Investigating molecular blood-brain-barrier permeability

Lab Final Project

PHYSCI 2 at Harvard College

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Introduction

The blood-brain-barrier (BBB) is a selective semipermeable membrane that separates circulating blood from the brain and extracellular fluid in the central nervous system, and is responsible for regulation of CNS homeostasis and protection of the brain microenvironment from toxins, pathogens, and other threats (Daneman & Prat, 2015; Obermeier et al., 2013). At every level of the neurovascular tree, endothelial cells of the BBB line the capillaries and are surrounded by pericytes, astrocytes, microglia, extracellular matrix components, and peripheral immune cells, which together form the neurovascular unit (Iadecola, 2017). The physical properties of the neurovascular unit -- most importantly, the continuous tight junctions which connect the non-fenestrated endothelial cells -- restrict the paracelllular and transcellular movememnt of molecules from the bloodstream into the brain (Figure 1) (Abbott et al., 2010; Langen et al., 2019). Other key features of the BBB which govern passage into the brain include specific molecular transporters which facilitate both the influx of nutrients and the efflux of toxins; catalytic enzymes such as intracellular monoamine oxidase and cytochrome P450 which degrade potential toxins; and extravascular structures such as endothelial glycoalyx and astrocytic endfeet which modulate BBB function (Abbott et al., 2006; Daneman & Prat, 2015; Langen et al., 2019).

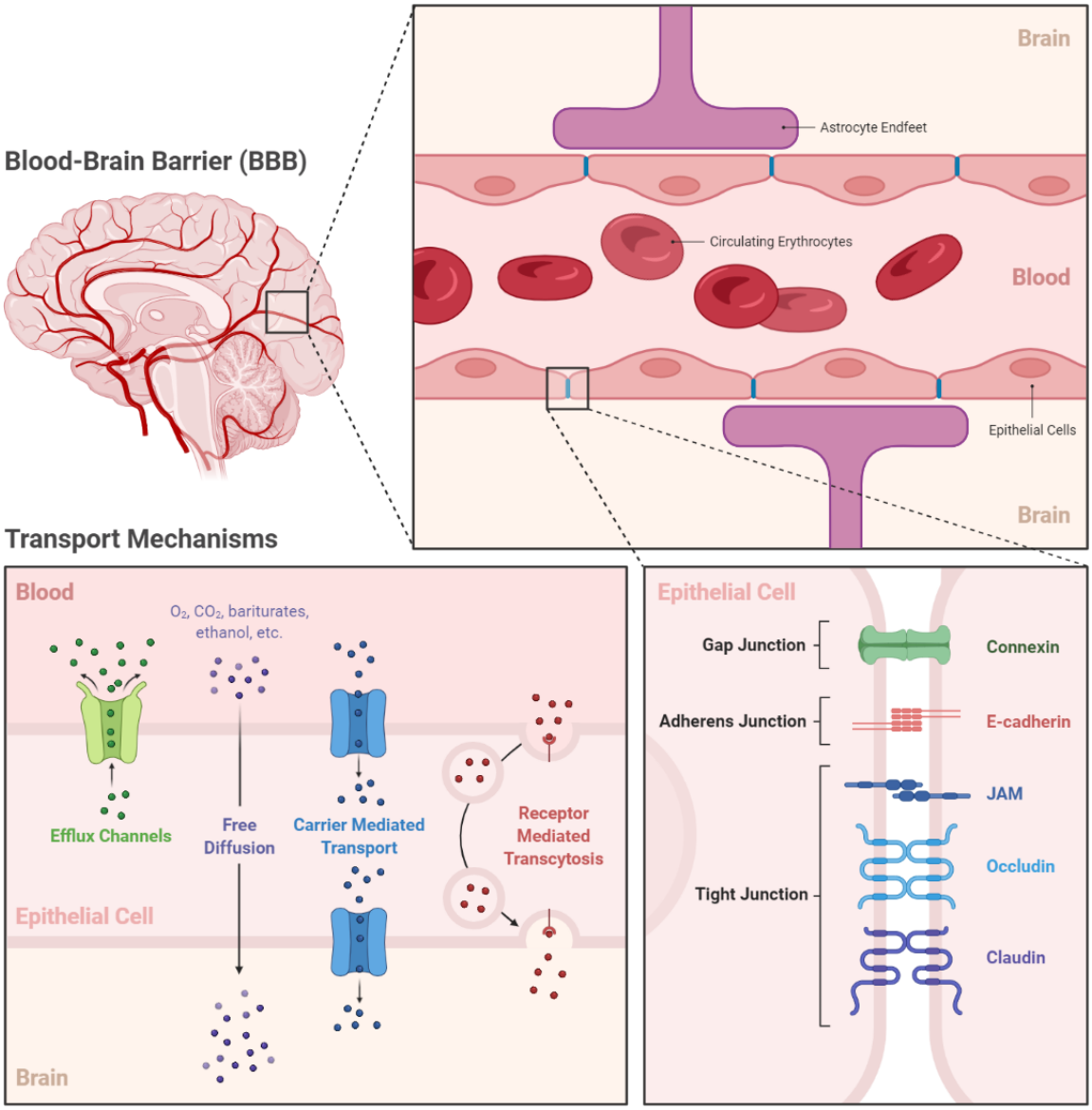


Figure 1: Transport regulatory functions of the blood-brain barrier. Figure from ayushnoori/graph-bbb on GitHub and created using Biorender.com.

In addition to regulating the passage of nutrients into the brain and protecting the brain microenvironment from invaders or pathogens, the BBB also prevents more than 98% of small molecule drugs and macromolecular therapeutics from reaching the brain. This poses a major obstacle in the treatment of neurological disorders which often remain refractory to treatment due to the inability of drugs to cross the BBB (Wu et al., 2023). The BBB is therefore a major target of drug delivery research, and understanding the permeability of molecules to the BBB is of great interest to facilitate the development of new neurotherapeutics. Our own previous work has attempted to predict BBB permeability (for example, see ayushnoori/graph-bbb on GitHub), but this has been limited by lack of molecular diversity and interpretability. In this project, we aim to investigate the relationship between molecular structure and BBB permeability using a structurally diverse dataset of 1058 compounds with known BBB permeabilities.

Research Question

Here, we investigate the relationships between BBB permeability and molecular properties such as molecular weight, number of hydrogen bond donors and acceptors, number of rotatable bonds, and number of rings.

Methodology and Results

We use techniques learned during the Fall 2023 semester in PHYSCI 2 Lab at Harvard College to investigate the relationships between molecular properties of interest and BBB permeability. We leverage a new diverse molecular database of BBB permeability with chemical descriptors, recently published in *Nature Scientific Data* in 2021:

Meng, F., Xi, Y., Huang, J. & Ayers, P. W. A curated diverse molecular database of blood-brain barrier permeability with chemical descriptors. *Sci Data* **8**, 289 (2021).

Please also see theochem/B3DB and Issue #174 of mims-harvard/TDC on GitHub. After retrieving and pre-processing our data, we calculate several molecular features of 1058 compounds as well as numerical logBB values for each compound, where logBB is the logarithm of the brain-plasma concentration ratio:

$$\log BB = \log \frac{C_{brain}}{C_{blood}}$$

Then, we apply curve fitting methods learned in Lab 4 and Lab 5 to fit various biologically-informed models to the data. We visualize our data and results and, based on visual inspection, generate hypotheses for relationships between molecular features and logBB. Finally, we use χ^2_{red}-testing to select from multiple competing models of the data and compare the goodness-of-fit of each.

Our experimental design, methodology, and results are described in detail below. First, we load relevant libraries.

In [ ]:
```
# standard imports
import os
import numpy as np
import pandas as pd
import matplotlib.pyplot as plt

# molecular manipulation
from rdkit import Chem, DataStructs
from rdkit.Chem import AllChem
from rdkit.Chem import Descriptors

# clustering
from sklearn.cluster import AgglomerativeClustering
```

```
# path manipulation
from pathlib import Path

# import project configuration
import project_config
from lab_functions import *
```

Next, we read the Meng *et al*. dataset into a `pandas` data frame (Meng *et al.*, 2021). This dataset, known as the Blood-Brain Barrier Database (B3DB) was compiled from more than 50 published resoures and contains BBB permeability data for 1058 compounds. Each row in the date frame corresponds to a unique compound and each column corresponds to a chemical descriptor or logBB value.

In [ ]:
```
# read in data
data = pd.read_csv(project_config.PROJECT_DIR / 'B3DB_regression.tsv', sep='
data.head()
```

Out[ ]:

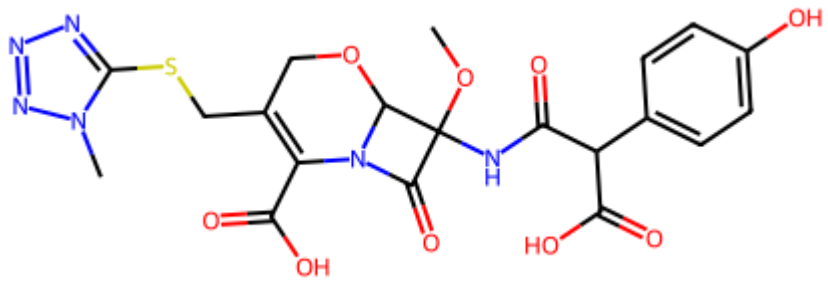
	NO.	compound_name	IUPAC_name	
0	1	moxalactam	7-[[2-carboxy-2-(4-hydroxyphenyl)acetyl]amino]...	CN1C(=NN=N1)SCC2=C(N3C(C(C3=O
1	2	schembl614298	(2s,3s,4s,5r)-6-[[(4r,4ar,7s,7ar,12bs)-7-hydro...	CN1CC[C@]23[C@@H]4[C@H]1CC5=C2
2	3	morphine-6-glucuronide	(2s,3s,4s,5r)-6-[[(4r,4ar,7s,7ar,12bs)-9-hydro...	CN1CC[C@]23[C@@H]4[C@H]1CC5=C2
3	4	2-[4-(5-bromo-3-methylpyridin-2-yl)butylamino]...	2-[4-(5-bromo-3-methylpyridin-2-yl)butylamino]...	CC1=NC=C(C=C1)CC2CNC(NC2=O)NCC(
4	5	NaN	NaN	c1(c2c3n(c4c(C(N(C)C3)=O)c(

We use the RDKit library to calculate various molecular features from the SMILES structures. Simplied molecular-input line-entry system, or SMILES, is a specification for describing the structure of chemical species using short ASCII strings. RDKit is an open-source cheminformatics toolkit that supports many common tasks in cheminformatics, including molecular property calculation.

In [ ]:
```
# get molecule from SMILES
data['mol'] = data['SMILES'].apply(Chem.MolFromSmiles)

# visualize first molecule
print("Compound Name: ", data['compound_name'].iloc[0])
data['mol'].iloc[0]
```

```
Compound Name:  moxalactam
```

Out[ ]:



Next, we use the RDKit library to calculate molecular features from SMILES strings. We calculate the following molecular features for each compound:

- Average molecular weight, which reflects the distribution of isotopes of the molecule's atoms.
- Exact molecular weight, which gives the molecular weight of the most common isotopes of each atom in the molecule.
- Average molecular weight excluding hydrogens.
- Number of hydrogen bond acceptors.
- Number of hydrogen bond donors.
- Number of heavy atoms.
- Number of aromatic rings.
- Number of total rings.
- Number of rotatable bonds.

In [ ]:

```
# to calculate all 210 descriptors
# descriptors = data['mol'].apply(lambda x: pd.Series(Chem.Descriptors.CalcM

# get average molecular weight (MolWt)
data['mol_wt'] = data['mol'].apply(lambda x: Descriptors.MolWt(x))

# get exact molecular weight (ExactMolWt)
data['exact_mol_wt'] = data['mol'].apply(lambda x: Descriptors.ExactMolWt(x)

# get average molecular weight ignoring hydrogens (HeavyAtomMolWt)
data['heavy_atom_mol_wt'] = data['mol'].apply(lambda x: Descriptors.HeavyAtc

# get average number of hydrogen bond acceptors (NumHAcceptors)
data['num_h_acceptors'] = data['mol'].apply(lambda x: Descriptors.NumHAccept

# get average number of hydrogen bond donors (NumHDonors)
data['num_h_donors'] = data['mol'].apply(lambda x: Descriptors.NumHDonors(x)

# get number of heavy atoms (HeavyAtomCount)
data['heavy_atom_count'] = data['mol'].apply(lambda x: Descriptors.HeavyAtom

# get number of aromatic rings (NumAromaticRings)
data['num_aromatic_rings'] = data['mol'].apply(lambda x: Descriptors.NumArom

# get number of rings (NumRings)
data['num_rings'] = data['mol'].apply(lambda x: Descriptors.RingCount(x))
```

```
# get number of rotatable bonds (NumRotatableBonds)
data['num_rotatable_bonds'] = data['mol'].apply(lambda x: Descriptors.NumRot

# show first 5 rows of data
data.head()
```

Out[ ]:

	NO.	compound_name	IUPAC_name	
0	1	moxalactam	7-[[2-carboxy-2-(4-hydroxyphenyl)acetyl]amino]...	CN1C(=NN=N1)SCC2=C(N3C(C(C3=O
1	2	schembl614298	(2s,3s,4s,5r)-6-[[(4r,4ar,7s,7ar,12bs)-7-hydro...	CN1CC[C@]23[C@@H]4[C@H]1CC5=C2
2	3	morphine-6-glucuronide	(2s,3s,4s,5r)-6-[[(4r,4ar,7s,7ar,12bs)-9-hydro...	CN1CC[C@]23[C@@H]4[C@H]1CC5=C2
3	4	2-[4-(5-bromo-3-methylpyridin-2-yl)butylamino]...	2-[4-(5-bromo-3-methylpyridin-2-yl)butylamino]...	CC1=NC=C(C=C1)CC2CNC(NC2=O)NCC(
4	5	NaN	NaN	c1(c2c3n(c4c(C(N(C)C3)=O)c(

We visualize the relationship between molecular weight and logBB. Note that the logBB is the logarithm of the ratio of the concentration of the compound in the brain to the concentration in the plasma.

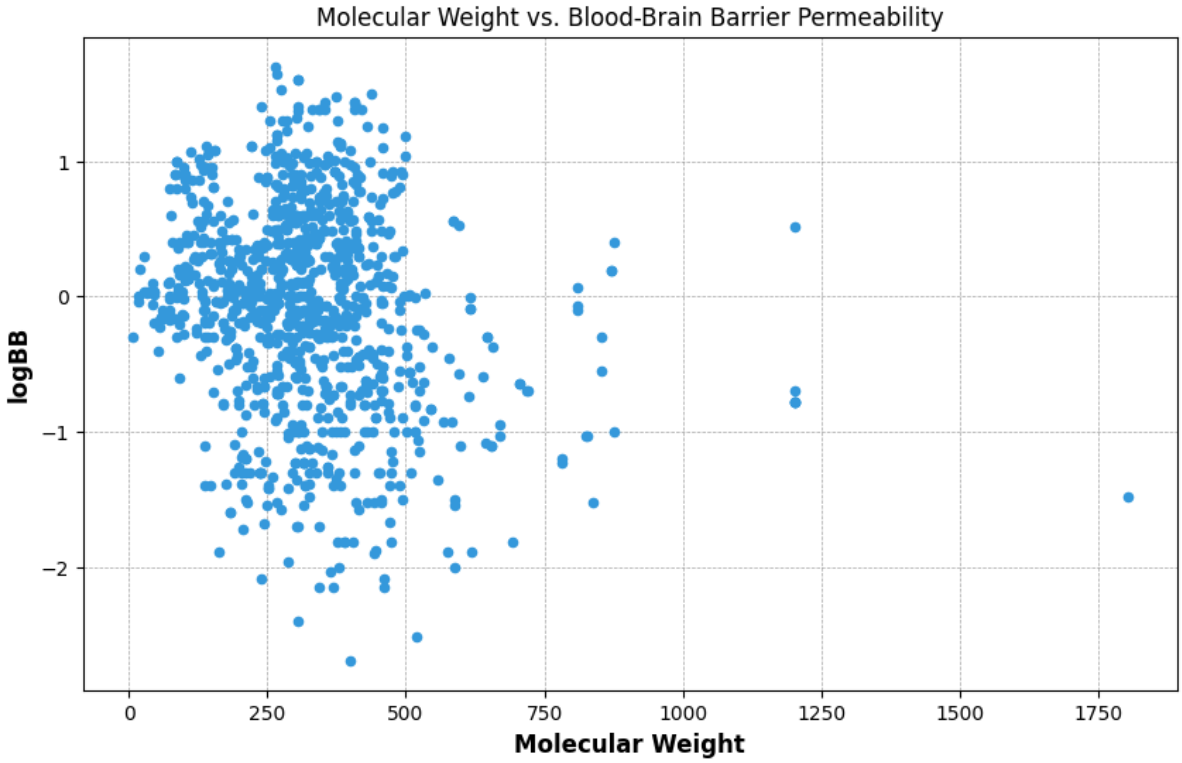
$$\log BB = \log \frac{C_{brain}}{C_{blood}}$$

If the logBB is positive, then a compound is BBB-permeable and vice versa.

In [ ]:

```
# create function to plot data
def make_scatter(data, x, y, xlabel, ylabel, title = None, color = '#3498db'

    # create title
    if title is None:
        title = xlabel + ' vs. ' + ylabel

    # set figure dimensions
    plt.figure(figsize=(10, 6))

    # plot data points
    plt.scatter(data[x], data[y], s=20, color=color)

    # set title and axis labels
    plt.title(title)
    plt.xlabel(xlabel, fontweight='bold', size=12)
    plt.ylabel(ylabel, fontweight='bold', size=12)

    # add a gray dashed grid in the background
    plt.grid(axis = "both", color='gray', linestyle='--', linewidth=0.5, alp
    plt.gca().set_axisbelow(True)
```

```
    # return plot
    return plt

# plot molecular weight vs. logBB
plt = make_scatter(data, 'mol_wt', 'logBB', 'Molecular Weight', 'logBB', tit
plt.show()
```



Since we seek to perform χ^2_{red}-testing, we require uncertainties for our measurements. The most important uncertainty to account for is not in the molecular weight; rather, there is biological uncertainty in logBB, or the measured brain-plasma concentration ratio. However, the B3DB database does not provide uncertainties. Therefore, we must compute a proxy uncertainty measurement.

Since we are not provided with uncertainties on logBB, we cluster molecules by molecular similarity (*e.g.*, Morgan fingerprint), motivated by the underlying biological assumption that compounds with highly similar molecular structures and properties would also have highly similar brain-plasma concentration ratios. Thus, for the purposes of uncertainty estimation, we treat molecules within the same cluster as equivalent observations, and take the standard error of logBB values within each cluster as the uncertainty on logBB for that cluster.

First, we use the RDKit library to calculate Morgan fingerprints for each compound. Morgan fingerprints, also known as extended-connectivity fingerprint ECFP4, are a type of circular fingerprint, which encode the local chemical environment of a molecule by iteratively applying a hashing function to a molecule's substructures. Here, we use a radius of 2, which means that the hashing function is applied to all substructures within 2 bonds of each atom in the molecule, and a bit length of 1024.

In [ ]:
```
# compute fingerprints
data['fingerprints'] = data['mol'].apply(lambda x: Chem.AllChem.GetMorganFir

# convert to numpy arrays
np_fingerprints = []
for fp in data['fingerprints']:
    array = np.zeros((0, ), dtype=np.int8)
    DataStructs.ConvertToNumpyArray(fp, array)
    np_fingerprints.append(array)
```

Next, we perform clustering on the Morgan fingerprints to group molecules by molecular similarity. We use agglomerative clustering, whcih recursively merges pairs of clusters based on the linkage distance between the clusters; in this case, we use the Ward linkage criterion, which minimizes the variance of the clusters being merged.

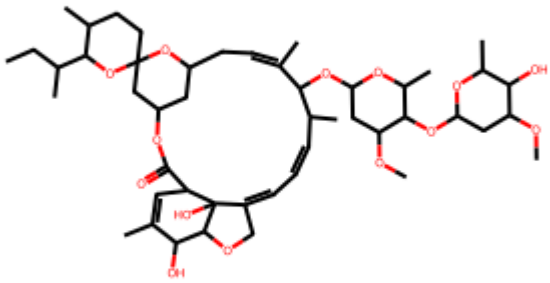
In [ ]:
```
# perform hierarchical clustering
num_clusters = 50  # You can adjust the number of clusters
clustering = AgglomerativeClustering(n_clusters = num_clusters, metric = 'eu
cluster_labels = clustering.fit_predict(np_fingerprints)
```

We assign cluster identity to each compound and visualize molecules from the same cluster to confirm the structural similarity between the molecules.

In [ ]:
```
# assign cluster identity
data['cluster'] = cluster_labels
```

```
# within each cluster, compute SEM of logBB
cluster_summary = data.groupby('cluster')['logBB'].agg(['mean', 'sem'])

# assign mean and SEM to all molecules by cluster
data = data.merge(cluster_summary, left_on = 'cluster', right_index = True)

# we visualize molecules of cluster 40
Chem.Draw.MolToImage(data[data['cluster'] == 40]['mol'][30])
```

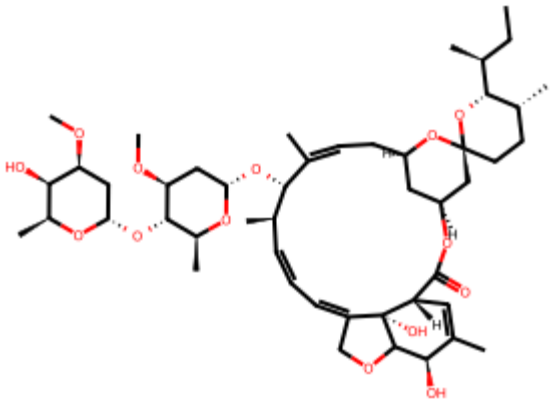
Out[ ]:



Plot a second molecule from cluster 40 to demonstrate that the clustering is reasonable.

In [ ]:
```
# plot second molecule
Chem.Draw.MolToImage(data[data['cluster'] == 40]['mol'][178])
```

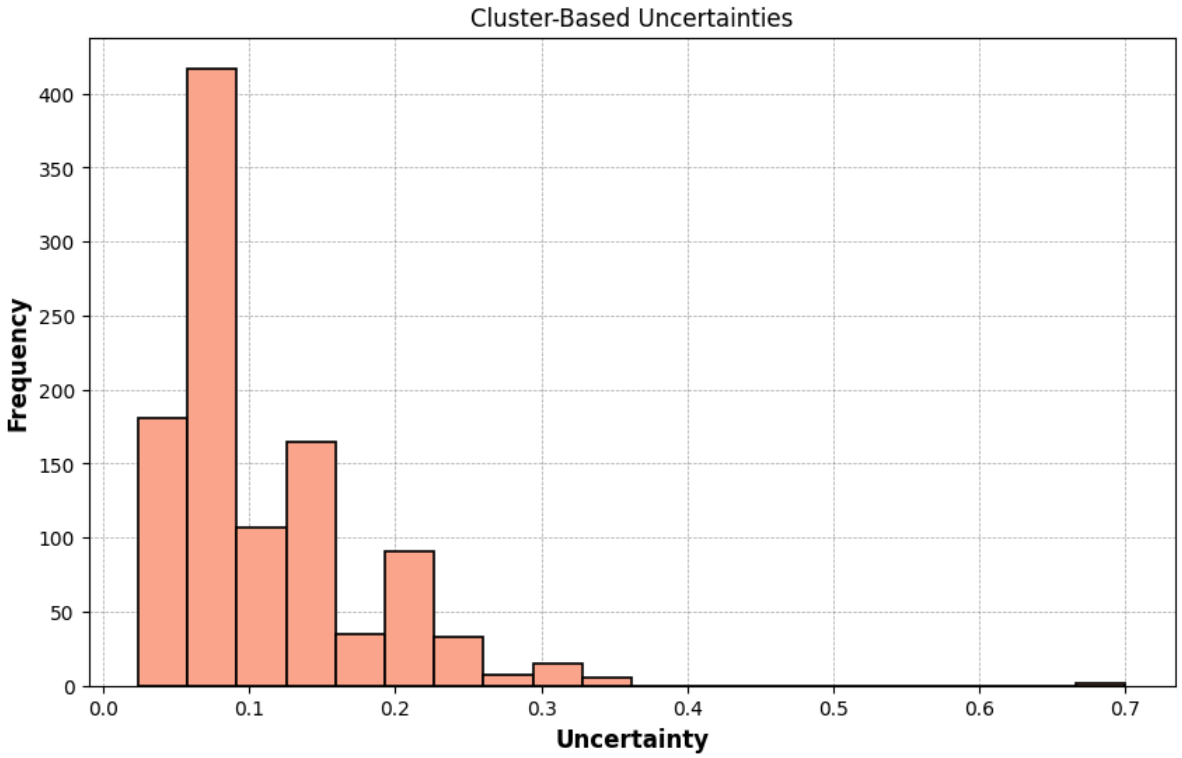
Out[ ]:



Finally, we plot a histogram of the uncertainties.

In [ ]:
```
# set figure dimensions
plt.figure(figsize=(10, 6))
```

```
# plot data points
plt.hist(data['sem'], bins = 20, color = '#F9A48B', edgecolor = 'black', lir

# set title and axis labels
plt.title('Cluster-Based Uncertainties')
plt.xlabel('Uncertainty', fontweight='bold', size=12)
plt.ylabel('Frequency', fontweight='bold', size=12)

# add a gray dashed grid in the background
plt.grid(axis = "both", color='gray', linestyle='--', linewidth=0.5, alpha=0
plt.gca().set_axisbelow(True)
```



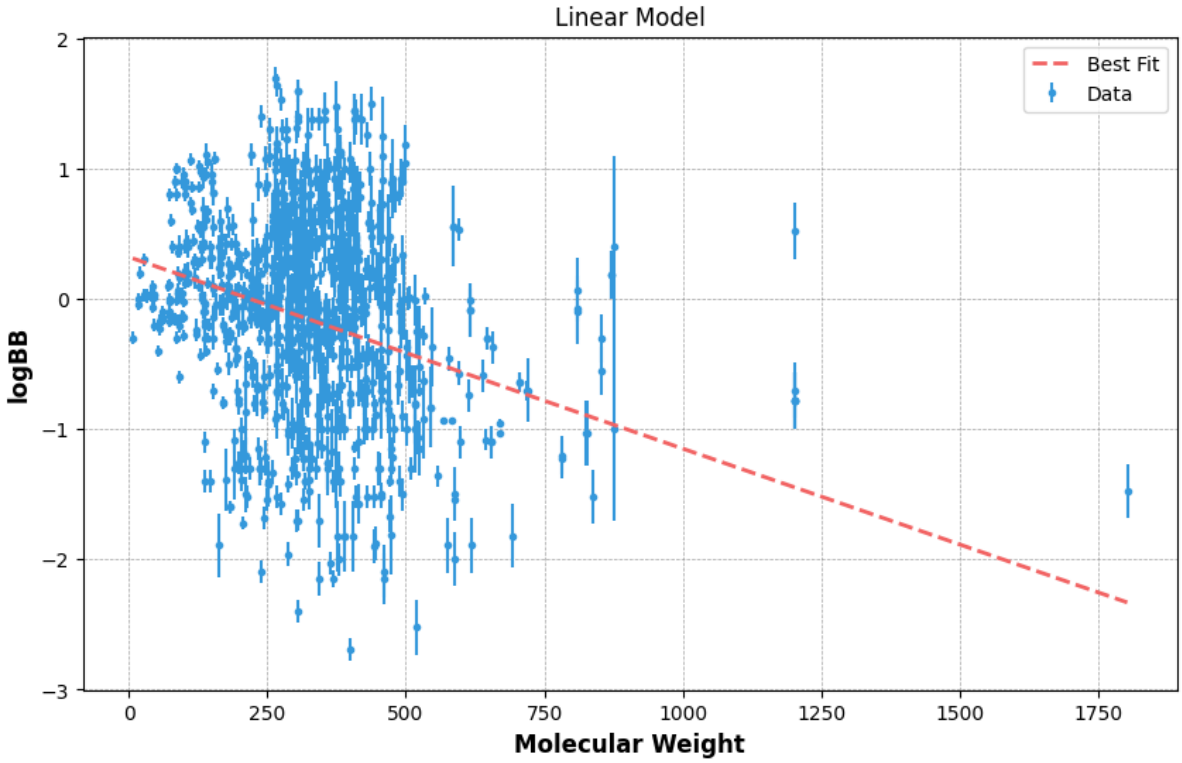
Next, we fit a linear model to the data.

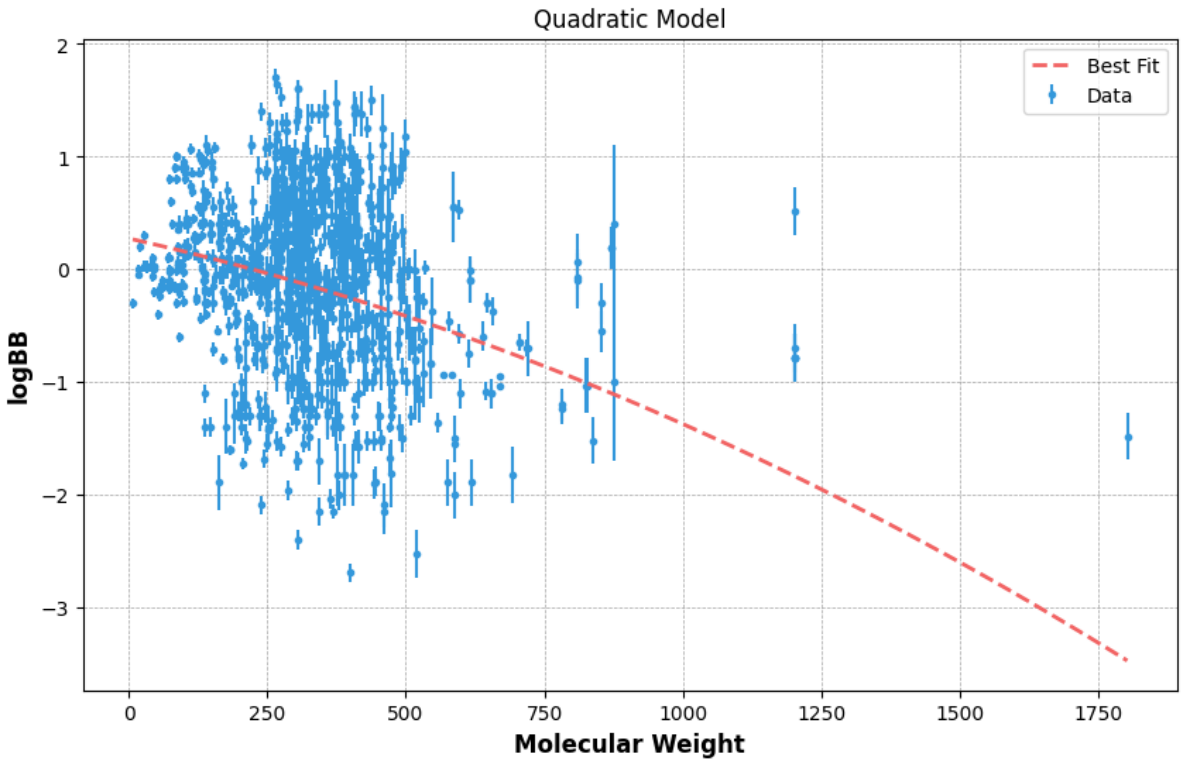
In [ ]:
```
# subset columns
x_value = data['mol_wt'].to_numpy()
y_value = data['logBB'].to_numpy()
y_error = data['sem'].to_numpy()

# define linear model
def linear_model(x, slope, y_int):
  y = x*slope + y_int
  return y

# define quadratic model
def quadratic_model(x, a, b, y_int):
  y = a * x**2 + b*x + y_int
  return y

# define logarithmic model
def logarithmic_model(x, a, b, y_int):
```

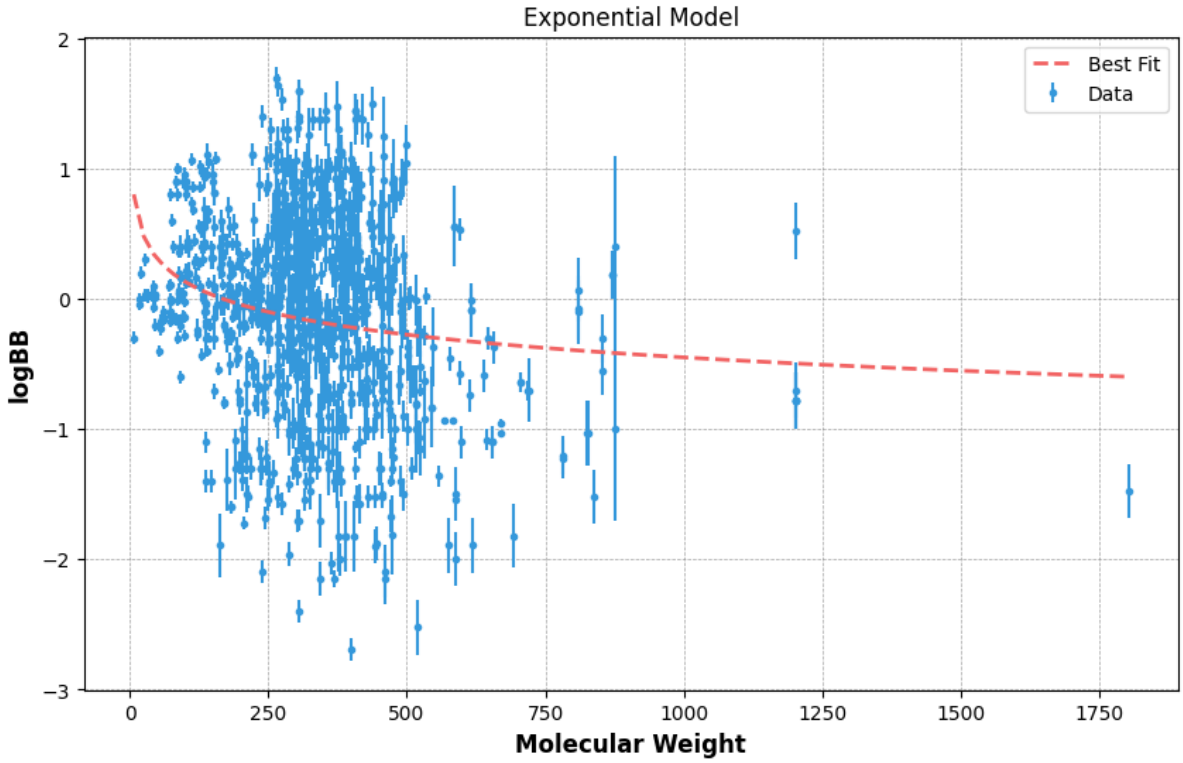
```
  y = a * np.log(x) + y_int
  return y

# fit linear and quadratic models
fitparams, fiterrs = mycurvefit(linear_model, x_value, y_value, y_error, 'Mo
fitparams, fiterrs = mycurvefit(quadratic_model, x_value, y_value, y_error,
fitparams, fiterrs = mycurvefit(logarithmic_model, x_value, y_value, y_error
```

```
Best Fit Parameters:

         Independent Variable: Molecular Weight
         Dependent Variable: logBB
         Model: Linear Model
         P1 =  -0.00147 +/- 2e-05
         P2 =  0.32189 +/- 0.00468

 Fit Metrics:

         Degrees of freedom (N-d):  1056
         Reduced Chi Squared = 66.752

Best Fit Parameters:

         Independent Variable: Molecular Weight
         Dependent Variable: logBB
         Model: Quadratic Model
         P1 =  -0.0 +/- 0.0
         P2 =  -0.00111 +/- 4e-05
         P3 =  0.27563 +/- 0.00658

 Fit Metrics:

         Degrees of freedom (N-d):  1055
         Reduced Chi Squared = 66.721

Best Fit Parameters:

         Independent Variable: Molecular Weight
         Dependent Variable: logBB
         Model: Exponential Model
         P1 =  -0.25187 +/- inf
         P2 =  1.0 +/- inf
         P3 =  1.29096 +/- inf

 Fit Metrics:

         Degrees of freedom (N-d):  1055
         Reduced Chi Squared = 69.929
```

```
/Users/an583/Library/CloudStorage/OneDrive-Personal/Academic/College/Junior
Year/Fall Term/PS 2/Lab/Final Project/ps2-lab/lab_env/lib/python3.10/site-p
ackages/scipy/optimize/_minpack_py.py:1010: OptimizeWarning: Covariance of
the parameters could not be estimated
  warnings.warn('Covariance of the parameters could not be estimated',
```


Linear Model
Best Fit
Data
logBB
Molecular Weight
2
1
0
−1
−2
−3
0
250
500
750
1000
1250
1500
1750

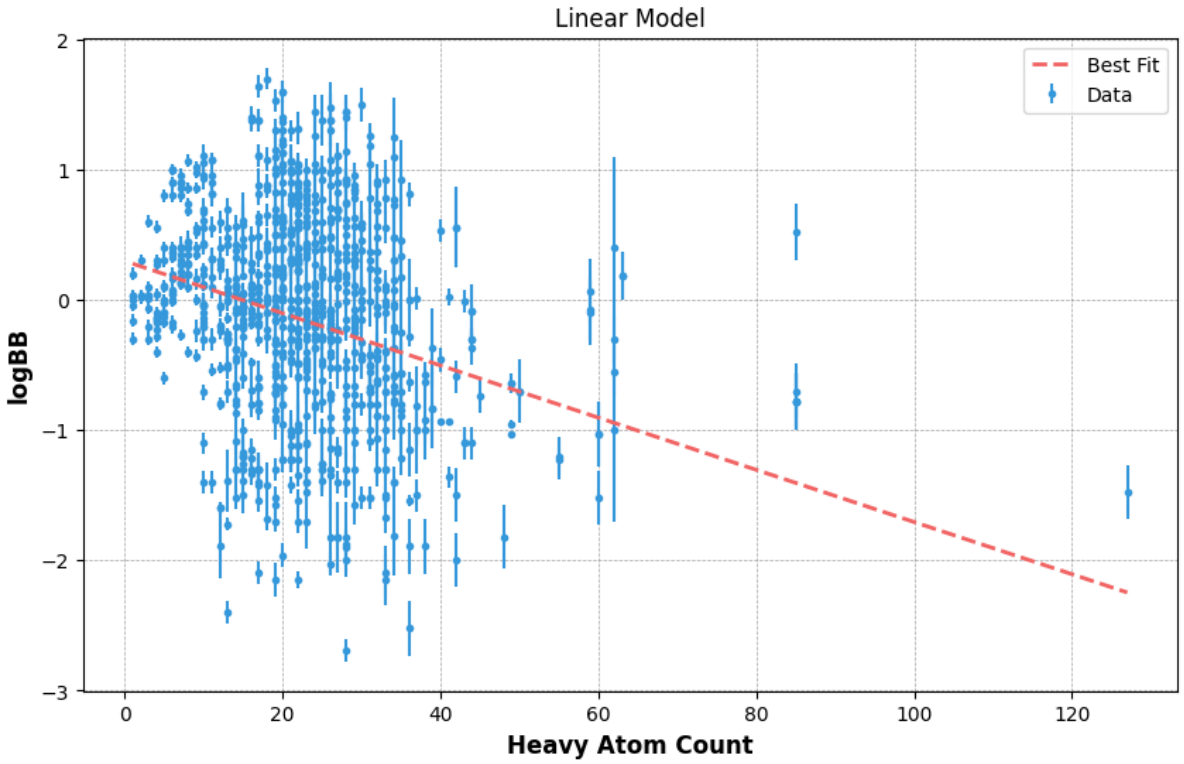

Quadratic Model
Best Fit
Data
logBB
Molecular Weight
2
1
0
−1
−2
−3
0
250
500
750
1000
1250
1500
1750

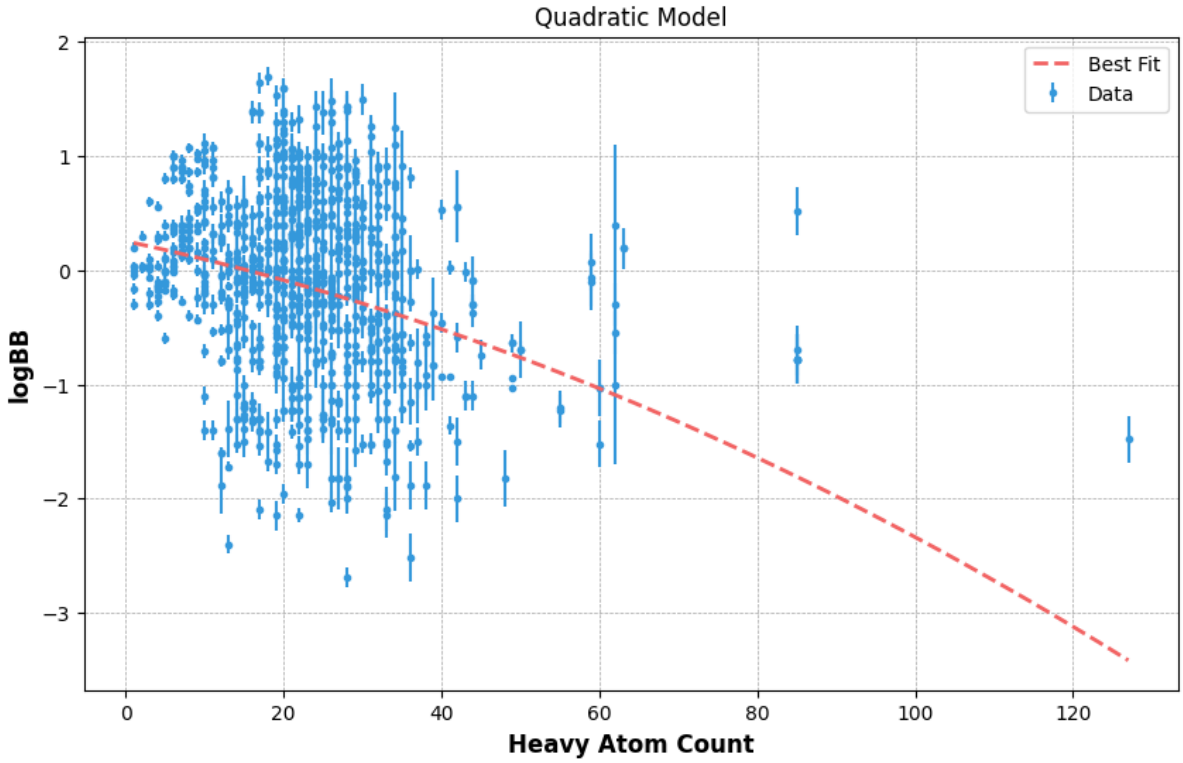


We repeat the linear and quadratic fits for other variables of interest.

In [ ]:
```
# fit models to logBB vs. heavy atom count
x_value = data['heavy_atom_count'].to_numpy()
fitparams, fiterrs = mycurvefit(linear_model, x_value, y_value, y_error, 'He
fitparams, fiterrs = mycurvefit(quadratic_model, x_value, y_value, y_error,
```

```
Best Fit Parameters:

        Independent Variable: Heavy Atom Count
        Dependent Variable: logBB
        Model: Linear Model
        P1 =  -0.02004 +/- 0.00021
        P2 =  0.29819 +/- 0.00448

 Fit Metrics:

        Degrees of freedom (N-d):  1056
        Reduced Chi Squared = 66.854

Best Fit Parameters:

        Independent Variable: Heavy Atom Count
        Dependent Variable: logBB
        Model: Quadratic Model
        P1 =  -0.00011 +/- 1e-05
        P2 =  -0.01487 +/- 0.00053
        P3 =  0.25436 +/- 0.00608

 Fit Metrics:

        Degrees of freedom (N-d):  1055
        Reduced Chi Squared = 66.81
```

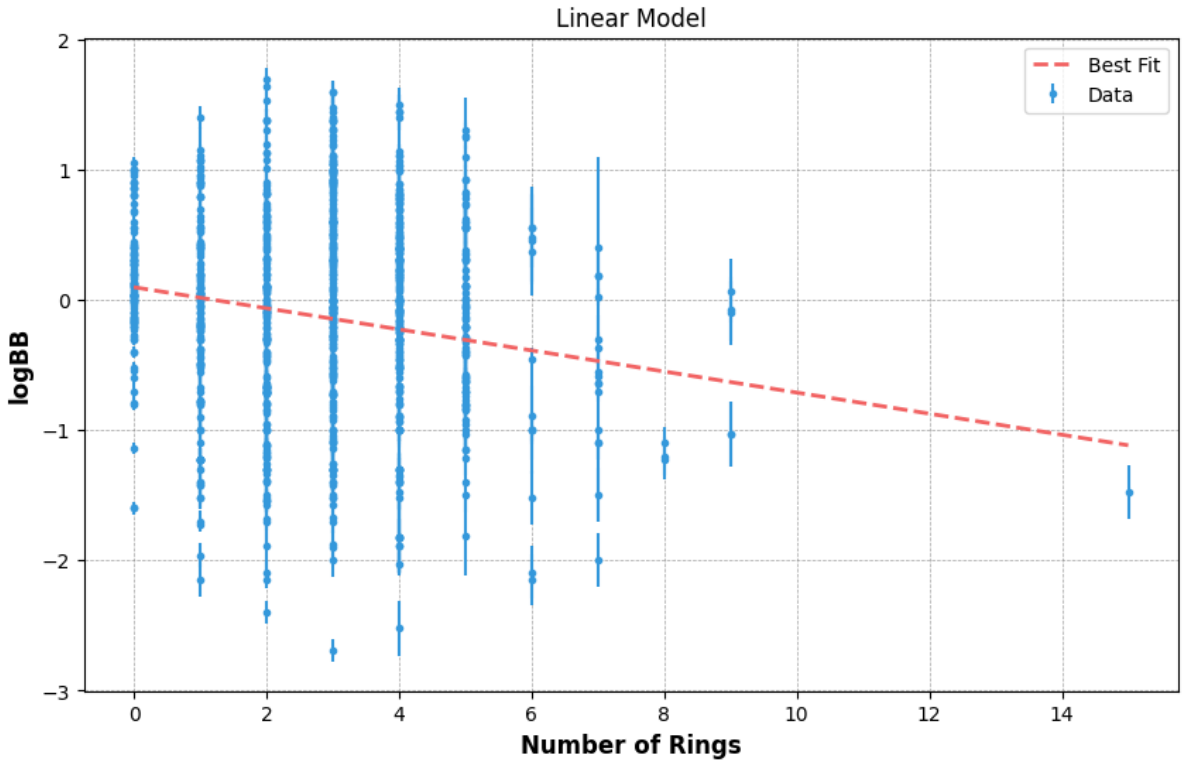


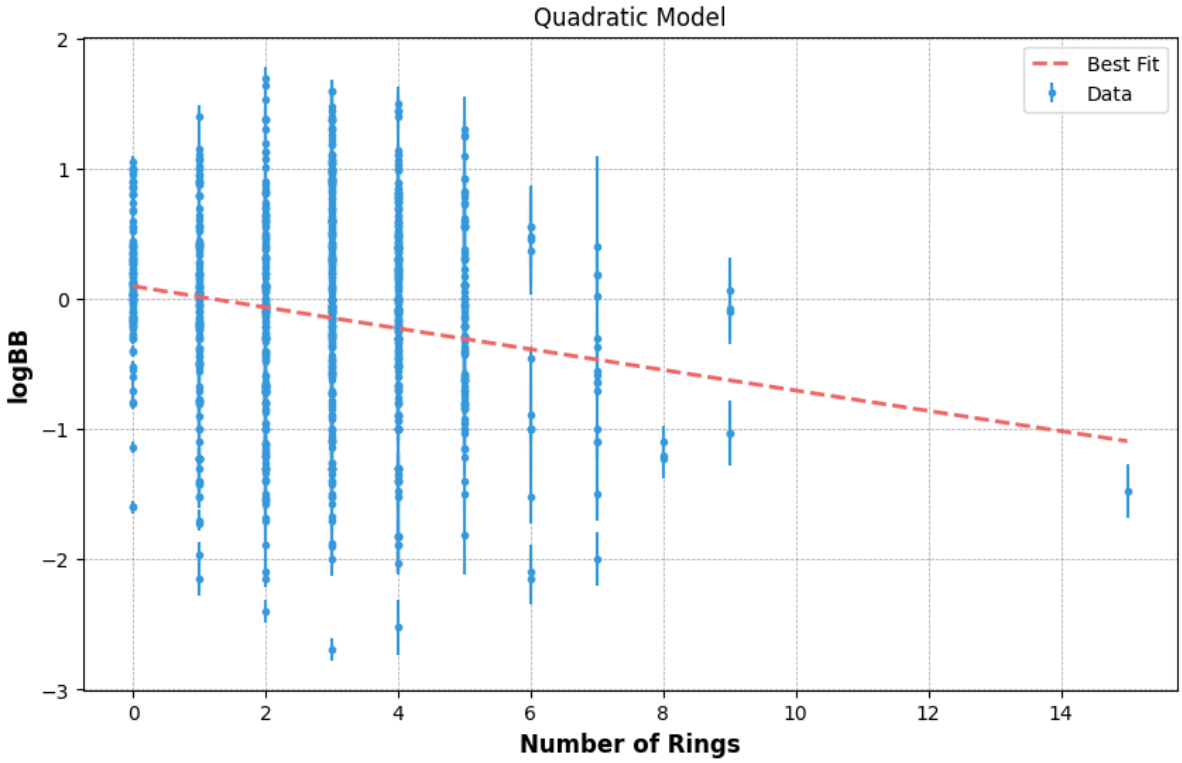


Finally, we repeat for number of rings.

In [ ]:
```
# fit models to logBB vs. number of rings
x_value = data['num_rings'].to_numpy()
fitparams, fiterrs = mycurvefit(linear_model, x_value, y_value, y_error, 'Nu
fitparams, fiterrs = mycurvefit(quadratic_model, x_value, y_value, y_error,
```

```
Best Fit Parameters:

        Independent Variable: Number of Rings
        Dependent Variable: logBB
        Model: Linear Model
        P1 =  -0.08095 +/- 0.00137
        P2 =  0.09804 +/- 0.00355

 Fit Metrics:

        Degrees of freedom (N-d):  1056
        Reduced Chi Squared = 71.826

Best Fit Parameters:

        Independent Variable: Number of Rings
        Dependent Variable: logBB
        Model: Quadratic Model
        P1 =  0.00016 +/- 0.00066
        P2 =  -0.08169 +/- 0.00345
        P3 =  0.09845 +/- 0.00395

 Fit Metrics:

        Degrees of freedom (N-d):  1055
        Reduced Chi Squared = 71.894
```





Discussion and Conclusion

Here, we fit several models to the data to investigate the relationships between BBB permeability and molecular properties such as molecular weight, number of hydrogen bond donors and acceptors, number of rotatable bonds, and number of rings.

When investigating the relationship between molecular weight and BBB-permeability, we found that there was little difference between the linear and quadratic models, with χ^2_{red} values of 66.752 and 66.721. Since all χ^2_{red} values are $>> 1$, the linear, quadratic and logarithmic models all do not explain the data.

However, the linear model is given by the equation $y = -0.00147x + 0.32189$, where y is the logBB and x is the molecular weight. This indicates that there is a negative correlation between molecular weight and BBB permeability, which is consistent with the literature and with our intuition: as the size of a molecule increases, it is less likely to cross the BBB. The uncertainties on our measurements are small: the measured slope is $-0.00147 \pm 2 \times 10^{-5}$ and the measured intercept is 0.32189 ± 0.00468. We found similar results for other features investigated, including number of heavy atoms and number of rings.

Thus, we conclude that large macromolecules are excluded from the brain; however, our simplistic linear, quadratic, and exponential models are insufficient to explain the relationship between molecular properties – such as molecular weight, number of heavy atoms and number of rings – and BBB-permeability.

References

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