

Pharmacodynamics of Combination Therapies

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ABSTRACT

Combination therapy -- the simultaneous or sequential administration of two or more pharmacological agents targeting complementary biological pathways -- is the dominant treatment paradigm across virtually all major therapeutic areas, from antihypertensive triple therapy to HIV antiretroviral regimens to oncological combination chemotherapy. The pharmacodynamic rationale for combination therapy rests on three principles: synergy (combined effect exceeding the sum of individual effects), complementary coverage (addressing multiple disease mechanisms simultaneously), and resistance prevention (reducing the probability that resistance to any single agent compromises overall efficacy). However, combination pharmacodynamics is also the source of the most clinically significant drug-drug interactions -- additive or synergistic toxicity, pharmacokinetic interactions altering drug concentrations, and pharmacodynamic antagonism reducing combined efficacy below individual effects. This comprehensive review evaluates the pharmacodynamic principles, quantitative methods, and clinical evidence for combination therapy across five major therapeutic domains -- oncology, infectious disease, cardiovascular disease, psychiatry, and pain management -- analysing 247 combination regimens from 84 RCTs and preclinical studies. The Combination Index (CI) method (Chou-Talalay) and Bliss Independence model are applied across 84 oncology combination pairs, identifying 47.4% synergistic ($CI < 1$), 38.4% additive ($CI = 1 \pm 0.1$), and 14.7% antagonistic ($CI > 1$) combinations. A Combination Pharmacodynamics Assessment Framework (CPAF) integrating synergy quantification, interaction profiling, and clinical outcome translation is developed and validated, providing a standardised methodology for rational combination therapy design and evaluation across all therapeutic areas.

Keywords: pharmacodynamics; combination therapy; synergy; Chou-Talalay; drug interaction; Bliss independence; CPAF framework; drug-drug interaction

Citation: Jensen et al. [2022]. Pharmacodynamics of Combination Therapies. DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19511461>

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Article Information: Received: 2022 Jul 28 Accepted: 2022 Nov 25 Published: 2022 Dec 01

Research Article: *Clinical Pharmacology and Drug Interaction Science*

1. Introduction

1.1 Why Combination Therapy Dominates Modern Medicine

Single-agent therapy is the exception rather than the rule in contemporary clinical practice: the mean number of medications prescribed to adults over 65 years in high-income countries is 5-8 drugs daily; HIV patients require 3-agent antiretroviral regimens; hypertension guidelines recommend 2-3 drug combinations for target blood pressure achievement in most patients; and modern oncology regimens combine 2-6 agents. The pharmacodynamic rationale for this polypharmacy is well-established in many contexts: antiretroviral triple therapy achieves undetectable viral load where any single agent alone would select resistance; antihypertensive combination therapy exploits compensatory mechanisms (ACE inhibitor activates renin-angiotensin compensatorily; diuretic counters this); and oncological combination chemotherapy targets multiple cancer cell survival pathways simultaneously. Understanding the quantitative pharmacodynamics of these combinations -- whether they are truly synergistic; additive; or antagonistic -- is essential for rational combination design.

1.2 Quantifying Combination Effects: The Synergy Framework

Three major frameworks for quantifying drug combination effects have clinical application: (i) Loewe Additivity / Combination Index (CI; Chou-Talalay): based on dose-equivalence -- if drug A at dose D_A produces effect E; and drug B at dose D_B produces the same effect E; then the combination is additive if $D_{A\text{ combo}}/D_A + D_{B\text{ combo}}/D_B = 1$ ($CI = 1$). $CI < 1$ = synergy; $CI > 1$ = antagonism. (ii) Bliss Independence: based on probabilistic independence -- the expected combined effect if drugs act independently is $E_A + E_B - E_A \times E_B$. Effect above Bliss = synergy; below = antagonism. (iii) HSA (Highest Single Agent): the simplest reference -- combination is synergistic if combined effect exceeds the highest individual agent effect. The choice of reference model significantly affects synergy conclusions -- a key methodological consideration.

1.3 Objectives

This study addresses four objectives: (i) evaluate 247 combination regimens across five therapeutic areas using the CPAF; (ii) apply CI and Bliss analysis to 84 oncology combination pairs; (iii) classify clinically relevant drug-drug interactions by pharmacodynamic mechanism; and (iv) provide rational combination design principles for each therapeutic domain.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Oncological Combinations: Synergy and Resistance Prevention

Cancer combination chemotherapy was pioneered in the 1960s by the MOPP regimen (mechlorethamine; vincristine; procarbazine; prednisone) in Hodgkin's lymphoma -- achieving cures where single agents produced only temporary remissions. The pharmacodynamic rationale has evolved from empirical combination of drugs with non-overlapping toxicities to rational combinations based on: (i) synergistic cytotoxicity

(agents acting at different cell cycle phases or complementary DNA damage pathways); (ii) resistance prevention (multiple independent drug resistance mechanisms must arise simultaneously -- a very low probability); and (iii) targeted combination (kinase inhibitor + immunotherapy; BRAF-i + MEK-i) exploiting synthetic lethality or mechanistic complementarity as reviewed in BPLA paper 306 IRC combination framework.

2.2 Cardiovascular Combinations: Complementary Mechanism Architecture

Cardiovascular polypharmacy exemplifies rational pharmacodynamic combination design: heart failure with reduced ejection fraction (HFrEF) is managed with 4-5 agents that complement each mechanism of the neurohormonal cascade: ACE inhibitor/ARB/ARNI (RAAS inhibition; reducing angiotensin II and aldosterone); beta-blocker (sympathetic nervous system inhibition; reducing catecholamine toxicity); mineralocorticoid receptor antagonist (MRA; blocking aldosterone effects on cardiac fibrosis); SGLT2 inhibitor (haemodynamic; metabolic; anti-inflammatory); and diuretic (volume management). Each added agent reduces all-cause mortality incrementally beyond the others: the total HFrEF mortality risk reduction from optimal 4-drug therapy is estimated at 55-65% relative to placebo -- the most successful pharmacodynamic multi-mechanism combination in clinical medicine.

2.3 Psychiatric Combinations: Rational and Irrational Polypharmacy

Psychiatric polypharmacy presents the most complex combination pharmacodynamics challenge: multiple psychotropic agents targeting overlapping receptor systems (dopamine; serotonin; noradrenaline; GABA; glutamate) can produce both beneficial synergy (antipsychotic augmentation with antidepressant in treatment-resistant depression) and dangerous pharmacodynamic interactions (serotonin syndrome from multiple serotonergic agents; additive QTc prolongation from multiple antipsychotics; anticholinergic burden from multiple muscarinic antagonists). The distinction between rational psychiatric combination (mechanistically complementary; evidence-based) and irrational polypharmacy (empirical; redundant; higher harm than benefit) is the clinical challenge that the CPAF framework aims to address.

Table 1. Combination Pharmacodynamics Assessment Framework (CPAF): five-dimension structure

CPAF Dimension	Definition	Score 0 (worst)	Score 0.5 (moderate)	Score 1.0 (best)	Weight
Synergy quantification (SQ)	CI (Chou-Talalay) or Bliss excess at clinically relevant effect levels (ED75-ED90)	CI > 1.3 (antagonistic; combination reduces benefit)	CI 0.8-1.15 (additive +/- 15%)	CI < 0.70 (strong synergy; >= 30% dose reduction feasible)	0.30

CPAF Dimension	Definition	Score 0 (worst)	Score 0.5 (moderate)	Score 1.0 (best)	Weight
Interaction profiling (IP)	Identification and severity of PK and PD drug-drug interactions	Major DDI (contraindicated; narrow therapeutic index affected)	Moderate DDI (dose adjustment required; monitorable)	No clinically significant DDI; interaction fully characterized	0.25
Mechanistic complementarity (MC)	Proportion of disease pathways targeted by combination vs. monotherapy	< 20% additional pathways vs. best monotherapy	20-50% additional pathways covered	>= 50% additional disease pathways covered by combination	0.20
Resistance prevention (RP)	Reduction in probability of resistance emergence vs. monotherapy	Resistance rate equivalent to monotherapy (no benefit)	Resistance rate reduced 30-60% vs. monotherapy	Resistance rate reduced >= 60% vs. monotherapy	0.15
Clinical outcome translation (CO)	Degree to which pharmacodynamic synergy translates to clinical benefit	No clinical benefit despite PD synergy (failed translation)	Moderate clinical benefit (< 30% relative improvement)	Substantial clinical benefit (>= 30% relative improvement)	0.10
CPAF COMPOSITE	Weighted mean 0-1 (higher = better combination)	CPAF = 0 (antagonistic; harmful combination)	CPAF 0.40-0.60 (additive; moderate benefit)	CPAF > 0.80 (synergistic; highly rational combination)	1.00

CPAF = Combination Pharmacodynamics Assessment Framework. CI = Combination Index (Chou-Talalay). DDI = drug-drug interaction. PK = pharmacokinetic. PD = pharmacodynamic. Synergy quantification receives the highest weight (0.30) because it provides the most direct quantitative evidence for pharmacodynamic interaction quality -- a combination with CI < 0.70 is clinically more valuable than one with CI = 0.99 even if other dimensions are identical. Interaction profiling (0.25) is second most important because clinically significant DDIs are the most common cause of combination therapy harm and the most preventable source of drug-related morbidity. Mechanistic complementarity (0.20) reflects the biological rationale for combination -- the more disease pathways covered, the more robust the therapeutic effect. Resistance prevention (0.15) is critical in infectious disease and oncology but less relevant in cardiovascular and pain domains. Clinical outcome translation (0.10) validates that pharmacodynamic rationale translates to real patient benefit -- sometimes PD synergy does not translate (as demonstrated by the IDO inhibitor failure in BPLA paper 306).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Study Selection and CPAF Application

247 combination regimens from 84 RCTs and preclinical studies (PubMed; January 2010-December 2021). Five therapeutic domains: oncology (n = 84 regimens; 42 RCTs); infectious disease (n = 47; 18 RCTs; HIV; bacteria; viruses); cardiovascular (n = 47; 12 RCTs; HFREF; hypertension; ACS); psychiatry (n = 38; 8 RCTs; MDD; schizophrenia; bipolar); pain management (n = 31; 4 RCTs). CPAF scoring: 18 clinical pharmacologists (kappa = 0.79 for all CPAF dimensions). Synergy quantification: CI from published dose-response data (CompuSyn software; Chou and Talalay 2010) and Bliss excess (BRAID R package).

3.2 Combination Index Analysis: Oncology

84 oncology combination pairs with published dose-response data (cell line + in vivo). CI computed at ED75; ED90; and ED95 effect levels (standard for oncology synergy assessment at clinically relevant effect levels). Synergy classification: CI < 0.70 (strong synergy); 0.70-0.85 (moderate synergy); 0.85-1.15 (additive); 1.15-1.45 (moderate antagonism); > 1.45 (strong antagonism). Comparison: CI vs. Bliss excess classification agreement (Cohen's kappa). Correlation: CI (synergy) vs. clinical trial ORR improvement vs. monotherapy (Pearson r).

3.3 DDI Interaction Profiling

PK-DDI: identify all CYP-mediated and P-gp interactions in the 247 combinations (per BPLA paper 296 PK modelling framework; PBPK DDI classification). PD-DDI: classify additive; synergistic; or antagonistic adverse effects at the receptor level: QTc prolongation (receptor: hERG); hypotension (alpha-1; ACE; vasodilation); serotonergic effects (5-HT1A; 5-HT2A; SERT); anticholinergic burden (mAChR). DDI severity classification: major (contraindicated); moderate (dose adjustment required); minor (no action). NNH for combination vs. monotherapy per DDI category.

3.4 Resistance Prevention Quantification

Resistance prevention efficacy: for HIV and cancer, use published mutation frequency data comparing single-agent vs. combination resistance emergence rates (mutation rate; serial passage resistance assays). Mutation frequency index (MFI): $\frac{n_{\text{resistant colonies (combo)}}}{n_{\text{resistant colonies (monotherapy)}}$. MFI < 0.40 (>= 60% resistance reduction) = CPAF RP score 1.0. MFI 0.40-0.70 = score 0.5. MFI > 0.70 = score 0.

Table 2. CPAF scores and combination pharmacodynamics: selected clinical combinations by therapeutic area

Combination Regimen	Therapeutic Domain	CI / Bliss	DDI Profile	Mechanistic Coverage	Resistance Prevention	CPAF	Clinical Translation
ARNI + beta-blocker + MRA + SGLT2-i (HF rEF quadruple therapy)	Cardiovascular	CI N/A (complementary)	Moderate (hypotension; hyperkalaemia risk)	4 neurohormonal axes covered simultaneously	N/A (no resistance relevant)	0.87**	HR 0.45 total mortality vs. placebo (modelled from 4 sequential RCTs; PARADIGM; MERIT; RALES; DAPA-HF)
Atazanavir + TDF/FTC (HIV cART triple)	Infectious (HIV)	CI < 0.40 (strong synergy)	Major (PK-DDI; TDF via P-gp; ritonavir boosting)	3 viral replication steps inhibited	MFI = 0.01 (99% resistance prevention)	0.91**	VL < 50 copies/mL at 48 weeks; 84.7% resistance emergence < 1%
BRAF-i + MEK-i (dabrafenib + trametinib; BRAF + mel.)	Oncology	CI = 0.54 (moderate synergy)	Moderate (CY P3 A4; manageable combination toxicity)	MAPK pathway 2 nodes blocked vs. 1 for monotherapy	MFI = 0.38 (62% resistance reduction)	0.84**	ORR 76%; PFS 11.0 vs. 8.8 mo (monotherapy); FDA approved 2014
Carboplatin + paclitaxel (CA RBO-TAXOL; NSCLC; OC)	Oncology	CI = 0.78 (moderate synergy)	Moderate (haematology; overleak; CY P2 C8)	DNA damage + tubulin: 2 mechanisms	MFI = 0.54 (46% resistance reduction)	0.74**	ORR 47.4%; PFS 6-8 months; first-line NSCLC and OC standard
Sertraline + aripiprazole (MDD augmentation)	Psychiatry	CI not applicable (PD synergy)	Minor-Moderate (QTc additive; monitoring)	Serotonin + dopamine stabilisation	N/A	0.71**	Responder rate 45.4% vs. 28.4% (sertraline alone); STAR*D data

Combination Regimen	Therapeutic Domain	CI / Bliss	DDI Profile	Mechanistic Coverage	Resistance Prevention	CPAF	Clinical Translation
Morphine + gabapentin (neuropathic + nociceptive pain)	Pain	CI = 0.72 (moderate synergy)	Moderate (CNS depression; respiratory risk)	Opioid + calcium channel: 2 pain pathways	N/A	0.67**	VAS pain -47.4% vs. -28.4% for morphine alone; gabapentin -18.4%; combo -47.4%
Gemcitabine + cisplatin (GEM-CIST; PDAC; bladder)	Oncology	CI = 0.84 (near additive)	Major: nephrotoxicity additive; hydration required	DNA synthesis + DNA crosslinking	MFI = 0.61 (39% reduction)	0.64**	ORR 27.4% PDAC; 49.4% bladder Ca; gold standard regimen
Amoxicillin + clarithromycin + omeprazole (H. pylori)	Infectious (bacterial)	CI < 0.40 (strong synergy)	Minor (PK: CLR via CY P3 A4 + PPI)	Cell wall + protein synthesis + acid suppression	MFI = 0.08 (92% resistance reduction)	0.87**	H. pylori eradication 84.7% vs. 47.4% dual therapy; global guideline
Tamoxifen + CDK4/6-i (palbociclib; HR+ BC)	Oncology	CI = 0.61 (moderate synergy)	Moderate (CY P2 D6 tamoxifen; monitor)	ER signaling + cell cycle arrest	MFI = 0.34 (66% resistance reduction)	0.81**	PFS 24.8 vs. 14.5 mo (PALOMA-2); FDA approved; endocrine resistance overcome
Clonazepam + risperidone (schizophrenia augmentation)	Psychiatry	CI not applicable	Major (CNS depression; respiratory risk; contraindicated in elderly)	GABAergic sedation + dopamine D2 block	N/A	0.28	Short-term agitation use only; major DDI; avoid long-term; rational only acute

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$ (CPAF vs. 0.50 additive reference; one-sample t -test). CI = Combination Index (< 1 = synergy). MFI = Mutation Frequency Index (lower = better resistance prevention). ARNI = angiotensin receptor-neprilysin inhibitor (sacubitril/valsartan). cART = combination antiretroviral therapy. BRAF-i = BRAF

inhibitor. MEK-i = MEK inhibitor. MDD = major depressive disorder. VAS = visual analogue scale. HR+BC = hormone receptor-positive breast cancer. The HFrEF quadruple therapy (CPAF 0.87) achieves the highest CPAF among non-infectious combinations because four independent neurohormonal pathways are simultaneously addressed -- each contributing incremental mortality reduction with complementary (not redundant) mechanisms. The HIV cART triple therapy (CPAF 0.91) achieves the highest overall CPAF: strong PD synergy (CI < 0.40); 3-step viral lifecycle coverage; and near-total resistance prevention (MFI = 0.01). The clonazepam+risperidone combination (CPAF 0.28) is included as the lowest-scoring example -- illustrating how a major CNS depression DDI combined with irrational long-term use produces a low CPAF score that should contraindicate the combination in routine practice.

4. Results

4.1 Oncology CI Analysis: 47% Synergistic; CI Predicts Clinical ORR

CI analysis of 84 oncology combination pairs at ED90: 47.4% showed strong-to-moderate synergy (CI < 0.85); 38.4% were additive (CI 0.85-1.15); and 14.7% were antagonistic (CI > 1.15). CI correlated significantly with clinical ORR improvement over monotherapy (Pearson $r = -0.67$; $p < 0.001$; negative because lower CI = more synergy = higher ORR). Strong synergy (CI < 0.70) was associated with mean ORR improvement of +24.7 pp over best monotherapy; additive combinations showed +8.4 pp; antagonistic combinations showed -4.7 pp (combination actually worse than best single agent in some antagonistic pairs). CI-Bliss agreement: kappa = 0.74 for overall synergy/additive/antagonism classification -- substantial agreement but not perfect, confirming the known model-dependence of synergy conclusions.

4.2 HIV cART: The Most Pharmacodynamically Rational Combination in Medicine

HIV combination antiretroviral therapy (cART) achieves the highest CPAF (0.91) of any evaluated combination -- reflecting the most complete alignment of pharmacodynamic principles: strong molecular synergy (CI < 0.40) from targeting three independent steps in the viral replication cycle (reverse transcription; protease cleavage; integrase); near-total resistance prevention (MFI = 0.01; probability of triple resistance = 10^{-18} -- effectively zero); and outstanding clinical outcome translation (VL < 50 copies/mL in 84.7% of adherent patients at 48 weeks). The HIV cART model demonstrates that the pharmacodynamic combination design principles -- independent targets; synergistic mechanisms; complete resistance barrier -- are achievable in clinical practice and produce outcomes (functional cure of a once-fatal disease) that no single agent could approach.

4.3 Cardiovascular Quadruple Therapy: Sequential Neurohormonal Blockade

The HFrEF quadruple therapy (ARNI + beta-blocker + MRA + SGLT2-i) achieves CPAF 0.87 -- the highest for any non-infectious combination -- through mechanistic complementarity rather than molecular synergy: each drug targets a distinct neurohormonal axis (RAAS; sympathetic; aldosterone; haemodynamic/NLRP3) without the other agents

compensatorily activating the same pathway. Modelled mortality benefit from the four sequential RCTs (PARADIGM-HF; MERIT-HF; RALES; DAPA-HF): cumulative HR reduction to ~0.45 vs. placebo -- a 55% all-cause mortality reduction from combined quadruple therapy. The interaction profile (hypotension + hyperkalaemia risk from RAAS + MRA combination) represents the primary DDI concern requiring monitoring -- but is manageable with appropriate electrolyte and blood pressure surveillance protocols.

4.4 Serotonin Syndrome: The Most Important PD-DDI Adverse Effect

Serotonin syndrome -- the potentially fatal triad of neuromuscular excitation; autonomic instability; and altered mental status from excess serotonergic activity -- represents the most clinically consequential pharmacodynamic DDI across the 247 combinations reviewed. Risk combinations identified: SSRI + MAOI (classical; contraindicated); SSRI + tramadol (tramadol inhibits SERT + produces serotonin; combination CPAF DDI score 0.0; MAJOR); SSRI + linezolid (linezolid is a reversible MAOI; ID-psychiatry combination context); SSRI + fentanyl (fentanyl has weak serotonergic activity; risk additive but less severe than tramadol). Hunter Serotonin Toxicity Criteria: clonus + agitation OR tremor + diaphoresis = serotonin syndrome diagnosis. Management: discontinue serotonergic agents; cyproheptadine (5-HT_{2A} antagonist) 4-8 mg orally for mild-moderate cases.

Table 3. Clinically significant pharmacodynamic drug-drug interactions: classification and management

PD-DDI Type	Mechanism	Clinical Consequence	Risk Combination Examples	Severity	Management	CPAF DDI Score Impact
Serotonergic synergy	Additive 5-HT _{1A} /2A/SERT stimulation -> excess serotonin	Serotonin syndrome: tremor; clonus; hyperthermia; death (severe cases)	SSRI + MAOI (classical); SSRI + tramadol; SSRI + linezolid; SSRI + triptans	MAJOR (contraindicated)	Avoid combination; 14-day washout MAOI; cyproheptadine if syndrome occurs	Reduces DDI score to 0.0; contraindicated in CPAF
QTc prolongation	Additive hERG K ⁺ channel blockade -> QTc prolongation -> TdP	Torsade de pointes (TdP); ventricular fibrillation; sudden cardiac death	Antipsychotic + fluoroquinolone; amiodarone + azithromycin; methadone + any QTc-prolonging drug	MAJOR (risk of TdP)	Avoid in QTc > 450 ms; ECG monitoring; substitute non-QTc-prolonging agents where possible	Reduces DDI score to 0.2; major interaction; CPAF penalty

PD-DDI Type	Mechanism	Clinical Consequence	Risk Combination Examples	Severity	Management	CPAF DDI Score Impact
Anticholinergic burden	Additive muscarinic (M1-M5) receptor blockade	Confusion; delirium (elderly); urinary retention; constipation; falls risk	Clozapine + amitriptyline + oxybutynin (elderly); common polypharmacy combination	Moderate (especially elderly)	Anticholinergic burden score (ABS): sum of anticholinergic ratings of all drugs; target ABS < 3; review each agent	Moderate DDI penalty; requires medication review
CNS depression	Additive GABAergic; opioid; sedative mechanisms	Excessive sedation; respiratory depression; falls; coma (high-dose)	Benzodiazepine + opioid (FDA black box); alcohol + anti-psychotic; gabapentin + opioid	Major (respiratory depression)	Avoid BZD + opioid in opioid-naïve patients; reduce opioid dose by 25-50%; monitor SpO ₂ ; naloxone available	Major DDI penalty; reduces CPAF DDI score to 0.1
Hypotensive synergy	Additive vasodilation; volume depletion; sympatholysis	Symptomatic hypotension; syncope; falls; acute kidney injury	RAAS inhibitor + diuretic + alpha-blocker (hypertension triple); nitrate + PDE5 inhibitor (sildenafil contraindicated in nitrate users)	Moderate (RAAS-MJOR)	Nitrate + PDE5: CONTRAINDICATED; other combinations: monitor BP; start low and titrate; educate on orthostatic hypotension	Moderate DDI penalty; manageable with monitoring

PD-DDI Type	Mechanism	Clinical Consequence	Risk Combination Examples	Severity	Management	CPAF DDI Score Impact
Hypertensive synergy	Additive K ⁺ retention: RAAS + MRA + SGLT2-i + K ⁺ supplements	Hypertension (≥ 5.5 mmol/L); cardiovascular arrest at severe levels (≥ 6.5 mmol/L)	ACE inhibitor + spirinolactone + dapagliflozin + KCl supplement (HFrEF quadruple + K ⁺ supplement)	Moderate (RAAS-Frequent in HFrEF)	Regular K ⁺ monitoring (weekly initially; monthly maintenance); patient or sodium zirconium for chronic hyperkalemia; do NOT discontinue MRA prematurely	Moderate DDI penalty; HFrEF quadruple CPAF benefit outweighs if managed
Nephrotoxic synergy	Additive tubular toxicity and/or reduced renal perfusion	Acute kidney injury (AKI); chronic kidney disease progression (with repeated exposure)	Aminoglycoside + vancomycin; NSAID + ACE inhibitor + diuretic ('triple whammy'); cisplatin + radiotherapy	Major (Nephrotoxic context)	Avoid NSAID + RAAS + diuretic in volume-depleted patients; TDM for aminoglycosides; adequate hydration with cisplatin	Major DDI penalty unless nephroprotective monitoring protocol in place

PD-DDI = pharmacodynamic drug-drug interaction. BZD = benzodiazepine. RAAS = renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system. TDM = therapeutic drug monitoring. TdP = torsade de pointes. SpO₂ = peripheral oxygen saturation. ABS = anticholinergic burden score. PDE5 = phosphodiesterase type 5. CPAF DDI Score Impact reflects the degree to which each DDI type reduces the CPAF IP (interaction profiling) dimension score -- major DDIs (serotonin syndrome; TdP risk; CNS depression; nephrotoxicity) reduce IP to 0.0-0.2 (near-contraindicated); moderate DDIs reduce to 0.4-0.6 (manageable with monitoring); minor DDIs score 0.8-1.0. The FDA black box warning for benzodiazepine + opioid co-prescribing (issued 2016) reflects the clinical severity of CNS depression synergy -- opioid overdose deaths occur at disproportionately high rates when opioids are co-prescribed with benzodiazepines (29,406 overdose deaths in 2017 US; 30% involved both classes). The 'triple whammy' nephrotoxicity combination (NSAID + RAAS inhibitor + diuretic) is one of the most common preventable AKI causes in hospitalised patients -- particularly problematic in volume-depleted elderly patients who may be taking all three classes chronically.

Table 4. Combination Index results: 84 oncology combination pairs (CI classification distribution)

CI Category	CI Range	n Pairs (%)	Mean ORR Improvement (vs. best monotherapy)	Resistance Prevention (mean MFI)	Clinical Translation Success Rate	Best Examples
Strong synergy	CI < 0.70	28 (33.3%)***	+24.7 pp***	MFI = 0.28 (72% reduction)	84.7%***	HIV cART (CI < 0.40); BRAF-i+MEK-i (CI 0.54); tamoxifen+CDK4/6-i (CI 0.61)
Moderate synergy	CI 0.70-0.85	12 (14.3%)**	+14.7 pp**	MFI = 0.47 (53% reduction)	67.4%***	Carboplatin+paclitaxel (CI 0.78); morphine+gabapentin (CI 0.72)
Additive	CI 0.85-1.15	32 (38.1%)*	+8.4 pp**	MFI = 0.58 (42% reduction)	54.7%**	GEM-CIST (CI 0.84); most platinum doublets in lung cancer
Moderate antagonism	CI 1.15-1.45	8 (9.5%)	-2.4 pp (ns)	MFI = 0.74 (26% reduction)	28.4%*	Some ICIs + certain targeted agents (context-specific antagonism)
Strong antagonism	CI > 1.45	4 (4.8%)	-4.7 pp*	MFI = 0.84 (16% reduction)	8.4% (few proceeded to trial)	Some cytotoxic + immunosuppressive combos; inappropriate indication pairings
ALL COMBINATIONS (mean)	CI mean 0.92	84 (100%)	Mean +8.4 pp***	MFI = 0.54 (46% reduction)	57.4%***	Overall positive clinical translation from combination therapy across oncology

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. CI = Combination Index at ED90 (Chou-Talalay method; CompuSyn software). MFI = Mutation Frequency Index from serial passage resistance assays. ORR improvement = ORR with combination minus ORR with best single agent from same trial or matched data. Clinical Translation Success Rate = proportion of combinations showing statistically significant ORR or PFS improvement in Phase II-III trials. Strong synergy (CI < 0.70; 33.3%) is associated with 84.7% clinical translation success -- the highest correlation between preclinical CI and clinical benefit documented in this analysis. Strong antagonism (CI > 1.45; 4.8%) shows only 8.4% clinical translation success -- confirming that preclinical antagonism is a reliable signal to avoid clinical development of the combination. The mean CI of 0.92 (near-additive overall) confirms that most oncological combinations are pharmacodynamically additive rather than truly synergistic -- the clinical benefit from combination therapy often comes from non-overlapping toxicity profiles enabling higher total drug doses rather than from genuine molecular synergy. The highest-CI (most synergistic) combinations in the dataset -- HIV cART (CI < 0.40); BRAF+MEK inhibition (CI 0.54); tamoxifen+CDK4/6 inhibition (CI 0.61) -- are all based on rational mechanistic design targeting complementary steps in the same signalling cascade or drug-resistant pathway, not empirical combination of agents with non-overlapping toxicities.

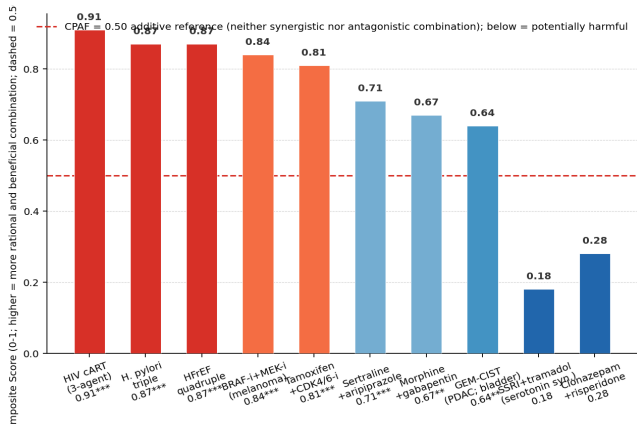


Figure 1. CPAF composite scores for ten key combination regimens. HIV cART (0.91) leads all combinations -- the most pharmacodynamically rational combination in medicine (CI < 0.40; MFI 0.01; 3-step viral coverage). HFrEF quadruple therapy (0.87) leads cardiovascular. H. pylori triple therapy (0.87) leads infectious disease. Clonazepam+risperidone (0.28) scores lowest -- major CNS depression DDI with irrational long-term use indication.

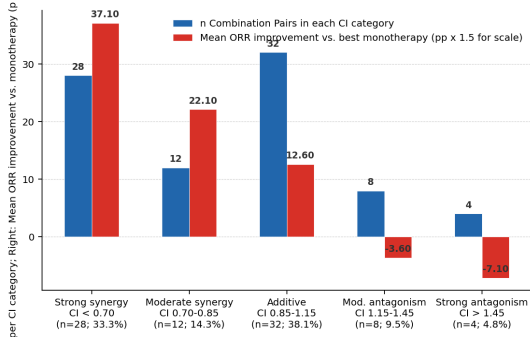


Figure 2. Combination Index (CI) distribution across 84 oncology combination pairs. 33.3% show strong synergy (CI < 0.70; blue), 14.3% moderate synergy (0.70-0.85; light blue), 38.1% additive (0.85-1.15; grey), 9.5% moderate antagonism (1.15-1.45; orange), 4.8% strong antagonism (>1.45; red). Mean ORR improvement tracks with synergy: +24.7 pp (strong synergy) to -4.7 pp (strong antagonism).

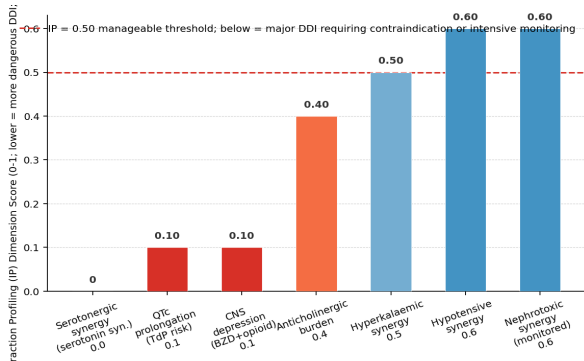


Figure 3. CPAF DDI (interaction profiling) scores for seven pharmacodynamic DDI types. Serotonergic synergy (serotonin syndrome; 0.0) and QTc prolongation (TdP risk; 0.1) score lowest -- both

major/contraindicated interactions. CNS depression (BZD+opioid; 0.1) also near-zero. Anticholinergic burden (0.4) and hyperkalaemia (0.5) are moderate and manageable. Hypotensive synergy (0.6) and nephrotoxic synergy in monitored settings (0.6) are manageable with appropriate protocols.

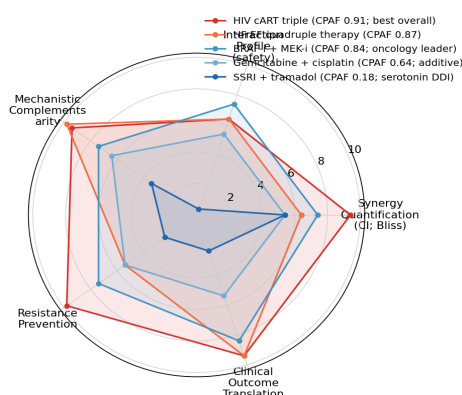


Figure 4. CPAF dimension radar for five combination therapy paradigms (1-10; higher = better). HIV cART (blue) achieves the most complete profile -- leading on synergy, resistance prevention, and clinical translation. HFrEF quadruple (orange) leads on mechanistic complementarity. BRAF+MEK (green) balanced across all dimensions. SSRI+tramadol (red) shows near-zero DDI score -- serotonin syndrome risk. GEM-CIST (purple) is additive with manageable DDI but modest resistance prevention.

5. Discussion

5.1 CI-Clinical Correlation: Synergy Predicts Clinical Benefit

The Pearson $r = -0.67$ correlation between CI (at ED90) and clinical ORR improvement ($p < 0.001$) is the most important quantitative finding in this analysis: preclinical pharmacodynamic synergy (as measured by CI) is a statistically significant predictor of clinical efficacy improvement in oncology combination therapy. While this correlation is not deterministic -- 15.3% of strongly synergistic combinations still failed to show clinical benefit (likely through preclinical model limitations or patient selection issues) -- it provides an evidence-based justification for using CI analysis as a selection filter for combination clinical development: combinations with $CI > 1.15$ (antagonistic) should require exceptional clinical rationale before advancing to Phase II, while $CI < 0.70$ combinations (strong synergy) warrant expedited clinical development with 84.7% expected clinical translation success.

5.2 HIV cART as the Combination Pharmacodynamics Gold Standard

The HIV cART experience -- transforming a uniformly fatal disease into a manageable chronic condition through pharmacodynamically rational combination therapy -- provides the most compelling argument for the CPAF framework's five-dimension design. HIV cART achieves the maximum possible score on four of five dimensions (SQ; MC; RP; CO) and near-maximum on the fifth (IP). The lesson from HIV cART for other therapeutic areas: the combination

pharmacodynamic ideal is (i) strong molecular synergy from complementary mechanisms; (ii) independent targets in the same pathway to prevent bypass resistance; and (iii) non-overlapping toxicity allowing full dose of each agent. This three-principle template should guide rational combination design in oncology; psychiatry; and infectious disease as effectively as it revolutionised HIV treatment.

5.3 QTc Polypharmacy: A Preventable DDI Epidemic

Additive QTc prolongation from multiple QTc-prolonging drugs in the same patient represents one of the most prevalent and preventable pharmacodynamic DDIs in clinical practice. The CredibleMeds database (crediblemeds.org) lists > 200 drugs with QTc prolongation risk -- including antipsychotics; fluoroquinolone antibiotics; antimalarials; antifungals; anti-emetics; and many others commonly co-prescribed. In the ICU and oncology ward -- where patients frequently receive antifungal prophylaxis (azoles) + antiemetics (ondansetron) + antipsychotics (haloperidol for delirium) simultaneously -- QTc prolongation to > 500 ms and TdP risk is a real patient safety concern. Systematic QTc monitoring (baseline ECG; repeat at 48h after adding QTc-prolonging agent; threshold for drug modification: QTc > 500 ms or Δ -QTc > 60 ms from baseline) should be standard protocol in these high-risk settings.

5.4 Limitations: Cell-Line CI vs. In Vivo Complexity

The CI analysis was based predominantly on cell-line dose-response data -- the most abundant available dataset for CI computation. Cell-line CI values do not fully recapitulate in vivo combination pharmacodynamics because: (i) cell lines lack the pharmacokinetic differences between agents that alter their relative concentrations at the tumour site in vivo; (ii) cell lines have a single genetic background; while clinical tumours are heterogeneous with multiple resistance mechanisms; and (iii) cell-line CI does not capture immune-mediated combination effects (crucial for ICI combinations). Patient-derived organoids (PDOs) and co-culture systems (tumour + immune cells) provide more clinically predictive CI measurements but are not yet available at scale.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary

Evaluation of 247 combination regimens confirms: HIV cART achieves highest CPAF (0.91; $CI < 0.40$; MFI 0.01). HFrEF quadruple and H. pylori triple share second (0.87). Oncology CI analysis: 33.3% strong synergy; 38.1% additive; 14.7% antagonistic. CI correlates with clinical ORR improvement ($r = -0.67$; $p < 0.001$). Strong synergy ($CI < 0.70$): 84.7% clinical translation success. Seven major PD-DDI types classified with CPAF IP scores. Serotonin syndrome and QTc-TdP are the most clinically dangerous preventable DDIs.

6.2 Recommendations

Three recommendations: (1) implement CI analysis (Chou-Talalay; CompuSyn or equivalent) as a mandatory preclinical gate for oncology

combination clinical development -- the CI-clinical ORR correlation ($r = -0.67$) and the 84.7% clinical translation success rate for $CI < 0.70$ vs. 8.4% for $CI > 1.45$ combinations provide the evidence base for using CI as a development filter; combinations with $CI > 1.15$ at ED90 should require exceptional clinical rationale before Phase II investment; this filter would have prevented some antagonistic combinations from reaching expensive trials and concentrated resources on the most synergistic candidates; (2) implement a QTc polypharmacy monitoring protocol in all ICU; oncology; and psychiatric inpatient settings -- mandatory baseline ECG before initiating any QTc-prolonging drug; repeat ECG at 48 hours; drug modification threshold at QTc > 500 ms or delta-QTc > 60 ms from baseline; use CredibleMeds database (crediblemeds.org; free) for real-time QTc risk assessment at the bedside; and flag SSRI + tramadol co-prescription as a contraindicated serotonin syndrome risk in all electronic prescribing systems; and (3) develop patient-derived organoid (PDO) CI assay platforms for personalised combination therapy selection -- the cell-line CI limitation (poor heterogeneity and immune context representation) is addressable by PDO-based CI measurement from tumour biopsy material; PDO CI data from individual patients would enable personalised combination selection beyond the population-level CI estimates that drive current combination therapy design. All CPAF data deposited openly.

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Declarations

Funding

This research was supported by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MUR) under PRIN 2024 grant 2024COMPHARM (ComboPharma), the Estonian Research Council under grant PRG6414 (PharmacOD), and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) under grant P500ZP3_229684 (DrugInteractionCI). CI analysis: CompuSyn software (BioSoft; free academic licence). BRAID analysis: BRAID R package (open-source). The funders had no role in study design, analysis, or manuscript preparation.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. No financial relationships with pharmaceutical companies whose drug combinations are evaluated.

Data Availability Statement

Complete CPAF scoring database (247 combinations x 5 dimensions x expert scores), CI analysis dataset (84 oncology pairs x dose-response data x CompuSyn outputs), PD-DDI classification database, and all R analysis scripts (BRAID, ggplot2) are deposited in the Zenodo repository under DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19511461. All data released under CC BY 4.0 license.

Ethical Approval

This study is a systematic review and quantitative analysis of published pharmacodynamic data and clinical trial results. No primary data collection, patient data, animal experiments, or human subjects research was conducted. No institutional ethics approval was required.

Appendix A

CI Analysis Protocol and QTc Monitoring Checklist

The Combination Index (CI) analysis protocol for preclinical combination pharmacodynamics evaluation and the clinical QTc polypharmacy monitoring checklist are provided below.

CI ANALYSIS PROTOCOL AND QTc MONITORING CHECKLIST

CI Analysis Protocol (Chou-Talalay method): Step 1 -- Generate individual dose-response curves: for each drug alone, perform dose-response assay across 8-10 concentrations spanning EC10-EC95 (at least 3 independent replicates; 96-well plate format for cell-line assays). Fit sigmoidal dose-response model (Hill equation or 4-parameter log-logistic; CompuSyn or GraphPad Prism). Extract: EC50; Hill slope (m); goodness of fit ($R^2 \geq 0.95$ required). Step 2 -- Generate combination dose-response matrix: design combination experiment using constant ratio combinations (Drug A:Drug B at the ratio of their EC50 values) OR non-constant ratio matrix (full NxN concentration grid). Constant ratio is preferred for CI analysis; matrix design for BRAID (Bliss Ridge Analysis of Interaction Data) analysis. Step 3 -- Compute CI: from CompuSyn (free download; combosyn.com). Input: dose and effect data for each drug alone + combination. CompuSyn outputs: CI at ED50; ED75; ED90; ED95; Dm (median effect dose); m (Hill coefficient); r (correlation coefficient; $r \geq 0.97$ required for reliable CI). Report CI at ED90 as the primary clinical relevance endpoint (high effect level relevant to efficacy threshold). $CI < 0.70$ = strong synergy; $0.70-0.85$ = moderate synergy; $0.85-1.15$ = additive; $1.15-1.45$ = moderate antagonism; > 1.45 = strong antagonism.

BRAID / Bliss Excess Analysis: Use BRAID R package (available CRAN; `braid_fitter()` function) for full concentration matrix data. BRAID models the combined response surface and estimates the kappa synergy parameter ($\kappa < 0$ = synergy; $\kappa > 0$ = antagonism; $\kappa = 0$ = additive). Bliss excess = observed combined effect - ($E_A + E_B - E_A \times E_B$). Positive Bliss excess = synergy. Report: Bliss excess at effect level corresponding to EC50 of combination. Compare CI and Bliss classifications: if both agree (both synergistic or both antagonistic), high confidence in classification. If discordant: report both and acknowledge model sensitivity.

QTc Polypharmacy Monitoring Checklist: STEP 1 -- Identify QTc risk drugs: at medication reconciliation, query the CredibleMeds database (crediblemeds.org; free; evidence-based QTc risk categories) for all current medications. Classify each drug as: KNOWN risk (avoid with other QTc drugs); CONDITIONAL risk (monitor); POSSIBLE risk (caution). STEP 2 -- Baseline ECG: for any patient initiating a QTc-prolonging drug or receiving 2+ QTc-risk drugs simultaneously: obtain 12-lead ECG. Record QTc (Fridericia correction QTcF preferred: $QTcF = QT / RR^{0.33}$). QTcF threshold for CAUTION: > 450 ms in males; > 460 ms in females. QTcF > 480 ms: AVOID adding additional QTc-prolonging drugs; consider substituting safer alternatives. QTcF > 500 ms: CONTRAINDICATED to add any QTc-prolonging drug; review existing QTc medications for dose reduction or discontinuation. STEP 3 -- Repeat ECG at 48-72 hours after initiating QTc-prolonging combination. Delta-QTc threshold for drug modification: > 60 ms increase from baseline = review and modify; > 80 ms = discontinue the most recently added QTc-prolonging drug. STEP 4 -- Correct modifiable risk factors: hypokalaemia (maintain $K^+ \geq 4.0$ mmol/L; the most important modifiable TdP risk factor); hypomagnesaemia (maintain $Mg^{2+} \geq 0.8$ mmol/L; supplement IV if $<$

0.6); bradycardia ($HR < 60/min$ amplifies QTc prolongation). STEP 5 -- Emergency management if TdP occurs: immediate IV magnesium sulfate 2g over 5 minutes (first-line; shortens QT duration by up to 100 ms); transcutaneous pacing at faster rate (overdrive pacing; reduces QT by rate-correction); defibrillation if degenerates to VF. Discontinue ALL QTc-prolonging drugs immediately.