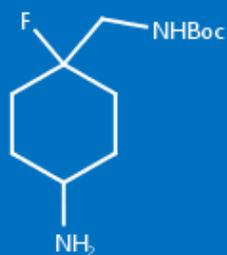
## Cyclohexanes in Drug Discovery

The bioisosterism between the cyclohexyl and the *t*-butyl group is amply demonstrated during the structure–activity relationship (SAR) investigations for the two marketed hepatitis C virus (HCV) non-structural protein (NS)3/4A inhibitors telaprevir (Incivek, **20**) and boceprevir (Victrelis, **21**). Both are serine protease reversible covalent inhibitors. Aided by structure-based drug design (SBDD), Vertex arrived at hexapeptide **19** with a  $K_i$  value of 200 nM. Extensive SAR efforts led to truncation of the P<sub>1</sub>' amide. More relevantly, the P<sub>4</sub> position on **19** was an isopropyl fragment (not a *t*-butyl group *per se*, but a close analogue). Evidently, the corresponding S<sub>4</sub> pocket on the NS3/4A serine protease protein was deeper. As a consequence, employing a cyclohexyl substituent enhanced the hydrophobic binding, which eventually led to the discovery of a potent and bioavailable covalent telaprevir (Incivek, **20**) on top of P<sub>2</sub> and P<sub>3</sub> optimization.<sup>1</sup> That was a significant achievement of medicinal chemistry considering “Trying to land an inhibitor in the HCV protease target binding site was like trying to land a plane on a piece of pizza — it’s flat and greasy and there’s nothing to hang onto”.<sup>2</sup>

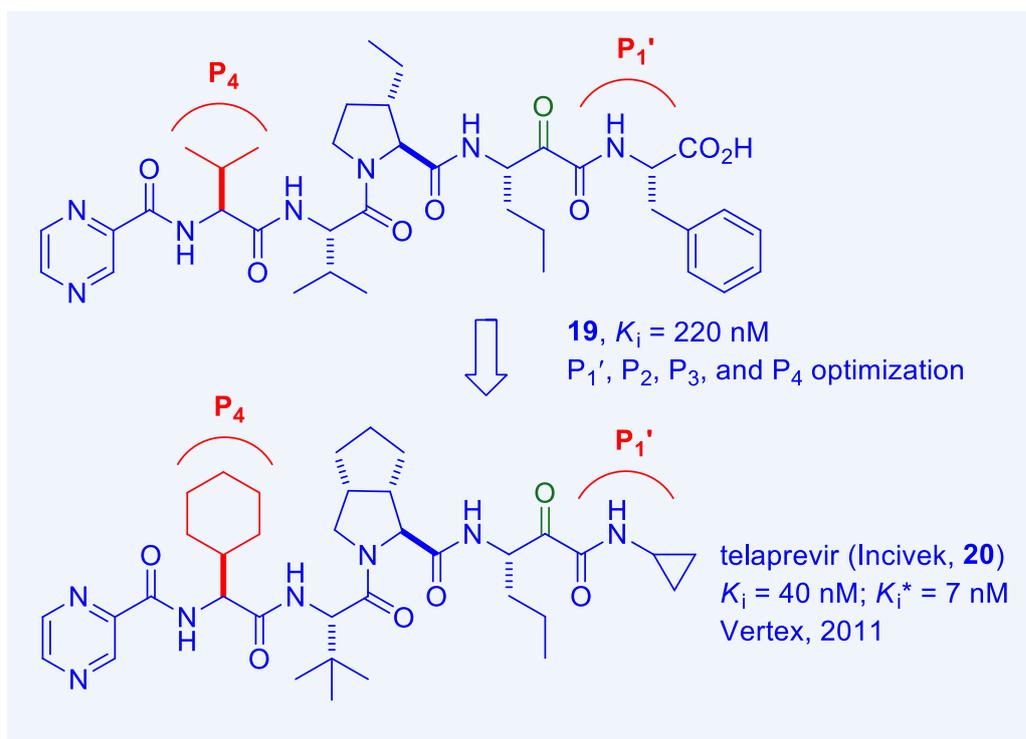
## PharmaBlock Products



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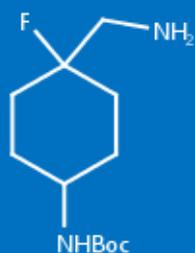


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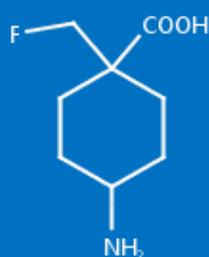


While veteran drug hunters know intimately the nomenclature of binding pockets of proteases, it might be useful to show the definition here for our novice colleagues. As shown in the scheme below, the active catalytic site serves as the reference point: the catalytic zinc in the scheme for angiotensin converting enzyme (ACE). But the NS3/4A serine protease protein's catalytic serine residue (Ser139) is the reference point, which attacks the ketoamide "warhead" and causes cleavage of the substrate. Binding pockets on the right of the catalytic site are known as prime pockets ( $S_1'$ ,  $S_2'$ , and  $S_3'$ , etc.) and binding pockets on the left of the catalytic site are known as non-prime pockets ( $S_1$ ,  $S_2$ , and  $S_3$ , etc.). Correspondingly, substituents on the endogenous ligands that occupy the prime pockets are known as prime substituents ( $P_1'$ ,  $P_2'$ , and  $P_3'$ , etc.) and substituents that occupy the non-prime pockets are known as non-prime substituents ( $P_1$ ,  $P_2$ , and  $P_3$ , etc.).

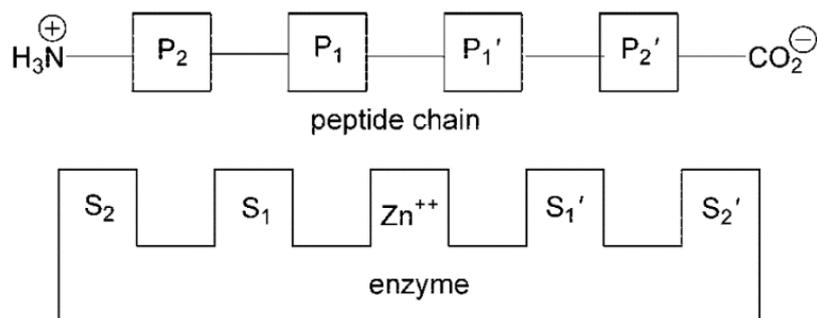
## PharmaBlock Products



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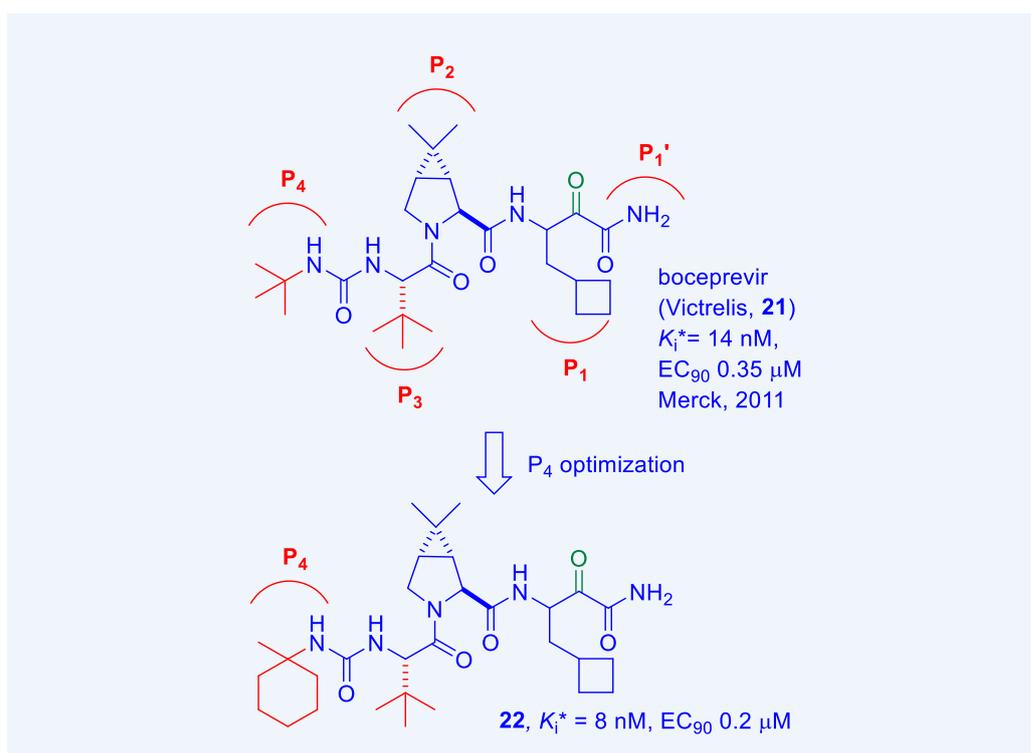


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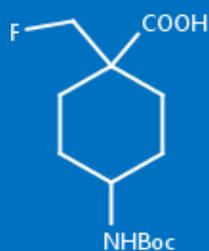
Definition of binding pockets and endogenous ligand for protease (ACE)

To improve upon boceprevir (Victrelis, **21**), Schering–Plough carried out additional SAR to develop more potent inhibitors with improved PK profile, particularly in monkeys, to target a once daily compound. Changing the P<sub>4</sub> group from *t*-butylurea to cyclohexylmethylurea gave rise to compound **22** with higher potency in both an enzyme assay ( $K_i^*$ ) and a cell-based assay (EC<sub>90</sub>).<sup>3</sup> These efforts eventually led to the marketing of narlaprevir (Arlansa, **61**), a *t*-butylsulfonyl analogue of **22**.

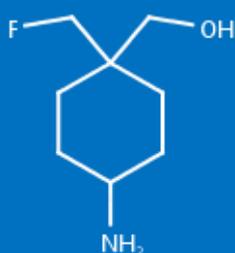


Since aripiprazole (Abilify, **23**) as a D<sub>2</sub> partial agonist is probably the most successful antipsychotic, many “me-too” drugs have stemmed from it. Rigidifying aripiprazole (**23**)’s floppy linear linker into a cyclohexyl ring led to the discovery of cariprazine (Vraylar, **24**), which is a D<sub>3</sub> (rD<sub>3</sub>  $K_i = 0.71$  nM) selective partial agonist and is 13-fold more selective against the D<sub>2</sub> receptor (rD<sub>2</sub>  $K_i = 9.3$  nM) in a rat dopamine receptor assay.<sup>4</sup>

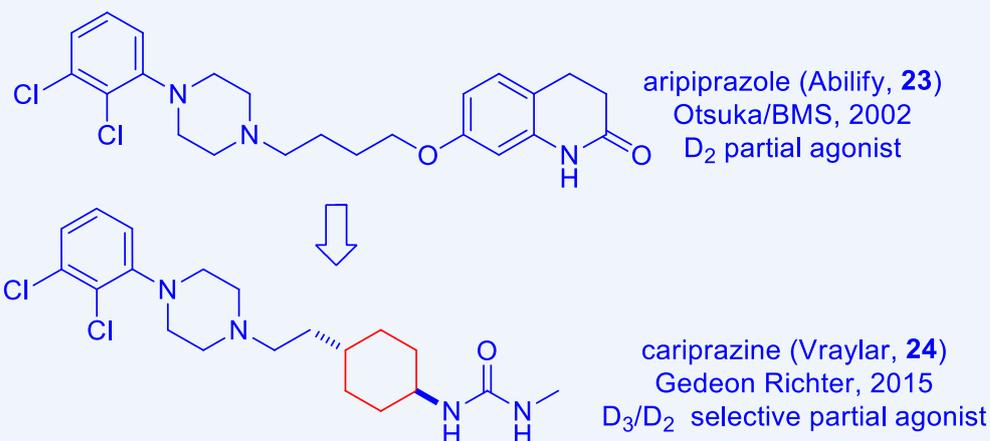
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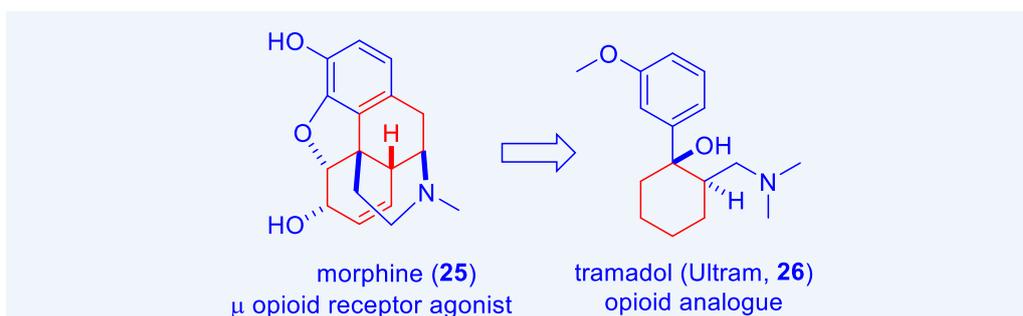
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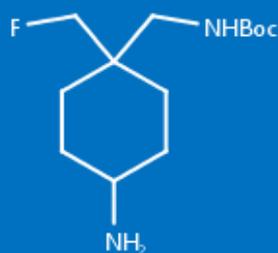


Truncation of the structure of morphine (**25**), a  $\mu$  opioid receptor agonist, resulted in the discovery of a new pain medicine tramadol (Ultram, **26**) as an opioid analogue.<sup>5</sup> It is evident that the cyclohexyl core structure is part of the crucial pharmacophore.

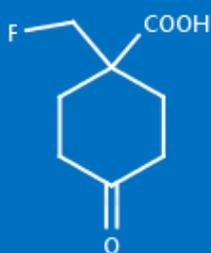


The cyclohexene ring has been employed as a bioisostere of a furanose ring since its conformational behavior is similar to that of a saturated five-membered ring and it may offer more metabolic stability.<sup>6</sup> The genesis of oseltamivir (Tamiflu, **28**) is a case in point. Gilead wisely chose the cyclohexene ring to replace the tetrahydropyranyl core structure on zanamivir (Relenza, **27**). Zanamivir (**27**) is so polar that it does not cross cell membrane thus has to be given via inhalation. The cyclohexene ring was expected to be chemically and enzymatically stable, to be suited for chemical modifications, and, more importantly, to be suitable bioisostere of the proposed oxonium cation in the transition state of sialic acid cleavage by neuraminidase.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, oseltamivir (Tamiflu, **28**) is orally bioavailable with a bioavailability of 75% and a half-life of 6–10 h.

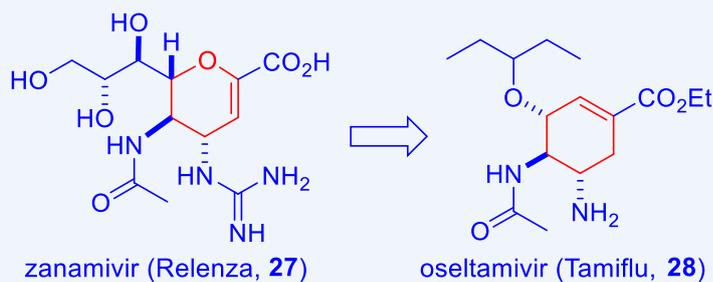
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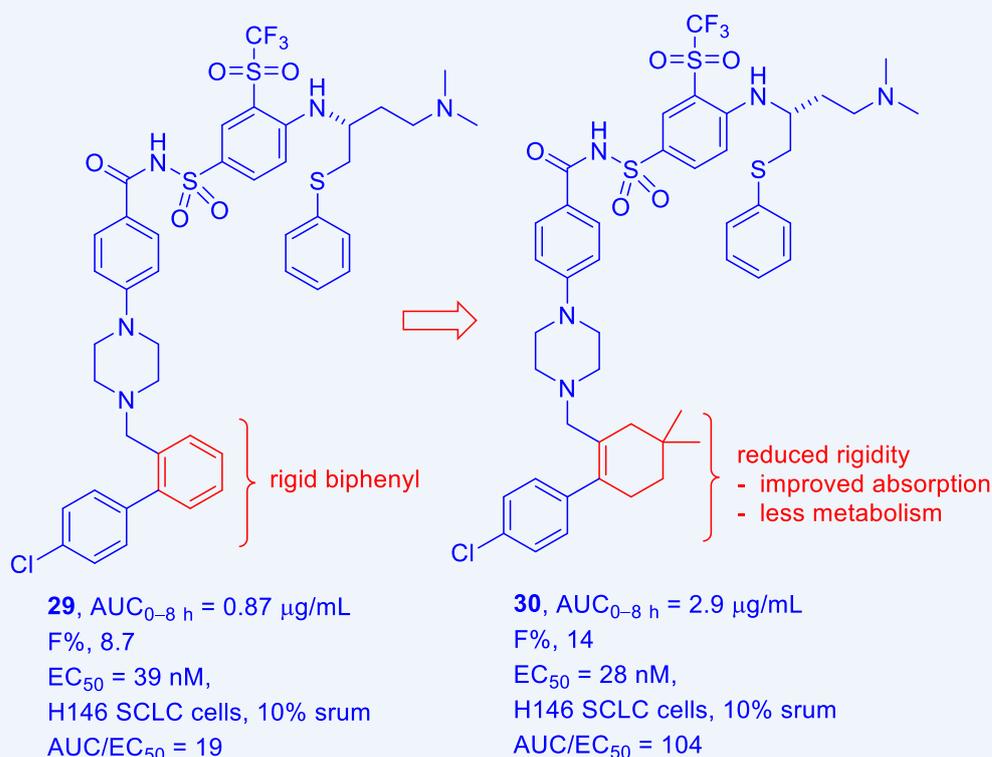
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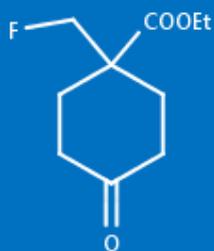
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In the same vein, *en route* to the discovery of its ground-breaking B-cell lymphoma-2 (BCL-2) inhibitor venetoclax (Venclexta, **31**) via fragment-based drug discovery (FBDD), Abbvie arrived at compound **29** with a rigid biphenyl structure. Switching one of the phenyl ring to cyclohexene provided an opportunity to make ring modifications that were fundamentally different from those that were made to the aromatic ring in its place. Simply bulking up the ring by adding alkyl groups produced the dimethylcyclohexene **30**, which had still higher plasma levels, and also appeared to improve tissue/plasma distributions in various pharmacokinetic models.<sup>8</sup> Addition of the dimethyl group was a great idea since it eliminates the metabolic liability associated with simple cyclohexenes, which are prone to be oxidized to the corresponding aromatic phenyl analogue.



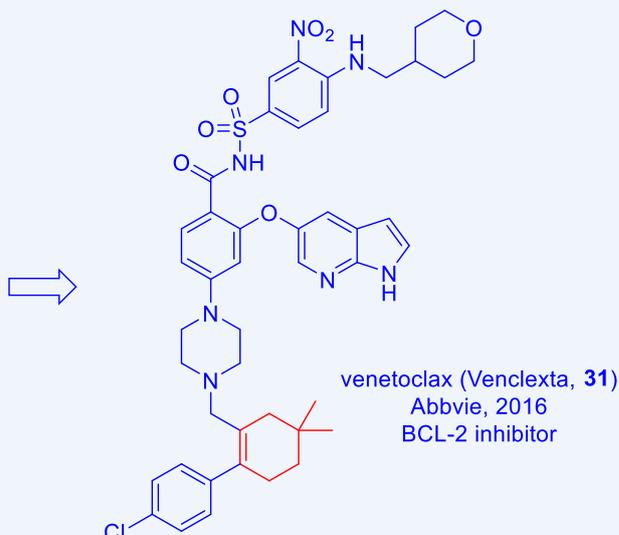
## PharmaBlock Products



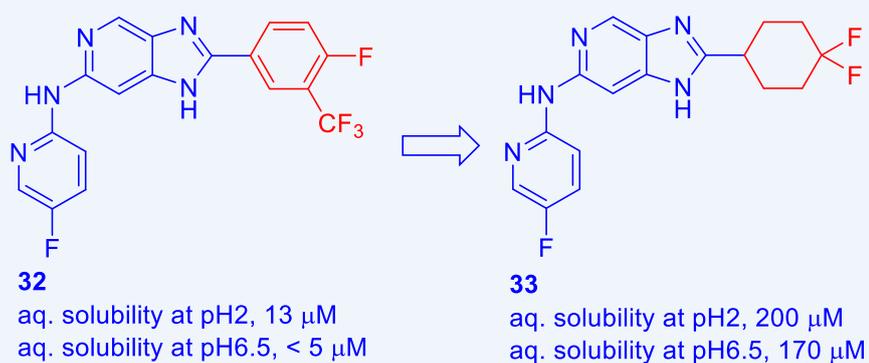
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PBSQA149



The cyclohexyl fragment helps breaking the crystal lattices and boosts aqueous solubility in imidazopyridine antimalarial drugs. Compound **32** as an NF54 inhibitor was rather potent ( $IC_{50}$ , 18 nM) but suffered poor aqueous solubility. Replacing the 1-fluoro-2-(trifluoromethyl)phenyl group with a 1,1-difluorocyclohexyl substituent gave rise to compound **33**, which was 3.8-fold less potent than **32** but enjoyed greatly improved aqueous solubility at both pH2 and pH6.5, respectively.<sup>9</sup>



## PharmaBlock Products

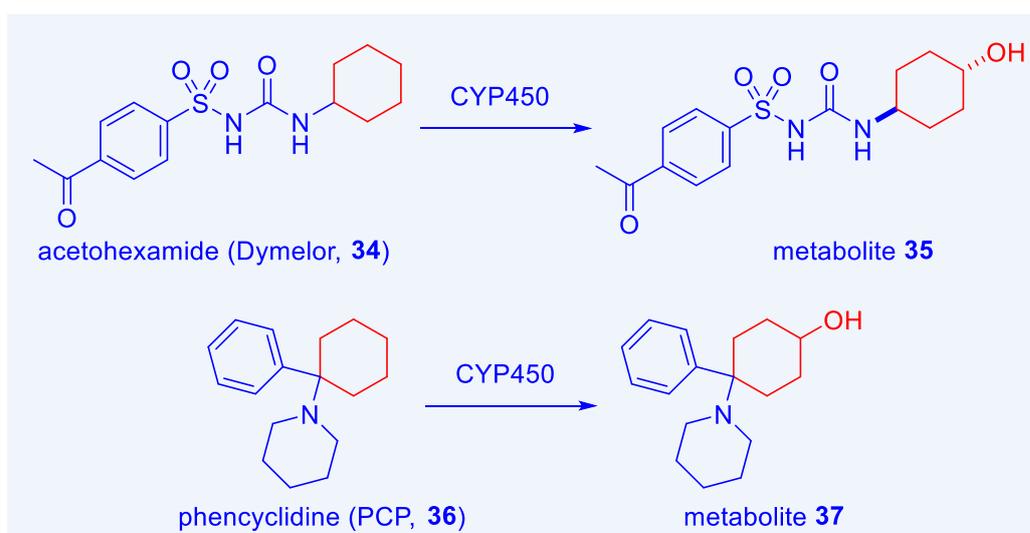


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PBJL226

Being greasy, the cyclohexyl motif is prone to CYP450 oxidation to the corresponding cyclohexanol. For instance, one of the major metabolites of sulfonylurea drug acetohexamide (Dymelor, **34**, for the treatment of type II diabetes mellitus) is *para*-hydroxylhexyl derivative **35**. Another key metabolite of acetohexamide (**34**) is the secondary alcohol from reduction of the acetyl group by carbonyl reductase.<sup>10</sup> In a similar manner, phencyclidine (PCP, **36**) is metabolized to the corresponding *para*-hydroxyhexyl derivative **37**.<sup>11</sup>



Proteolysis targeting chimera (PROTAC) as a drug discovery approach has gained much momentum lately since Arvinas' androgen receptor protein degrader ARV-110 advanced to phase I clinical trials in 2019. A similar technique, Specific and Non-genetic IAP-dependent Protein Eraser (SNIPER), employs small molecule ligands for E3 ubiquitin ligases cIAP1 (cellular inhibitor of apoptosis protein), which contains a cyclohexyl substituent. For instance, SNIPER(ABL)-062 (**38**) showed binding affinities against ABL1, cIAP1/2, and XIAP and induced potent Bcr-Abl protein degradation.<sup>12</sup> Asciminib is the first allosteric kinase inhibitor in clinical trials.

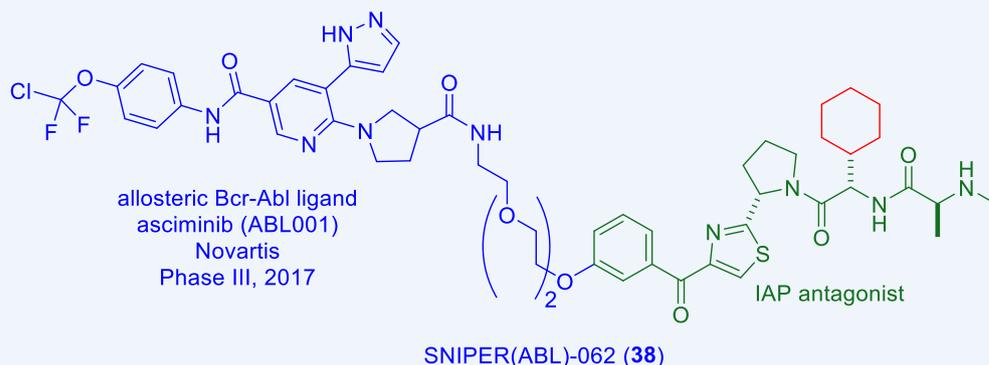
## PharmaBlock Products



PBJL227



PBJL230



Schering–Plough employed bicycle[4.1.0]heptanes as phenyl isosteres for their melanin-concentrating hormone (MCH) receptors antagonists, which have potential as treatment of obesity. Compound **39** was a potent MCH-R1 antagonist which exhibited oral efficacy in chronic (28 days) rodent models, reducing cumulative food intake and body weight gain relative to vehicle controls. Unfortunately, the biphenyl amine moiety (in green and red) was a very potent mutagenic agent as indicated by its strong positive result in an Ames test. Although the biphenylamine itself was not formed *in vivo*, it was deemed unsuitable for development because of the potential risk of exposure to such a highly mutagenic precursor. Replacing the middle phenyl ring with pyrazine, pyrimidine and saturated derivatives such as piperidines, their MCH-R1 activities were drastically reduced. While the cyclohexenyl replacement was extremely active ( $K_i = 3$  nM), the cyclohexenyl fragment has a dual liability of intrinsic metabolic instability associated with the styrene and its potential for generating a biphenylamine via aromatization. Further exploration to discover more stable analogues led to cyclopropanation of the double bond to form a bicyclo[4.1.0]alkyl group achieved this goal. The bicyclo[4.1.0]heptanyl analogue **40** had a comparable binding affinity and similar efficacy in obese animal models and it was devoid of the mutagenicity issue associated with biphenylamine derivatives.<sup>13</sup>

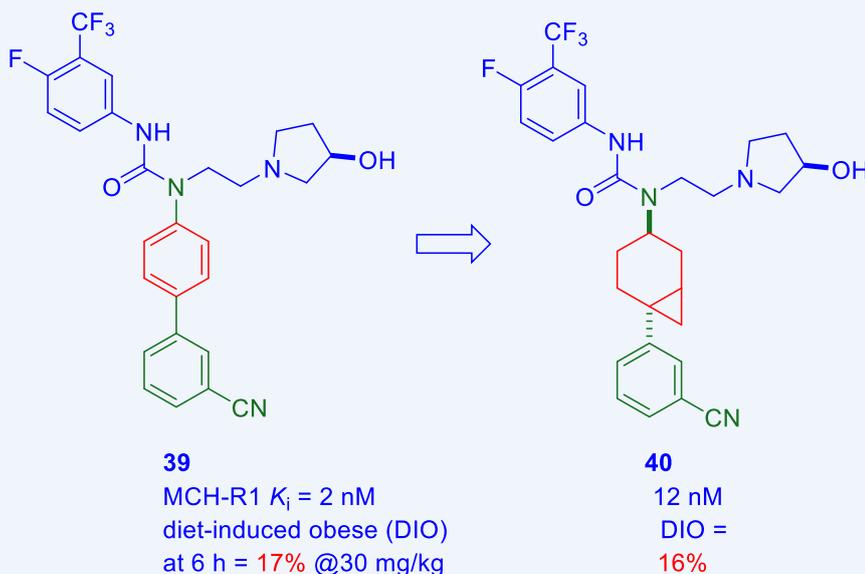
## PharmaBlock Products



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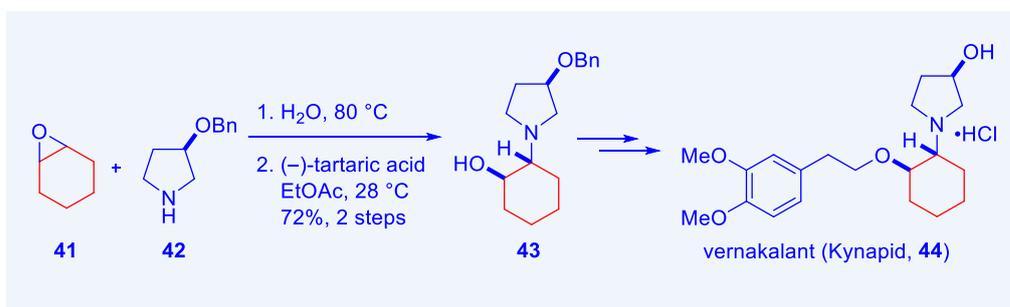


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## Synthesis of Some Cyclohexane-containing Drugs

Merck's vernakalant (Kynapid, **44**) is an atrial potassium channel blocker. In one of the synthetic routes leading to vernakalant (**44**), racemic cyclohexyl epoxide (**41**) was opened with protected prolinol **42** as the nucleophile in hot water. The resulting mixture of diastereomers were separated by classical resolution of the corresponding tartrate salt to afford *cis*-isomer **43**. Subsequent ether formation from **43** was followed by de-benzylation to deliver the desired active pharmaceutical ingredient (API) **44**.<sup>14</sup>



## PharmaBlock Products

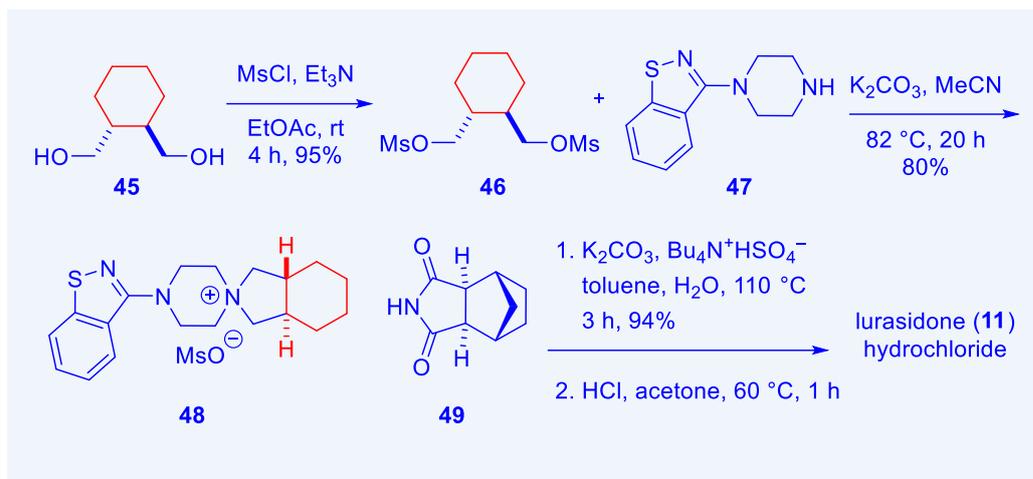


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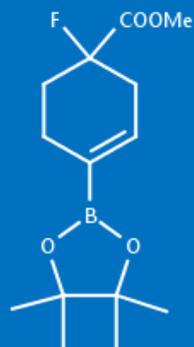
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Dainippon's preparation of lurasidone (Latuda, **11**) commenced with mesylation of commercially available diol **45** to give bis-mesylate **46**. Condensation of bis-electrophile **46** with aryl-piperazine **47** offered dialkylation product as ammonium salt **48**. Since **48** is such a reactive intermediate, its  $S_N2$  reaction with succinimide **49** readily took place to deliver lurasidone (**11**), which was conveniently converted to lurasidone hydrochloride as the API.<sup>15</sup>

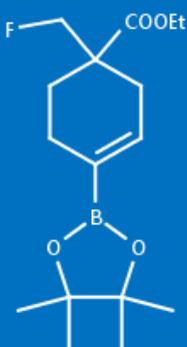


Production of Sankyo's FXa inhibitor edoxaban (Savaysa, **14**) began with cyclohexyl epoxide **50** as the starting material. Regio-specific  $S_N2$  reaction with sodium azide gave the corresponding hydroxyazide intermediate, which was converted to alcohol **51** via palladium-catalyzed hydrogenation in the presence of  $\text{Boc}_2\text{O}$ . Mesylation of **51** and another  $S_N2$  reaction with sodium azide produced azide **52**, which underwent another palladium-catalyzed hydrogenation and protection sequence to offer, this time, Cbz carbamate-protected amine **53**. Saponification of the ester group on **53** produced the acid, which was coupled with dimethylamine-HCl salt to form amide **54**. Removal of the Cbz protection and reaction of the exposed primary amine with oxalic acid gave rise to oxalate salt **55**, which was eventually transformed to the API edoxaban (Savaysa, **14**) after 5 additional steps.<sup>16</sup>

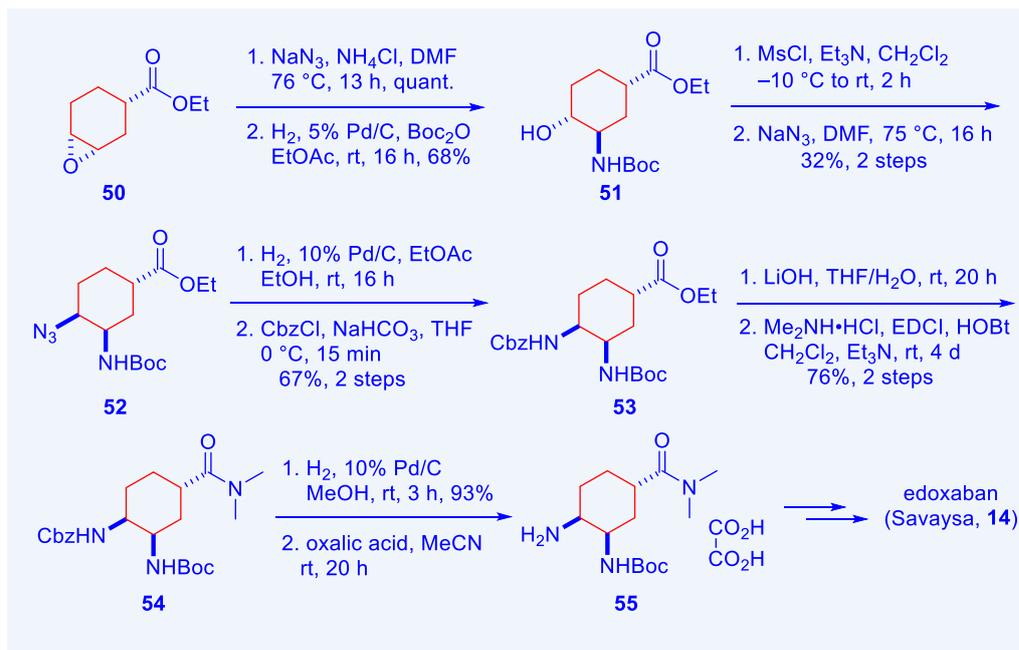
## PharmaBlock Products



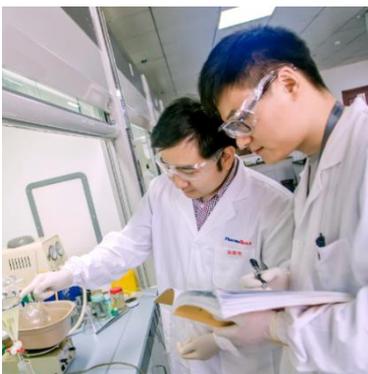
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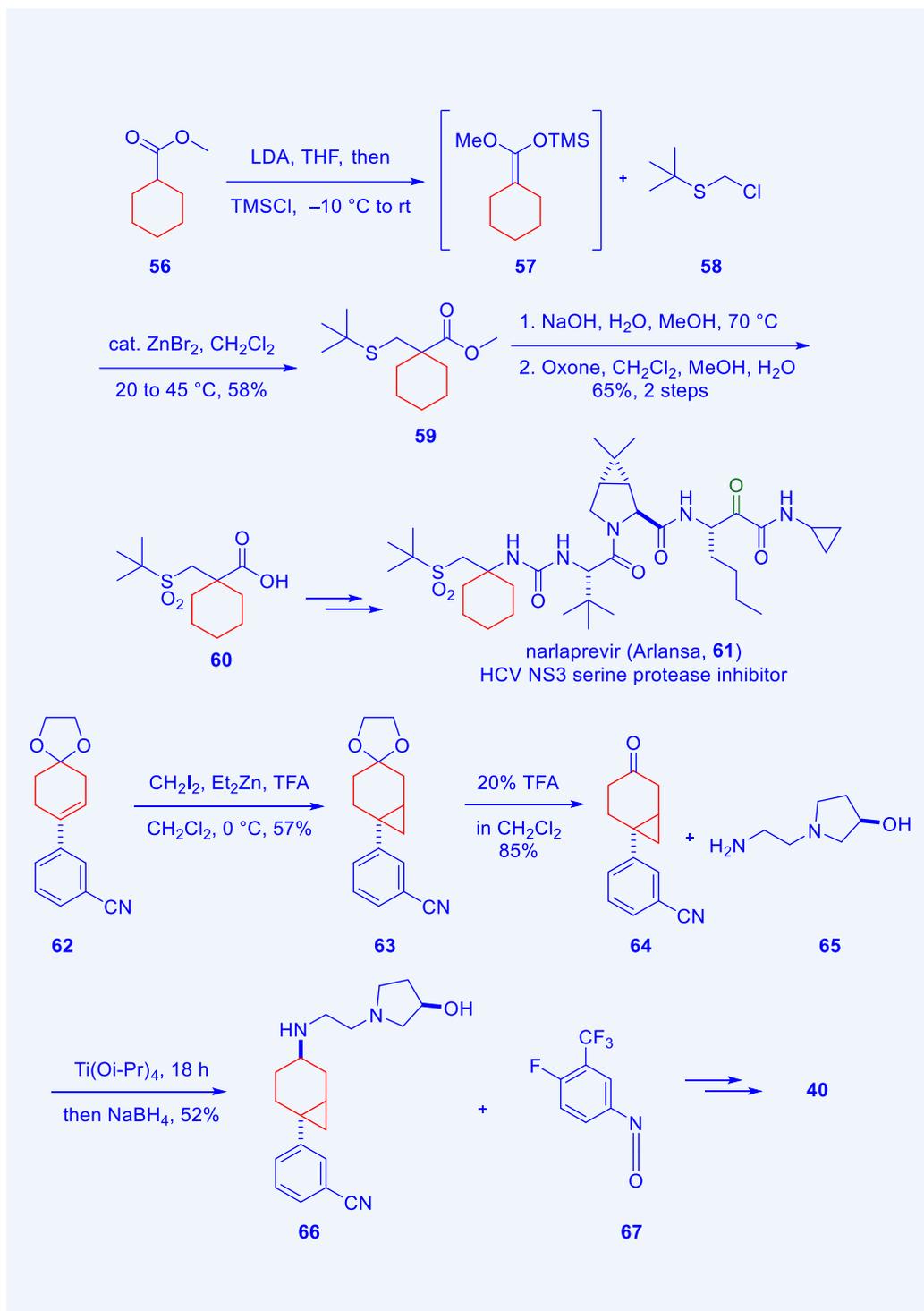


Methyl cyclohexylcarboxylate (**56**) was employed as the starting material for the synthesis of HCV NS3 serine protease inhibitor narlaprevir (Arlansa, **61**). Silyl enol ether **57** was generated *in situ* by treating **54** with freshly prepared LDA followed by quenching with TMSCl. It was immediately treated chloride **58** under Lewis acid catalysis to assemble adduct **59**. Subsequently, the ester on **59** was hydrolyzed to the corresponding acid and the sulfide was oxidized by Oxone to the corresponding sulfone **60**. Coupling of the key cyclohexyl intermediate **60** with three amino acid fragments delivered narlaprevir (**61**) in another additional 6 steps.<sup>17</sup>



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Schering–Plough’s synthesis of the bicyclo[4.1.0]heptanyl analogue **40** involved a modified Simmons–Smith reaction. Thus, cyclopropanation of cyclohexene **62** was achieved by treating **62** with  $\text{CH}_2\text{I}_2$  and  $\text{Et}_2\text{Zn}$  in the presence of TFA to give bicyclo[4.1.0]heptanyl **63**. After removal of the ketal protection, the resulting ketone **64** underwent a reductive amination with amine **65** to afford adduct **66**. To avoid direct ketone reduction by  $\text{NaBH}_4$ , the imine intermediate was pre-formed with the aid of  $\text{Ti}(\text{O}i\text{-Pr})_4$  before adding  $\text{NaBH}_4$ . Coupling between **66** with isocyanate **67** then delivered the final product **40** after chiral separation.<sup>13</sup>

To conclude, the cyclohexyl fragment is a popular building in both natural and synthetic drugs, serving as either the core structure or as part of a peripheral side chain. The cyclohexyl group may function as a bioisostere for the *t*-butyl group for a deeper hydrophilic pocket on target protein. As a rigid version of floppy alkyl chain, the cyclohexyl replacement reduces entropy and may offer better affinity. As a bioisotere for the flat phenyl group, cyclohexyl substituent has the advantage of being three dimensional, which potentially offers more contact points with target protein. This concept has been proven in the discovery of venetoclax (Venclexta). In addition, the cyclohexenyl motif is a metabolically more stable bioisostere for furanose and this concept has been demonstrated by the success of oseltamivir (Tamiflu).

## References

1. Lin, C.; Kwong, A. D.; Perni, R. B. *Infect. Disord. Drug Targets* **2006**, *6*, 3–16.
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