

A Saturated Map of Common Genetic Variants Associated with Human Height from 5.4 Million Individuals of Diverse Ancestries

ABSTRACT

Common SNPs are predicted to collectively explain 40-50% of phenotypic variation in human height, but identifying the specific variants and associated regions requires huge sample sizes. Here we show, using GWAS data from 5.4 million individuals of diverse ancestries, that 12,111 independent SNPs that are significantly associated with height account for nearly all of the common SNP-based heritability. These SNPs are clustered within 7,209 non-overlapping genomic segments with a median size of ~90 kb, covering ~21% of the genome. The density of independent associations varies across the genome and the regions of elevated density are enriched for biologically relevant genes. In out-of-sample estimation and prediction, the 12,111 SNPs account for 40% of phenotypic variance in European ancestry populations but only ~10%-20% in other ancestries. Effect sizes, associated regions, and gene prioritization are similar across ancestries, indicating that reduced prediction accuracy is likely explained by linkage disequilibrium and allele frequency differences within associated regions. Finally, we show that the relevant biological pathways are detectable with smaller sample sizes than needed to implicate causal genes and variants. Overall, this study, the largest GWAS to date, provides an unprecedented saturated map of specific genomic regions containing the vast majority of common height-associated variants.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2007, genome-wide association studies (GWAS) have identified thousands of associations between common single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) and height, primarily using studies of European ancestry. The largest GWAS published to date for adult height focussed on common variation and reported up to 3,290 independent associations in 712 loci using a sample size of up to 700,000 individuals.¹ To date, adult height, which is highly heritable and easily measured, has provided a larger number of common genetic associations than any other human phenotype. In addition, a large collection of genes has been implicated in disorders of skeletal growth, and these are enriched in loci mapped by GWAS of height in the normal range. These features make height an attractive model trait for assessing the role of common genetic variation in defining the genetic and biological architecture of polygenic human phenotypes.

As available sample sizes continue to increase for GWAS of common variants, it becomes important to consider whether these larger samples can “saturate” or nearly completely catalogue the information that can be derived from GWAS. This question of completeness can take several forms, including prediction accuracy compared with heritability attributable to common variation, the mapping of associated genomic regions that account for this heritability, and whether increasing sample sizes continue to provide additional information about the identity of prioritised genes and gene sets. Furthermore, because most GWAS continue to be performed largely in populations of European ancestry, it is important to address these questions of completeness in the context of

multiple ancestries. Finally, some have proposed that, when sample sizes become sufficiently large, effectively every gene and genomic region will be implicated by GWAS, rather than implicating specific subsets of genes and biological pathways.²

Using data from 5,380,080 individuals, we set out to map common genetic associations with adult height, using variants catalogued in the HapMap 3 project (HM3), and to assess the saturation of this map with respect to variants, genomic regions, and likely causal genes and gene sets. We identify significant variants, explore signal density across the genome, perform out-of-sample estimation and prediction analyses within European and non-European ancestry studies, and prioritise genes and gene sets as likely mediators of the effects on height. We show that this set of common variants reaches predicted limits for prediction accuracy within European-ancestry populations and largely saturates both the genomic regions associated with height and broad categories of likely relevant gene sets; future work remains to extend prediction accuracy to non-European ancestries and to more definitively connect associated regions with individual likely causal genes and variants.

RESULTS

An overview of our study design and analysis strategy is illustrated in [Suppl. Fig. 1](#).

Multi-ancestry GWAS meta-analysis identifies 12,111 height-associated SNPs

We performed genetic analysis of up to 5,380,080 individuals from 281 studies from the GIANT consortium and 23andMe, Inc. including 4,080,687 participants of predominantly European ancestries (75.8% of total sample), 472,730 participants with predominantly East-Asian ancestries (8.8%), 455,180 participants of Hispanic ethnicity with typically admixed ancestries (8.5%), 293,593 participants of predominantly African ancestries, mostly African-Americans with admixed African and European ancestries (5.5%) and 77,890 participants of predominantly South-Asian ancestries (1.4%). We refer to these five groups of participants/cohorts by the shorthand EUR, EAS, HIS, AFR, and SAS, respectively, yet recognising that these commonly used groupings oversimplify the actual genetic diversity among participants. Cohort-specific information is provided in [Suppl. Tables 1 – 3](#). We tested the association between standing height and 1,385,132 autosomal bi-allelic SNPs from the HM3 tagging panel³, which contains >1,095,888 SNPs with a minor allele frequency (MAF) >1% in each of the five ancestral groups included in our meta-analysis. [Suppl. Fig. 2](#) shows the frequency distribution of HM3 SNPs across all five groups of cohorts.

We first performed individual meta-analyses in each of the five groups of cohorts. We identified 9863, 1888, 918, 493 and 69 quasi-independent genome-wide significant (GWS; $P < 5 \times 10^{-8}$) SNPs in the EUR, HIS, EAS, AFR and SAS groups, respectively ([Table 1](#); [Suppl. Tables 4 – 8](#)). Quasi-independent associations were obtained after performing approximate conditional and joint multiple-SNP (COJO) analyses,⁴ as implemented in GCTA⁵ ([Suppl. Methods](#)). Previous studies have shown that confounding due to population stratification may remain uncorrected in large EUR GWAS meta-analyses.^{6,7} Therefore, we specifically investigated confounding effects in our EUR GWAS and found no evidence that these GWAS results are driven by population stratification ([Suppl. Note 1](#), [Suppl. Fig. 3](#)).

To compare results across the five groups of cohorts, we examined the genetic and physical colocalization between SNPs identified in the largest group (EUR) with those found in the non-EUR groups. We found that over 83% of GWS SNPs detected in non-EUR are in strong linkage disequilibrium (LD; $r_{LD}^2 > 0.8$) with at least one variant reaching marginal genome-wide significance in EUR (Suppl. Tables 5 – 8) and over 87% of associations detected in non-EUR meta-analyses fall within 100 kb of at least one GWS SNP identified in EUR (Suppl. Fig. 4a). In contrast, a randomly sampled HM3 SNP falls within 100 kb of a EUR GWS SNP only about 68% of the time (standard error; S.E.=0.5% over 10,000 draws). Next, we quantified the cross-ancestry correlation of allele substitution effects (ρ_b) at GWS SNPs for all pairs of ancestry groups. We estimated ρ_b using five sets of GWS SNPs identified in each of ancestry group. After correction for winner's curse,^{8,9} we found ρ_b to range between 0.64 and 0.99 across all pairs of ancestry groups and all sets of GWS SNPs (Suppl. Fig. 5 – 9). Thus, the observed GWS height associations are substantially shared across major ancestral groups, consistent with previous studies based on smaller sample sizes.^{10,11}

To find signals that are specific to certain groups, we tested if any individual SNPs detected in non-EUR GWAS are conditionally independent of signals detected in EUR GWAS. We fitted an approximate joint model that includes GWS SNPs identified in EUR and non-EUR, using LD reference panels specific to each ancestry group. After excluding SNPs in strong LD ($r_{LD}^2 > 0.8$ in either ancestry group), we found that 2, 19, 49 and 143 of the GWS SNPs detected in SAS, AFR, EAS and HIS GWAS respectively are conditionally independent of GWS SNPs identified in EUR GWAS (Suppl. Table 9). On average these conditionally independent SNPs have a larger MAF and effect size in non-EUR than in EUR cohorts, which may have contributed to increased statistical power of detection. The largest frequency difference relative to EUR was observed for rs2463169 (height-increasing G allele frequency: 23% in AFR vs. 84% in EUR) within the intron of *PAWR*, which codes for the prostate apoptosis response-4 protein. Interestingly, rs2463169 is located within the 12q21.2 locus, where a strong signal of positive selection in West-African Yoruba populations was previously reported.¹² The estimated effect at rs2463169 is $\beta \sim 0.034$ standard deviation (SD) per G allele in AFR vs. $\beta \sim -0.002$ SD/G allele in EUR and the p-value of marginal association in EUR is $P_{EUR} = 0.08$, suggesting either a true difference in effect size or nearby causal variant(s) with differing LD to rs2463169.

Given that our results demonstrate a strong genetic overlap of GWAS signals across ancestries, we performed a fixed-effect meta-analysis of all five ancestry groups to maximise statistical power for discovering associations due to shared causal variants. The mean Cochran's heterogeneity Q-statistic is $\sim 34\%$ across SNPs, which indicates moderate heterogeneity of SNP effects between ancestries. The mean chi-square association statistic in our fixed effect meta-analysis (hereafter referred to as $META_{FE}$) is ~ 36 , and $\sim 18\%$ of all HM3 SNPs are marginally GWS. Moreover, we found allele frequencies in our $META_{FE}$ to be very similar to that of EUR (mean F_{ST} across SNPs between EUR and $META_{FE}$ is ~ 0.001), as expected because our $META_{FE}$ consists of $>75\%$ EUR participants and $\sim 14\%$ participants with admixed European and non-European ancestries (i.e. HIS and AFR). To further assess if LD in our $META_{FE}$ could be reasonably approximated by the LD from EUR, we performed LD score regression analysis of our $META_{FE}$ using LD scores estimated in EUR. In this analysis, we focused on the attenuation ratio statistic ($R_{LDSC-EUR}$), for which values $>20\%$ classically indicate strong LD inconsistencies between a given reference and GWAS summary statistics. For example, using EUR LD scores in the GWAS of HIS, which is the non-EUR group genetically closest to EUR ($F_{ST} \sim 0.02$), yields an estimated $R_{LDSC-EUR}$ of $\sim 25\%$ (S.E. 1.8%), consistent with strong LD

differences between HIS and EUR. By contrast, in our META_{FE}, we found an estimated R_{LDSC-EUR} of ~4.5% (S.E. 0.8%), which is significantly lower than 20% and also not statistically different from 3.8% (S.E. 0.8%) in our EUR meta-analysis. Altogether, our LD score regression analyses suggest that LD in our META_{FE} can be reasonably approximated by LD from EUR.

We therefore proceeded to identify quasi-independent GWS SNPs from the multi-ancestry meta-analysis by performing a COJO analysis of our META_{FE}, using genotypes from ~350,000 unrelated EUR participants of the UK Biobank (UKB) as an LD reference. We identified 12,111 quasi-independent GWS SNPs, including 9,920 (82%) primary signals with a GWS marginal effect and 2,191 secondary signals that only reached GWS in a joint regression model (Suppl. Table 10). Of the GWS SNPs obtained from the non-EUR meta-analyses above that were conditionally independent of the EUR GWS SNPs, 0/2 in SAS, 5/19 in AFR, 27/49 in EAS, and 39/143 in HIS remained statistically significant in our META_{FE} (Suppl. Table 9), meaning that a small number of additional signals were only identified in the ancestry-specific analyses.

We next sought replication of the 12,111 META_{FE} signals using GWAS data from 49,160 participants of the Estonian Biobank (EBB). We first re-assessed the consistency of allele frequencies between our META_{FE} and the EBB set. We found a correlation of allele frequencies of ~0.98 between the two datasets and a mean F_{ST} across SNPs of ~0.005, similar to estimates obtained between populations from the same continent. Of the 12,111 GWS SNPs identified through our COJO analysis, 11,847 were available in the EBB dataset, 97% of which (11,529) have MAF>1% (Suppl. Table 10). Given the large difference in sample size between our discovery and replication samples, direct statistical replication of individual associations at GWS is not achievable for most SNPs identified (Suppl. Fig. 10a). Instead, we assessed the correlation of SNP effects between our discovery and replication GWAS as an overall metric of replicability.^{1,13} Over the 11,529/11,847 SNPs with a MAF>1% in the EBB, we found a correlation of marginal SNP effects of $\rho_b=0.93$ (jackknife standard error; S.E. 0.01) and a correlation of conditional SNP effects using the same LD reference panel of $\rho_b=0.80$ (S.E. 0.03; Suppl. Fig. 11). Although we had limited power to replicate associations with 238 GWS variants that are rare in the EBB (MAF<1%), we found, consistent with expectations (Suppl. Methods; Suppl. Fig. 10b), that 60% of them have a marginal SNP effect that is sign-consistent with that from our discovery GWAS (Fisher exact test; $P=0.001$). The proportion of sign-consistent SNP effects was >75% (Fisher exact test; $P<10^{-50}$) for variants with a MAF>1%, also consistent with expectations (Suppl. Fig. 10b). Altogether, our analyses demonstrate the robustness of our findings and show their replicability in an independent sample.

Genomic distribution of height-associated SNPs

To examine signal density among the 12,111 GWS SNPs detected in our META_{FE}, we defined a measure of local density of association signals for each GWS SNP based on the number of additional independent associations within 100 kb (Suppl. Fig. 12). We observed that 69% of GWS SNPs shared their location with another associated, conditionally independent, GWS SNP (Fig. 1). The mean signal density across the entire genome is 2.0 (LOCO-S.E. = 0.14), consistent with a non-random genomic distribution of GWS SNPs. Next we evaluated signal density around 462 autosomal genes curated from the Online Mendelian Inheritance in Man (OMIM) database¹⁴ as harbouring pathogenic mutations causing syndromes of abnormal skeletal growth (“OMIM genes”; Suppl. Methods; Suppl. Table 11). We found that a high density of height-associated SNPs is significantly correlated with the presence of an OMIM gene nearby (Enrichment fold of OMIM gene

when density >1 : $2.5\times$; $P<0.001$; **Suppl. Methods, Suppl. Fig. 13a**).^{15,16} Interestingly, the enrichment of OMIM genes almost linearly increases with the density of height-associated SNPs (**Suppl. Fig. 13b**). Thus, these 12,111 GWS SNPs nonrandomly cluster near each other and also near known skeletal growth genes.

The largest density of conditionally independent associations was observed on chromosome 15 near *ACAN*, a gene mutated in short stature and skeletal dysplasia syndromes, where 25 GWS SNPs co-localise within 100 kb of one another (**Fig. 1; Suppl. Fig. 14**). We show in **Suppl. Note 2** and **Suppl. Figs. 14-15**, using haplotype- and simulation-based analyses, that a multiplicity of independent causal variants is the most likely explanation of this observation. Interestingly, we also found that signal density is partially explained by the presence of a recently identified^{17,18} height-associated variable-number-of-tandem-repeat (VNTR) polymorphism at this locus (**Suppl. Note 2**). In fact, the 25 independent GWS SNPs clustered within 100 kb of rs4932198 explain $>40\%$ of the VNTR length variation in multiple ancestries (**Suppl. Fig. 15e**) and an additional $\sim 0.24\%$ ($P=8.7 \times 10^{-55}$) phenotypic variance in EUR above what is explained by the VNTR alone (**Suppl. Fig. 15f**). Altogether, our conclusion is consistent with prior evidence of multiple types of common variation influencing height through *ACAN* gene function, involving multiple enhancers,¹⁹ missense variants²⁰ and tandem repeat polymorphisms.^{17,18}

Variance explained by SNPs within identified loci

To quantify the proportion of height variance explained by GWS SNPs identified in our $META_{FE}$, we stratified all HM3 SNPs into two groups: SNPs in the close vicinity of GWS SNPs, hereafter denoted GWS loci, and all remaining SNPs. We defined GWS loci as non-overlapping genomic segments containing at least 1 GWS SNP, such that GWS SNPs in adjacent loci are $>2 \times 35$ kb away from each other (i.e. 35 kb window on each side). We chose a 35 kb threshold based on findings from Wu et al.²¹ who previously showed that causal common variants are located within 35 kb of GWS SNPs with $>80\%$ probability. Accordingly, we grouped the 12,111 GWS SNPs identified in our $META_{FE}$ into 7,209 non-overlapping loci (**Suppl. Table 12**) with lengths ranging from 70 kb (for loci containing only 1 signal) to 711 kb (for loci containing up to 25 signals). The average length of GWS loci is ~ 90 kb (SD 46 kb). The cumulative length of GWS loci represent ~ 647 Mb, or $\sim 21\%$ of the genome (assuming a genome length of ~ 3039 Mb).²²

To estimate what fraction of heritability is explained by common variants within the 21% of the genome overlapping GWS loci, we calculated two genomic relationship matrices (GRMs), one for SNPs within these loci and one for SNPs outside these loci, and then used both matrices to estimate a stratified SNP-based heritability (h^2_{SNP}) of height in 8 independent samples of all five population groups represented in our $META_{FE}$ (**Fig. 2; Suppl. Methods**). Altogether, our stratified estimation of SNP-based heritability shows that SNPs within these 7,209 GWS loci explain $\sim 100\%$ of h^2_{SNP} in EUR and $>90\%$ of h^2_{SNP} across all non-EUR groups, despite being drawn from less than a quarter of the genome (**Fig. 2**). We also varied the window size used to define GWS loci and found that 35 kb was the smallest window size for which this level of saturation of SNP-based heritability could be achieved (**Suppl. Fig. 16**).

To further assess the robustness of this key result, we tested if the 7,209 height-associated GWS loci are systematically enriched for trait-heritability. We chose body mass index (BMI) as a control trait given its small genetic correlation with height ($r_g=-0.1$, ref.²³) and found no significant

enrichment of SNP-based heritability for BMI within height-associated GWS loci (Suppl. Fig. 17). Furthermore, we repeated our analysis using a random set of SNPs with similar EUR MAF and LD scores as the 12,111 height-associated GWS SNPs. We found this control set of SNPs to explain only ~27% of h_{SNP}^2 for height, consistent with the proportion of SNPs within the loci defined by this random set of SNPs (Suppl. Figs. 16 - 17). Finally, we extended our stratified estimation of SNP-based heritability to all well-imputed common SNPs (i.e. beyond the HM3 panel) and found, consistently across population groups, that although more genetic variance can be explained by common SNPs not included in the HM3 panel, all information remains concentrated within these 7,209 GWS loci (Suppl. Fig. 18). Thus, with this large GWAS, nearly all of the variability in height that is attributable to common genetic variants can be mapped to regions comprising ~21% of the genome.

Out-of-sample prediction accuracy

We quantified the accuracy of polygenic scores (PGS) for height based on GWS SNPs in 61,095 unrelated individuals from 3 studies, including 33,001 participants of the UKB who were not included in our discovery GWAS (i.e. 14,587 EUR; 9,257 SAS; 6,911 AFR and 2,246 EAS; **Suppl. Methods**), 14,058 EUR participants from the Lifelines cohort study; and 8,238 HIS and 5,798 AFR participants from the PAGE study. Prediction accuracy (R_{GWS}^2) was defined as the squared correlation between the PGS and actual height (corrected for mean and variance sex differences and 20 genotypic principal components). We found that PGS based on 12,111 GWS SNPs from our META_{FE} systematically outperformed those based on GWS identified in ancestry-specific meta-analyses (Fig. 3a). The only exception was in EUR where both PGS performed equally. The largest prediction accuracy was observed in EUR participants ($R_{\text{GWS}}^2 \sim 40\%$; S.E. 0.6%) and the smallest one in AFR participants from the UKB ($R_{\text{GWS}}^2 \sim 9.4\%$; S.E. 0.7%). Note that the difference in R_{GWS}^2 between the EUR and AFR ancestry cohorts is expected because of the over-representation of EUR in our META_{FE} and consistent with a relative accuracy (R_{GWS}^2 in AFR)/(R_{GWS}^2 in EUR) of ~25% previously reported.²⁴ Nevertheless, we found the accuracy of PGS based on GWS from our multi-ancestry META_{FE} to be consistently larger than that of PGS based on GWS SNPs from a EUR GWAS (Fig. 3a). The largest improvement was observed in AFR, where the meta-analysed accuracy in AFR participants of UKB and PAGE was increased from $R_{\text{GWS}}^2 = 6.6\%$ (S.E. 0.4%) to $R_{\text{GWS}}^2 = 10.8\%$ (S.E. 0.5%), i.e. almost a ~1.6-fold improvement. This observation is partly explained by the increased statistical power but also by the refined estimation of SNP effects due to the inclusion of shorter and ancestry-specific LD blocks in AFR cohorts.

Furthermore, we sought to evaluate the prediction accuracy of PGS relative to that of familial information as well as the potential improvement in accuracy gained from combining both sources of information. We analysed 981 unrelated EUR trios (i.e. two parents and one offspring) and 17,492 independent EUR sibling pairs from the UKB, who were excluded from our META_{FE}. We found that height of any first-degree relative yields a prediction accuracy between 25% and 30% (Fig. 3b). Moreover, the accuracy of the parental average is ~44% (S.E. 3.2%), which is larger but not significantly different from R_{GWS}^2 in EUR. In addition, we found that a linear combination of the average height of parents and of the offspring's PGS yields an unprecedented accuracy of 54% (S.E. 3.2%). This observation reflects the fact that PGS can explain within-family differences between siblings, while average parental height cannot. To show this empirically, we estimate that our PGS based on GWS SNPs explain ~33% (S.E. 0.7%) of height variance between siblings (**Suppl. Methods**). Finally, we demonstrate that the optimal weighting between parental average and PGS

can be predicted theoretically as function of R_{GWS}^2 , the full narrow sense heritability and the phenotypic correlation between spouses (**Suppl. Note 3**, **Suppl. Fig. 19**).

In summary, the estimation of variance explained and prediction analyses in European-ancestry samples show that the set of 12,111 GWS SNPs account for nearly all of h_{SNP}^2 and that combining SNP-based PGS with family history significantly improves prediction accuracy. In contrast, both estimation and prediction results show clear attenuation in samples with non-European ancestry, consistent with previous studies.^{24–27}

Relationship between GWAS discoveries, sample size and ancestry diversity

Our large study offers a unique opportunity to empirically quantify how increasing GWAS sample sizes and ancestry diversity affects discovery of variants, genes and biological pathways. To address this question, we re-analysed 3 previously published GWAS of height^{1,15,16} and also down-sampled our meta-analysis into 4 subsets (including our EUR and META_{FE} GWAS). Altogether we analysed 7 GWAS with a sample size increasing from ~0.13 M up to ~5.3 M individuals (**Table 2**).

For each GWAS, we quantified 8 metrics grouped into 4 *variant*- and *locus*-based metrics (number of GWS SNPs, number of GWS loci, prediction accuracy (R_{GWS}^2) of PGS based on GWS SNPs, the proportion of the genome covered by GWS loci), a *functional annotation*-based metric (enrichment statistics from stratified LDSC^{28,29}), 2 *gene*-based metrics (number of genes prioritised by Summary data based Mendelian Randomization³⁰ (SMR; **Suppl. Methods**), proximity of variants with OMIM genes), and a *gene-set*-based metric (enrichment within clusters of gene sets/pathways). Overall, we found different patterns for the relationship between those metrics and GWAS sample size and ancestry composition, consistent with varying degrees of saturation achieved at different sample sizes.

We observed the strongest saturation for the *gene-set* and *functional annotation* metrics, which capture how well general biological functions can be inferred from GWAS results using currently available computational methods. Using two popular gene set prioritisation methods (DEPICT³¹ and MAGMA³²), we found that the same broad clusters of related gene sets (including most of the clusters enriched for OMIM genes) are prioritised at all GWAS sample sizes (**Suppl. Figs. 20–21**; **Suppl. Tables 13 – 15**; **Suppl. Note 4**). Similarly, stratified LDSC estimates of heritability enrichment within 97 functional annotations also remain stable across the range of sample sizes (**Suppl. Fig. 22**). Overall, we found no significant improvement for all these higher-level metrics from adding non-EUR samples to our analyses. The latter observation is consistent with other analyses demonstrating that GWAS expectedly implicate similar biology across major ancestral groups (**Suppl. Note 4**; **Suppl. Fig. 23**).

For the *gene*-level metric, the excess in the number of OMIM genes that are proximate to a GWS SNP (compared with matched sets of random genes) plateaus at sample sizes of $N > 1.5M$; while the relative enrichment of GWS SNPs near OMIM genes first decreases with sample size, then plateaus when $N > 1.5M$ (**Suppl. Figs. 24a–c**). Interestingly, the decrease observed for $N < 1.5M$ reflects the preferential localization of larger effect variants (those identified with smaller sample sizes) closer to OMIM genes (**Suppl. Fig. 24d**) and, conversely, that more recently identified variants with smaller effects tend to localize further away from OMIM genes (**Suppl. Fig. 24e**). We also investigated the number of genes prioritised using Summary-data based Mendelian

Randomization (hereafter referred to as SMR genes; **Suppl. Methods**) using expression quantitative trait loci (eQTL) as genetic instruments (**Suppl. Table 16**) as an alternative *gene*-level metric and found it to saturate for $N > 4M$ (**Suppl. Fig. 24f**). Note that saturation of SMR genes is partly affected by the biological relevance and statistical power of eQTL studies.³⁰ Therefore, we can expect more genes to be prioritised when integrating GWAS summary statistics from this study with that from larger eQTL studies that may be available in the future and may involve more tissue types. Gene-level metrics were also not substantially affected by adding non-EUR samples, again consistent with broadly similar sets of genes affecting height across ancestries.

At the level of variants and genomic regions, we saw a steady and almost linear increase in the number of GWS SNPs as a function of sample size, as previously reported.³³ However, given that newly identified variants tend to cluster near ones identified at smaller sample sizes, we also saw a saturation in the number of loci identified for $N > 2.5M$, where the upward trend starts to weaken (**Suppl. Fig. 25a**). We found a similar pattern for the percentage of the genome covered by GWS loci, with the degree of saturation varying as a function of the window size used to define loci (**Suppl. Fig. 25b**). The observed saturation in PGS prediction accuracy (both within ancestry, i.e. in EUR; and multi-ancestry) was more noticeable than that of the number and genomic coverage of GWS loci. In fact, increasing sample size from 2.5M to 4M by adding another 1.5M EUR samples increased the number of GWS SNPs from 7,020 to 9,863 (i.e. $(9,863 - 7,020) / 7,020 = \sim 1.4$ -fold increase) but the absolute increase in prediction accuracy is less than +2.7%. This improvement is mainly observed in EUR but remains lower than +1.3% in EAS and AFR individuals. However, adding another $\sim 1M$ participants of non-EUR improves the multi-ancestry prediction accuracy by over +3.4% (**Suppl. Fig. 25c**), highlighting the value of non-EUR populations for this purpose.

Altogether, these analyses show that increasing GWAS sample size not only increases prediction accuracy but also sheds more light on the genomic distribution of causal variants and, at all but the largest sample sizes, the genes proximal to these variants. By contrast, enrichment of higher-level, broadly defined biological categories such as gene sets/pathways and functional annotations can be identified using relatively small sample sizes ($N \sim 0.25M$ for height). Importantly, we confirm that increased genetic diversity in GWAS discovery samples significantly improves the prediction accuracy of PGS in under-represented ancestries.

DISCUSSION

By performing the largest GWAS to date in 5,380,080 individuals with a primary focus on common genetic variation, we have provided new insights into the genetic architecture of height – including a saturated genomic map of 12,111 genetic associations for height. Consistent with previous studies,^{15,16} we have shown signal density of associations (known and novel) are not randomly distributed across the genome; rather, associated variants are more likely detected around genes previously associated with Mendelian disorders of growth. Furthermore, we observed strong genetic overlap of association across cohorts of various continental ancestries. Effect estimates are moderately to highly correlated (min=0.64, max=0.99), and while there are significant differences in power to detect an association between cohorts with European and non-European ancestries, the majority of genetic associations for height observed in populations with non-European

ancestry lie in close proximity and in linkage disequilibrium to associations identified within populations of European ancestry.

By increasing our experimental sample size to >7-times that of previous studies, we have explained up to 40% of the inter-individual variation in height in independent European-ancestry samples using GWS SNPs alone, and >90% of h^2_{SNP} across diverse populations when incorporating all common SNPs within 35 kb of GWS SNPs. This result is important as it highlights that future investigation of common (MAF>1%) genetic variation associated with height in many ancestries will most likely detect signals within the 7,209 GWS loci identified in the present study. An interesting future question is whether rare genetic variants associated with height are also concentrated within the same loci. Of note, previous studies have reported significant enrichment of height heritability near genes as compared to inter-genic regions (e.g. up to >50 kb away from start/stop genomic position of genes).³⁴ Our findings are consistent but not reducible to that observation, given that up to ~31% of GWS SNPs identified in this study lie >50 kb away from any gene.

Our study provides a powerful genetic predictor of height based on 12,111 GWS SNPs, for which accuracy reaches ~40% (i.e. 80% of h^2_{SNP}) in individuals of European ancestries and up to ~10% in individuals of predominantly African ancestries. Importantly, we show using a new method developed by Wang and colleagues²⁷ that LD and MAF differences between European and African ancestries can explain up to ~84% (S.E. 1.5%) of the loss of prediction accuracy between these populations (**Suppl. Methods**), with the remaining loss being presumably explained by heritability differences between populations and/or differences in effect sizes across populations (e.g., due to gene-by-gene or gene-by-environment interactions). This observation is consistent with common causal variants for height being largely shared across ancestries. Therefore, we anticipate that fine-mapping of GWS loci identified in this study, ideally using methods that can accommodate dense sets of signals and large populations with African ancestries, would substantially improve the accuracy of a derived height PGS for non-European ancestry populations. Our study has a large number of participants with African ancestries as compared with previous efforts. However, we emphasise that further increasing the size of GWAS in non-European ancestry populations, including those with diverse African ancestries, is essential to bridge the gap in prediction accuracy, particularly as most studies only partially capture the wide range of ancestral diversity both within Africa and globally. Such increased samples size would help to identify potential ancestry-specific causal variants, to facilitate ancestry-specific fine mapping, and to inform gene by environment/ancestry interactions. Another important finding of our study is to show how individual PGS can be optimally combined with familial information and thereby improve the overall accuracy of height prediction to above 54% in European ancestry populations.

Although large sample sizes are needed to pinpoint the common variants responsible for the heritability of height (and larger samples in multiple ancestries will likely be required to map these at finer scale), the prioritization of relevant genes and gene sets is feasible at smaller sample sizes than that required to account for the common variant heritability. Thus, the sample sizes required for saturation of GWAS are smaller for identifying enriched gene sets, with identification of genes implicated as potentially causal and mapping of genomic regions containing associated variants requiring successively larger sample sizes. Furthermore, unlike prediction accuracy, prioritization

of likely causal genes and even mapping of associated regions is consistent across ancestries, reflecting the expected similarity in the biological architecture of human height across populations.

Our study has a number of limitations. First, we focused on SNPs from the HM3 panel, which only partially capture common genetic variation. However, although a significant fraction of height variance can be explained by common SNPs outside the HM3 SNPs panel, we showed that the extra information (also referred to as 'hidden heritability') remains concentrated within GWS loci identified from our HM3 SNPs based analyses (Suppl. Fig. 18). This result underlines the widespread allelic heterogeneity at height-associated loci. Another limitation of our study is that we determined conditional associations using an EUR LD reference ($N \sim 350,000$), which is sub-optimal given that $\sim 24\%$ of our discovery sample is of non-EUR. We emphasise that no analytical tool with an adequately large multi-ancestry reference panel currently is available to properly address how to identify conditionally independent associations in a multi-ancestry study. Fine-mapping of variants remains a particular challenge when attempted across ancestries in loci containing multiple signals (as is often the case for height). A third limitation of our study is our inability to perform well-powered replication analyses of genetic associations specific to populations with non-European ancestries, due to current limited availability of such data. Finally, as with all GWAS, definitive identification of effector genes and the mechanisms by which genes and variants influence phenotype remains a key bottleneck. Therefore, progress towards identifying causal genes from GWAS of height will be mostly driven by the availability of relevant complementary data (e.g., context-specific eQTL in relevant tissues and cell-types) and the power of computational methods that can integrate these data.

In summary, our study has been able to demonstrate empirically that the combined additive effects of tens of thousands of individual variants, detectable with a large enough experimental sample size, can explain substantial variation in a human phenotype. For human height, we show that studies of the order of ~ 5 million participants of various ancestries provide enough power to map $>90\%$ of genetic variance explained by common SNPs down to $\sim 21\%$ of the genome. Height has been used as a model trait for the study of human polygenic traits, including common diseases, because of its high heritability and relative ease of measurement enabling large sample sizes and increased power. Conclusions about the genetic architecture, sample size requirements for additional GWAS discovery, and scope for polygenic prediction that were initially made for height have by-and-large agreed with those for common disease. If the results from this study can also be extrapolated to disease, this would suggest that substantially increased sample sizes could largely resolve the heritability attributed to common variation to a finite set of SNPs (and small genomic regions). These variants and regions would implicate a particular subset of genes, regulatory elements, and pathways that would be most relevant to address questions of function, mechanism and therapeutic intervention.

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LIST OF AUTHORS

Loic Yengo^{*,#1}, Sailaja Vedantam^{*,2,3}, Eirini Marouli^{*,4,5}, Julia Sidorenko¹, Eric Bartell^{6,2,3}, Saori Sakaue^{7,8,3,9}, Marielisa Graff¹⁰, Anders U. Eliassen^{11,12}, Yunxuan Jiang¹³, Sridharan Raghavan^{14,15}, Jenkai Miao^{2,3}, Joshua D. Arias¹⁶, Ronen E. Mukamel^{17,3,18}, Cassandra N. Spracklen^{19,20}, Xianyong Yin²¹, Shyh-Huei Chen²², Teresa Ferreira²³, Yingjie Ji²⁴, Tugce Karedera^{25,26}, Kreete Lüll²⁷, Kuang Lin²⁸, Deborah E. Malden²⁸, Carolina Medina-Gomez²⁹, Moara Machado¹⁶, Amy Moore³⁰, Sina Rüeger^{31,32}, Tarunveer S. Ahluwalia^{33,34}, Masato Akiyama^{7,35}, Matthew A. Allison³⁶, Marcus Alvarez³⁷, Mette K. Andersen³⁸, Alireza Ani^{39,40}, Vivek Appadurai⁴¹, Liubov Arbeeva⁴², Seema Bhaskar⁴³, Lawrence F. Bielak⁴⁴, Sailalitha Bollepalli⁴⁵, Lori L. Bonnycastle⁴⁶, Jette Bork-Jensen³⁸, Jonathan P. Bradfield^{47,48}, Yuki Bradford⁴⁹, Peter S. Braund^{50,51}, Jennifer A. Brody⁵², Kristoffer S. Burgdorf^{53,54}, Brian E. Cade^{55,6}, Hui Cai⁵⁶, Qiuyin Cai⁵⁶, Archie Campbell⁵⁷, Marisa Cañadas-Garre⁵⁸, Eulalia Catamo⁵⁹, Jin-Fang Chai⁶⁰, Xiaoran Chai^{61,62}, Li-Ching Chang⁶³, Yi-Cheng Chang^{64,65}, Chien-Hsiun Chen⁶³, Alessandra Chesi^{66,67}, Seung Hoan Choi⁶⁸, Ren-Hua Chung⁶⁹, Massimiliano Cocca⁵⁹, Maria Pina Concas⁵⁹, Christian Couture⁷⁰, Gabriel Cuellar-Partida^{71,13}, Rebecca Danning⁷², E. Warwick Daw⁷³, Frauke Degenhard⁷⁴, Graciela E. Delgado⁷⁵, Alessandro Delitala⁷⁶, Ayşe Demirkan^{77,78}, Xuan Deng⁷⁹, Poornima Devineni⁸⁰, Alexander Dietl^{81,82}, Maria Dimitriou⁸³, Latchezar Dimitrov⁸⁴, Rajkumar Dorajoo^{85,86}, Arif B. Ekici⁸⁷, Jorgen E. Engmann⁸⁸, Zamy Fairhurst-Hunter²⁸, Alike-Eleni Farmaki⁸⁹, Jessica D. Faul⁹⁰, Juan-Carlos Fernandez-Lopez⁹¹, Lukas Forer⁹², Margherita Francescato⁹³, Sandra Freitag-Wolf⁹⁴, Christian Fuchsberger⁹⁵, Tessel E. Galesloot⁹⁶, Yan Gao⁹⁷, Zishan Gao^{98,99,100}, Frank Geller¹⁰¹, Olga Giannakopoulou⁴, Franco Giulianini⁷², Anette P. Gjesing³⁸, Anuj Goel^{102,26}, Scott D. Gordon¹⁰³, Mathias Gorski⁸¹, Sarah E. Graham¹⁰⁴, Jakob Grove^{105,106,107}, Xiuqing Guo¹⁰⁸, Stefan Gustafsson¹⁰⁹, Jeffrey Haessler¹¹⁰, Thomas F. Hansen^{41,111,54}, Aki Havulinna^{45,112}, Simon J. Haworth^{113,114}, Jing He⁵⁶, Nancy Heard-Costa^{115,116}, Prashantha Hebbar¹¹⁷, George Hindy^{3,118}, Yuk-Lam A. Ho¹¹⁹, Edith Hofer^{120,121}, Elizabeth Holliday¹²², Katrin Horn^{123,124}, Whitney E. Hornsby¹⁰⁴, Jouke-Jan Hottenga¹²⁵, Hongyan Huang¹²⁶, Jie Huang^{127,128}, Alicia Huerta-Chagoya^{129,130}, Jennifer E. Huffman¹¹⁹, Yi-Jen Hung¹³¹, Shaofeng Huo¹³², Mi Yeong Hwang¹³³, Hiroyuki Iha¹³⁴, Daisuke D. Ikeda¹³⁴, Masato Isono¹³⁵, Anne U. Jackson²¹, Susanne Jäger^{136,137}, Iris E. Jansen^{138,139}, Ingegerd Johansson^{140,141}, Jost B. Jonas^{142,143,144,145}, Anna Jonsson³⁸, Torben Jørgensen¹⁴⁶, Ioanna-Panagiota Kalafati⁸³, Masahiro Kanai^{7,8,3}, Stavroula Kanoni⁴, Line L. Kårhus¹⁴⁶, Anuradhani Kasturiratne¹⁴⁷, Tomohiro Katsuya¹⁴⁸, Takahisa Kawaguchi¹⁴⁹, Rachel L. Kember¹⁵⁰, Katherine A. Kentistou^{151,152}, Han-Na Kim^{153,154}, Young Jin Kim¹³³, Marcus E. Kleber^{75,155}, Maria J. Knol⁷⁷, Azra Kurbasic¹⁵⁶, Marie Lauzon¹⁰⁸, Phuong Le^{157,158}, Rodney Lea¹⁵⁹, Jong-Young Lee¹⁶⁰, Hampton L. Leonard^{161,162,163}, Shengchao A. Li¹⁶, Xiaohui Li¹⁰⁸, Xiaoyin Li^{164,165}, Jingjing Liang¹⁶⁴, Honghuang Lin¹⁶⁶, Shih-Yi Lin¹⁶⁷, Jun Liu^{28,77}, Xueping Liu¹⁰¹, Ken Sin Lo¹⁶⁸, Jirong Long⁵⁶, Laura Lores-Motta¹⁶⁹, Jian'an Luan¹⁷⁰, Valeriya Lyssenko^{171,172}, Leo-Pekka Lyytikäinen^{173,174,175}, Anubha Mahajan²⁶, Vasiliki Mamakou¹⁷⁶, Massimo Mangino^{177,178}, Ani Manichaikul¹⁷⁹, Jonathan Marten¹⁸⁰, Manuel Mattheisen^{105,181,182}, Laven Mavarani¹⁸³, Aaron F. McDaid^{31,32}, Karina Meidtnier^{136,137}, Tori L. Melendez¹⁰⁴, Josep M. Mercader^{184,185,18,186}, Yuri Milaneschi¹⁸⁷, Jason E. Miller^{188,189}, Iona Y. Millwood^{28,190}, Pashupati P. Mishra^{173,174,175}, Ruth E. Mitchell^{113,191}, Line T. Møllehave¹⁴⁶, Anna Morgan⁵⁹, Soeren Mucha¹⁹², Matthias Munz¹⁹², Masahiro Nakatochi¹⁹³, Christopher P. Nelson^{50,51}, Maria Nethander^{194,195}, Chu Won Nho¹⁹⁶, Aneta A. Nielsen¹⁹⁷, Ilja M. Nolte³⁹, Suraj S. Nongmaithem^{43,198}, Raymond Noordam¹⁹⁹, Ioanna Ntalla⁴, Teresa Ntule²⁰⁰, Anita Pandit²¹, Paraskevi Christofidou¹⁷⁷, Katri Pärna^{39,201}, Marc Pauper¹⁶⁹, Eva R. B. Petersen²⁰², Liselotte V. Petersen^{203,106}, Niina Pitkänen^{204,205}, Ozren Polašek^{206,207}, Alaitz Poveda¹⁵⁶, Michael H. Preuss^{208,209}, Saiju Pyarajan^{80,55,6}, Laura M. Raffield¹⁹, Hiromi Rakugi¹⁴⁸, Julia Ramirez⁴, Asif Rasheed²¹⁰, Dennis Raven²¹¹, Nigel W. Rayner^{212,213,26,198}, Carlos Riveros²¹⁴, Rebecca Rohde¹⁰, Daniela Ruggiero^{200,215}, Sanni E. Ruotsalainen⁴⁵, Kathleen A. Ryan^{216,217}, Maria Sabater-Lleal^{218,219}, Richa Saxena^{3,186}, Markus Scholz^{123,124}, Anoop Sendamarai⁸⁰, Botong Shen²²⁰, Jingchunzi Shi¹³, Jae Hun Shin²²¹, Carlo Sidore²²², Xueling Sim⁶⁰, Colleen M. Sitlani⁵², Roderick C. Sliker^{223,224}, Roelof A. J. Smit^{208,225}, Albert V. Smith^{44,226}, Jennifer A. Smith^{44,90}, Laura J. Smyth⁵⁸, Lorraine Southam^{212,227}, Valgerdur Steinthorsdottir²²⁸, Liang Sun¹³², Fumihiko Takeuchi¹³⁵, Divya Sri Priyanka Tallapragada^{43,229}, Kent D. Taylor¹⁰⁸, Bamidele O. Tayo²³⁰, Catherine Tcheandjie^{231,232}, Natalie Terzikhan⁷⁷, Paola Tesolin⁹³, Alexander Teumer^{233,234}, Elizabeth Theusch²³⁵, Deborah J. Thompson^{236,237}, Gudmar Thorleifsson²²⁸, Paul R. H. J. Timmers^{180,151}, Stella Trompet^{199,238}, Constance Turman¹²⁶, Simona Vaccargiu²²², Sander W. van der Laan²³⁹, Peter J. van der Most³⁹, Jan B. van Klinken^{240,241,242}, Jessica van Setten²⁴³, Shefali S. Verma⁶⁶, Niek Verweij²⁴⁴, Yogasudha Veturi⁴⁹, Carol A. Wang^{245,214}, Chaolong Wang^{246,247}, Lihua Wang⁷³, Zhe Wang²⁰⁸, Helen R. Warren^{4,248}, Wen Bin Wei²⁴⁹, Ananda R. Wickremasinghe¹⁴⁷, Matthias Wielscher^{250,251}, Kerri L. Wiggins⁵², Bendik S. Winsvold^{252,253}, Andrew Wong²⁵⁴, Yang Wu¹, Matthias Wuttke^{255,256}, Rui Xia²⁵⁷, Tian Xie³⁹, Ken Yamamoto²⁵⁸, Jingyun Yang^{259,260}, Jie Yao¹⁰⁸, Hannah Young²⁶¹, Noha A. Yousri^{262,263}, Lei Yu^{259,260}, Lingyao Zeng²⁶⁴, Weihua Zhang^{265,266}, Xinyuan Zhang⁴⁹, Jing-Hua Zhao¹⁷⁰, Wei Zhao⁴⁴, Wei Zhou^{267,268,3,269}, Martina E. Zimmermann⁸¹, Magdalena Zoledziowska²²², Linda S. Adair^{270,271}, Hieab H. H. Adams^{272,273}, Carlos A. Aguilar-Salinas^{274,275}, Fahd Al-Mulla¹¹⁷, Donna K. Arnett²⁷⁶, Folkert W. Asselbergs^{243,277,278}, Bjørn Olav Åsvold^{279,280,281}, John Attia¹²²,

Bernhard Banas²⁸², Stefania Bandinelli²⁸³, David A. Bennett^{259,260}, Tobias Bergler²⁸², Dwaipayan Bharadwaj²⁸⁴, Ginevra Biino²⁸⁵, Hans Bisgaard¹¹, Eric Boerwinkle²⁸⁶, Carsten A. Böger^{282,287,288}, Klaus Bønnelykke¹¹, Dorret I. Boomsma¹²⁵, Anders D. Børghlum^{105,106,289,290}, Judith B. Borja^{291,292}, Claude Bouchard²⁹³, Donald W. Bowden^{84,294}, Ivan Brandslund^{295,296}, Ben Brumpton^{279,297}, Julie E. Buring^{72,6}, Mark J. Caulfield^{4,248}, John C. Chambers^{298,266,265,299}, Giriraj R. Chandak^{43,300}, Stephen J. Chanock¹⁶, Nish Chaturvedi²⁵⁴, Yii-Der Ida Chen¹⁰⁸, Zhengming Chen^{28,190}, Ching-Yu Cheng^{61,301}, Ingrid E. Christophersen^{302,303}, Marina Ciullo^{200,215}, John W. Cole^{304,305}, Francis S. Collins⁴⁶, Richard S. Cooper²³⁰, Miguel Cruz³⁰⁶, Francesco Cucca^{222,76}, L. Adrienne Cupples^{79,116}, Michael J. Cutler³⁰⁷, Scott M. Damrauer^{308,309,49}, Thomas M. Dantoft¹⁴⁶, Gert J. de Borst³¹⁰, Lisette C. P. G. M. de Groot³¹¹, Philip L. De Jager^{312,3}, Dominique P. V. de Kleijn³¹⁰, H. Janaka de Silva¹⁴⁷, George V. Dedoussis⁸³, Anneke I. den Hollander¹⁶⁹, Shufa Du^{270,271}, Douglas F. Easton^{237,313}, Petra J. M. Elders³¹⁴, A. Heather Eliassen^{55,126}, Patrick T. Ellinor^{315,316,68}, Sölve Elmståhl³¹⁷, Jeanette Erdmann¹⁹², Michele K. Evans²²⁰, Diane Fatkin^{318,319,320}, Bjarke Feenstra³²¹, Mary F. Feitosa⁷³, Luigi Ferrucci³²², Ian Ford³²³, Myriam Fornage^{257,324}, Andre Franke⁷⁴, Paul W. Franks^{156,325,326}, Barry I. Freedman³²⁷, Paolo Gasparini^{59,93}, Christian Gieger^{99,137}, Giorgia Grotto^{59,93}, Michael E. Goddard^{328,329}, Yvonne M. Golightly^{42,10,330,331}, Clicerio Gonzalez-Villalpando³³², Penny Gordon-Larsen^{270,271}, Harald Grallert^{99,137}, Struan F. A. Grant^{47,333,334,335}, Niels Grarup³⁸, Lyn Griffiths¹⁵⁹, Leif Groop^{45,172}, Vilmundur Gudnason^{226,336}, Christopher Haiman³²¹, Hakon Hakonarson^{47,333,337,338}, Torben Hansen³⁸, Catharina A. Hartman²¹¹, Andrew T. Hattersley³³⁹, Caroline Hayward¹⁸⁰, Susan R. Heckbert³⁴⁰, Chew-Kiat Heng^{341,342}, Christian Hengstenberg³⁴³, Alex W. Hewitt^{344,345,346}, Haretsugu Hishigaki¹³⁴, Carel B. Hoyng¹⁶⁹, Paul L. Huang^{347,315,6}, Wei Huang³⁴⁸, Steven C. Hunt^{349,262}, Kristian Hveem^{279,280}, Elina Hyppönen^{350,351}, William G. Iacono²⁶¹, Sahoko Ichihara³⁵², M. Arfan Ikram⁷⁷, Carmen R. Isasi³⁵³, Rebecca D. Jackson³⁵⁴, Marjo-Riitta Jarvelin^{250,355,356,357}, Zi-Bing Jin^{358,359}, Karl-Heinz Jöckel¹⁸³, Peter K. Joshi¹⁵¹, Pekka Jousilahti¹¹², J. Wouter Jukema^{238,360,361}, Mika Kähönen^{362,363}, Yoichiro Kamatani^{7,364}, Kui Dong Kang³⁶⁵, Jaakko Kaprio⁴⁵, Sharon L. R. Kardina⁴⁴, Fredrik Karpe^{213,366}, Norihiro Kato¹³⁵, Frank Kee⁵⁸, Thorsten Kessler^{264,367}, Amit V. Khera^{186,3}, Chiea Chuen Khor²⁴⁷, Lambertus A. L. M. Kiemeny^{96,368}, Bong-Jo Kim¹³³, Eung Kwon Kim³⁶⁹, Hyung-Lae Kim³⁷⁰, Paulus Kirchhof^{371,372,373,374}, Mika Kivimäki³⁷⁵, Woon-Puay Koh³⁷⁶, Heikki A. Koistinen^{112,377,378}, Genovefa D. Kolovou³⁷⁹, Jaspal S. Kooner^{265,299,380,381}, Charles Kooperberg¹¹⁰, Anna Köttgen²⁵⁵, Peter Kovacs³⁸², Adriaan Kraaijeveld²⁴³, Peter Kraft¹²⁶, Ronald M. Krauss²³⁵, Meena Kumari³⁸³, Zoltan Kutalik^{31,32}, Markku Laakso³⁸⁴, Leslie A. Lange³⁸⁵, Claudia Langenberg^{170,386}, Lenore J. Launer²²⁰, Loic Le Marchand³⁸⁷, Hyejin Lee³⁸⁸, Nanette R. Lee²⁹¹, Terho Lehtimäki^{173,174,175}, Huaixing Li¹³², Liming Li^{389,390}, Wolfgang Lieb³⁹¹, Xu Lin^{132,392}, Lars Lind¹⁰⁹, Allan Linneberg^{146,393}, Ching-Ti Liu⁷⁹, Jianjun Liu²⁴⁷, Markus Loeffler^{123,124}, Barry London³⁹⁴, Steven A. Lubitz^{315,316,68}, Stephen J. Lye³⁹⁵, David A. Mackey^{346,344}, Reedik Mägi²⁷, Patrik K. E. Magnusson³⁹⁶, Gregory M. Marcus³⁹⁷, Pedro Marques Vidal^{398,399}, Nicholas G. Martin¹⁰³, Winfried März^{75,400}, Fumihiko Matsuda¹⁴⁹, Robert W. McGarrah^{401,402}, Matt McGue²⁶¹, Amy Jayne McKnight⁵⁸, Sarah E. Medland⁴⁰³, Dan Mellström^{194,404}, Andres Metspalu²⁷, Braxton D. Mitchell^{216,217,405}, Paul Mitchell⁴⁰⁶, Dennis O. Mook-Kanamori^{407,408}, Andrew D. Morris⁴⁰⁹, Lorelei A. Mucci¹²⁶, Patricia B. Munroe^{4,248}, Mike A. Nalls^{161,162,163}, Saman Nazarian⁴¹⁰, Amanda E. Nelson^{42,411}, Matt J. Neville^{213,366}, Christopher Newton-Cheh^{315,412}, Christopher S. Nielsen^{413,414}, Markus M. Nöthen⁴¹⁵, Claes Ohlsson^{194,416}, Albertine J. Oldehinkel²¹¹, Lorena Orozco⁴¹⁷, Katja Pahkala^{204,205,418}, Päivi Pajukanta^{37,419}, Colin N. A. Palmer⁴²⁰, Esteban J. Parra¹⁵⁸, Cristian Pattaro⁹⁵, Oluf Pedersen³⁸, Craig E. Pennell^{245,214}, Brenda W. J. H. Penninx¹⁸⁷, Louis Perusse^{70,421}, Annette Peters^{100,422,137}, Patricia A. Peyser⁴⁴, David J. Porteous⁵⁷, Danielle Posthuma¹³⁸, Chris Power⁴²³, Peter P. Pramstaller⁹⁵, Michael A. Province⁷³, Qibin Qi³⁵³, Jia Qu³⁵⁹, Daniel J. Rader^{424,49}, Olli T. Raitakari^{204,205,425}, Sarju Ralhan⁴²⁶, Loukianos S. Rallidis⁴²⁷, Dabeeru C. Rao⁴²⁸, Susan Redline^{55,6}, Dermot F. Reilly⁴²⁹, Alexander P. Reiner^{430,110}, Sang Youl Rhee⁴³¹, Paul M. Ridker^{72,6}, Michiel Rienstra²⁴⁴, Samuli Ripatti^{45,3,432}, Marylyn D. Ritchie⁴⁹, Dan M. Roden⁴³³, Frits R. Rosendaal⁴⁰⁷, Jerome I. Rotter¹⁰⁸, Igor Rudan¹⁵¹, Femke Rutters²²⁴, Charumathi Sabanayagam^{61,301}, Danish Saleheen^{434,210}, Veikko Salomaa¹¹², Nilesh J. Samani^{50,51}, Dharambir K. Sanghera^{435,436,437,438}, Naveed Sattar⁴³⁹, Børge Schmidt¹⁸³, Helena Schmidt⁴⁴⁰, Reinhold Schmidt¹²⁰, Matthias B. Schulze^{136,137,441}, Heribert Schunkert⁴⁴², Laura J. Scott²¹, Rodney J. Scott⁴⁴³, Peter Sever³⁸¹, Eric J. Shiroma²²⁰, M. Benjamin Shoemaker⁴⁴⁴, Xiao-Ou Shu⁵⁶, Eleanor M. Simonsick³²², Mario Sims⁹⁷, Jai Rup Singh⁴⁴⁵, Andrew B. Singleton¹⁶¹, Moritz F. Sinner^{446,367}, J. Gustav Smith^{447,448,449}, Harold Snieder³⁹, Tim D. Spector¹⁷⁷, Meir J. Stampfer^{126,450,55}, Klaus J. Stark⁸¹, David P. Strachan⁴⁵¹, Leen M. t Hart^{223,224,452}, Yasuharu Tabara¹⁴⁹, Hua Tang⁴⁵³, Jean-Claude Tardif^{168,454}, Thangavel A. Thanaraj¹¹⁷, Nicholas J. Timpson^{113,191}, Anke Tönjes³⁸², Angelo Tremblay^{70,421}, Tiinamaija Tuomi^{455,45,456,172}, Jaakko Tuomilehto^{112,457,458}, Maria-Teresa Tusié-Luna^{459,460}, Andre G. Uitterlinden²⁹, Rob M. van Dam^{60,461,462}, Pim van der Harst^{244,243}, Nathalie Van der Velde^{463,464}, Cornelia M. van Duijn^{28,77}, Natasja van Schoor⁴⁶⁵, Veronique Vitart¹⁸⁰, Uwe Völker^{466,234}, Peter Vollenweider^{398,399}, Henry Völzke^{233,234}, Scott Vrieze²⁶¹, Niels H. Wachter-Rodarte⁴⁶⁷, Mark Walker⁴⁶⁸, Ya Xing Wang¹⁴⁵, Nicholas J. Wareham¹⁷⁰, Richard M. Watanabe^{469,470,471}, Hugh Watkins^{102,26}, David R. Weir⁹⁰, Thomas M. Werge^{41,393,472}, Elisabeth Widen⁴⁵, Lynne R. Wilkens³⁸⁷, Gonneke Willemsen¹²⁵, Walter C. Willett^{450,126,55},

James F. Wilson^{151,180}, Tien-Yin Wong^{61,301}, Jeong-Taek Woo⁴³¹, Alan F. Wright⁴⁷³, Jer-Yuarn Wu^{63,474}, Huichun Xu^{216,217}, Chittaranjan S. Yajnik⁴⁷⁵, Mitsuhiro Yokota⁴⁷⁶, Jian-Min Yuan^{477,478}, Eleftheria Zeggini^{212,227,479}, Babette S. Zemel^{337,67,335,49}, Wei Zheng⁵⁶, Xiaofeng Zhu¹⁶⁴, Joseph M. Zmuda⁴⁷⁸, Alan B. Zonderman²²⁰, John-Anker Zwart^{252,480}, 23andMe Research Team¹³, VA Million Veteran Program⁴⁸¹, DiscovEHR (DiscovEHR and MyCode Community Health Initiative)⁴⁸², eMERGE (Electronic Medical Records and Genomics Network)⁴⁸³, Lifelines Cohort Study⁴⁸⁴, Regeneron Genetics Center⁴⁸⁵, The PRACTICAL Consortium⁴⁸⁶, Understanding Society Scientific Group⁴⁸⁷, Daniel I. Chasman^{72,6}, Yoon Shin Cho²²¹, Iris M. Heid⁸¹, Mark I. McCarthy^{^,26,213}, Maggie C. Y. Ng^{84,488}, Christopher J. O'Donnell^{127,55,6}, Fernando Rivadeneira²⁹, Unnur Thorsteinsdottir^{228,336}, Yan V. Sun^{489,490}, E. Shyong Tai^{461,60}, Michael Boehnke²¹, Panos Deloukas^{4,491}, Anne E. Justice^{492,10}, Cecilia M. Lindgren^{23,26,3}, Ruth J. F. Loos^{208,493,209,494}, Karen L. Mohlke¹⁹, Kari E. North¹⁰, Kari Stefansson^{228,336}, Robin G. Walters^{28,190}, Thomas W. Winkler⁸¹, Kristin L. Young¹⁰, Po-Ru Loh^{17,3,18}, Jian Yang^{495,496,1}, Tõnu Esko²⁷, Themistocles L. Assimes^{231,232}, Adam Auton¹³, Goncalo R. Abecasis²¹, Cristen J. Willer^{104,267,497}, Adam E. Locke⁴⁹⁸, Sonja I. Berndt¹⁶, Guillaume Lettre^{168,454}, Timothy M. Frayling²⁴, Yukinori Okada^{§,7,8,499,500}, Andrew R. Wood^{§,24}, Peter M. Visscher^{§,1}, Joel N. Hirschhorn^{§,2,501,502}

¹Institute for Molecular Bioscience, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD 4072, Australia, ²Division of Endocrinology, Boston Children's Hospital, Boston, MA 02115, USA, ³Program in Medical and Population Genetics, Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, Cambridge, MA 02142, USA, ⁴William Harvey Research Institute, Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen Mary University of London, EC1M 6BQ, UK, ⁵Centre for Genomic Health, Life Sciences, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK, ⁶Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA 02115, USA, ⁷Laboratory for Statistical Analysis, RIKEN Center for Integrative Medical Sciences, Yokohama, Kanagawa, 230-0045, Japan, ⁸Department of Statistical Genetics, Osaka University Graduate School of Medicine, Osaka 565-0871, Japan, ⁹Divisions of Genetics and Rheumatology, Brigham and Women's Hospital and Department of Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA 02115, USA, ¹⁰Department of Epidemiology, Gillings School of Global Public Health, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27516, USA, ¹¹COPSAC, Copenhagen Prospective Studies on Asthma in Childhood, Herlev and Gentofte Hospital, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark, ¹²Section for Bioinformatics, Department of Health Technology, Technical University of Denmark, Copenhagen, Denmark, ¹³23andMe, Inc, Sunnyvale, CA 94086, USA, ¹⁴Department of Veterans Affairs, Eastern Colorado Healthcare System, Aurora, CO 80045, USA, ¹⁵Division of Biomedical Informatics and Personalized Medicine, University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, Aurora, CO 80045, USA, ¹⁶Division of Cancer Epidemiology and Genetics, National Cancer Institute, Rockville, MD USA 20850, ¹⁷Division of Genetics, Department of Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, MA 02115, USA, ¹⁸Department of Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA 02115, USA, ¹⁹Department of Genetics, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA, ²⁰Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, School of Public Health and Health Sciences, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA 01003, USA, ²¹Department of Biostatistics and Center for Statistical Genetics, University of Michigan School of Public Health, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA, ²²Department of Biostatistics and Data Science, Wake Forest School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, NC 27157, USA, ²³Big Data Institute, Li Ka Shing Centre for Health Information and Discovery, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK, ²⁴Genetics of Complex Traits, College of Medicine and Health, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK, ²⁵Center for Health Data Science, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark, ²⁶Wellcome Centre for Human Genetics, Nuffield Department of Medicine, University of Oxford, Oxford OX3 7BN, UK, ²⁷Institute of Genomics, Estonian Genome Centre, University of Tartu, 51010, Tartu, Estonia, ²⁸Nuffield Department of Population Health, University of Oxford, Oxford OX3 7LF, UK, ²⁹Laboratory of Population Genomics, Internal Medicine, Erasmus MC, University Medical Center Rotterdam, Rotterdam, 3015 GD, the Netherlands, ³⁰Division of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, RTI International, Durham, NC 27709, USA, ³¹Center for Primary Care and Public Health, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland, ³²Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics, Switzerland, ³³Steno Diabetes Center Copenhagen, Gentofte, Denmark, ³⁴Department of Biology, The Bioinformatics Center, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark, ³⁵Department of Ophthalmology, Graduate School of Medical Sciences, Kyushu University, Fukuoka, Japan, ³⁶Department of Family Medicine, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093, USA, ³⁷Department of Human Genetics, David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA, ³⁸Novo Nordisk Foundation Center for Basic Metabolic Research, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark, ³⁹Department of Epidemiology, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, Groningen, 9700 RB, the Netherlands, ⁴⁰Department of Bioinformatics, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, 8174673461, Iran, ⁴¹Institute of Biological Psychiatry, Mental Health Services, Copenhagen University Hospital, Copenhagen, Denmark, ⁴²Thurston Arthritis Research Center, University of North Carolina at

698 Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA, ⁴³Genomic Research on Complex diseases (GRC-Group), CSIR-Centre
699 for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad, India, ⁴⁴Department of Epidemiology, University of Michigan
700 School of Public Health, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA, ⁴⁵Institute for Molecular Medicine Finland (FIMM),
701 HiLIFE, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, FI-00014, Finland, ⁴⁶Molecular Genetics Section, Medical Genomics
702 and Metabolic Genetics Branch, National Human Genome Research Institute, National Institutes of Health,
703 Bethesda, MD 20892, USA, ⁴⁷Center for Applied Genomics, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Philadelphia,
704 PA 19104, USA, ⁴⁸Quantinuum Research LLC, Wayne, PA, USA, ⁴⁹Department of Genetics, University of
705 Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA, ⁵⁰Department of Cardiovascular Sciences, University of
706 Leicester, Leicester, UK, ⁵¹NIHR Leicester Biomedical Research Centre, Glenfield Hospital, Leicester, UK,
707 ⁵²Cardiovascular Health Research Unit, Department of Medicine, University of Washington, Seattle, WA
708 98195, USA, ⁵³Department of Clinical Immunology, Copenhagen University Hospital, Rigshospitalet,
709 Copenhagen, Denmark, ⁵⁴NovoNordic Center for Protein Research, Copenhagen University, Copenhagen,
710 Denmark, ⁵⁵Department of Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, MA 02115, USA, ⁵⁶Division of
711 Epidemiology, Department of Medicine, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nashville, TN 37232, USA,
712 ⁵⁷Centre for Genomic and Experimental Medicine, Institute of Genetics and Cancer, University of Edinburgh,
713 Edinburgh, EH4 2XU, UK, ⁵⁸Centre for Public Health, Queen's University of Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK,
714 ⁵⁹Institute for Maternal and Child Health – IRCCS, Burlo Garofolo, 34127, Trieste, Italy, ⁶⁰Saw Swee Hock
715 School of Public Health, National University of Singapore and National University Health System, 117549,
716 Singapore, ⁶¹Ocular Epidemiology, Singapore Eye Research Institute, Singapore National Eye Centre,
717 168751, Singapore, ⁶²Department of Ophthalmology, National University of Singapore and National
718 University Health System, 119228, Singapore, ⁶³Institute of Biomedical Sciences, Academia Sinica, Taipei
719 115, Taiwan, ⁶⁴Graduate Institute of Medical Genomics and Proteomics, Medical College, National Taiwan
720 University, Taipei, Taiwan, ⁶⁵Department of Internal Medicine, National Taiwan University Hospital, Taipei,
721 Taiwan, ⁶⁶Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA
722 19104, USA, ⁶⁷Center for Spatial and Functional Genomics, Division of Human Genetics, Children's Hospital
723 of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA, ⁶⁸Cardiovascular Disease Initiative, Broad Institute of MIT and
724 Harvard, Cambridge, MA 02142, USA, ⁶⁹Institute of Population Health Sciences, National Health Research
725 Institutes, Zhunan, Taiwan, ⁷⁰Department of Kinesiology, Faculty of Medicine, Université Laval, 2300 rue de
726 la Terrasse, Québec QC, G1V 0A6, Canada, ⁷¹Diamantina Institute, The University of Queensland, Brisbane,
727 QLD 4072, Australia, ⁷²Division of Preventive Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, MA 02115,
728 USA, ⁷³Division of Statistical Genomics, Department of Genetics, Washington University School of Medicine,
729 520 South Euclid Avenue, Campus Box 8506-98-601, St Louis, MO 63110-1093, USA, ⁷⁴Institute of Clinical
730 Molecular Biology, Christian-Albrechts University of Kiel, Kiel, Germany, ⁷⁵Vth Department of Medicine,
731 Medical Faculty Mannheim, Heidelberg University, Mannheim, Baden-Württemberg, 68167, Germany,
732 ⁷⁶Dipartimento di Scienze Biomediche, Università degli Studi di Sassari, Sassari, Italy, ⁷⁷Department of
733 Epidemiology, Erasmus MC, University Medical Center Rotterdam, Rotterdam, 3015 GD, the Netherlands,
734 ⁷⁸Section of Statistical Multi-omics, Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine, University of Surrey,
735 Guildford, UK, ⁷⁹Department of Biostatistics, Boston University School of Public Health, Boston, MA 02118,
736 USA, ⁸⁰Center for Data and Computational Sciences, VA Boston Healthcare System, Boston, MA, USA,
737 ⁸¹Department of Genetic Epidemiology, University of Regensburg, Regensburg, Germany, ⁸²Department of
738 Internal Medicine II, University Hospital Regensburg, Regensburg, Germany, ⁸³Department of Nutrition &
739 Dietetics, School of Health & Education, Harokopio University of Athens, Athens, 17676, Greece, ⁸⁴Center for
740 Precision Medicine, Wake Forest School of Medicine, Medical Center Boulevard, Winston-Salem, NC 27157,
741 USA, ⁸⁵Genome Institute of Singapore, Agency for Science, Technology, and Research, Singapore, ⁸⁶Health
742 Services and Systems Research, Duke-NUS Medical School Singapore, Singapore, ⁸⁷Institute of Human
743 Genetics, Friedrich-Alexander Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, 91054 Erlangen, Germany, ⁸⁸Institute of
744 Cardiovascular Science, Faculty of Population Health, University College London, London, WC1E 6BT, UK,
745 ⁸⁹Harokopio University Athens, Athens, 17671, Greece, ⁹⁰Survey Research Center, Institute for Social
746 Research, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48104, USA, ⁹¹Computational Genomics Department,
747 National Institute of Genomic Medicine, Mexico City, Mexico, ⁹²Institute of Genetic Epidemiology, Medical
748 University of Innsbruck, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria, ⁹³Department of Medicine, Surgery and Health Sciences,
749 University of Trieste, 34149, Trieste, Italy, ⁹⁴Institute of Medical Informatics and Statistics, Kiel University,
750 University Hospital Schleswig-Holstein, Kiel, Germany, ⁹⁵Eurac Research, Institute for Biomedicine,
751 Affiliated Institute of the University of Lübeck, Bolzano, Italy, ⁹⁶Radboud University Medical Center,
752 Radboud Institute for Health Sciences, Department for Health Evidence, Nijmegen, the Netherlands,
753 ⁹⁷Jackson Heart Study, Department of Medicine, University of Mississippi, Jackson, MS 39216, USA, ⁹⁸Nanjing
754 University of Chinese Medicine, Nanjing, Jiangsu 210029, China, ⁹⁹Research Unit of Molecular Epidemiology,
755 Institute of Epidemiology, Helmholtz Zentrum München Research Center for Environmental Health,

Neuherberg, Germany, ¹⁰⁰Institute of Epidemiology, Helmholtz Zentrum München Research Center for Environmental Health, Neuherberg, Germany, ¹⁰¹Department of Epidemiology Research, Statens Serum Institut, Copenhagen, Denmark, ¹⁰²Cardiovascular Medicine/Radcliffe Department of Medicine, University of Oxford, John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford, Oxfordshire, OX3 9DU, UK, ¹⁰³Genetic Epidemiology, QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute, Brisbane, QLD 4006, Australia, ¹⁰⁴Department of Internal Medicine, Division of Cardiology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA, ¹⁰⁵Department of Biomedicine (Human Genetics) and iSEQ Center, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark, ¹⁰⁶The Lundbeck Foundation Initiative for Integrative Psychiatric Research, iPSYCH, Aarhus, Denmark, ¹⁰⁷BiRC - Bioinformatics Research Centre, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark, ¹⁰⁸The Institute for Translational Genomics and Population Sciences, Department of Pediatrics, The Lundquist Institute for Biomedical Innovation at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, Torrance, CA 90502, USA, ¹⁰⁹Department of Medical Sciences, Uppsala University, Sweden, ¹¹⁰Division of Public Health Sciences, Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Seattle, WA 98109, USA, ¹¹¹Danish Headache Center, Department of Neurology, Copenhagen University Hospital, Rigshospitalet, Copenhagen, Denmark, ¹¹²Department of Public Health and Welfare, Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, Helsinki 00271, Finland, ¹¹³MRC Integrative Epidemiology Unit, University of Bristol, Bristol, BS8 2BN, UK, ¹¹⁴Bristol Dental School, University of Bristol, Bristol, BS1 2LY, UK, ¹¹⁵Department of Neurology, Boston University School of Medicine, Boston, MA 02118, USA, ¹¹⁶Framingham Heart Study, Framingham, MA 01701, USA, ¹¹⁷Department of Genetics & Bioinformatics, Dasman Diabetes Institute, Kuwait, ¹¹⁸Department of Clinical Sciences in Malmö, Lund University, Sweden, ¹¹⁹Veterans Affairs Boston Healthcare System, Boston, MA 02132, USA, ¹²⁰Clinical Division of Neurogeriatrics, Department of Neurology, Medical University of Graz, 8036 Graz, Austria, ¹²¹Institute for Medical Informatics, Statistics and Documentation, Medical University of Graz, 8036 Graz, Austria, ¹²²School of Medicine and Public Health, University of Newcastle, Callaghan NSW 2305 Australia, ¹²³University of Leipzig, Medical Faculty, Institute for Medical Informatics, Statistics and Epidemiology, 04107 Leipzig, Germany, ¹²⁴University of Leipzig, Medical Faculty, LIFE Research Center for Civilization Diseases, 04103 Leipzig, Germany, ¹²⁵Department of Biological Psychology, Behaviour and Movement Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands, ¹²⁶Department of Epidemiology, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA 02115, USA, ¹²⁷Department of Medicine, Veterans Affairs Boston Healthcare System, Boston, MA 02132, USA, ¹²⁸Department of Global Health, Peking University of Global Health, Beijing, China, ¹²⁹Unidad de Biología Molecular y Medicina Genómica, Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Médicas y Nutrición Salvador Zubirán, ¹³⁰Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología, Mexico, ¹³¹Division of Endocrine and Metabolism, Tri-Service General Hospital Songshan Branch, Taipei, Taiwan, ¹³²Shanghai Institute of Nutrition and Health, University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Shanghai, 200031, China, ¹³³Division of Genome Science, Department of Precision Medicine, National Institute of Health, 28159 Republic of Korea, ¹³⁴Biomedical Technology Research Center, Tokushima Research Institute, Otsuka Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd., Tokushima, 771-0192, Japan, ¹³⁵Research Institute, National Center for Global Health and Medicine, Tokyo, Japan, ¹³⁶Department of Molecular Epidemiology, German Institute of Human Nutrition Potsdam-Rehbruecke, Nuthetal, 14558, Germany, ¹³⁷German Center for Diabetes Research (DZD), Neuherberg, 85764, Germany, ¹³⁸Department of Complex Trait Genetics, Center for Neurogenomics and Cognitive Research, Amsterdam Neuroscience, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, ¹³⁹Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Pediatric Psychology, Section Complex Trait Genetics, Amsterdam Neuroscience, Vrije Universiteit Medical Center, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, ¹⁴⁰Department of Biobank Research, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden, ¹⁴¹Department of Odontology, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden, ¹⁴²Institute of Molecular and Clinical Ophthalmology Basel, Switzerland, ¹⁴³Privatpraxis Prof Jonas und Dr Panda-Jonas, Heidelberg, Germany, ¹⁴⁴Department of Ophthalmology, Medical Faculty Mannheim, Heidelberg University, Mannheim, Germany, ¹⁴⁵Beijing Institute of Ophthalmology, Beijing Tongren Hospital, Capital Medical University, Beijing Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences Key Laboratory, Beijing, China, ¹⁴⁶Center for Clinical Research and Prevention, Bispebjerg and Frederiksberg Hospital, Copenhagen, Denmark, ¹⁴⁷Faculty of Medicine, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, ¹⁴⁸Osaka University Graduate School of Medicine, Osaka, Japan, ¹⁴⁹Center for Genomic Medicine, Kyoto University Graduate School of Medicine, Kyoto, Japan, ¹⁵⁰Department of Psychiatry, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA, ¹⁵¹Centre for Global Health Research, Usher Institute, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, EH8 9DX, Scotland, ¹⁵²Centre for Cardiovascular Sciences, Queens Medical Research Institute, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH16 4TJ, Scotland, ¹⁵³Medical Research Institute, Kangbuk Samsung Hospital, Sungkyunkwan University School of Medicine, Seoul, 03181, Republic of Korea, ¹⁵⁴Department of Clinical Research Design & Evaluation, SAIHST, Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul, 06355, Republic of Korea, ¹⁵⁵SYNLAB MVZ Humangenetik Mannheim, Mannheim, Baden-Württemberg, 68163, Germany, ¹⁵⁶Department of Clinical Sciences, Genetic and Molecular Epidemiology Unit, Lund University,

814 Malmö, Sweden, ¹⁵⁷Department of Computer Science, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON M5S 2E4, Canada,
815 ¹⁵⁸Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto at Mississauga, Mississauga, ON L5L 1C6, Canada,
816 ¹⁵⁹Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation, The University of Queensland Genomics Research Centre, Centre
817 for Genomics and Personalised Health, School of Biomedical Sciences, Qld University of Technology, 60
818 Musk Ave, Kelvin Grove Qld, Australia, ¹⁶⁰Oneomics, Soonchunhyang Mirai Medical Center, Gyeonggi-do,
819 14585, Korea, ¹⁶¹Laboratory of Neurogenetics, National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health,
820 Bethesda, MD 20892, USA, ¹⁶²Center for Alzheimer's and Related Dementias, National Institutes of Health,
821 Bethesda, MD 20892, USA, ¹⁶³Data Tecnica International, Glen Echo, MD 20812, USA, ¹⁶⁴Department of
822 Population and Quantitative Health Sciences, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH 44106, USA,
823 ¹⁶⁵current address: Department of Mathematics and Statistics, St. Cloud State University, St Cloud, MN
824 56301, USA, ¹⁶⁶Section of Computational Biomedicine, Department of Medicine, Boston University School of
825 Medicine, Boston, MA 02118, USA, ¹⁶⁷Center for Geriatrics and Gerontology, Taichung Veterans General
826 Hospital, Taichung, Taiwan, ¹⁶⁸Montreal Heart Institute, Montreal, Quebec, H1T 1C8, Canada, ¹⁶⁹Department
827 of Ophthalmology, Radboud University Medical Center, Nijmegen, 6525 GA, the Netherlands, ¹⁷⁰MRC
828 Cardiovascular Epidemiology Unit, Department of Public Health and Primary Care, University of Cambridge,
829 Strangeways Research Laboratory, Wort's Causeway, Cambridge CB1 8RN, ¹⁷¹Department of Clinical
830 Science, Center for Diabetes Research, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway, ¹⁷²Department of Clinical
831 Sciences, Lund University Diabetes Centre, Malmö, Sweden, ¹⁷³Department of Clinical Chemistry, Fimlab
832 Laboratories, Tampere 33520, Finland, ¹⁷⁴Department of Clinical Chemistry, Finnish Cardiovascular
833 Research Center - Tampere, Faculty of Medicine and Health Technology, Tampere University, Tampere
834 33014, Finland, ¹⁷⁵Department of Cardiology, Heart Center, Tampere University Hospital, Tampere 33521,
835 Finland, ¹⁷⁶National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Dromokaiteio Psychiatric Hospital, Athens,
836 Greece, ¹⁷⁷Department of Twin Research and Genetic Epidemiology, King's College London, London SE1
837 7EH, UK, ¹⁷⁸NIHR Biomedical Research Centre at Guy's and St Thomas' Foundation Trust, London SE1 9RT,
838 UK, ¹⁷⁹Center for Public Health Genomics, University of Virginia School of Medicine, Charlottesville, VA
839 22908, USA, ¹⁸⁰MRC Human Genetics Unit, Institute of Genetics and Cancer, University of Edinburgh,
840 Western General Hospital, Edinburgh EH4 2XU, Scotland, ¹⁸¹Department of Psychiatry and Department of
841 Community Health and Epidemiology, Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS, Canada, ¹⁸²Institute of Psychiatric
842 Phenomics and Genomics (IPPG), University Hospital, LMU Munich, Munich, Germany, ¹⁸³Institute for
843 Medical Informatics, Biometry and Epidemiology, University Hospital Essen, Essen, 45130, Germany,
844 ¹⁸⁴Programs in Metabolism and Medical and Population Genetics, Broad Institute of Harvard and MIT,
845 Cambridge, MA 02142, USA, ¹⁸⁵Diabetes Unit, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA 02114, USA,
846 ¹⁸⁶Center for Genomic Medicine, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA 02114, USA, ¹⁸⁷Department of
847 Psychiatry, Amsterdam Public Health and Amsterdam Neuroscience, Amsterdam UMC/Vrije Universiteit,
848 Amsterdam, 1081 HL, the Netherlands, ¹⁸⁸Biomedical and Translational Informatics Institute, Geisinger,
849 Danville, PA 17821, USA, ¹⁸⁹Department of Genetics, Institute for Biomedical Informatics, Perelman School
850 of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA, ¹⁹⁰MRC Population Health Research
851 Unit, Nuffield Department of Population Health, University of Oxford, Oxford OX3 7LF, UK, ¹⁹¹Population
852 Health Sciences, Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol, Bristol, BS8 2BN, UK, ¹⁹²Institute for
853 Cardiogenetics, University of Lübeck, 23562, Lübeck, Germany, ¹⁹³Public Health Informatics Unit,
854 Department of Integrated Health Sciences, Nagoya University Graduate School of Medicine, Nagoya, 461-
855 8673, Japan, ¹⁹⁴Centre for Bone and Arthritis Research, Department of Internal Medicine and Clinical
856 Nutrition, Institute of Medicine, Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden,
857 ¹⁹⁵Bioinformatics Core Facility, Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden,
858 ¹⁹⁶Korea Institute of Science and Technology, Gangneung Institute of Natural Products, Gangneung,
859 Gangwon-do, 25451, Republic of Korea, ¹⁹⁷Department of Clinical Biochemistry, Lillebaelt Hospital, Kolding,
860 Denmark, ¹⁹⁸Department of Human Genetics, Wellcome Sanger Institute, Hinxton, CB10 1SA, UK,
861 ¹⁹⁹Department of Internal Medicine, Section of Gerontology and Geriatrics, Leiden University Medical
862 Center, Leiden, the Netherlands, ²⁰⁰Institute of Genetics and Biophysics A. Buzzati-Traverso, CNR, Naples,
863 80131 Italy, ²⁰¹Institute of Genomics, University of Tartu, 51010, Tartu, Estonia, ²⁰²Department of Clinical
864 Biochemistry and Immunology, Hospital of Southern Jutland, 6200 Aabenraa, Denmark, ²⁰³The National
865 Centre for Register-based Research, University of Aarhus, Aarhus, Denmark, ²⁰⁴Centre for Population Health
866 Research, University of Turku and Turku University Hospital, Turku 20014, Finland, ²⁰⁵Research Centre of
867 Applied and Preventive Cardiovascular Medicine, University of Turku, Turku 20014, Finland, ²⁰⁶Medical
868 School, University of Split, Šoltanska 2, 21000 Split, Croatia, ²⁰⁷Algebra University College, Ilica 242, Zagreb,
869 Croatia, ²⁰⁸The Charles Bronfman Institute for Personalized Medicine, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount
870 Sinai, New York, NY 10029, USA, ²⁰⁹Department of Environmental Medicine and Public Health, Icahn School
871 of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY 10029, USA, ²¹⁰Center for Non-Communicable Diseases, Karachi,

872 Pakistan, ²¹¹Department of Psychiatry, Interdisciplinary Center Psychopathology and Emotion Regulation,
873 University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, Groningen, 9700 RB, the Netherlands,
874 ²¹²Institute of Translational Genomics, Helmholtz Zentrum München, German Research Center for
875 Environmental Health, Neuherberg, Germany, ²¹³Oxford Centre for Diabetes, Endocrinology and
876 Metabolism, Radcliffe Department of Medicine, University of Oxford, Churchill Hospital, Oxford OX3 7LE,
877 UK, ²¹⁴Hunter Medical Research Institute, New Lambton Heights, NSW 2308, Australia, ²¹⁵IRCCS Neuromed,
878 Pozzilli (IS), 86077 Italy, ²¹⁶Department of Medicine, Division of Endocrinology, Diabetes & Nutrition,
879 University of Maryland School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD 21201, USA, ²¹⁷Program for Personalized and
880 Genomic Medicine, University of Maryland School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD 21201, USA, ²¹⁸Unit of
881 Genomics of Complex Diseases. Research Institute Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau. IIB Sant Pau.
882 Barcelona, Spain, ²¹⁹Cardiovascular Medicine Unit, Department of Medicine, Karolinska Institutet, Center
883 for Molecular Medicine, Stockholm, Sweden, ²²⁰Laboratory of Epidemiology and Population Sciences,
884 National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, Baltimore, MD 21224, USA, ²²¹Department of
885 Biomedical Science, Hallym University, Chuncheon, Gangwon-do, 24252, Republic of Korea, ²²²Istituto di
886 Ricerca Genetica e Biomedica, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (CNR), Cagliari, Italy, ²²³Department of
887 Cell and Chemical Biology, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, the Netherlands, ²²⁴Department of
888 Epidemiology and Data Science, Amsterdam Public Health Institute, Amsterdam Cardiovascular Sciences
889 Institute, Amsterdam UMC, location VUmc, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, ²²⁵Department of Clinical
890 Epidemiology, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, Netherlands, ²²⁶Icelandic Heart Association,
891 Holtasmari 1,201 Kopavogur, Iceland, ²²⁷Wellcome Sanger Institute, Hinxton, CB10 1SA, UK, ²²⁸deCODE
892 Genetics/Amgen inc., Reykjavik, Iceland, ²²⁹Mohn Nutrition Research Laboratory, Department of Clinical
893 Science, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway, ²³⁰Department of Public Health Sciences, Parkinson School
894 of Health Sciences and Public Health, Loyola University Chicago, Maywood, IL 60153, USA, ²³¹VA Palo Alto
895 Health Care System, Palo Alto, CA, USA, ²³²Department of Medicine, Stanford University School of Medicine,
896 Stanford, CA 94305, USA, ²³³Institute for Community Medicine, University Medicine Greifswald, W.-
897 Rathenau-Str. 48, Greifswald, 17475, Germany, ²³⁴DZHK (German Centre for Cardiovascular Research),
898 Partner Site Greifswald, Greifswald, 17475, Germany, ²³⁵Cardiology Division, Department of Pediatrics,
899 University of California San Francisco, Oakland, CA 94609, USA, ²³⁶Centre for Cancer Genetic Epidemiology,
900 University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK, ²³⁷Department of Public Health and Primary Care, University of
901 Cambridge, Cambridge, UK, ²³⁸Department of Cardiology, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, the
902 Netherlands, ²³⁹Central Diagnostics Laboratory, Division Laboratories, Pharmacy, and Biomedical Genetics,
903 University Medical Center Utrecht, Utrecht University, 3584 CX Utrecht, the Netherlands, ²⁴⁰Department of
904 Human Genetics, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, the Netherlands, ²⁴¹Laboratory Genetic
905 Metabolic Diseases, Amsterdam UMC, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam Gastroenterology and
906 Metabolism, Amsterdam Cardiovascular Sciences, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, ²⁴²Core Facility
907 Metabolomics, Amsterdam UMC, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, ²⁴³Department of
908 Cardiology, Division Heart and Lungs, University Medical Center Utrecht, Utrecht University, 3584 CX
909 Utrecht, the Netherlands, ²⁴⁴Department of Cardiology, University of Groningen, University Medical Center
910 Groningen, Groningen, 9700 RB, the Netherlands, ²⁴⁵School of Medicine and Public Health, College of Health,
911 Medicine and Wellbeing, The University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia, ²⁴⁶Department of
912 Epidemiology and Biostatistics, School of Public Health, Tongji Medical College, Huazhong University of
913 Science and Technology, Wuhan, China, ²⁴⁷Genome Institute of Singapore, Agency for Science, Technology
914 and Research, 138672, Singapore, ²⁴⁸NIHR Barts Cardiovascular Biomedical Research Centre, Barts and The
915 London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen Mary University of London, London, EC1M 6BQ, UK,
916 ²⁴⁹Department of Ophthalmology, Beijing Tongren Hospital, Capital Medical University, China,
917 ²⁵⁰Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, MRC-PHE Centre for Environment and Health, School of
918 Public Health, Imperial College London, London, W2 1PG, UK, ²⁵¹Department of Dermatology, Medical
919 University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria, ²⁵²Department of Research and Innovation, Division of Clinical
920 Neuroscience, Oslo University Hospital, Oslo, Norway, ²⁵³Department of Neurology, Oslo University
921 Hospital, Oslo, Norway, ²⁵⁴MRC Unit for Lifelong Health and Ageing at UCL, Institute of Cardiovascular
922 Science, UCL, London, WC1E 6BT, UK, ²⁵⁵Institute of Genetic Epidemiology, Faculty of Medicine and Medical
923 Center - University of Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany, ²⁵⁶Department of Medicine IV – Nephrology and Primary
924 Care, Faculty of Medicine and Medical Center – University of Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany, ²⁵⁷Institute of
925 Molecular Medicine, McGovern Medical School, University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston,
926 Houston, TX 77030, USA, ²⁵⁸Department of Medical Biochemistry, Kurume University School of Medicine,
927 Kurume, 830-0011, Japan, ²⁵⁹Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center, Rush University Medical Center, Chicago, IL
928 60612, USA, ²⁶⁰Department of Neurological Sciences, Rush University Medical Center, Chicago, IL 60612,
929 USA, ²⁶¹Department of Psychology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA, ²⁶²Department of

930 Genetic Medicine, Weill Cornell Medicine, Doha, Qatar, ²⁶³Department of Computer and Systems
 931 Engineering, Alexandria University, Egypt, ²⁶⁴Department of Cardiology, German Heart Centre Munich,
 932 Technical University Munich, Munich, Germany, ²⁶⁵Department of Cardiology, Ealing Hospital, London
 933 North West University Healthcare NHS Trust, Middlesex UB1 3HW, UK, ²⁶⁶Department of Epidemiology and
 934 Biostatistics, Imperial College London, London W2 1PG, UK, ²⁶⁷Department of Computational Medicine and
 935 Bioinformatics, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA, ²⁶⁸Analytic and Translational Genetics
 936 Unit, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA 02114, USA, ²⁶⁹Stanley Center for Psychiatric Research,
 937 Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, Cambridge, MA 02142, USA, ²⁷⁰Department of Nutrition, Gillings School
 938 of Global Public Health, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27516, USA, ²⁷¹Carolina
 939 Population Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27516, USA, ²⁷²Department
 940 of Clinical Genetics, Erasmus MC, Rotterdam, 3015 GD, the Netherlands, ²⁷³Department of Radiology and
 941 Nuclear Medicine, Erasmus MC, Rotterdam, 3015 GD, the Netherlands, ²⁷⁴Unidad de Investigacion de
 942 Enfermedades Metabolicas and Direction of Nutrition, Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Medicas y Nutricion,
 943 Mexico City, Mexico, ²⁷⁵Tecnologico de Monterrey, Escuela de Medicina y Ciencias de la Salud, Monterrey,
 944 NL, 64710, México, ²⁷⁶Department of Epidemiology and Dean's Office, College of Public Health, University
 945 of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40536, USA, ²⁷⁷Institute of Cardiovascular Science, Faculty of Population Health
 946 Sciences, University College London, London, WC1E 6BT, UK, ²⁷⁸Health Data Research UK and Institute of
 947 Health Informatics, University College London, London NW1 2DA, UK, ²⁷⁹KG Jebsen Center for Genetic
 948 Epidemiology, Department of Public Health and Nursing, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences,
 949 Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NTNU, Norway, ²⁸⁰HUNT Research Centre, Department of
 950 Public Health and Nursing, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Levanger, Norway,
 951 ²⁸¹Department of Endocrinology, St. Olavs Hospital, Trondheim University Hospital, Trondheim, Norway,
 952 ²⁸²Department of Nephrology, University Hospital Regensburg, Regensburg, Germany, ²⁸³Geriatric Unit,
 953 Azienda Toscana Centro, Florence, Italy, ²⁸⁴Systems Genomics Laboratory, School of Biotechnology,
 954 Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi 110 067, India, ²⁸⁵Institute of Molecular Genetics, National
 955 Research Council of Italy, Pavia, Italy, ²⁸⁶Center for Human Genetics and Dept. of Epidemiology, University
 956 of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, Houston, TX 77030, USA, ²⁸⁷Department of Nephrology and
 957 Rheumatology, Kliniken Südostbayern, Regensburg, Germany, ²⁸⁸KfH Kidney Center Traunstein, Traunstein,
 958 Germany, ²⁸⁹Center for Genomics and Personalized Medicine (CGPM), Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark,
 959 ²⁹⁰Bioinformatics Research Centre, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark, ²⁹¹USC-Office of Population
 960 Studies Foundation, Inc., University of San Carlos, Cebu City, Philippines, ²⁹²Department of Nutrition and
 961 Dietetics, University of San Carlos, Cebu City, Philippines, ²⁹³Human Genomics Laboratory, Pennington
 962 Biomedical Research Center, Baton Rouge, LA 70808, USA, ²⁹⁴Department of Biochemistry, Wake Forest
 963 School of Medicine, Medical Center Boulevard, Winston-Salem, NC 27157, USA, ²⁹⁵Department of Clinical
 964 Biochemistry, Lillebaelt Hospital, Vejle, Denmark, ²⁹⁶Institute of Regional Health Research, University of
 965 Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark, ²⁹⁷Clinic of Medicine, St. Olavs Hospital, Trondheim University
 966 Hospital, Trondheim, Norway, ²⁹⁸Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, Nanyang Technological University,
 967 Singapore 308232, Singapore, ²⁹⁹Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, Imperial College London, London
 968 W12 0HS, UK, ³⁰⁰Adjunct Faculty, JSS University Academy of Higher Education and Research, Mysuru, India,
 969 ³⁰¹Ophthalmology & Visual Sciences Academic Clinical Program (Eye ACP), Duke-NUS Medical School,
 970 169857, Singapore, ³⁰²Department of Medical Genetics, Oslo University Hospital, Oslo, Norway,
 971 ³⁰³Department of Medical Research, Bærum Hospital, Vestre Viken Hospital Trust, Gjetsum, Norway,
 972 ³⁰⁴Department of Neurology, Division of Vascular Neurology, University of Maryland School of Medicine,
 973 Baltimore, MD 21201, USA, ³⁰⁵Baltimore Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Department of Neurology,
 974 Baltimore, MD 21201 USA, ³⁰⁶Unidad de Investigación Médica en Bioquímica, Hospital de Especialidades,
 975 Centro Médico Nacional Siglo XXI, Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, 06720 Mexico City, Mexico,
 976 ³⁰⁷Intermountain Heart Institute, Intermountain Medical Center, Murray, UT 84107, USA, ³⁰⁸Department of
 977 Surgery, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA, ³⁰⁹Corporal Michael J. Crescenz VA
 978 Medical Center, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA, ³¹⁰Department of Vascular Surgery, University Medical Center
 979 Utrecht, University of Utrecht, 3584 CX Utrecht, the Netherlands, ³¹¹Department of Human Nutrition,
 980 Wageningen University, Wageningen, the Netherlands, ³¹²Center for Translational and Computational
 981 Neuroimmunology, Department of Neurology, Columbia University Medical Center, New York, NY 10032,
 982 USA, ³¹³Department of Oncology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK, ³¹⁴Department of General
 983 Practice, Amsterdam Public Health Institute, Amsterdam UMC, location VUmc, Amsterdam, The
 984 Netherlands, ³¹⁵Cardiovascular Research Center, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA 02114, USA,
 985 ³¹⁶Cardiac Arrhythmia Service, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA 02114, USA, ³¹⁷Department of
 986 Health Sciences, Division of Geriatric Medicine, Lund University, Sweden, ³¹⁸Molecular Cardiology Division,
 987 Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute, Darlinghurst, NSW, 2010, Australia, ³¹⁹Cardiology Department, St

988 Vincent's Hospital, Darlinghurst, NSW, 2010, Australia, ³²⁰Faculty of Medicine, UNSW Sydney, Kensington,
 989 NSW 2052, Australia, ³²¹Department of Preventive Medicine, Keck School of Medicine of USC, Los Angeles,
 990 CA 90089, USA, ³²²Translational Gerontology Branch, National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of
 991 Health, Baltimore, MD 21224, USA, ³²³Robertson Center for Biostatistics, University of Glasgow, UK,
 992 ³²⁴Human Genetics Center, School of Public Health, University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston,
 993 Houston, TX 77030, USA, ³²⁵Department of Public Health and Clinical Medicine, Umeå University, Umeå,
 994 Sweden, ³²⁶Department of Nutrition, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA, ³²⁷Department
 995 of Internal Medicine, Wake Forest School of Medicine, Medical Center Boulevard, Winston-Salem, NC 27157,
 996 USA, ³²⁸Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Science, Na, Parkville, Victoria, 3010, Australia, ³²⁹Agriculture
 997 Victoria Research, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, Bundoora, Victoria, 3083, Australia, ³³⁰Injury
 998 Prevention Research Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA,
 999 ³³¹Division of Physical Therapy, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA,
 1000 ³³²Centro de Investigacion en Salud Poblacional Instituto Nacional de Salud Publica and Centro de Estudios
 1001 en Diabetes, Ahuacatitlan CP 62100 Cuernavaca Morelos, Mexico, ³³³Division of Human Genetics, Children's
 1002 Hospital of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA, ³³⁴Departments of Pediatrics and Genetics, Perelman
 1003 School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA, ³³⁵Division of Endocrinology
 1004 and Diabetes, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA, ³³⁶Faculty of Medicine,
 1005 University of Iceland, 101 Reykjavik, Iceland, ³³⁷Department of Pediatrics, Perelman School of Medicine,
 1006 University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA, ³³⁸Division of Pulmonary Medicine, Children's
 1007 Hospital of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA, ³³⁹Institute of Biomedical and Clinical Science,
 1008 University of Exeter Medical School, Exeter, UK, ³⁴⁰Cardiovascular Health Research Unit, Department of
 1009 Epidemiology, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195, USA, ³⁴¹Department of Paediatrics, Yong Loo
 1010 Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore, Singapore, ³⁴²Khoo Teck Puat - National University
 1011 Children's Medical Institute, National University Health System, Singapore, ³⁴³Department of Cardiology,
 1012 Internal Medicine II, Medical University of Vienna, 1090 Vienna, Austria, ³⁴⁴Menzies Research Institute
 1013 Tasmania, University of Tasmania, Hobart, 7000, Tasmania, Australia, ³⁴⁵Centre for Eye Research Australia,
 1014 Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 3002, Victoria, Australia,
 1015 ³⁴⁶Centre for Ophthalmology and Vision Science, Lions Eye Institute, University of Western Australia, Perth,
 1016 6009, Western Australia, Australia, ³⁴⁷Cardiology Division, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA
 1017 02114, USA, ³⁴⁸Department of Genetics, Shanghai-MOST Key Laboratory of Heath and Disease Genomics,
 1018 Chinese National Human Genome Center and Shanghai Industrial Technology Institute, Shanghai, China,
 1019 ³⁴⁹Department of Internal Medicine, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84132, USA, ³⁵⁰Australian Centre
 1020 for Precision Health, Clinical and Health Sciences, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia, ³⁵¹South
 1021 Australian Health and Medical Research Institute, Adelaide, Australia, ³⁵²Department of Environmental and
 1022 Preventive Medicine, Jichi Medical University School of Medicine, Shimotsuke, 329-0498, Japan,
 1023 ³⁵³Department of Epidemiology and Population Health, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, NY
 1024 10461, USA, ³⁵⁴Division of Endocrinology, Diabetes and Metabolism, School of Medicine, Ohio State
 1025 University, Columbus OH 43210, USA, ³⁵⁵Center for Life Course Health Research, Faculty of Medicine,
 1026 University of Oulu, FI-90014 Oulun yliopisto, Finland, ³⁵⁶Unit of Primary Health Care, Oulu University
 1027 Hospital, OYS, 90220 Oulu, Finland, ³⁵⁷Department of Life Sciences, College of Health and Life Sciences,
 1028 Brunel University London, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH, UK, ³⁵⁸Beijing Institute of Ophthalmology, Beijing
 1029 Tongren Eye Center, Beijing Tongren Hospital, Capital Medical University, Beijing Ophthalmology and
 1030 Visual Sciences Key Laboratory, 100730 Beijing, China, ³⁵⁹The Eye Hospital, School of Ophthalmology &
 1031 Optometry, Wenzhou Medical University, Wenzhou, Zhejiang 325027, China, ³⁶⁰Einthoven Laboratory for
 1032 Experimental Vascular Medicine, LUMC, Leiden, the Netherlands, ³⁶¹Netherlands Heart Institute, Utrecht,
 1033 the Netherlands, ³⁶²Department of Clinical Physiology, Tampere University Hospital, Tampere 33521,
 1034 Finland, ³⁶³Department of Clinical Physiology, Finnish Cardiovascular Research Center - Tampere, Faculty
 1035 of Medicine and Health Technology, Tampere University, Tampere 33014, Finland, ³⁶⁴Laboratory of
 1036 Complex Trait Genomics, Department of Computational Biology and Medical Sciences, Graduate School of
 1037 Frontier Sciences, The University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan, ³⁶⁵Department of Ophthalmology, The Catholic
 1038 University of Korea Incheon St. Mary's Hospital, Incheon, 21431, Republic of Korea, ³⁶⁶NIHR Oxford
 1039 Biomedical Research Centre, Churchill Hospital, Oxford, UK, ³⁶⁷German Centre for Cardiovascular Research
 1040 (DZHK), partner site Munich Heart Alliance, Munich, Germany, ³⁶⁸Radboud University Medical Center,
 1041 Radboud Institute for Health Sciences, Department of Urology, Nijmegen, the Netherlands, ³⁶⁹Yonsei
 1042 University Severance Eye Hospital, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul, 03718, Republic of Korea, ³⁷⁰Department of
 1043 Biochemistry, College of Medicine, Ewha Womans University, Seoul, 07804, Republic of Korea,
 1044 ³⁷¹Department of Cardiology, University Heart and Vascular Center UKE Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany,
 1045 ³⁷²Institute of Cardiovascular Sciences, College of Medical and Dental Sciences, University of Birmingham,

1046 B15 2GW, UK, ³⁷³German Center for Cardiovascular Research, Partner Site Hamburg/Kiel/Lübeck, Germany,
1047 ³⁷⁴Atrial Fibrillation NETwork, Münster, Germany, ³⁷⁵Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, UCL
1048 Institute of Epidemiology and Health Care, University College London, UK, ³⁷⁶Healthy Longevity
1049 Translational Research Programme, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore,
1050 ³⁷⁷University of Helsinki and Department of Medicine, Helsinki University Hospital, Helsinki 00029, Finland,
1051 ³⁷⁸Minerva Foundation Institute for Medical Research, Helsinki 00290, Finland, ³⁷⁹Director of Preventive
1052 Cardiology, Lipoprotein Apheresis Unit and Lipid Disorders Clinic, Metropolitan Hospital, 185 47, Athens,
1053 Greece, ³⁸⁰MRC-PHE Centre for Environment and Health, Imperial College London, London W2 1PG, UK,
1054 ³⁸¹National Heart and Lung Institute, Imperial College London, London, UK, ³⁸²Medical Department III –
1055 Endocrinology, Nephrology, Rheumatology, University of Leipzig Medical Center, 04103 Leipzig, Germany,
1056 ³⁸³Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park CO4 3SQ, UK, ³⁸⁴Institute
1057 of Clinical Medicine, Internal Medicine, University of Eastern Finland and Kuopio University Hospital,
1058 Kuopio 70210, Finland, ³⁸⁵Department of Medicine, University of Colorado at Denver, Aurora, CO 80045,
1059 USA, ³⁸⁶Berlin Institute of Health at Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Germany, ³⁸⁷Epidemiology
1060 Program, University of Hawaii Cancer Center, Honolulu, HI 96813, USA, ³⁸⁸Department of Internal Medicine,
1061 Ewha Womans University School of Medicine, Seoul, 07985, Republic of Korea, ³⁸⁹Department of
1062 Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Peking University Health Science Center, Beijing 100191, China, ³⁹⁰Peking
1063 University Center for Public Health and Epidemic Preparedness & Response, Beijing 100191, China,
1064 ³⁹¹Institute of Epidemiology and Biobank Popgen, Kiel University, Kiel, Germany, ³⁹²Key Laboratory of
1065 Systems Health Science of Zhejiang Province, Hangzhou Institute for Advanced Study, University of Chinese
1066 Academy of Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Hangzhou, 310024, China, ³⁹³Department of Clinical
1067 Medicine, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark,
1068 ³⁹⁴Division of Cardiovascular Medicine and Abboud Cardiovascular Research Center, University of Iowa
1069 Hospitals and Clinics, Iowa City, IA, 52242, USA, ³⁹⁵Alliance for Human Development, Lunenfeld-Tanenbaum
1070 Research Institute, Sinai Health System, Ontario, Canada, ³⁹⁶Department of Medical Epidemiology and
1071 Biostatistics, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, ³⁹⁷Division of Cardiology, University of California San
1072 Francisco, San Francisco, CA 94143, USA, ³⁹⁸Department of Medicine, Internal Medicine, Lausanne
1073 University Hospital, Lausanne, Switzerland, ³⁹⁹University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland, ⁴⁰⁰SYNLAB
1074 Academy, SYNLAB Holding Deutschland GmbH, P5 7, Mannheim, Baden-Württemberg, 68161, Germany,
1075 ⁴⁰¹Department of Medicine, Division of Cardiology, Duke University School of Medicine, Durham, NC 27710,
1076 USA, ⁴⁰²Duke Molecular Physiology Institute, Duke University School of Medicine, Durham, NC 27701, USA,
1077 ⁴⁰³Psychiatric Genetics, QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute, Brisbane, QLD 4006, Australia,
1078 ⁴⁰⁴Geriatric Medicine, Institute of Medicine, Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg,
1079 Sweden, ⁴⁰⁵Geriatrics Research and Education Clinical Center, Baltimore Veterans Administration Medical
1080 Center, Baltimore, MD, ⁴⁰⁶Centre for Vision Research and Department of Ophthalmology, Westmead
1081 Millennium Institute of Medical Research, University of Sydney, Sydney, 2022, New South Wales, Australia,
1082 ⁴⁰⁷Department of Clinical Epidemiology, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, the Netherlands,
1083 ⁴⁰⁸Department of Public Health and Primary Care, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, the
1084 Netherlands, ⁴⁰⁹Usher Institute of Population Health Sciences and Informatics, University of Edinburgh,
1085 Edinburgh, UK, ⁴¹⁰Electrophysiology Section, Division of Cardiovascular Medicine, Perelman School of
1086 Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA, ⁴¹¹Department of Medicine, University
1087 of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA, ⁴¹²Center for Genomic Medicine, Massachusetts
1088 General Hospital, Boston, MA 02114, USA, ⁴¹³Department of Chronic Diseases and Ageing, Norwegian
1089 Institute of Public Health, Oslo, Norway, ⁴¹⁴Department of Pain Management and Research, Oslo University
1090 Hospital, Oslo, Norway, ⁴¹⁵Institute of Human Genetics, School of Medicine & University Hospital Bonn,
1091 Bonn, 53127, Germany, ⁴¹⁶Sahlgrenska University Hospital, Department of Drug Treatment, Gothenburg,
1092 Sweden, ⁴¹⁷Laboratorio de Inmunogenómica y Enfermedades Metabólicas, Instituto Nacional de Medicina
1093 Genómica, CDMX, Mexico, ⁴¹⁸Paavo Nurmi Centre, Sports and Exercise Medicine Unit, Department of
1094 Physical Activity and Health, Turku 20014, Finland, ⁴¹⁹Institute for Precision Health, David Geffen School of
1095 Medicine at UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA, ⁴²⁰Pat MacPherson Centre for Pharmacogenetics and
1096 Pharmacogenomics, Division of Population Health and Genomics, School of Medicine, University of Dundee,
1097 Ninewells Hospital and Medical School, Dundee, DD1 9SY, UK, ⁴²¹Centre Nutrition, santé et société
1098 (NUTRISS), Institute of Nutrition and Functional Foods, Université Laval, Québec QC, G1V 0A6, ⁴²²IBE-Chair
1099 of Epidemiology, LMU Munich, 85764 Neuherberg, Germany, ⁴²³Population, Policy and Practice, UCL Great
1100 Ormond Street Hospital Institute of Child Health, London, UK, ⁴²⁴Department of Medicine, University of
1101 Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA, ⁴²⁵Department of Clinical Physiology and Nuclear Medicine,
1102 Turku University Hospital, Turku 20014, Finland, ⁴²⁶Hero DMC Heart Institute, Dyanand Medical College,
1103 Ludhiana, Punjab, 14100, India, ⁴²⁷Second Department of Cardiology, Medical School, National and

1104 Kapodistrian University of Athens, University General Hospital Attikon, Athens, Greece, ⁴²⁸Division of
1105 Biostatistics, Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis, MO, 63110, USA, ⁴²⁹Genetics, Merck Sharp
1106 & Dohme Corp., Kenilworth, NJ 07033, USA, ⁴³⁰Department of Epidemiology, University of Washington,
1107 Seattle, WA 98195, USA, ⁴³¹Department of Endocrinology and Metabolism, Kyung Hee University School of
1108 Medicine, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul, 02447, Korea, ⁴³²Department of Public Health, Clinicum, Faculty of
1109 Medicine, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland, ⁴³³Departments of Medicine, Pharmacology, and
1110 Biomedical Informatics, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nashville, TN 37232, USA, ⁴³⁴Department of
1111 Cardiology and Department of Medicine, Columbia University, NY 10032, USA, ⁴³⁵Department of Pediatrics,
1112 Section of Genetics, College of Medicine, University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, Oklahoma City, OK
1113 73104 USA, ⁴³⁶Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center,
1114 Oklahoma City, OK 73104, USA, ⁴³⁷Department of Physiology, University of Oklahoma Health Sciences
1115 Center, Oklahoma City, OK 73104, USA, ⁴³⁸Oklahoma Center for Neuroscience, University of Oklahoma
1116 Health Sciences Center, Oklahoma City, OK 73104, USA, ⁴³⁹BHF Glasgow Cardiovascular Research Centre,
1117 Faculty of Medicine, Glasgow, UK, ⁴⁴⁰Gottfried Schatz Research Center (for Cell Signaling, Metabolism and
1118 Aging), Medical University of Graz, 8010 Graz, Austria, ⁴⁴¹Institute of Nutritional Science, University of
1119 Potsdam, Nuthetal, 14558, Germany, ⁴⁴²Deutsches Herzzentrum München, Cardiology, and Technische
1120 Universität München, 80636, Germany, ⁴⁴³School of Biomedical Science and Pharmacy, University of
1121 Newcastle, Callaghan NSW 2305 Australia, ⁴⁴⁴Department of Medicine, Vanderbilt University Medical
1122 Center, Nashville, TN 37232, USA, ⁴⁴⁵Central University of Punjab, Bathinda, 151001, India, ⁴⁴⁶Department
1123 of Medicine I, University Hospital, LMU Munich, 81377, Munich, Germany, ⁴⁴⁷Department of Cardiology,
1124 Clinical Sciences, Lund University and Skåne University Hospital, SE-221 85 Lund, Sweden, ⁴⁴⁸The
1125 Wallenberg Laboratory/Department of Molecular and Clinical Medicine, Institute of Medicine, Gothenburg
1126 University and the Department of Cardiology, Sahlgrenska University Hospital, Gothenburg, Sweden,
1127 ⁴⁴⁹Wallenberg Center for Molecular Medicine and Lund University Diabetes Center, Lund University, Lund,
1128 Sweden, ⁴⁵⁰Department of Nutrition, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA 02115, USA,
1129 ⁴⁵¹Population Health Research Institute, St George's, University of London, London SW17 0RE, UK,
1130 ⁴⁵²Molecular Epidemiology Section, Department of Biomedical Data Sciences, Leiden University Medical
1131 Center, Leiden, the Netherlands, ⁴⁵³Department of Genetics, Stanford University School of Medicine,
1132 Stanford, CA 94305, USA, ⁴⁵⁴Department of Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Université de Montréal, Montreal,
1133 Quebec, H3J 1J4, Canada, ⁴⁵⁵Helsinki University Central Hospital, Research Program for Clinical and
1134 Molecular Metabolism, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland, ⁴⁵⁶Folkhälsan Research Center, Helsinki,
1135 Finland, ⁴⁵⁷Department of Public Health, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland, ⁴⁵⁸Diabetes Research
1136 Group, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, ⁴⁵⁹Unidad de Biología Molecular y Medicina
1137 Genómica, Instituto de Investigaciones Biomédicas, UNAM, Mexico City, Mexico, ⁴⁶⁰Instituto Nacional de
1138 Ciencias Médicas y Nutrición Salvador Zubirán, Mexico City, ⁴⁶¹Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National
1139 University of Singapore and National University Health System, 119228, Singapore, ⁴⁶²Milken Institute
1140 School of Public Health, The George Washington University, Washington DC 20052, USA, ⁴⁶³Department of
1141 Internal Medicine, Erasmus MC, University Medical Center Rotterdam, Rotterdam, 3015 GD, the
1142 Netherlands, ⁴⁶⁴Dept Geriatric Medicine, Amsterdam Public Health, Amsterdam UMC, location AMC,
1143 Meibergdreef 9, 1105 AZ Amsterdam, the Netherlands, ⁴⁶⁵Department of Epidemiology and Data Science,
1144 Amsterdam UMC, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, ⁴⁶⁶Interfaculty Institute for Genetics and Functional
1145 Genomics, University Medicine Greifswald, Felix-Hausdorff-Str. 8, Greifswald, 17475, Germany, ⁴⁶⁷Unidad
1146 de Investigación Médica en Epidemiología Clínica, Hospital de Especialidades, Centro Médico Nacional Siglo
1147 XXI, Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, 06720 Mexico City, Mexico, ⁴⁶⁸Institute of Cellular Medicine,
1148 Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne NE2 4HH, UK, ⁴⁶⁹Department of Population and Public Health
1149 Sciences, Keck School of Medicine of USC, Los Angeles, CA 90089, USA, ⁴⁷⁰Department of Physiology &
1150 Neuroscience, Keck School of Medicine of USC, Los Angeles, CA 90089, USA, ⁴⁷¹USC Diabetes and Obesity
1151 Research Institute, Keck School of Medicine of USC, Los Angeles, CA 90089, USA, ⁴⁷²Lundbeck Foundation
1152 Center for GeoGenetics, GLOBE Institute, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark, ⁴⁷³MRC Human
1153 Genetics Unit, Institute of Genetics and Cancer, University of Edinburgh, Western General Hospital, Crewe
1154 Road, Edinburgh EH4 2XU, Scotland, ⁴⁷⁴School of Chinese Medicine, China Medical University, Taichung,
1155 Taiwan, ⁴⁷⁵Diabetes Unit, KEM Hospital and Research Centre, Pune, India, ⁴⁷⁶Kurume University School of
1156 Medicine, Kurume, 830-0011, Japan, ⁴⁷⁷Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, UPMC Hillman
1157 Cancer Center, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15232, USA, ⁴⁷⁸Department of Epidemiology,
1158 Graduate School of Public Health, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15232, USA, ⁴⁷⁹TUM School of
1159 Medicine, Technical University of Munich and Klinikum Rechts der Isar, 81675 Munich, Germany,
1160 ⁴⁸⁰Institute of Clinical Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway, ⁴⁸¹VA Million Veteran
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[^]Current address: Genentech, 1 DNA Way, South San Francisco, CA 94080, USA

^{*}These authors contributed equally

[§]These authors co-directed the study

[#]Corresponding author

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Steering committee:

G.R.A., T.L.A., S.I.B., M.B., D.I.C., Y.S.C., T.E., T.M.F., I.M.H., J.N.H., G.L., C.M.L., A.E.L., R.J.F.L., M.I.M., K.L.M., M.C.Y.N., K.E.N., C.J.O., Y.O., F.Ri., Y.V.S., E.S.T., C.J.W., U.T., P.M.Vis., R.G.W.

Conveners of GIANT working groups:

S.I.B., Pa.D., J.N.H., A.E.J., G.L., C.M.L., R.J.F.L., E.M., K.L.M., K.E.N., Y.O., C.N.S., R.G.W., C.J.W., A.R.Wo., Lo.Y.

Writing Group (drafted, edited, and commented on manuscript):

E.Ba., J.N.H., G.L., E.M., Y.O., Sr.R., Sa.S., Sa.V., P.M.Vis., A.R.Wo., Lo.Y.

Coordinated or supervised data collection or analysis specific to manuscript:

Ad.A., Pa.D., T.E., T.M.F., J.N.H., A.E.J., G.L., A.E.L., P.-R.L., Y.O., K.S., U.T., P.M.Vis., R.G.W., A.R.Wo., Jian Y., Lo.Y.

Data preparation group (checked and prepared data from contributing cohorts for meta-analyses):

J.Ar., S.I.B., S.-H.C., T.F., S.E.G., M.Gr., Yi.J., A.E.J., Tu.K., A.E.L., Kr.L., D.E.M., E.M., C.M.-G., M.Ma., A.Moo., Si.R., C.N.S., Sa.V., T.W.W., X.Y., Kr.Y.

Meta-analysis working group:

J.N.H., E.M., Sa.V., Lo.Y.

Primary height analysis working group (post meta-analysis):

E.Ba., A.D.B., M.Gr., Yu.J., M.Kan., Ku.L., Je.M., E.M., R.E.Mu., Sr.R., Sa.S., Ju.S., Sa.V., A.R.Wo., Lo.Y.

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Table 1. Summary of results from within-ancestry and trans-ancestry GWAS meta-analyses. N denotes the sample size for each SNP. GWS: Genome-Wide Significant ($P < 5 \times 10^{-8}$). COJO SNPs: near independent GWS SNPs identified using an approximate conditional and Joint analysis implemented in the GCTA software. P_{GWS} : P-value from marginal association test. GWS loci were defined as genomic regions centred around each GWS SNP and including all SNPs within 35 kb on each side of the lead GWS SNP. Overlapping GWS loci were merged so that the number and cumulative length of GWS loci are calculated on non-overlapping GWS loci. Percentage of the genome covered was calculated by dividing the cumulative of GWS loci by 3,039 Mb, i.e. the approximated length of the human genome.

Cohort Ancestry/Ethnic Group	Number of studies	Max N (Mean N)	Number of GWS COJO SNPs ($P_{\text{GWS}} < 5 \times 10^{-8}$)	Number of GWS loci (35 kb)	Cumulative length of non-overlapping GWS loci (% genome)
European (EUR)	173	4,080,687 (3,612,229)	9,863 (8,382)	6,386	552.5 Mb (18.4%)
East-Asian (EAS)	56	472,730 (320,570)	918 (807)	821	60.5 Mb (2.0%)
Hispanic (HIS)	11	455,180 (431,645)	1,888 (1,332)	1,599	121.4 Mb (4.0%)
African (AFR)	29	293,593 (222,981)	493 (417)	436	32.5 Mb (1.1%)
South Asian (SAS)	12	77,890 (59,420)	69 (65)	66	4.7 Mb (0.2%)
Trans-ancestry meta-analysis (META _{FE})	281	5,314,291* (4,611,160)	12,111 (9,920)	7,209	647.5 Mb (21.6%)

*The number of individuals in the trans-ancestry meta-analysis (N=5,314,291) is smaller than the sum of ancestry group specific meta-analyses (N=5,380,080) because of variation in per-SNP sample sizes for SNPs included in the final analysis.

1649 **Table 2.** Overview of 5 European ancestry GWAS re-analysed in our study to quantify the relationship
1650 between sample size and discovery. Summary statistics from the 3 published GWAS were imputed using
1651 the SSIMP software to maximise coverage of HapMap 3 SNPs (**Suppl. Methods**). GWS loci are defined as
1652 in the legend of Table 1.
1653

Down-sampled GWAS	Max N (Mean N)	Number of GWS COJO SNPs	% of the genome covered by GWS loci (35 kb)
Lango-Allen et al. ^{15*}	130,010 (128,942)	240	0.5%
Wood et al. ¹⁶	241,724 (239,227)	633	1.4%
Yengo et al. ¹	695,648 (688,927)	2,794	5.8%
GIANT-EUR (no 23andMe)	1,632,839 (1,502,499)	4,867	9.7%
23andMe-EUR	2,502,262 (2,498,336)	7,020	13.6%

1654 *Summary-statistics from the Lango-Allen et al. study, initially over-corrected for population stratification using a
1655 double genomic control correction, were re-inflated such that the LD score regression intercept estimated from re-
1656 inflated test statistics equals 1.

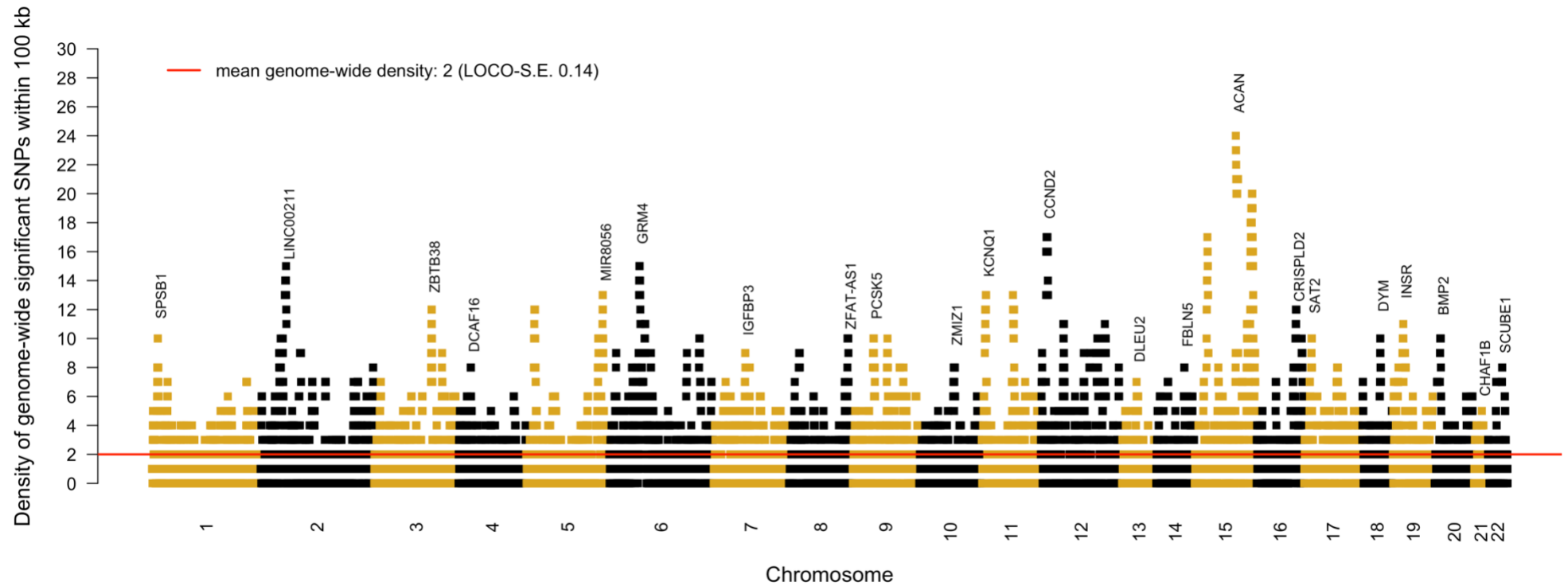


Fig. 1. Brisbane plot showing the genomic density of independent genetic associations with height. Each dot represents one of the 12,111 quasi-independent genome-wide significant (GWS; $P < 5 \times 10^{-8}$) height-associated SNPs identified using approximate conditional and joint multiple-SNP (COJO) analyses of our trans-ancestry GWAS meta-analysis. Density was calculated for each associated SNP as the number of other independent associations within 100 kb. A density of 1 means that a GWS COJO SNP share its location with another independent GWS COJO SNP within <100 kb. The average signal density across the genome is 2 (standard error; S.E. 0.14). S.E. were calculated using a Leave-One-Chromosome-Out jackknife approach (LOCO-S.E.). Sub-significant SNPs are not represented on the figure.

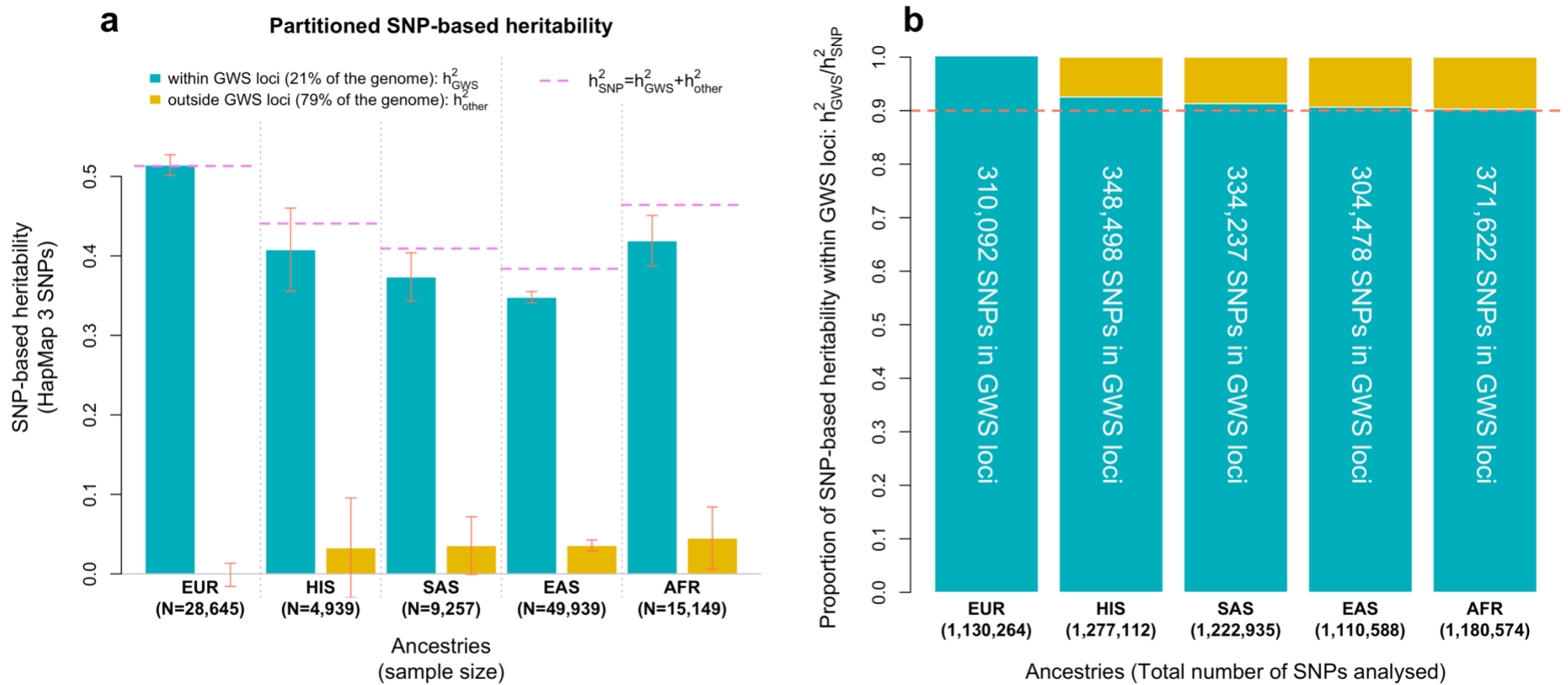


Fig. 2. Variance of height explained by HapMap 3 SNP within genome-wide significant (GWS) loci. **Panel a** shows stratified SNP-based heritability (h^2_{SNP}) estimates obtained after partitioning the genome into SNPs within 35 kb of a GWS SNP (“GWS loci” label) vs. SNPs >35 kb away from any GWS SNP. Analyses were performed in samples of five different ancestry/ethnic groups: European (EUR: meta-analysis of UK Biobank (UKB) + Lifelines study), African (AFR: meta-analysis of UKB + PAGE study), East-Asian (EAS: meta-analysis of UKB + China Kadoorie Biobank), South-Asian (SAS: UKB) and Hispanic group (HIS: PAGE). **Panel b** shows that >90% of h^2_{SNP} in all ancestries is explained by SNPs within GWS loci identified in this study. The cumulative length of non-overlapping GWS loci is ~647 Mb, i.e. ~21% of the genome assuming a genome length of ~3039 Mb.²² The proportion of HapMap 3 SNPs in GWS loci is ~27%.

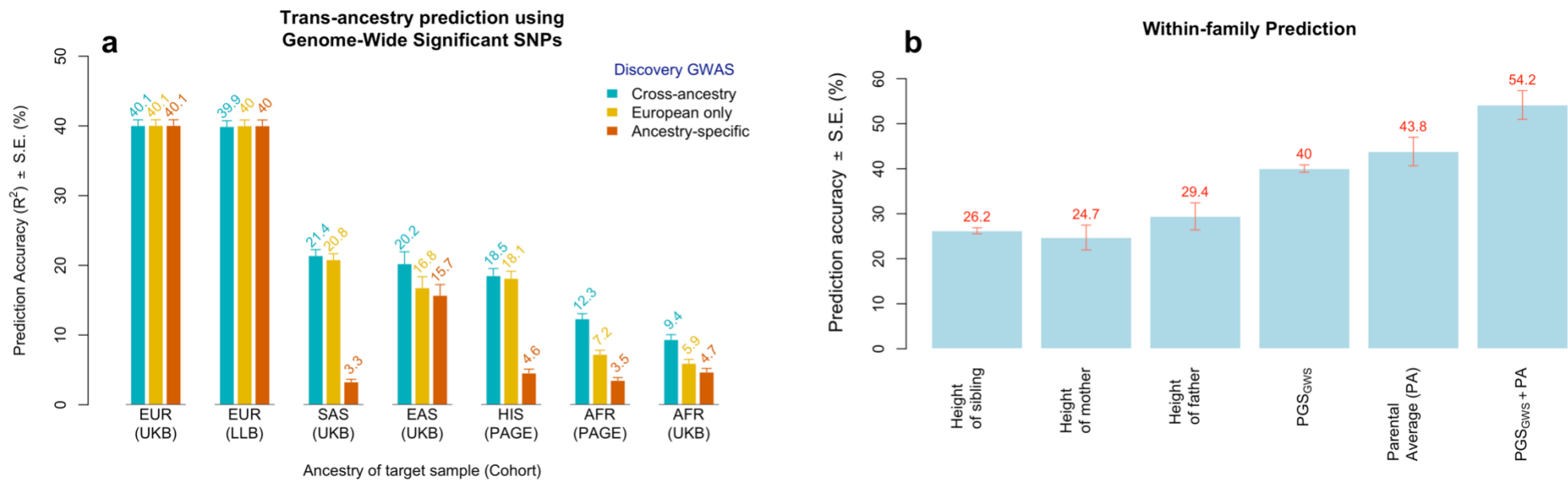


Fig. 3. Accuracy of a polygenic predictors of height (PGS) within-family and across ancestries. Prediction accuracy (R^2) was measured as the squared correlation between PGS and actual height adjusted for age, sex and 10 genetic principal components. **Panel a** shows the accuracy of PGSs assessed in participants of 5 different ancestry groups: European (EUR; N=14,587) from the UK Biobank (UKB) and the Lifelines Biobank (LLB; N=14,058) cohorts, South-Asian (SAS; N=9,257) from UKB, East-Asian (EAS; N=2,246) from UKB, Hispanic (HIS; N=8,238) from the PAGE study and admixed African (AFR) from UKB (N=6,911) and PAGE (N=5,798). PGSs used for prediction, in **Panel a**, are based on genome-wide significant (GWS) SNPs identified in (1) cross-ancestry meta-analysis (green bar), (2) EUR meta-analysis (yellow bar) and (3) ancestry-specific meta-analyses (red bars). **Panel b** shows the squared correlation of height between first-degree relatives of EUR participants in UKB and the accuracy of a predictor combining PGS (denoted , PGS_{GWS}, as based on GWS SNPs) and familial information. PGS_{GWS} accuracy shown in **Panel b** is the average accuracy in EUR participants from UKB and LLB from **Panel a**. Sibling correlation was calculated in 17,492 independent EUR sibling pairs from the UKB and parent-offspring correlations in 981 EUR unrelated trios (i.e. two parents and 1 child) from the UKB.