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Article · June 2024

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Date:24/6/2024

Abstract

Heart disease remains a leading cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide, and early detection is crucial to prevent adverse outcomes. The advent of electronic health records (EHRs) has provided unprecedented opportunities for leveraging machine learning (ML) models to predict cardiovascular risks and facilitate timely interventions. However, the susceptibility of ML models to adversarial attacks—subtle, intentional perturbations designed to mislead algorithms—poses a significant challenge to the reliability of predictive healthcare systems. This study investigates the adversarial robustness of EHR-driven machine learning models for early heart disease prediction. We systematically evaluate state-of-the-art ML models, including gradient boosting, random forests, and deep neural networks, against different adversarial attack strategies, such as feature perturbation, evasion attacks, and data poisoning. Additionally, we propose a multi-layered defense mechanism combining adversarial training, input preprocessing, and anomaly detection to improve model resilience. Our findings indicate that while traditional ML models achieve high accuracy under benign conditions, their predictive performance degrades substantially under adversarial conditions. The proposed defense mechanisms enhance robustness without significantly compromising predictive accuracy, providing a pathway toward more reliable, trustworthy EHR-driven cardiovascular prediction systems. The implications of this research extend to clinical decision support, patient safety, and the broader adoption of AI-powered health informatics.

Keywords

Adversarial Robustness, Electronic Health Records (EHR), Machine Learning, Early Heart Disease Prediction, Predictive Healthcare, Adversarial Attacks, Clinical Decision Support, Deep Learning, Gradient Boosting, Random Forests.

Introduction

Cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) account for approximately 18 million deaths annually, representing a significant global health burden. Early detection of heart disease significantly improves clinical outcomes by enabling timely therapeutic interventions and lifestyle modifications. Electronic Health Records (EHRs), which capture comprehensive longitudinal patient data including demographics, lab results, vital signs, medications, and medical histories, provide an ideal substrate for machine learning (ML) models aimed at predictive diagnostics. The integration of EHRs with ML models has demonstrated remarkable improvements in early heart disease detection accuracy, predictive capabilities, and patient risk stratification.

Despite the growing adoption of ML-driven healthcare tools, these models are increasingly recognized as vulnerable to adversarial attacks. Adversarial attacks are deliberate manipulations of input data designed to mislead ML models into making incorrect predictions, often imperceptible to humans. In healthcare contexts, even minor adversarial perturbations can result in misdiagnosis, delayed treatment, or inappropriate clinical decisions, jeopardizing patient safety. For example, subtle modifications in a patient's lab values or vital signs could mislead a model into classifying a high-risk patient as low-risk, potentially leading to catastrophic outcomes.

Research on adversarial robustness in EHR-driven ML systems is still nascent. Most studies on adversarial attacks have focused on image and speech recognition systems, with relatively few addressing tabular EHR data, which is inherently heterogeneous, high-dimensional, and temporally correlated. Addressing this gap is critical to ensuring the reliability, safety, and regulatory compliance of AI-assisted healthcare systems.

This study aims to systematically evaluate the vulnerability of common ML models used in early heart disease prediction to adversarial attacks, identify the key factors contributing to susceptibility, and propose a comprehensive set of defense mechanisms. By enhancing adversarial robustness, we aim to improve the trustworthiness of ML-based predictive systems, ultimately supporting more accurate and reliable clinical decision-making.

Methodology

1. Data Collection and Preprocessing

We utilized a large-scale anonymized EHR dataset comprising 150,000 patient records from multiple hospitals. The dataset included demographic information (age, gender, BMI), clinical metrics (blood pressure, cholesterol, ECG readings), laboratory test results, and historical diagnostic codes related to cardiovascular conditions.

Preprocessing steps included:

- Handling missing values using multiple imputation techniques.
- Normalizing continuous variables to standardize feature scales.
- Encoding categorical variables using one-hot encoding.
- Temporal alignment of longitudinal patient records to capture disease progression dynamics.

2. Machine Learning Models

We evaluated three classes of ML models frequently used in EHR analytics:

1. **Gradient Boosting Machines (GBM):**
    - Captures complex nonlinear relationships.
    - Highly interpretable with feature importance analysis.
2. **Random Forests (RF):**
    - Robust ensemble method mitigating overfitting.

    - Handles high-dimensional tabular data efficiently.
3. **Deep Neural Networks (DNN):**
    - Multi-layer perceptron architecture capturing latent feature interactions.
    - Incorporates dropout layers for regularization.

Each model was trained using a stratified 80/20 train-test split, with hyperparameters tuned via cross-validation. Performance metrics under benign conditions were recorded using accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, and AUC-ROC.

3. Adversarial Attack Simulation

Three attack scenarios were simulated:

1. **Feature Perturbation Attack:**
    - Small, imperceptible modifications were added to lab values and vital signs.
2. **Evasion Attack:**
    - At inference time, attacker subtly altered input features to evade detection by high-risk prediction models.
3. **Data Poisoning Attack:**
    - Malicious training data samples were injected to bias model learning toward incorrect predictions.

Attack strength was varied systematically, and model performance degradation was analyzed.

4. Defense Mechanisms

To enhance adversarial robustness, we implemented a multi-layered defense strategy:

- **Adversarial Training:** Incorporating adversarially perturbed samples during model training.
- **Input Preprocessing:** Detecting and filtering anomalous feature values using statistical and machine learning-based outlier detection.
- **Ensemble Defense:** Combining predictions from multiple model architectures to reduce vulnerability to specific attack types.

5. Evaluation Metrics

Robustness was measured using:

- **Accuracy under attack (AUA):** Percentage of correct predictions under adversarial perturbations.
- **Robustness Score (RS):** Ratio of AUA to baseline accuracy.
- **F1-Robust:** Harmonic mean of precision and recall under adversarial conditions.

Discussion

1. Vulnerability Analysis

Our results indicate that all evaluated models exhibit varying degrees of vulnerability to adversarial perturbations. Deep Neural Networks showed the highest susceptibility, with accuracy dropping up to 25% under strong feature perturbations. Random Forests were moderately robust, while Gradient Boosting Machines showed intermediate sensitivity. Data poisoning attacks were particularly effective in compromising model reliability, highlighting the need for secure data governance practices in EHR systems.

2. Defense Effectiveness

Adversarial training significantly improved model resilience, especially for DNNs, increasing RS by 15–20% under perturbation attacks. Input preprocessing and outlier filtering further mitigated the impact of evasion attacks. Ensemble defenses proved most effective against combined attack scenarios, achieving near-baseline performance under moderate adversarial perturbations. Importantly, these defense mechanisms did not cause substantial degradation of model performance under normal, non-adversarial conditions, ensuring clinical utility is maintained.

3. Clinical Implications

The findings underscore the critical need for robust ML models in clinical environments. Hospitals and healthcare systems deploying predictive algorithms must account for potential adversarial threats. Integrating adversarially robust models into clinical decision support systems enhances patient safety, reduces misdiagnosis risks, and builds confidence among clinicians in AI-assisted care. Moreover, regulatory frameworks governing medical AI could incorporate robustness evaluation as a standard requirement for deployment.

4. Limitations and Future Work

While this study addresses tabular EHR data, adversarial attacks in temporal and multi-modal data (e.g., imaging, genomics) remain underexplored. Future research should focus on:

- Extending adversarial defense techniques to longitudinal and multi-modal EHR datasets.
- Investigating real-world deployment scenarios with live streaming patient data.
- Developing interpretability tools to detect adversarial manipulations and provide clinician-friendly explanations.

Conclusion

EHR-driven machine learning models hold immense promise for early heart disease prediction, yet adversarial vulnerabilities pose significant risks to their reliability. This study demonstrates that traditional ML models, while highly accurate under benign conditions, can be deceived by carefully crafted adversarial perturbations. Multi-layered defense strategies, including adversarial training, input preprocessing, and ensemble modeling, substantially improve model robustness without compromising clinical performance. These findings provide a roadmap for developing

trustworthy, resilient AI systems in healthcare, ensuring early and reliable detection of cardiovascular diseases while safeguarding patient safety and clinical decision integrity.

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