

Genetic evidence of assortative mating in humans

Matthew R. Robinson^{1*}, Aaron Kleinman², Mariaelisa Graff³, Anna A. E. Vinkhuyzen¹, David Couper⁴, Michael B. Miller⁵, Wouter J. Peyrot⁶, Abdel Abdellaoui⁷, Brendan P. Zietsch⁸, Ilja M. Nolte⁹, Jana V. van Vliet-Ostaptchouk^{9,10}, Harold Snieder⁹, The LifeLines Cohort Study[†], Genetic Investigation of Anthropometric Traits (GIANT) consortium[‡], Sarah E. Medland¹¹, Nicholas G. Martin¹¹, Patrik K. E. Magnusson¹², William G. Iacono⁵, Matt McGue⁵, Kari E. North^{3,13}, Jian Yang^{1,14} and Peter M. Visscher^{1,14*}

In human populations, assortative mating is almost universally positive, with similarities between partners for quantitative phenotypes^{1–6}, common disease risk^{1,3,7–10}, behaviour^{6,11}, social factors^{12–14} and personality^{4,5,11}. The causes and genetic consequences of assortative mating remain unresolved because partner similarity can arise from different mechanisms: phenotypic assortment based on mate choice^{15,16}, partner interaction and convergence in phenotype over time^{14,17}, or social homogamy where individuals pair according to social or environmental background. Here, we present theory and an analytical approach to test for genetic evidence of assortative mating and find a correlation in genetic value among partners for a range of phenotypes. Across three independent samples of 24,662 spousal pairs in total, we infer a correlation at trait-associated loci between partners for height (0.200, 0.004 standard error, SE) that matched the phenotypic correlation (0.201, 0.004 SE), and a correlation at trait-associated loci for BMI (0.143, 0.007 SE) that was significantly lower than the phenotypic value (0.228, 0.004 SE). We extend our analysis to the UK Biobank study (7,780 pairs), finding evidence of a correlation at trait-associated loci for waist-to-hip ratio (0.101, 0.041 SE), systolic blood pressure (0.138, 0.064 SE) and educational attainment (0.654, 0.014 SE). Our results imply that mate choice, combined with widespread pleiotropy among traits, affects the genomic architecture of traits in humans.

Under direct phenotypic assortment for a heritable trait, pairing of phenotypically similar individuals will increase the proportion of homozygous progeny, create a directional build-up of gametic phase disequilibria after many generations^{16,18–20}, affect trait correlations between relatives^{16,21,22} and influence traits that are genetically correlated. In contrast, there are no genetic consequences in the population if partner similarity arises by an environmental correlation

from either social homogamy or an interaction between couples after pairing. Despite the fact that phenotypic similarity between partners for traits such as height and intelligence was first quantified over a century ago^{16,20,22,23}, the genetic consequences of assortative mating remain unresolved, because many confounding factors affect partner similarity, making it difficult to distinguish among the different mechanisms. As elegantly summarized in the first ever textbook on quantitative genetics: “Assortative mating in man, however, probably seldom arises purely in this way [phenotypic resemblance as a cause of assortative mating] and caution is needed in applying the results to human data”²⁴.

Studies have attempted to address this question empirically using classical twin designs¹³, finding mixed evidence for partner similarity due to initial choice for many phenotypes¹. A number of recent studies have used genomic data to examine the genetic similarity between couples, by estimating the genome-wide sharing of single-nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) and testing whether the observed correlation is greater than expected in the population^{25–27}. We show here that an extremely large sample size would be required in order to detect a deviation from expectation in genome-wide sharing (Supplementary Note, Supplementary Figure 1), which implies that results based on SNP sharing are most likely to be explained by other factors²⁸. For example, if a phenotype is correlated with social, cultural or ethnic status, and there is social homogamy, then partners will generally be genetically similar^{29–31}, but this will not affect the genetic architecture of traits in the population. A recent study of 13,068 pairs of adult male–female partners living in the same household found that the genotype of a person is correlated with the height of their partner³², with both genetic and environmental effects contributing to the observed phenotypic correlation of height between partners³². However, examining mate choice in a variance component framework when the data contains close relatives³² is unlikely to separate confounded environmental

¹Institute of Molecular Bioscience, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland 4072, Australia. ²Department of Research, 23andMe Inc., Mountain View, California 94041, USA. ³Department of Epidemiology, Gillings School of Global Public Health, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514, USA. ⁴Department of Biostatistics, Gillings School of Global Public Health, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514, USA. ⁵University of Minnesota, Department of Psychology, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA. ⁶Department of Psychiatry, VU University Medical Centre & GGZ inGeest, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. ⁷Department of Biological Psychology, VU University Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. ⁸School of Psychology, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland 4072, Australia. ⁹Department of Epidemiology, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, Groningen, 9700 RB, The Netherlands. ¹⁰Department of Endocrinology, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, Groningen, 9700 RB, The Netherlands. ¹¹QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute, 300 Herston Road, Herston, Queensland 4006, Australia. ¹²Karolinska Institutet, SE-171 77 Stockholm, Sweden. ¹³Carolina Centre for Genome Sciences, Gillings School of Global Public Health, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514, USA. ¹⁴The Queensland Brain Institute, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland 4072, Australia. [†]‡A full list of authors and their affiliations appears at the end of the paper.

*e-mail: m.robinson11@uq.edu.au; peter.visscher@uq.edu.au

Table 1 | Phenotypic and genetic correlations among partners for height.

Cohort	Spousal pairs	Number of SNP markers	Phenotypic correlation among pairs (95% CI)	BLUP predictor regression coefficient (SE)	Estimated genetic association among pairs (SE)		Heritability of mate choice (SE)		MLMA predictor regression variance explained (R ²)	
					Male partner	Female partner	Male partner	Female partner	Male partner	Female partner
Composite Sample of ARIC, HRS, LL and MCTFR cohorts	5,044	1,135,785	0.200 (0.186, 0.221)	1.082 (0.040)	0.175 (0.035)	0.185 (0.034)	0.027 (0.065)	0.044 (0.066)	0.005	0.011
23andMe research participant cohort	11,908	1,134,501	0.210 (0.193, 0.227)	1.112 (0.022)	0.213 (0.023)	0.220 (0.023)	0.086 (0.029)	0.005 (0.029)	0.008	0.010
UK Biobank	7,780	1,162,900	0.190 (0.180, 0.210)	1.090 (0.020)	0.191 (0.033)	0.192 (0.030)	0.046 (0.045)	0.005 (0.044)	0.008	0.012

The initial analysis was conducted in a dataset that was a composite of the Atherosclerosis in Communities (ARIC), Health and Retirement (HRS), LifeLines (LL), and Minnesota Center for Twin and Family Research (MCTFR) cohort studies, and the analysis was repeated in the UK Biobank and the 23andMe research participant cohort. Imputed HapMap3 single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) were used and the number of SNPs passing QC in each analysis is shown. Male partner and female partner refer to the focal individual used in the analysis. MLMA refers to mixed linear model association analysis of mate choice, and the SNP estimates gained were then used to predict height in an independent sample. BLUP, best linear unbiased predictor.

Table 2 | Phenotypic and genetic correlations among partners for BMI.

Cohort	Spousal pairs	Number of SNP markers	Phenotypic correlation among pairs (95% CI)	BLUP predictor regression coefficient (SE)	Estimated genetic association among pairs (SE)		Heritability of mate choice (SE)	
					Male partner	Female partner	Male partner	Female partner
Composite Sample of ARIC, HRS, LL and MCTFR cohorts	5,044	1,135,785	0.193 (0.168, 0.229)	0.997 (0.058)	0.099 (0.047)	0.080 (0.048)	0.025 (0.066)	0.001 (0.066)
23andMe research participant cohort	11,908	1,134,501	0.271 (0.255, 0.288)	0.880 (0.033)	0.159 (0.034)	0.215 (0.033)	0.015 (0.029)	0.063 (0.030)
UK Biobank	7,780	1,162,900	0.205 (0.170, 0.235)	0.987 (0.029)	0.117 (0.038)	0.158 (0.047)	0.030 (0.045)	0.014 (0.043)

The initial analysis was conducted in a dataset that was a composite of the Atherosclerosis in Communities (ARIC), Health and Retirement (HRS), LifeLines (LL), and Minnesota Center for Twin and Family Research (MCTFR) cohort studies, and the analysis was repeated in the UK Biobank and the 23andMe research participant cohort. Imputed HapMap3 SNPs were used and the number of SNPs passing QC in each analysis is shown. Male partner and female partner refer to the focal individual used in the analysis. BLUP, best linear unbiased predictor.

and genetic factors that affect partner similarity, meaning that the causes and genetic consequences of assortative mating remain obscured (Supplementary Note). In this study, we devise an analytical framework that is unbiased by environmental confounding or population stratification, to estimate the genetic association between partners for a phenotype, allowing for a determination of the degree to which phenotypic similarity of mates reflects a correlation among partners at trait-associated loci.

We first analysed height and body mass index (BMI) in three independent samples: a composite sample of 5,044 couples taken from a range of publicly available cohort studies; a sample of 7,780 couples from the UK Biobank study; and a sample of 11,908 couples from the 23andMe research participant cohort (Supplementary Table 1). In all samples, we selected heterosexual couples of European ethnicity, and we ensured that there were no close relatives within the data. We began by estimating the phenotypic correlation among couples for height and BMI after accounting for age and sex differences in both traits. We then predicted an individual's phenotype from a genome-wide genetic predictor created from their partner's genotype. To create the genetic predictor, we devised a random-effects approach. We first re-analysed results from recent genetic studies of height³³ and BMI³⁴ to ensure that the samples used in our study were independent of the discovery samples. We then re-estimated the SNP effects (SNPs on HapMap3) in a random-effect model that converts the least-squares SNP estimates into approximate best linear unbiased predictors (summary statistic BLUP, or SBLUP; see Methods). The SBLUP approach maximizes prediction

power as it creates a genetic predictor with BLUP properties^{35,36} (Supplementary Figure 2). From summary statistics of the meta-analysed genome-wide association study (GWAS), our SBLUP predictors for height and BMI had BLUP properties (slope of the regression of phenotype on genetic predictor of ~1, Tables 1,2), and explained 18% of the phenotypic variation of height and 8% of the phenotypic variation of BMI, as compared with estimates of 17% and 7%, respectively, obtained by using genetic predictors made directly from GWAS summary statistics^{33,34}.

We subsequently estimated the regression coefficient from a linear regression of the phenotype of a female on the SBLUP genetic predictor of their male partner, and vice versa, within a mixed-effects model. To further account for population stratification, we adjusted the genetic predictor by the first 20 principal components generated from genotype data prior to the analysis^{33,34,37}. We demonstrate by theory (Supplementary Methods) and through simulation (Supplementary Figures 2, 3 and 4) that if there is direct assortative mating for a phenotype, and the predictor has BLUP properties, then the regression coefficient from a linear regression of the phenotype of one partner on the genetic predictor of the other is expected to equal the phenotypic correlation among couples. Furthermore, we show by theory (Supplementary Methods) and simulation (Supplementary Figure 5) that indirect assortment for an unmeasured genetically correlated trait would also create a correlation among couples at trait-associated loci for the recorded phenotype, with the value dependent on the phenotypic and genetic correlations of the different phenotypes, the ratio of their heritability, and the

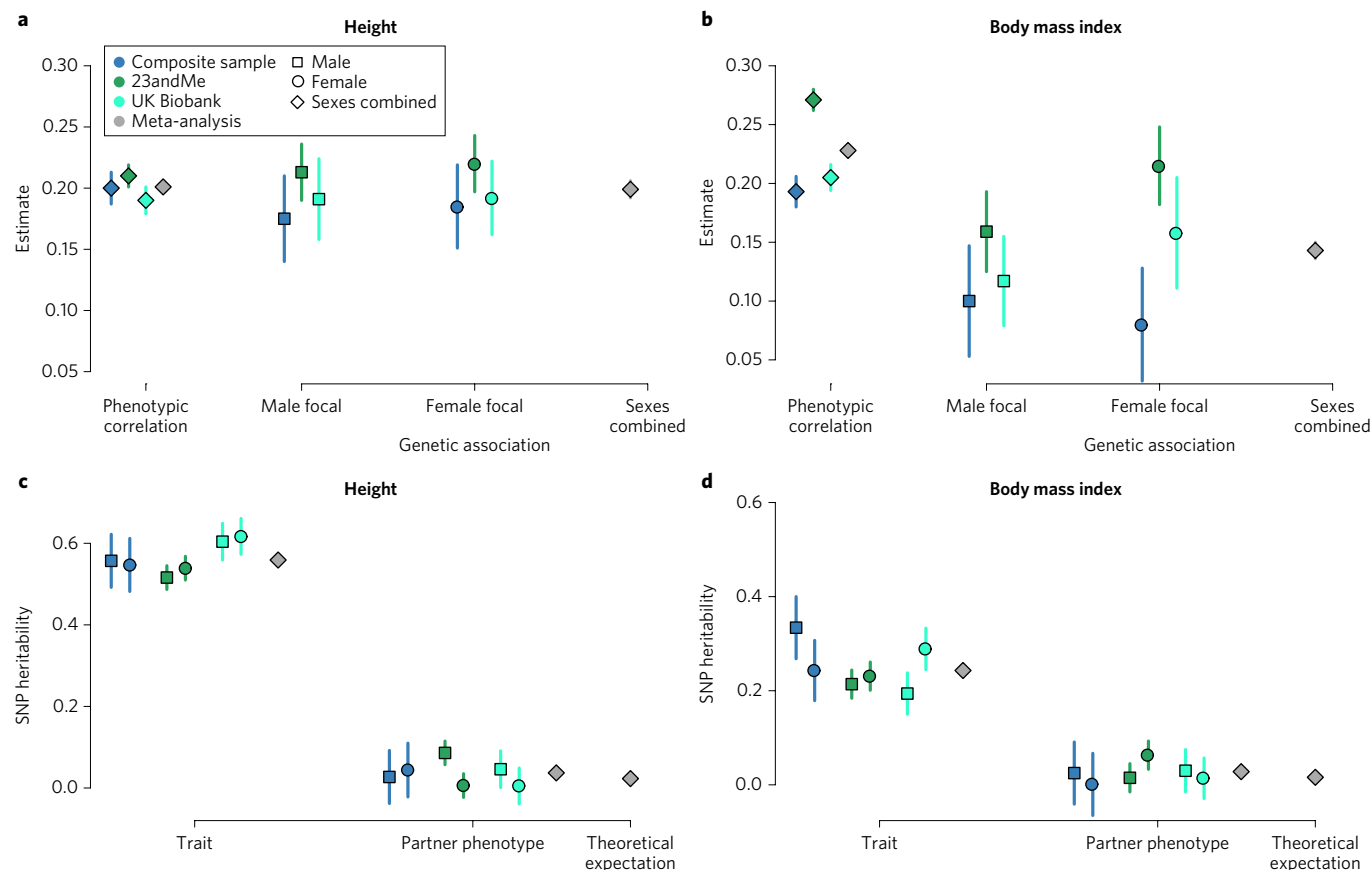


Figure 1 | Assortative mating for height and BMI creates a correlation at trait-associated loci among partners. In blue ($N=5,044$ couples) are the results of analysis conducted in a dataset that was a composite of the Atherosclerosis in Communities, Health and Retirement, LifeLines, and Minnesota Center for Twin and Family Research cohort studies. The analysis was repeated in the UK Biobank (cyan, $N=7,710$) and 23andMe research participant cohort (green, $N=11,908$), and then the results were meta-analysed (grey). **a,b**, The phenotypic correlation among spousal pairs is shown, after correcting for age and sex differences. ‘Male focal’ and ‘female focal’ refer to the focal individual used in the analysis to estimate the genetic association among partners for height (**a**) and BMI (**b**), with the combined meta-analysis value across studies in grey. **c,d**, Trait refers to the SNP heritability for height (**c**) and BMI (**d**), in males, females, and meta-analysed across sexes and studies. From the meta-analysis value, a theoretical expectation was derived for the heritability estimate gained when treating the phenotype of an individual’s partner as the phenotype of that individual, and then partner phenotype refers to those estimates gained from the data. Error bars give the SE of the estimates.

degree of partner assortment (Supplementary Methods). Therefore, our approach provides a direct estimate of the correlation among couples at trait-associated loci but cannot differentiate between direct assortment on a phenotype and assortment on a genetically correlated trait. However, our approach does differentiate between assortative mating based on selection of phenotypic characteristics and assortative mating based on shared social or environmental factors, because under only social/environmental homogamy we would not expect an association between genetic predictors of phenotype within the mixed-effect model of equation (1). This is because the equation accounts for population stratification, both by regressing principal components from the genetic predictor, and by fitting a relationship matrix estimated from the SNP markers.

We find evidence for a genetic basis of assortative mating for both height and BMI in all samples (Tables 1,2, Fig. 1). Across all samples, the meta-analysed phenotypic correlation among partners was 0.201 for height (0.004 SE) and 0.228 for BMI (0.004 SE; Tables 1,2, Fig. 1). For height, the meta-analysed value of the regression coefficient from a linear regression of the SBLUP genetic predictor of males and the phenotype of their female partner, and vice versa (meta-analysed value 0.200 with SE of 0.007, Table 2, Fig. 1a), did not significantly differ from the phenotypic correlation. For BMI, the meta-analysed estimate of the regression coefficient was 0.143 (0.007 SE), which was lower than the phenotypic correlation

(Table 2, Fig. 1b). The regression coefficients did not differ when using either the male or female partner as the focal individual (Tables 1 and 2; Fig. 1a and b). For both phenotypes, the regression coefficient was significantly different from the expectation of zero under only social homogamy or partner interaction (Supplementary Figure 3), and we demonstrate that correlation in ancestry among partners in our data would not drive the results we present (Supplementary Figure 6). For height, obtaining a genetic estimate equal to the phenotypic estimate under indirect assortment would require a combination of a partner correlation that is greater than 0.2, for a trait that has a genetic correlation of >0.5 with height, and a heritability of >0.8 , which is unlikely given that there is no evidence for a trait fitting these criteria. Therefore, our results suggest that there is direct assortative mating on height across all studies. For BMI, there may be indirect assortment on a genetically correlated trait, or there may be a combination of direct assortment and environmental factors that lead to phenotypic similarity among partners. For example, couples may additionally converge in phenotype over time, creating a mismatch in phenotypic and genetic estimates. Regardless of the mechanism, we find evidence of assortment at height- and BMI-associated loci implying gametic phase disequilibrium at those loci in the human population.

We estimated the heritability (h^2_{SNP}) associated with common SNPs for realized phenotypic mate choice in unrelated individuals,

by treating an individual's partner's phenotype as their own, and we tested this estimate against a derived theoretical expectation (Supplementary Methods, Supplementary Figure 7). The meta-analysed estimate of h^2_{SNP} for height was 0.559 (0.012) and that for BMI was 0.243 (0.012) across samples, with no evidence for significant differences among samples or sexes (Fig. 1d). Using these meta-analysis estimates and the phenotypic partner correlations, we calculated expectations of the h^2_{SNP} for realized phenotypic mate choice of 0.023 for height and 0.016 for BMI (Supplementary Methods and Supplementary Figure 7). The estimates of h^2_{SNP} for partner phenotype were not significantly different from their expectation, giving meta-analysis values of 0.030 (0.012) for height and 0.026 (0.012) for BMI (Tables 1,2, Fig. 1c and d). Finally, we conducted a mixed linear model association analysis of assortative mating for height, in which we tested for associations between the phenotype of an individual and the genotype of their partner. We created a genetic predictor from the SNP estimates gained from this analysis and used this to predict height in an independent sample of individuals from the combined cohorts that were not part of, or related to, the couples used in the analysis (Supplementary Table 1). The genetic predictor generated from the SNP results of the composite sample was significantly associated with height in the independent prediction sample (Table 1, prediction $R^2 = 0.011$, $p < 2 \times 10^{-16}$ for the female focal analysis; prediction $R^2 = 0.005$, $p < 4 \times 10^{-6}$ for the male focal analysis), and this result was replicated in both the UK Biobank and 23andMe samples (Table 1). These results also conformed to our expectation from theory and simulation (Supplementary Methods and Supplementary Figure 8). Taken together, these analyses suggest that the same loci underlie the trait and assortment on the trait, and provide further support for a correlation among partners at height- and BMI-associated loci.

We then extended our analysis to a range of phenotypes in the UK Biobank study. Of the 7,780 couples identified using household information (see Methods) with both phenotypic and genotypic data, all had measures of educational attainment (years), 4,323 had measures of bone mineral density, 7,773 had measures of waist-to-height ratio (WHR) and 7,173 had measures of blood pressure. We corrected the phenotypes for age and sex differences and standardized to a z-score before estimating the phenotypic correlation. To estimate the genetic association, we reanalysed summary statistics from recent genetic studies^{38–41} to create SBLUP statistics, and we then predicted an individual's phenotype from a genome-wide SBLUP genetic predictor created from their partner's genotype.

We find evidence for a correlation among partners at trait-associated loci for WHR, blood pressure and educational attainment (Fig. 2). In contrast, there was no evidence for either a phenotypic correlation for bone mineral density, or a correlation at bone mineral density associated loci, among partners (Fig. 2). Our findings for blood pressure, WHR and BMI probably reflect assortment on some combination of these phenotypes, or an alternative component of metabolism, given previous evidence for a genetic correlation between metabolic syndrome traits such as BMI, WHR and blood pressure⁴². For educational attainment, the correlation at trait-associated loci (0.654, 0.014 SE) was significantly higher than the phenotypic correlation (0.412, 0.011 SE). Previous studies indicate that a genetic predictor for educational attainment explains more variation in cognitive performance than educational attainment⁴³, and provide evidence^{41,43} for a genetic correlation between educational attainment and cognitive performance that is higher than the phenotypic correlation of ~ 0.5 . A partner correlation of ~ 0.65 for an unmeasured trait of cognitive performance with heritability ~ 0.7 that has phenotypic correlation ~ 0.6 and genetic correlation ~ 0.8 with educational attainment, and a heritability for educational attainment of ~ 0.35 , would result in the estimates that we obtain here (Supplementary Methods). We support these results by directly estimating the correlation among partners for genetic predictors of both height and

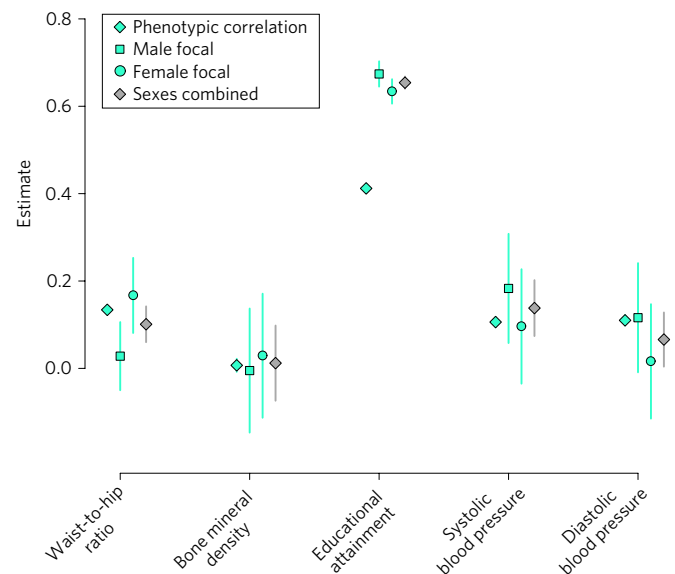


Figure 2 | Genetic evidence for assortative mating across a range of phenotypes in the UK Biobank study. Of the 7,780 couples identified in the UK Biobank with both phenotypic and genotypic data, all had measures of educational attainment (years), 4,323 had measures of bone mineral density, 7,773 had measures of waist-to-hip ratio and 7,173 had measures of blood pressure. We corrected the phenotypes for age and sex differences and standardized to a z-score before estimating the phenotypic correlation. To estimate the genetic association, we reanalysed summary statistics from recent genetic studies to create SBLUP statistics (see Methods). ‘Male focal’ (square) and ‘female focal’ (circle) refer to the focal individual used in the analysis to estimate the genetic association among partners, and ‘sexes combined’ refers to the meta-analysed value.

educational attainment, calculated from the ordinary least-squares association study estimates (Supplementary Figure S9). For educational attainment, we find that this direct estimate of the correlation at genetic value among partners is higher than the expected value given a phenotypic correlation of 0.4. In contrast, for height, the correlation at genetic value among partners conforms to the expectation given a phenotypic correlation of 0.2. While these findings on phenotypes other than height and BMI require replication that was not feasible in this study, they suggest that in addition to height there is phenotypic assortment in the UK population on traits that are associated with educational attainment and metabolism that creates a correlation among partners at trait-associated loci.

In summary, we show that the observed similarity in height, metabolic traits and educational attainment between partners reflects a correlation at trait-associated loci to differing degrees across traits. For height, there is likely to be direct phenotypic assortment, which is why our findings support a recent study³², despite the potential for bias by environmental confounding in that study. Secondary assortment on a genetically correlated trait probably leads to a correlation at trait-associated loci for educational attainment. Finally, for BMI, WHR and blood pressure there may be indirect assortment on a genetically correlated metabolic trait, or there may be a combination of direct assortment and environmental sharing that leads to phenotypic similarity among partners. For many phenotypes, shared environment probably plays a role in both phenotypic variation and mate choice. Our approach, which is free of environmental confounding, enables a direct estimation of the degree to which assortative mating creates a genetic correlation among partners at trait-associated loci for any phenotype in populations of any species.

Our results represent a snapshot of contemporary assortative mating in the human population, and we do not know whether mate

choice was historically consistent, or whether equilibrium has been reached. If we assume equilibrium and an equilibrium heritability of 0.7 for height and 0.4 for BMI⁴⁴, then our estimates of the degree to which the phenotypic correlation reflects a correlation at genetic values predict that the additive genetic variance and heritability are inflated by 17% and 5% for height, and 7% and 4% for BMI, respectively, relative to a population with random mating (see eq. 7.19 of previous work⁴⁵). For educational attainment, assuming an equilibrium heritability of 0.4 implies an inflation of 27% and 24% for the additive genetic variance and heritability, respectively. These results have implications for the interpretation of resemblance between relatives and for estimates of genetic parameters in populations.

Methods

We define assortative mating to be a phenotypic assortment that creates a directional build-up of gametic phase disequilibria at the underlying trait loci^{15,16,18,19,45}. Phenotypic assortment can be based either directly on a phenotype, or indirectly on the phenotype of a genetically correlated trait. We distinguish this from assortative mating under heterogamy/homogamy where assortment occurs based on the environment (culture, social status, ethnicity), which can create a correlation in trait value if the phenotype is correlated with these environmental factors. Cultural homogamy can also create a correlation in genetic similarity among individuals if there is correlated population stratification among couples⁴⁶. Our aim is to control for population stratification in order to quantify assortative mating genome-wide for height and BMI within populations.

Data. Composite cohort sample. We used a composite sample of data across a number of cohort studies (Supplementary Table 1). We selected heterosexual couples by identifying individuals of European ethnicity who had (i) a child together (inferred from genotype data and/or known pedigree structure), (ii) SNP genotype data, and (iii) phenotype data for height and BMI. Within each cohort, we adjusted the phenotype for age and standardized to z -scores in males and females separately, which removed differences in both mean and variance between males and females, and across cohorts. We then removed any couples that contained an outlying individual with a phenotypic value >7 SD from the mean.

All of the composite sample cohorts were independently imputed to a 1000 Genomes reference panel, using identical quality control (QC) procedures on the initial datasets of per-SNP missing data rate of <0.01 , minor allele frequency >0.01 , per-person missing data rate <0.01 , and Hardy–Weinberg disequilibrium p -value $<1 \times 10^{-6}$. Imputation was performed in two stages. First, the target data were haplotyped using HAPI-UR. Second, Impute2 was used to impute the haplotypes to the 1,000-genome reference panel (release 1, version 3). We then extracted best-guess genotypes at common SNPs typed in the HapMap 3 European sample with imputation info score >0.5 . We conducted principal component analysis within each cohort and removed individuals with principal eigenvector values that were >7 SD from the mean. We calculated allele frequencies within each of the cohorts and removed any SNPs with allele frequency differences across cohorts larger than 0.2. We then combined the cohorts together and conducted an additional round of QC of per-SNP missing data rate of <0.01 , minor allele frequency >0.01 , per-person missing data rate <0.01 and Hardy–Weinberg disequilibrium p -value $<1 \times 10^{-6}$. Finally, we removed one of any pair of individuals with estimated relatedness in a genetic relatedness matrix (see below) greater than a threshold of 0.05. All QC was conducted using PLINK v1.9.

23andMe research participant cohort. We repeated our analysis using data from the 23andMe research participant cohort, which is drawn from the customer base of 23andMe, a consumer genetics company. This cohort has been described in detail previously^{47,48}. Participants provided informed consent and answered survey questions online, under a protocol approved by the external institutional review board Ethical & Independent Review Services (E&I Review), which is accredited by the Association for the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs. Couples were selected who had at least one child in the database, and for whom self-reported height and weight were available. Relatives were then excluded, by removing one from any pair of individuals that shared more than 700 cM of total identity by descent. Participant genotype data were phased out of sample using a modified version of BEAGLE, and were then imputed in batches of 8,000 to 9,000 individuals against the September 2013 release of the 1000 Genomes Project haplotypes using Minimac2, with five rounds and 200 states for parameter estimation. Analyses were limited to 15.5 million SNPs with imputed $R^2 > 0.5$ averaged across all batches and $R^2 > 0.3$ in every batch.

UK Biobank Sample. We repeated our analyses using data from the UK Biobank following a recent study³². The UK Biobank Axiom (UKBA) array from Affymetrix

was custom-designed for the purpose of genotyping the UK Biobank participants. The UKBA array is being used to genotype ~450,000 of the ~500,000 UK Biobank participants. The other ~50,000 samples were genotyped on the closely related UK BiLEVE (UKBL) array. The UKBA array is an updated version of the UKBL array that includes additional markers, which replaced a small fraction of the markers used for genome-wide coverage. The UKBL cohort and the rest of UK Biobank differ only in small details of the DNA processing stage and the two SNP arrays are very similar with over 95% common marker content. The ~50,000 samples genotyped on the UKBL array are included in the interim release. After QC procedures have been applied (see Supplementary Methods), the interim UK Biobank data release contains genotypes for 152,736 samples that passed sample QC (~99.9% of total samples), and 806,466 SNPs that passed SNP QC in at least one batch ($>99\%$ of the array content).

Imputed genotype data are provided as part of the data release. Prior to imputation, genotypes SNPs on the UKBA chip and UKBL chip were removed if (i) they were missing across multiple batches, (ii) they were multiallelic or (iii) they were of minor allele frequency, $<1\%$. 1,037 sample outliers were also removed. These filters resulted in a dataset with 641,018 autosomal SNPs in 152,256 samples. The result of the imputation process using a merged reference panel from the UK10K and 1000 Genomes data (Supplementary Methods) is a dataset with 73,355,667 SNPs, short indels and large structural variants in 152,249 individuals. Selecting out only SNPs with imputation 'info score' >0.3 and minor allele count ≥ 5 gives ~40M SNPs in 152,249 individuals. Principal component analysis and the self-declared ethnicity were used to derive a 'White British' subset of samples. In addition, samples were excluded if they had (i) at least one identified closely related sample ($r > 0.1$); (ii) a genetically inferred sex that did not match the self-reported gender; (iii) ~500 extreme heterozygosity or missing genotype outliers. These filters resulted in a dataset with 112,338 samples, and further exclusion of one individual from a pair with an estimate SNP marker relatedness greater than 0.05 using GCTA (Supplementary Methods) resulted in a final sample of 108,042 samples. We then selected out 1,162,900 HapMap3 SNPs. BMI and height were recorded for every individual, and we selected only the first recorded measures. We then adjusted both phenotypes for age (factor with levels for each age between 40 and 73) and sex differences. BMI and height phenotypes 5 SD away from the mean were not included in the analyses. Both phenotypes were then converted to z -scores with zero mean and variance of 1.

From this set of 108,042 individuals, we used household sharing information to identify pairs of individuals who were less than 10 years apart in age, who both reported living with their spouse, in the same location, for the same length of time, with the same number of people in their household, and who had parents of different ages. This provided a set of 7,780 couples with complete height, BMI and genotype data. From these couples, 4,323 couples had complete bone mineral density data (UK Biobank unique data identifier 3148.0.0), 7,773 had measures of WHR (UK Biobank unique data identifier 48-0.0 and 49-0.0), 7,173 had measures of blood pressure (UK Biobank unique data identifiers 4079-0.0 and 4080-0.0) and all 7,780 had reported their educational attainment (UK Biobank unique data identifier 6138-0.0). We converted educational attainment to a continuous yearly measure as in a previous study⁴¹. We then adjusted the phenotypes for age (factor with levels for each age between 40 and 73) and sex differences, removed individuals 5 SD away from the mean, and standardized the phenotype to a z -score with zero mean and variance of 1.

Statistical analysis. Phenotypic correlation. We began by estimating the phenotypic correlation among couples for all phenotypes after accounting for age and sex differences in both traits.

Approximate best linear unbiased genetic predictor. We predicted an individual's phenotype from a genome-wide genetic predictor created from their partner's genotype. To create the genetic predictor, we devised a random-effect approach (Supplementary Methods). We first re-analysed results from recent genetic studies of height³³ and BMI³⁴ to ensure that the samples used in our study were independent of the discovery samples. For the extended UK Biobank analysis, we used results from genetic studies of bone mineral density³⁸, systolic and diastolic blood pressure³⁹, WHR⁴⁰ and educational attainment⁴¹, ensuring that the UK Biobank sample was not included within the discovery meta-analysis. We then re-estimated the SNP effects (SNPs on HapMap3) in a random-effect model that converts the least-squares SNP estimates into approximate best linear unbiased predictors (summary statistic BLUP: SBLUP; Supplementary Methods). The SBLUP approach maximizes prediction power, as it creates a genetic predictor with BLUP properties^{35,36} (Supplementary Figure 2).

Prediction accuracy of a predictor with BLUP properties. We then estimated the amount of variation in height and BMI that can be explained by a predictor with BLUP properties. To do this, we estimated principal components of the HapMap 3 best-guess imputed SNPs for the combined cohort and we selected the top 20 principal components to create a $N \times P$ matrix Z of eigenvectors across the P selected principal components. We then regressed the estimated genetic predictor onto the eigenvectors as $\hat{g}_m = \mu + Z\beta_m + e_m$ and $\hat{g}_f = \mu + Z\beta_f + e_f$ for males (m)

and females (f), respectively, where μ is the mean and β is a $P \times 1$ vector of the regression coefficients, and e is the residual error. We adjusted the predictors as $\hat{g}_{p_m} = \hat{g}_m - Z\hat{\beta}_m$ and $\hat{g}_{p_f} = \hat{g}_f - Z\hat{\beta}_f$. We then regressed the phenotypic values onto the adjusted genetic predictors as $y_m = \mu + \hat{g}_{p_m} + e$ and $y_f = \mu + \hat{g}_{p_f} + e$, where y_m and y_f are $N \times 1$ vectors and represent the phenotype for males and females, respectively. In the UK Biobank sample and the 23andMe cohort, the same approach was followed, with the top 20 principal components computed from a subset of genotyped SNPs^{47,48}. This approach removes population stratification (associated with the leading axes of genetic variation) in the predictor, before estimating the amount of variation in height and BMI explained by the genetic predictor, and the slope of the relationship between phenotype and genetic predictor^{49–52}. These two parameters are key to the later analysis.

Predicting an individual's phenotype from the genotype of their partner. To estimate the degree to which assortative mating creates a genetic correlation at trait-associated loci, we first determined the relationship between the genetic predictor of males and the phenotype of their female partner, and vice versa, as:

$$y_m = \mu_m + \hat{g}_{p_f} + u_m + e_m; y_f = \mu_f + \hat{g}_{p_m} + u_f + e_f \quad (1)$$

where u is an $N \times 1$ vector of the total genetic effects of the individuals, with $u = N(0, A\sigma_G^2)$. Here, A is the genetic relationship matrix between either males (when estimating u_m) or females (when estimating u_f), with its j th element being $A_{jj} = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N \frac{(x_{ij} - 2p_i)(x_{ij} - 2p_i)}{2p_i(1-p_i)}$ where p_i is the frequency of the minor allele of the imputed HapMap3 common SNP i , and x is the SNP genotype (best guess for the combined cohort and rounded imputed diploid dosage for the 23andMe cohort). The genetic relationship matrix accounts for population stratification in the phenotype, as it is equivalent to fitting all the principal components within the model. Equation (1) was estimated using the GREML function in GCTA v1.25. Under different types of assortative mating, we derive the expectation of the regression coefficient from a linear regression of the phenotype of males on the genetic predictor of their female partners, and vice versa, in the Supplementary Methods.

Common SNP heritability of realized mate choice. We then estimated the heritability associated with common SNPs (h_{SNP}^2) for realized mate choice of height and BMI as:

$$y_m = \mu_m + Z\beta_m + u_f + e_m; y_f = \mu_f + Z\beta_f + u_m + e_f \quad (2)$$

with notation the same as above. Equation (2) controls for population stratification by fitting the effects of the first 20 principal components estimated within the 23andMe data before then estimating the effects $u = N(0, A\sigma_G^2)$. We selected Hapmap3 common SNPs from the best-guess imputed SNP data to estimate A , and thus σ_G^2 is the variance explained by those SNPs. Equation (2) was estimated using the GREML function in GCTA v1.25. Again, we derive the expectation of the regression coefficient from a linear regression of the phenotype of males on the genetic predictor of their female partners, and vice versa, in the Supplementary Methods.

Mixed linear model association analysis of realized mate choice. To identify the genomic regions associated with realized mate choice and test for a single genetic basis of the trait and mate choice, which implies direct assortment on phenotype, we conducted a mixed linear model association analysis⁵³ as:

$$y_m = \mu_m + X_m\beta_f + u_m + e_m; y_f = \mu_f + X_m\beta_f + u_f + e_f \quad (3)$$

with notation the same as above, where β_i is the regression coefficient, X_{m_i} and X_{f_i} are $N \times 1$ vectors of genotypes for each SNP $i = 1, \dots, k$ (coded as 0, 1 or 2 defining the number of reference alleles), for males and females respectively, u_m and u_f are the polygenic effects (random effect) for males and females respectively, and e is the residual. We selected HapMap3 common SNPs ($MAF \geq 0.01$) from the best-guess imputed SNP data in equation (3) as we did for equations (1) and (2). Equation (3) was estimated using the MLMA function in GCTA v1.25. Again, we derive the expectation of the regression coefficient from a linear regression of the phenotype of males on the genetic predictor of their female partners and vice versa in the Supplementary Methods^{54,55}.

Simulation study. To support our results we conducted a simulation study using real genotype data that is described in full in the Supplementary Methods.

Data availability. We utilize publicly available dbGaP data from the Atherosclerosis Risk in Communities (ARIC) Study (dbGaP phs000090.v1.p1), Health and Retirement Study (HRS: dbGaP phs000428.v1.p1), and Resource for Genetic Epidemiology Research on Adult Health and Aging (GERA: dbGaP phs000674.v1.p1). We also use data from the UK Biobank which is a publicly available resource on request. Access to individual-level phenotypic, genetic and partner identity data from the 23andMe cohort, ARIC, TWINGENE, Minnesota Center for Twin and Family Research (MCTFR)

and the LifeLines Study is available with the obtainment of a research agreement. The summary data that support the findings of the study are available from M.R.R. upon request.

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Author contributions

M.R.R., J.Y. and P.M.V. conceived and designed the study. M.R.R., A.K. and M.G. analysed the data. M.R.R. devised and performed the simulations. A.A.E.V., W.J.P., A.A., B.Z., S.M. provided statistical support. 23andMe Inc., The LifeLines cohort, GIANT consortium, G.W.M., N.G.M., M.L., P.L., D.C., J.V.V.O., M.B.M., H.S., W.G.L., P.K.E.M., N.L.P., M.McG. and K.E.N. provided study oversight, sample collection and management. M.R.R. and P.M.V. derived the theory and wrote the manuscript. All collaborators reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to M.R.R. or P.M.V.

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Competing interests

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Members of The LifeLines Cohort Study

Behrooz Z. Alizadeh¹, H. Marika Boezen¹, Lude Franke², Pim van der Harst³, Gerjan Navis⁴, Marianne Rots⁵, Harold Snieder¹, Morris Swertz², Bruce H. R. Wolffenbuttel⁶, Cisca Wijmenga²

¹Department of Epidemiology, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, The Netherlands. ²Department of Genetics, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, The Netherlands. ³Department of Cardiology, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, The Netherlands. ⁴Department of Internal Medicine, Division of Nephrology, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, The Netherlands. ⁵Department of Medical Biology, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, The Netherlands. ⁶Department of Endocrinology, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, The Netherlands.

Members of the GIANT consortium

Goncalo R. Abecasis¹, Devin Absher², Helene Alavere³, Eva Albrecht⁴, Hana Lango Allen⁵, Peter Almgren⁶, Najaf Amin⁷, Philippe Amouyel⁸, Denise Anderson^{9,10}, Alice M. Arnold^{11,12}, Dominique Arveiler¹³, Thor Aspelund^{14,15}, Folkert W. Asselbergs¹⁶, Themistocles L. Assimes¹⁷, Mustafa Atalay¹⁸, Antony P. Attwood¹⁹⁻²¹, Larry D. Atwood²², Stephan J. L. Bakker²³, Beverley Balkau^{24,25}, Anthony J. Balmforth²⁶, Cristina Barlassina²⁷, Inês Barroso^{19,28}, Hanneke Basart²⁹, Sabrina Bauer³⁰, Jacques S. Beckmann^{31,32}, John P. Beilby³³⁻³⁶, Amanda J. Bennett³⁷, Yoav Ben-Shlomo³⁸, Richard N. Bergman³⁹, Sven Bergmann^{31,40}, Sonja I. Berndt⁴¹, Reiner Biffar⁴², Anna Maria Di Blasio⁴³, Bernhard O. Boehm⁴⁴, Michael Boehnke¹, Heiner Boeing⁴⁵, Eric Boerwinkle⁴⁶, Jennifer L. Bolton⁴⁷, Amélie Bonnefond⁴⁸, Lori L. Bonnycastle^{49,50}, Dorret I. Boomsma⁵¹, Ingrid B. Borecki^{52,53}, Stefan R. Bornstein^{54,55}, Nabila Bouatia-Naji^{56,57}, Gabrielle Boucher⁵⁸, Jennifer L. Bragg-Gresham¹, Paolo Brambilla⁵⁹, Marcel Bruinenberg⁶⁰, Thomas A. Buchanan^{39,61}, Christa Buechler³⁰, Gemma Cadby^{62,63}, Harry Campbell⁴⁷, Mark J. Caulfield⁶⁴, Christine Cavalcanti-Proença^{56,57}, Giancarlo Cesana⁶⁵, Stephen J. Chanock⁴¹, Daniel I. Chasman^{66,67}, Yii-Der Ida Chen^{68,69}, Peter S. Chines^{49,50}, Deborah J. Clegg⁷⁰, Lachlan Coin⁷¹, Francis S. Collins^{49,50}, John M. Connell^{72,73}, William Cookson⁷⁴, Matthew N. Cooper⁷⁵, Damien C. Croteau-Chonka⁷⁶, L. Adrienne Cupples⁷⁷, Daniele Cusi^{78,79}, Felix R. Day⁸⁰, Ian N. M. Day⁸¹, George V. Dedoussis⁸², Mariano Dei^{83,84}, Panos Deloukas¹⁹, Emmanouil T. Dermitzakis⁸⁵, Antigone S. Dimas⁸⁵⁻⁸⁷, Maria Dimitriou⁸², Anna L. Dixon⁸⁸, Marcus Dörr⁸⁹, Cornelia M. van Duijn^{79,91}, Shah Ebrahim^{92,93}, Sarah Edkins¹⁹, Gudny Eiriksdottir¹⁴, Kristina Eisinger³⁰, Niina Eklund^{94,95}, Paul Elliott^{71,96}, Raimund Erbel⁹⁷, Jeanette Erdmann⁹⁸⁻¹⁰¹, Michael R. Erdos⁴⁹, Johan G. Eriksson¹⁰²⁻¹⁰⁶, Tõnu Esko^{3,95,107}, Karol Estrada^{79,108}, David M. Evans¹⁰⁹, Ulf de Faire¹¹⁰, Tove Fall¹¹¹, Martin Farrall¹¹², Mary F. Feitosa⁵², Marco M. Ferrario¹¹³, Teresa Ferreira⁸⁶, Jean Ferrières¹¹⁴, Krista Fischer³, Eva Fisher⁴⁵, Gerry Fowkes⁴⁷, Caroline S. Fox¹¹⁵, Lude Franke^{60,116}, Paul W. Franks¹¹⁷⁻¹¹⁹, Ross M. Fraser⁴⁷, Francesca Frau⁷⁸, Timothy Frayling⁵, Nelson B. Freimer¹²⁰, Philippe Froguel^{48,56,57,121}, Mao Fu¹²², Stefan Gaget^{56,57}, Andrea Ganna¹¹¹, Pablo V. Gejman^{123,124}, Davide Gentilini⁴³, Eco J. C. Geus⁵¹, Christian Gieger⁴, Bruna Gigante¹¹⁰, Anette P. Gjesing¹²⁵, Nicole L. Glazer^{126,127}, Michael E. Goddard^{128,129}, Anuj Goel¹¹², Harald Grallert¹³⁰⁻¹³², Jürgen Gräßler¹³³, Henrik Grönberg¹¹¹, Leif C. Groop⁶, Christopher J. Groves³⁷, Vilmundur Gudnason^{14,15,134}, Candace Guiducci¹³⁵, Stefan Gustafsson¹¹¹, Ulf Gyllensten^{136,137}, Alistair S. Hall¹³⁸, Per Hall¹¹¹, Göran Hallmans¹¹⁹, Anders Hamsten¹³⁹, Torben Hansen^{125,140}, Talin Haritunians¹⁴¹, Tamara B. Harris¹⁴², Pim van der Harst^{116,143}, Anna-Liisa Hartikainen¹⁴⁴, Neelam Hassanali³⁷, Andrew T. Hattersley⁵, Aki S. Havulinna¹⁴⁵, Caroline Hayward¹⁴⁶, Nancy L. Heard-Costa²², Andrew C. Heath¹⁴⁷, Johannes Hebebrand¹⁴⁸, Iris M. Heid^{130,149-151}, Martin den Heijer¹⁵², Christian Hengstenberg¹⁵³⁻¹⁵⁵, Karl-Heinz Herzig¹⁵⁶⁻¹⁵⁸, Andrew A. Hicks¹⁵⁹⁻¹⁶¹, Aroon Hingorani¹⁶², Anke Hinney¹⁴⁸, Joel N. Hirschhorn^{135,163-165}, Albert Hofman^{79,90}, Christopher C. Holmes^{166,167}, Georg Homuth¹⁶⁸, Jouke-Jan Hottenga⁵¹, Kees G. Hovingh²⁹, Frank B. Hu¹⁶⁹⁻¹⁷¹, Yi-Juan Hu¹⁷², Jennifer E. Huffman¹⁴⁶, Jennie Hui^{33-35,75,173}, Heikki Huikuri¹⁷⁴, Steve E. Humphries¹⁷⁵, Joseph Hung^{34,176}, Sarah E. Hunt¹⁹, David Hunter¹⁶⁹⁻¹⁷¹, Kristian Hveem¹⁷⁷, Elina Hyppönen¹⁷⁸, Wilmar Igl¹³⁶, Thomas Illig^{130-132,179}, Erik Ingelsson¹¹¹, Carlos Iribarren^{180,181}, Bo Isomaa^{105,182}, Anne U. Jackson¹, Kevin B. Jacobs^{41,183}, Alan L. James^{34,184}, John-Olov Jansson¹⁸⁵, Ivonne Jarick¹⁸⁶, Marjo-Riitta Jarvelin^{71,156,187,188}, Karl-Heinz Jöckel¹⁸⁹, Åsa Johansson^{136,137,190,191}, Toby Johnson^{31,40,64,192}, Jennifer Jolley²⁰, Torben Jørgensen^{193,194}, Pekka Jousilahti¹⁴⁵, Antti Jula¹⁹⁵, Anne E. Justice¹⁹⁶, Marika Kaakinen^{156,187}, Mika Kähönen¹⁹⁷, Eero Kajantie^{103,198}, Stavroula Kanoni¹⁹, W. H. Linda Kao¹⁹⁹, Lee M. Kaplan^{66,200,201}, Robert C. Kaplan²⁰², Jaakko Kaprio²⁰³⁻²⁰⁶, Karen Kapur^{31,40}, Fredrik Karpe^{37,207,208}, Sekar Kathiresan²⁰⁹⁻²¹¹, Frank Kee²¹², Sirkka M. Keinänen-Kiukaanniemi^{213,214}, Shamika Ketkar⁵², Johannes Kettunen^{94,203}, Kay-Tee Khaw²¹⁵, Lambertus A. Kiemeny²¹⁶⁻²¹⁸, Tuomas O. Kilpeläinen⁸⁰, Leena Kinnunen²¹⁹, Mika Kivimäki¹⁶², Mika Kivimäki¹⁶², Melanie M. Van der Klauw^{60,220}, Marcus E. Kleber^{221,222}, Joshua W. Knowles¹⁷, Wolfgang Koenig²²³, Ivana Kolcic²²⁴, Genovefa Kolovou²²⁵, Inke R. König²²⁶, Seppo Koskinen¹⁴⁵, Peter Kovacs²²⁷, Peter Kraft^{171,228}, Aldi T. Kraja⁵², Kati Kristiansson^{94,203}, Kaarel Krjutškov³, Heyo K. Kroemer²²⁹, Jon P. Krohn⁸⁶, Vjekoslav Krzelj²³⁰, Diana Kuh²³¹, Jennifer R. Kulzer⁷⁶, Meena Kumari¹⁶², Zoltán Kutalik^{31,40}, Kari Kuulasmaa²³², Johanna Kuusisto^{233,234}, Kirsti Kvaloy¹⁷⁷, Markku Laakso^{233,234}, Jaana H. Laitinen²³⁵, Timo A. Lakka^{18,236}, Claudia Lamina^{130,237}, Claudia Langenberg^{80,162}, Olivier Lantieri²³⁸, G. Mark Lathrop²³⁹, Lenore J. Launer¹⁴², Debbie A. Lawlor⁸¹, Robert W. Lawrence⁷⁵, Irene M. Leach¹⁴³, Cecile Lecoeur^{48,56,57}, Sang Hong Lee²⁴⁰, Terho Lehtimäki^{241,242}, Michael F. Leitzmann¹⁴⁹, Guillaume Lettre^{58,243}, Douglas F. Levinson²⁴⁴, Guo Li¹²⁷, Shengxu Li^{80,245}, Liming Liang^{171,228}, Dan-Yu Lin²⁴⁶, Lars Lind²⁴⁷, Cecilia M. Lindgren^{37,86}, Jaana Lindström²¹⁹, Jianjun Liu²⁴⁸, Antonio Liuzzi²⁴⁹, Adam E. Locke¹, Marja-Liisa Lokki²⁵⁰, Christina Loley^{99,226}, Ruth J. F. Loos^{80,251-253}, Mattias Lorentzon²⁵⁴, Jian'an Luan⁸⁰, Robert N. Luben²¹⁵, Barbara Ludwig⁵⁴, Pamela A. Madden¹⁴⁷, Reedik Mägi^{3,86}, Patrik K. E. Magnusson¹¹¹, Massimo Mangino²⁵⁵, Paolo Manunta²⁵⁶, Diana Marek^{31,40}, Michel Marre^{257,258}, Nicholas G. Martin^{259,260}, Winfried März^{222,261}, Andrea Maschio⁸³, Iain Mathieson⁸⁶, Wendy L. McArdle^{262,263}, Steven A. McCarroll^{210,211,264},

Anne McCarthy²⁶⁵, Mark I. McCarthy^{3786,207,208}, Barbara McKnight¹¹, Carolina Medina-Gomez^{790,108}, Sarah E. Medland^{259,260}, Thomas Meitinger^{266,267}, Andres Metspalu^{3,95,107}, Joyce B. J. van Meurs^{790,108}, David Meyre^{48,57,268}, Kristian Midthjell¹⁷⁷, Evelin Mihailov^{3,95}, Lili Milani³, Josine L. Min^{86,269}, Susanne Moebus¹⁸⁹, Miriam F. Moffatt⁷⁴, Karen L. Mohlke⁷⁶, Cliona Molony²⁷⁰, Keri L. Monda^{196,271}, Grant W. Montgomery^{260,272}, Vincent Mooser²⁷³, Mario A. Morken⁴⁹, Andrew D. Morris²⁷⁴, Andrew P. Morris⁸⁶, Thomas W. Mühleisen^{275,276}, Martina Müller-Nurasyid^{14,186,277,278}, Patricia B. Munroe⁶⁴, Arthur W. Musk^{34,173,279}, Narisu Narisu^{49,50}, Gerjan Navis²³, Benjamin M. Neale²⁸⁰, Mari Nelis^{3,95,107}, James Nemesh²¹¹, Matt J. Neville³⁷, Julius S Ngwa⁷⁷, George Nicholson^{167,281}, Markku S. Nieminen²⁸², Inger Njølstad^{283,284}, Ellen A. Nohr²⁸⁵, Ilja M. Nolte^{286,287}, Kari E. North^{196,288}, Markus M. Nöthen^{275,276}, Dale R. Nyholt²⁸⁹, Jeffrey R. O'Connell¹²², Claes Ohlsson²⁵⁴, Albertine J. Oldehinkel²⁹⁰, Gert-Jan van Ommen^{91,291}, Ken K. Ong^{80,231}, Ben A. Oostra^{90,292,293}, Willem H. Ouwehand^{19-21,294}, Colin N. A. Palmer²⁷⁴, Lyle J. Palmer^{34,62,63,75}, Aarno Palotie^{19,203}, Guillaume Paré²⁹⁵, Alex N. Parker²⁹⁶, Lavinia Paternoster¹⁰⁹, Yudi Pawitan¹¹¹, Sonali Pechlivanis¹⁸⁹, John F. Peden^{86,297,298}, Nancy L. Pedersen¹¹¹, Oluf Pedersen^{125,299,300}, Niina Pellikka^{94,203}, Leena Peltonen^{19,103,203,301,302}, Brenda Penninx³⁰³⁻³⁰⁵, Markus Perola^{3,94,203}, John R. B. Perry⁵, Thomas Person⁷⁰, Annette Peters^{132,306,307}, Marjolein J. Peters^{790,108}, Irene Pichler¹⁵⁹, Kirsi H. Pietiläinen^{204,308}, Carl G. P. Platou^{177,309}, Ozren Polasek^{224,310,311}, Anneli Pouta^{144,188}, Chris Power¹⁷⁸, Peter P. Pramstaller^{159-161,312,313}, Michael Preuss^{100,226}, Jackie F. Price⁴⁷, Inga Prokopenko³⁷⁸⁶, Michael A. Province⁵², Bruce M. Psaty^{127,314,315}, Shaun Purcell^{210,301,316}, Carolin Pütter¹⁸⁹, Lu Qi^{169,170}, Thomas Quertermous¹⁷, Aparna Radhakrishnan^{19,20,294}, Olli Raitakari³¹⁷⁻³¹⁹, Joshua C. Randall^{19,86}, Rainer Rauramaa^{236,320}, Nigel W. Rayner³⁷⁸⁶, Emil Rehnberg¹¹¹, Augusto Rendon^{20,21,294,321}, Martin Ridderstråle³²², Paul M. Ridker^{66,67}, Samuli Ripatti^{199,4,203}, Aila Rissanen³⁰⁸, Fernando Rivadeneira^{790,108}, Carlo Rivolta³¹, Neil R. Robertson^{37,86}, Lynda M. Rose⁶⁷, Igor Rudan^{47,230}, Timo E. Saaristo^{323,324}, Hendrik Sager³²⁵, Veikko Salomaa^{145,232}, Nilesh J. Samani^{326,327}, Jennifer G. Sambrook^{20,294}, Alan R. Sanders^{123,124}, Camilla Sandholt¹²⁵, Serena Sanna^{83,84}, Jouko Saramies³²⁸, Eric E. Schadt³²⁹⁻³³², Andre Scherag¹⁸⁹, Sabine Schipf³³³, David Schlessinger³³⁴, Stefan Schreiber³³⁵, Heribert Schunkert⁹⁸⁻¹⁰¹, Peter E. H. Schwarz^{55,336}, Laura J. Scott¹, Jianxin Shi⁴¹, So-Youn Shin¹⁹, Alan R. Shuldiner^{122,337}, Dmitry Shungin^{117,119,338}, Stefano Signorini³³⁹, Kaisa Silander^{94,203}, Juha Sinisalo²⁸², Boris Skrobek^{48,57}, Jan H. Smit³⁰³, Albert Vernon Smith^{14,15,134}, George Davey Smith⁸¹, Harold Snieder^{60,286}, Nicole Soranzo^{19,255}, Thorkild I. A. Sørensen³⁴⁰, Ulla Sovio⁷¹, Timothy D. Spector²⁵⁵, Elizabeth K. Speliotes^{135,200,341,342}, Alena Stančáková³⁴³, Klaus Stark^{155,344}, Kari Stefansson^{345,346}, Valgerdur Steinthorsdottir³⁴⁵, Jonathan C. Stephens^{20,294}, Kathleen Stirrups¹⁹, Ronald P. Stolk^{60,287}, David P Strachan^{347,348}, Rona J Strawbridge¹³⁹, Heather M. Stringham¹, Michael Stumvoll³⁴⁹⁻³⁵¹, Ida Surakka^{94,203}, Amy J. Swift^{49,50}, Ann-Christine Syvanen³⁵², Mari-Liis Tammesoo³, Maris Teder-Laving^{3,95,107}, Tanya M. Teslovich¹, Alexander Teumer¹⁶⁸, Eirini V. Theodoraki⁸², Brian Thomson¹³⁵, Barbara Thorand³⁰⁶, Gudmar Thorleifsson³⁴⁵, Unnur Thorsteinsdottir^{345,346}, Nicholas John Timpson⁸¹, Anke Tönjes^{349,351,353}, David-Alexandre Tregouet³⁵⁴, Elena Tremoli³⁵⁵, Mieke D. Trip^{29,356}, Tiinamaija Tuomi^{105,357,358}, Jaakko Tuomilehto^{219,359-362}, Jonathan Tyrer³⁶³, Manuela Uda⁸³, André G. Uitterlinden^{790,108}, Gianluca Usala⁸³, Matti Uusitupa^{364,365}, Timo T. Valle²¹⁹, Liesbeth Vandenput²⁵⁴, Vincent Vatin^{56,57}, Sailaja Vedantam^{135,163-165}, Femmie de Vegt²¹⁶, Sita H. Vermeulen^{216,366}, Jorma Viikari³⁶⁷, Jarmo Virtamo²³², Peter M. Visscher^{240,368}, Veronique Vitart¹⁴⁶, Jana V. Van Vliet-Ostaptchouk^{60,220}, Benjamin F. Voight^{210,211,264}, Peter Vollenweider³⁶⁹, Claudia B. Volpato¹⁵⁹, Henry Völzke^{370,371}, Gérard Waeber³⁶⁹, Lindsay L. Waite², Henri Wallaschofski^{372,373}, G. Bragi Walters³⁴⁵, Zhaoming Wang^{41,183}, Nicholas J. Wareham⁸⁰, Richard M. Watanabe^{39,374}, Hugh Watkins¹¹², Michael N. Weedon⁵, Ryan Welch¹, Robert J. Weyant¹, Eleanor Wheeler¹⁹, Charles C. White⁷⁷, H-Erich Wichmann^{130,151,375-378}, Elisabeth Widen²⁰³, Sarah H. Wild⁴⁷, Gonneke Willemsen⁵¹, Cristen J. Willer¹, Tom Wilsgaard²⁸³, James F. Wilson⁴⁷, Sophie van Wingerden⁷, Bernhard R. Winkelmann³⁷⁹, Thomas W. Winkler^{149,150}, Daniel R. Witte³⁸⁰, Jacqueline C. M. Witteman⁷⁹⁰, Bruce H. R. Wolffenbuttel^{60,220}, Andrew Wong²³¹, Andrew R. Wood⁵, Tsegaselassie Workalemahu^{169,170}, Alan F. Wright¹⁴⁶, Jian Yang^{260,368}, John W. G. Yarnell³⁸¹, Lina Zgaga²²⁴, Jing Hua Zhao⁸⁰, M. Carola Zillikens^{90,108}, Paavo Zitting³⁸² and Krina T. Zondervan³⁸³

¹Department of Biostatistics, Center for Statistical Genetics, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109, USA. ²Hudson Alpha Institute for Biotechnology, Huntsville, Alabama 35806, USA. ³Estonian Genome Center, University of Tartu, Tartu 50410, Estonia. ⁴Institute of Genetic Epidemiology, Helmholtz Zentrum München - German Research Center for Environmental Health, 85764 Neuherberg, Germany. ⁵Genetics of Complex Traits, Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry, University of Exeter, Exeter, EX1 2LU, UK. ⁶Lund University Diabetes Centre, Department of Clinical Sciences, Lund University, 20502 Malmö, Sweden. ⁷Department of Epidemiology, Erasmus MC, Rotterdam, 3015GE, The Netherlands. ⁸Institut Pasteur de Lille, INSERM U744, Université Lille Nord de France, F-59000 Lille, France. ⁹Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, West Perth Western Australia 6872, Australia. ¹⁰Centre for Child Health Research, The University of Western Australia, Australia. ¹¹Departments of Biostatistics, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98195, USA. ¹²Collaborative Health Studies Coordinating Center, Seattle, Washington 98115, USA. ¹³Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, Strasbourg, France. ¹⁴Icelandic Heart Association, Kopavogur, Iceland. ¹⁵University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland. ¹⁶Department of Cardiology, Division Heart & Lungs, University Medical Center Utrecht, The Netherlands. ¹⁷Department of Medicine, Stanford University School of

Medicine, Stanford, California 94305, USA. ¹⁸Institute of Biomedicine/Physiology, University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio Campus, Finland. ¹⁹Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute, Hinxton, Cambridge, CB10 1SA, UK. ²⁰Department of Haematology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB2 0PT, UK. ²¹NIHR Cambridge Biomedical Research Centre, Cambridge, UK. ²²Department of Neurology, Boston University School of Medicine, Boston, Massachusetts 02118, USA. ²³Department of Internal Medicine, University Medical Center Groningen, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands. ²⁴INSERM CESP Centre for Research in Epidemiology and Public Health U1018, Epidemiology of diabetes, obesity and chronic kidney disease over the lifecourse, 94807 Villejuif, France. ²⁵University Paris Sud 11, UMRS 1018, 94807 Villejuif, France. ²⁶Multidisciplinary Cardiovascular Research Centre (MCRC), Leeds Institute of Genetics, Health and Therapeutics (LIGHT), University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK. ²⁷University of Milan, Department of Medicine, Surgery and Dentistry, 20139 Milano, Italy. ²⁸University of Cambridge Metabolic Research Labs, Institute of Metabolic Science Addenbrooke's Hospital, CB2 0QQ, Cambridge, UK. ²⁹Department of Vascular Medicine, Academic Medical Center, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. ³⁰Regensburg University Medical Center, Innere Medizin I, 93053 Regensburg, Germany. ³¹Department of Medical Genetics, University of Lausanne, 1005 Lausanne, Switzerland. ³²Service of Medical Genetics, Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Vaudois (CHUV) University Hospital, 1011 Lausanne, Switzerland. ³³PathWest Laboratory of Western Australia, Department of Molecular Genetics, J Block, QEII Medical Centre, Nedlands, Western Australia 6009, Australia. ³⁴Busselton Population Medical Research Foundation Inc., Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, Nedlands, Western Australia 6009, Australia. ³⁵School of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, Western Australia 6009, Australia. ³⁶Department of Surgery and Pathology, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, 6009, Australia. ³⁷Oxford Centre for Diabetes, Endocrinology and Metabolism, University of Oxford, Oxford, OX3 7LJ, UK. ³⁸Department of Social Medicine, University of Bristol, Bristol, BS8 2PS, UK. ³⁹Department of Physiology and Biophysics, Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California 90033, USA. ⁴⁰Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland. ⁴¹Division of Cancer Epidemiology and Genetics, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Department of Health and Human Services, Bethesda, Maryland 20892, USA. ⁴²Zentrum für Zahn-, Mund- und Kieferheilkunde, 17489 Greifswald, Germany. ⁴³Molecular Biology Department, Istituto Auxologico Italiano, Milano, Italy. ⁴⁴Division of Endocrinology and Diabetes, Department of Medicine, University Hospital, Ulm, Germany. ⁴⁵Department of Epidemiology, German Institute of Human Nutrition Potsdam-Rehbruecke, 14558 Nuthetal, Germany. ⁴⁶Human Genetics Center and Institute of Molecular Medicine, University of Texas Health Science Center, Houston, Texas 77030, USA. ⁴⁷Centre for Population Health Sciences, University of Edinburgh, Teviot Place, Edinburgh, EH8 9AG, Scotland. ⁴⁸CNRS UMR8199-IBL-Institut Pasteur de Lille, F-59000 Lille, France. ⁴⁹National Human Genome Research Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland 20892, USA. ⁵⁰Genome Technology Branch, National Human Genome Research Institute, NIH, Bethesda, MD 20892, USA. ⁵¹Department of Biological Psychology, VU University Amsterdam, 1081 BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands. ⁵²Department of Genetics, Washington University School of Medicine, St Louis, Missouri 63110, USA. ⁵³Division of Biostatistics, Washington University School of Medicine, St Louis, Missouri 63110, USA. ⁵⁴Department of Medicine III, University of Dresden, 01307 Dresden, Germany. ⁵⁵Department of Medicine III, University of Dresden, Medical Faculty Carl Gustav Carus, Fetscherstrasse 74, 01307 Dresden, Germany. ⁵⁶CNRS UMR8199-IBL-Institut Pasteur de Lille, F-59019 Lille, France. ⁵⁷University Lille Nord de France, 59000 Lille, France. ⁵⁸Montreal Heart Institute, Montreal, Quebec, H1T 1C8, Canada. ⁵⁹Dipartimento di Medicina Sperimentale, Università degli Studi Milano-Bicocca, Monza, Italy. ⁶⁰Lifelines Cohort Study, University Medical Center Groningen, University of Groningen, The Netherlands. ⁶¹Division of Endocrinology, Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California 90033, USA. ⁶²Genetic Epidemiology and Biostatistics Platform, Ontario Institute for Cancer Research, Toronto, M5G 1L7, Canada. ⁶³Prosserman Centre for Health Research, Samuel Lunenfeld Research Institute, Toronto, M5G 1X5, Canada. ⁶⁴Clinical Pharmacology and Barts and The London Genome Centre, William Harvey Research Institute, Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen Mary University of London, Charterhouse Square, London EC1M 6BQ, UK. ⁶⁵Department of Clinical Medicine, University of Milano-Bicocca, Monza, Italy. ⁶⁶Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts 02115, USA. ⁶⁷Division of Preventive Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts 02215, USA. ⁶⁸Department of OB/GYN and Medical Genetics Institute, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Los Angeles, CA, USA. ⁶⁹Department of Medicine, David Geffen School of Medicine at University of California, Los Angeles, California, USA. ⁷⁰University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, 5323 Harry Hines Blvd, Dallas Texas 75390-8854, USA. ⁷¹Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, School of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, Imperial College London, London, W2 1PG, UK. ⁷²British Heart Foundation Glasgow Cardiovascular Research Centre, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, G12 8TA, UK. ⁷³University of Dundee, Ninewells Hospital & Medical School, Dundee, DD1 9SY, UK. ⁷⁴National Heart and Lung Institute, Imperial College London, London SW3 6LY, UK. ⁷⁵Centre for Genetic Epidemiology and Biostatistics, University of Western Australia, Crawley, Western Australia 6009, Australia. ⁷⁶Department of Genetics, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27599, USA. ⁷⁷Department of Biostatistics, Boston University School of Public Health, Boston, Massachusetts 02118, USA. ⁷⁸University of Milan, Department of Health Sciences, Ospedale San Paolo, 20139 Milano, Italy. ⁷⁹Fondazione Filarete, Milano, Italy. ⁸⁰MRC Epidemiology Unit, Institute of Metabolic Science, Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge, CB2 0QQ, UK. ⁸¹MRC Centre for Causal Analyses in Translational Epidemiology, Department of Social Medicine, Oakfield House, Bristol, BS8 2BN, UK. ⁸²Department of Dietetics-Nutrition, Harokopio University, 70 El. Venizelou Str, Athens, Greece. ⁸³Istituto di Neurogenetica e Neurofarmacologia del CNR, Monserrato, 09042, Cagliari, Italy. ⁸⁴Istituto di Ricerca Genetica e Biomedica del CNR, Monserrato, 09042, Cagliari, Italy. ⁸⁵Department of Genetic Medicine and Development, University of Geneva Medical School, Geneva 1211, Switzerland. ⁸⁶Wellcome Trust Centre for Human Genetics, University of Oxford, Oxford, OX3 7BN, UK. ⁸⁷Biomedical Sciences Research Center Al. Fleming, 16672 Vari, Greece. ⁸⁸Department of Pharmacy and Pharmacology, University of Bath, Bath, BA1 1RL, UK. ⁸⁹Department of Internal Medicine B, Ernst-Moritz-Arndt University, 17475 Greifswald, Germany. ⁹⁰Netherlands Genomics Initiative (NGI)-sponsored Netherlands Consortium for Healthy Aging (NCHA), The Netherlands. ⁹¹Center of Medical Systems Biology, Leiden University Medical Center, 2333 ZC Leiden, The Netherlands. ⁹²The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, WC1E 7HT, UK. ⁹³South Asia Network for Chronic Disease. ⁹⁴National Institute for Health and Welfare, Department of Chronic Disease Prevention, Unit of Public Health Genomics, 00014, Helsinki, Finland. ⁹⁵Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology, University of Tartu, Tartu 51010, Estonia. ⁹⁶MRC-HPA Centre for Environment and Health, London W2 1PG, UK. ⁹⁷Clinic of Cardiology, West German Heart Centre, University Hospital of Essen, University Duisburg-Essen, Germany. ⁹⁸Nordic Center of Cardiovascular Research (NCCR), 23538 Lübeck, Germany. ⁹⁹Universität zu Lübeck, Medizinische Klinik II, 23562 Lübeck, Germany. ¹⁰⁰Universität zu Lübeck, Medizinische Klinik II, 23538 Lübeck, Germany. ¹⁰¹Deutsches Zentrum für Herz-Kreislaufforschung e. V. (DZHK), Universität zu Lübeck, 23538 Lübeck, Germany. ¹⁰²Department of General Practice and Primary health Care, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland. ¹⁰³National Institute for Health and Welfare, 00271 Helsinki, Finland. ¹⁰⁴Helsinki University Central Hospital, Unit of General Practice, 00280 Helsinki, Finland. ¹⁰⁵Folkhalsan Research Centre, 00250 Helsinki, Finland. ¹⁰⁶Vasa Central Hospital, 65130 Vasa, Finland. ¹⁰⁷Estonian Biocenter, Tartu 51010, Estonia. ¹⁰⁸Department of Internal Medicine, Erasmus MC, Rotterdam, 3015GE, The Netherlands. ¹⁰⁹MRC Centre for Causal Analyses in Translational Epidemiology, Department of Social Medicine, University of Bristol, Bristol, BS8 2BN, UK. ¹¹⁰Division of Cardiovascular Epidemiology, Institute of Environmental Medicine, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden. ¹¹¹Department of Medical Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Karolinska Institutet, 171 77 Stockholm, Sweden. ¹¹²Cardiovascular Medicine, University of Oxford, Wellcome Trust Centre for Human Genetics, Oxford, OX3 7BN, UK. ¹¹³Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine Research Center, Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine, University of Insubria, Varese, Italy. ¹¹⁴Department of Cardiology, Toulouse University School of Medicine, Rangueil Hospital, Toulouse, France. ¹¹⁵Division of Intramural Research, National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, Framingham Heart Study, Framingham, Massachusetts 01702, USA. ¹¹⁶Department of Genetics, University Medical Center Groningen, University of Groningen, The Netherlands. ¹¹⁷Department of Clinical

Sciences, Genetic and Molecular Epidemiology Unit, Skåne University Hospital Malmö, Lund University, Malmö, Sweden. ¹¹⁸Department of Nutrition, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, MA, USA. ¹¹⁹Department of Public Health & Clinical Medicine, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden. ¹²⁰Center for Neurobehavioral Genetics, University of California, Los Angeles, California 90095, USA. ¹²¹Department of Genomics of Common Disease, School of Public Health, Imperial College London, W12 0NN, London, UK. ¹²²Department of Medicine, University of Maryland School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland 21201, USA. ¹²³University of Chicago, Chicago, IL. ¹²⁴Northshore University Healthsystem, Evanston, Illinois 60201, USA. ¹²⁵Hagedorn Research Institute, 2820 Gentofte, Denmark. ¹²⁶Department of Medicine, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98101, USA. ¹²⁷Cardiovascular Health Research Unit, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98101, USA. ¹²⁸University of Melbourne, Parkville 3010, Australia. ¹²⁹Department of Primary Industries, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, Australia. ¹³⁰Institute of Epidemiology, Helmholtz Zentrum München - German Research Center for Environmental Health, 85764 Neuherberg, Germany. ¹³¹Unit for Molecular Epidemiology, Helmholtz Zentrum München - German Research Center for Environmental Health, Neuherberg, Germany. ¹³²Research Unit for Molecular Epidemiology, Helmholtz Zentrum München - German Research Center for Environmental Health, Neuherberg, Germany. ¹³³Department of Medicine III, Pathobiochemistry, University of Dresden, 01307 Dresden, Germany. ¹³⁴Department of Medicine, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland. ¹³⁵Metabolism Initiative and Program in Medical and Population Genetics, Broad Institute, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142, USA. ¹³⁶Department of Genetics and Pathology, Rudbeck Laboratory, University of Uppsala, SE-75185 Uppsala, Sweden. ¹³⁷Department of Immunology, Genetics and Pathology, Uppsala University, Sweden. ¹³⁸Division of Cardiovascular and Neuronal Remodelling, Multidisciplinary Cardiovascular Research Centre, Leeds Institute of Genetics, Health and Therapeutics, University of Leeds, UK. ¹³⁹Atherosclerosis Research Unit, Department of Medicine, Solna, Karolinska Institutet, Karolinska University Hospital, 171 76 Stockholm, Sweden. ¹⁴⁰Faculty of Health Science, University of Southern Denmark, 5000 Odense, Denmark. ¹⁴¹Medical Genetics Institute, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Los Angeles, California 90048, USA. ¹⁴²Laboratory of Epidemiology, Demography, Biometry, National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland 20892, USA. ¹⁴³Department of Cardiology, University Medical Center Groningen, University of Groningen, The Netherlands. ¹⁴⁴Department of Clinical Sciences/Obstetrics and Gynecology, University of Oulu, 90014 Oulu, Finland. ¹⁴⁵National Institute for Health and Welfare, Department of Chronic Disease Prevention, Chronic Disease Epidemiology and Prevention Unit, 00014, Helsinki, Finland. ¹⁴⁶MRC Human Genetics Unit, Institute for Genetics and Molecular Medicine, Western General Hospital, Edinburgh, EH4 2XU, Scotland, UK. ¹⁴⁷Department of Psychiatry, Washington University School of Medicine, St Louis, MO 63108, USA. ¹⁴⁸Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, University of Duisburg-Essen, 45147 Essen, Germany. ¹⁴⁹Regensburg University Medical Center, Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, 93053 Regensburg, Germany. ¹⁵⁰Public Health and Gender Studies, Institute of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, Regensburg University Medical Center, Regensburg, Germany. ¹⁵¹Institute of Epidemiology I, Helmholtz Zentrum München - German Research Center for Environmental Health, Neuherberg, Germany. ¹⁵²Department of Internal Medicine, VU University Medical Centre, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. ¹⁵³Klinik und Poliklinik für Innere Medizin II, Universität Regensburg, 93053 Regensburg, Germany. ¹⁵⁴Regensburg University Medical Center, Innere Medizin II, 93053 Regensburg, Germany. ¹⁵⁵Klinik und Poliklinik für Innere Medizin II, Universitätsklinikum Regensburg, 93053 Regensburg, Germany. ¹⁵⁶Biocenter Oulu, University of Oulu, 90014 Oulu, Finland. ¹⁵⁷Institute of Biomedicine, Department of Physiology, University of Oulu, 90014 Oulu, Finland. ¹⁵⁸Department of Psychiatry, Kuopio University Hospital and University of Kuopio, 70210 Kuopio, Finland. ¹⁵⁹Institute of Genetic Medicine, European Academy Bozen/Bolzano (EURAC), Affiliated Institute of the University of Lübeck, Lübeck, Germany, Bolzano/Bozen, 39100, Italy. ¹⁶⁰Center for Biomedicine, European Academy Bozen/Bolzano (EURAC), Affiliated Institute of the University of Lübeck, Lübeck, Germany, Bolzano/Bozen, 39100, Italy. ¹⁶¹Center for Biomedicine, European Academy Bozen/Bolzano (EURAC), Affiliated Institute of the University of Lübeck, Lübeck, Germany, Bolzano/Bozen, 39100, Italy. ¹⁶²Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, University College London, 1-19 Torrington Place, London WC1E 6BT, UK. ¹⁶³Divisions of Genetics and Endocrinology and Program in Genomics, Children's Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts 02115, USA. ¹⁶⁴Department of Genetics, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts 02115, USA. ¹⁶⁵Divisions of Genetics and Endocrinology and Center for Basic and Translational Obesity Research, Children's Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts 02115, USA. ¹⁶⁶MRC Harwell, Harwell Science and Innovation Campus, Oxfordshire, OX11 0RD, UK. ¹⁶⁷Department of Statistics, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 3TG, UK. ¹⁶⁸Interfaculty Institute for Genetics and Functional Genomics, Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-University Greifswald, 17487 Greifswald, Germany. ¹⁶⁹Department of Nutrition, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, Massachusetts 02115, USA. ¹⁷⁰Channing Laboratory, Department of Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts 02115, USA. ¹⁷¹Department of Epidemiology, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, Massachusetts 02115, USA. ¹⁷²Department of Biostatistics and Bioinformatics, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia 30322, USA. ¹⁷³School of Population Health, The University of Western Australia, Nedlands WA 6009, Australia. ¹⁷⁴Institute of Clinical Medicine, Department of Internal Medicine, University of Oulu, 90014 Oulu, Finland. ¹⁷⁵Cardiovascular Genetics, British Heart Foundation Laboratories, Rayne Building, University College London, London, United Kingdom. ¹⁷⁶School of Medicine and Pharmacology, The University of Western Australia, Nedlands WA 6009, Australia. ¹⁷⁷HUNT Research Centre, Department of Public Health and General Practice, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 7600 Levanger, Norway. ¹⁷⁸Centre For Paediatric Epidemiology and Biostatistics/MRC Centre of Epidemiology for Child Health, University College of London Institute of Child Health, London, UK. ¹⁷⁹Hannover Unified Biobank, Hannover Medical School, 30625 Hannover, Germany. ¹⁸⁰Division of Research, Kaiser Permanente Northern California, Oakland, California 94612, USA. ¹⁸¹Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, California 94107, USA. ¹⁸²Department of Social Services and Health Care, 68601 Jakobstad, Finland. ¹⁸³Core Genotyping Facility, SAIC-Frederick, Inc., NCI-Frederick, Frederick, Maryland 21702, USA. ¹⁸⁴School of Medicine and Pharmacology, University of Western Australia, Perth, Western Australia 6009, Australia. ¹⁸⁵Department of Physiology, Institute of Neuroscience and Physiology, Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden. ¹⁸⁶Institute of Medical Biometry and Epidemiology, University of Marburg, 35037 Marburg, Germany. ¹⁸⁷Institute of Health Sciences, University of Oulu, 90014 Oulu, Finland. ¹⁸⁸National Institute for Health and Welfare, 90101 Oulu, Finland. ¹⁸⁹Institute for Medical Informatics, Biometry and Epidemiology (IMIBE), University Hospital of Essen, University of Duisburg-Essen, Essen, Germany. ¹⁹⁰Department of Cancer Research and Molecular Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, N-7489, Norway. ¹⁹¹Uppsala Clinical Research Center, Uppsala university hospital, Sweden. ¹⁹²Clinical Pharmacology, William Harvey Research Institute, Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen Mary, University of London, London, UK. ¹⁹³Research Centre for Prevention and Health, Glostrup University Hospital, 2600 Glostrup, Denmark. ¹⁹⁴Faculty of Health Science, University of Copenhagen, 2100 Copenhagen, Denmark. ¹⁹⁵National Institute for Health and Welfare, Department of Chronic Disease Prevention, Population Studies Unit, 20720 Turku, Finland. ¹⁹⁶Department of Epidemiology, School of Public Health, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514, USA. ¹⁹⁷Department of Clinical Physiology, University of Tampere and Tampere University Hospital, 33520 Tampere, Finland. ¹⁹⁸Hospital for Children and Adolescents, Helsinki University Central Hospital and University of Helsinki, 00029 HUS, Finland. ¹⁹⁹Department of Epidemiology and Medicine, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, Maryland 21205, USA. ²⁰⁰Division of Gastroenterology, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts 02114, USA. ²⁰¹MGH Weight Center, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts 02114, USA. ²⁰²Department of Epidemiology and Population Health, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, New York 10461, USA. ²⁰³Institute for Molecular Medicine Finland (FIMM), University of Helsinki, 00014, Helsinki, Finland. ²⁰⁴Finnish Twin Cohort Study, Department of Public Health, University of Helsinki, 00014, Helsinki, Finland. ²⁰⁵National Institute for Health and Welfare, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, Unit for Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 00271 Helsinki, Finland. ²⁰⁶National Institute for Health and Welfare, Unit for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Helsinki, Finland. ²⁰⁷NIHR Oxford Biomedical Research Centre, Churchill Hospital, Oxford, OX3 7LJ, UK. ²⁰⁸Oxford National Institute for Health Research Biomedical Research Centre,

Churchill Hospital, Old Road Headington, Oxford, OX3 7LJ, UK. ²⁰⁹Cardiovascular Research Center and Cardiology Division, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts 02114, USA. ²¹⁰Center for Human Genetic Research, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts 02114, USA. ²¹¹Program in Medical and Population Genetics, Broad Institute of Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142, USA. ²¹²UKCRC Centre of Excellence for Public Health (NI) Queens University, Belfast. ²¹³Faculty of Medicine, Institute of Health Sciences, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland. ²¹⁴Unit of General Practice, Oulu University Hospital, Oulu, Finland. ²¹⁵Department of Public Health and Primary Care, Institute of Public Health, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB2 2SR, UK. ²¹⁶Department of Epidemiology, Biostatistics and HTA, Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Centre, 6500 HB Nijmegen, The Netherlands. ²¹⁷Department of Urology, Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Centre, 6500 HB Nijmegen, The Netherlands. ²¹⁸Comprehensive Cancer Center East, 6501 BG Nijmegen, The Netherlands. ²¹⁹National Institute for Health and Welfare, Diabetes Prevention Unit, 00271 Helsinki, Finland. ²²⁰Department of Endocrinology, University Medical Center Groningen, University of Groningen, P.O. Box 30001, 9700 RB Groningen, The Netherlands. ²²¹LURIC Study nonprofit LLC, Freiburg, Germany. ²²²Mannheim Institute of Public Health, Social and Preventive Medicine, Medical Faculty of Mannheim, University of Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany. ²²³Department of Internal Medicine II - Cardiology, University of Ulm Medical Center, Ulm, Germany. ²²⁴Andrija Stampar School of Public Health, Medical School, University of Zagreb, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia. ²²⁵1st Cardiology Department, Onassis Cardiac Surgery Center 356, Sygrou Ave., Athens, Greece. ²²⁶Institut für Medizinische Biometrie und Statistik, Universität zu Lübeck, Universitätsklinikum Schleswig-Holstein, Campus Lübeck, 23562 Lübeck, Germany. ²²⁷Interdisciplinary Centre for Clinical Research, University of Leipzig, 04103 Leipzig, Germany. ²²⁸Department of Biostatistics, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, Massachusetts 02115, USA. ²²⁹Institut für Pharmakologie, Universität Greifswald, 17487 Greifswald, Germany. ²³⁰Croatian Centre for Global Health, School of Medicine, University of Split, Split 21000, Croatia. ²³¹MRC Unit for Lifelong Health & Ageing, London, UK. ²³²National Institute for Health and Welfare, Department of Chronic Disease Prevention, Chronic Disease Epidemiology and Prevention Unit, 00271, Helsinki, Finland. ²³³Department of Medicine, University of Kuopio and Kuopio University Hospital, 70210 Kuopio, Finland. ²³⁴Department of Medicine, University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio Campus and Kuopio University Hospital, 70210 Kuopio, Finland. ²³⁵Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, 90220 Oulu, Finland. ²³⁶Kuopio Research Institute of Exercise Medicine, Kuopio, Finland. ²³⁷Division of Genetic Epidemiology, Department of Medical Genetics, Molecular and Clinical Pharmacology, Innsbruck Medical University, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria. ²³⁸Institut inter-régional pour la sante (IRSA), F-37521 La Riche, France. ²³⁹Centre National de Genotypage, Evry, Paris 91057, France. ²⁴⁰The Queensland Brain Institute, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. ²⁴¹Department of Clinical Chemistry, University of Tampere and Tampere University Hospital, 33520 Tampere, Finland. ²⁴²Department of Clinical Chemistry, Fimlab Laboratories, University of Tampere and Tampere University Hospital, 33520 Tampere, Finland. ²⁴³Department of Medicine, Université de Montréal, Montreal, Quebec, H3T 1J4, Canada. ²⁴⁴Stanford University School of Medicine, Stanford, California 93405, USA. ²⁴⁵Department of Epidemiology, Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, New Orleans, LA 70112, USA. ²⁴⁶Department of Biostatistics, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA. ²⁴⁷Department of Medical Sciences, Uppsala University, Akademiska sjukhuset, 751 85 Uppsala, Sweden. ²⁴⁸Human Genetics, Genome Institute of Singapore, Singapore 138672, Singapore. ²⁴⁹Department of Internal Medicine, Istituto Auxologico Italiano, Verbania, Italy. ²⁵⁰Transplantation Laboratory, Haartman Institute, University of Helsinki, 00014, Helsinki, Finland. ²⁵¹The Charles Bronfman Institute of Personalized Medicine, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, NY 10029, USA. ²⁵²Child Health and Development Institute, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, NY 10029, USA. ²⁵³Department of Preventive Medicine, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, NY 10029, USA. ²⁵⁴Department of Internal Medicine, Institute of Medicine, Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg, 413 45 Gothenburg, Sweden. ²⁵⁵Department of Twin Research and Genetic Epidemiology, King's College London, London, SE1 7EH, UK. ²⁵⁶Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele, Chair of Nephrology San Raffaele Scientific Institute, OU Nephrology and Dialysis, 20132 Milan, Italy. ²⁵⁷Department of Endocrinology, Diabetology and Nutrition, Bichat-Claude Bernard University Hospital, Assistance Publique des Hôpitaux de Paris, F-75018 Paris, France. ²⁵⁸Cardiovascular Genetics Research Unit, Université Henri Poincaré-Nancy 1, 54000, Nancy, France. ²⁵⁹Genetic Epidemiology Laboratory, Queensland Institute of Medical Research, Queensland 4006, Australia. ²⁶⁰Queensland Institute of Medical Research, Queensland 4029, Australia. ²⁶¹Synlab Academy, Mannheim, Germany. ²⁶²Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) Laboratory, Department of Social Medicine, University of Bristol, Bristol, BS8 2BN, UK. ²⁶³School of Social and Community Medicine, University of Bristol, UK. ²⁶⁴Department of Molecular Biology, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts 02114, USA. ²⁶⁵Division of Health, Research Board, An Bord Taighde Sláinte, Dublin, 2, Ireland. ²⁶⁶Institute of Human Genetics, Klinikum rechts der Isar der Technischen Universität München, 81675 Munich, Germany. ²⁶⁷Institute of Human Genetics, Helmholtz Zentrum München - German Research Center for Environmental Health, 85764 Neuherberg, Germany. ²⁶⁸Department of Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4L8, Canada. ²⁶⁹Human Genetics, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden 2333, The Netherlands. ²⁷⁰Merck Research Laboratories, Merck & Co., Inc., Boston, Massachusetts 02115, USA. ²⁷¹Center for Observational Research, Amgen, Thousand Oaks, CA, 91320. ²⁷²Molecular Epidemiology Laboratory, Queensland Institute of Medical Research, Queensland 4006, Australia. ²⁷³Genetics Division, GlaxoSmithKline, King of Prussia, Pennsylvania 19406, USA. ²⁷⁴Medical Research Institute, University of Dundee, Ninewells Hospital and Medical School, Dundee, DD1 9SY. ²⁷⁵Institute of Human Genetics, University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany. ²⁷⁶Department of Genomics, Life & Brain Center, University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany. ²⁷⁷Department of Medicine I, University Hospital Grosshadern, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, Germany. ²⁷⁸Institute of Medical Informatics, Biometry and Epidemiology, Chair of Genetic Epidemiology, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, Germany. ²⁷⁹Department of Respiratory Medicine, Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, Nedlands, 6009, Australia. ²⁸⁰Analytic and Translational Genetics Unit, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA 02114. ²⁸¹MRC Harwell, Harwell, UK. ²⁸²Division of Cardiology, Cardiovascular Laboratory, Helsinki University Central Hospital, 00029 Helsinki, Finland. ²⁸³Department of Community Medicine, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Tromsø, Tromsø, Norway. ²⁸⁴Department of Clinical Medicine, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Tromsø, Tromsø, Norway. ²⁸⁵Department of Public Health, Section of Epidemiology, Aarhus University, Denmark. ²⁸⁶Unit of Genetic Epidemiology and Bioinformatics, Dept of Epidemiology, University Medical Center Groningen, University of Groningen, P.O. Box 30001, 9700 RB Groningen, The Netherlands. ²⁸⁷Department of Epidemiology, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, The Netherlands. ²⁸⁸Carolina Center for Genome Sciences, School of Public Health, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514, USA. ²⁸⁹Neurogenetics Laboratory, Queensland Institute of Medical Research, Queensland 4006, Australia. ²⁹⁰Interdisciplinary Center Psychopathology and Emotion Regulation, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, The Netherlands. ²⁹¹Department of Human Genetics, Leiden University Medical Center, 2333 ZC Leiden, The Netherlands. ²⁹²Department of Clinical Genetics, Erasmus MC, Rotterdam, 3015GE, The Netherlands. ²⁹³Centre for Medical Systems Biology & Netherlands Consortium on Healthy Aging, Leiden, The Netherlands. ²⁹⁴NHS Blood and Transplant, Cambridge Centre, Cambridge, CB2 0PT, UK. ²⁹⁵Department of Pathology and Molecular Medicine, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario L8N3Z5, Canada. ²⁹⁶Amgen, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139, USA. ²⁹⁷Department of Cardiovascular Medicine, University of Oxford, Level 6 West Wing, John Radcliffe Hospital, Headley Way, Headington, Oxford, OX3 9DU. ²⁹⁸illumina Inc. Cambridge, USA. ²⁹⁹Institute of Biomedical Sciences, University of Copenhagen, 2200 Copenhagen, Denmark. ³⁰⁰Faculty of Health Science, University of Aarhus, 8000 Aarhus, Denmark. ³⁰¹The Broad Institute of Harvard and MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142, USA. ³⁰²Department of Medical Genetics, University of Helsinki, 00014 Helsinki, Finland. ³⁰³Department of Psychiatry/EMGO Institute, VU University Medical Center, 1081 BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands. ³⁰⁴Department of Psychiatry, Leiden University Medical Centre, 2300 RC Leiden, The Netherlands. ³⁰⁵Department of Psychiatry, University Medical Centre Groningen, 9713 GZ Groningen, The Netherlands. ³⁰⁶Institute of Epidemiology II, Helmholtz Zentrum München - German Research Center for Environmental Health, Neuherberg, Germany. ³⁰⁷Munich Heart Alliance, Munich, Germany. ³⁰⁸Obesity Research unit, Department of Psychiatry, Helsinki

University Central Hospital, Helsinki, Finland. ³⁰⁹Department of Medicine, Levanger Hospital, The Nord-Trøndelag Health Trust, 7600 Levanger, Norway. ³¹⁰Gen-Info Ltd, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia. ³¹¹Faculty of Medicine, University of Split, Croatia. ³¹²Department of Neurology, General Central Hospital, Bolzano, Italy. ³¹³Department of Neurology, University of Lübeck, Lübeck, Germany. ³¹⁴Departments of Epidemiology, Medicine and Health Services, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98195, USA. ³¹⁵Group Health Research Institute, Group Health, Seattle, Washington 98101, USA. ³¹⁶Department of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts 02115, USA. ³¹⁷Research Centre of Applied and Preventive Cardiovascular Medicine, University of Turku, 20520 Turku, Finland. ³¹⁸The Department of Clinical Physiology, Turku University Hospital, 20520 Turku, Finland. ³¹⁹The Department of Clinical Physiology and Nuclear Medicine, Turku University Hospital, 20520 Turku, Finland. ³²⁰Department of Clinical Physiology and Nuclear Medicine, Kuopio University Hospital, Kuopio, Finland. ³²¹MRC Biostatistics Unit, Institute of Public Health, Cambridge, UK. ³²²Department of Clinical Sciences, Lund University, 20502 Malmö, Sweden. ³²³Finnish Diabetes Association, Kirjoniementie 15, 33680, Tampere, Finland. ³²⁴Pirkanmaa Hospital District, Tampere, Finland. ³²⁵Medizinische Klinik II, Universität zu Lübeck Ratzeburger Allee 160, D-23538 Lübeck, Germany. ³²⁶Department of Cardiovascular Sciences, University of Leicester, Glenfield Hospital, Leicester, LE3 9QP, UK. ³²⁷Leicester NIHR Biomedical Research Unit in Cardiovascular Disease, Glenfield Hospital, Leicester, LE3 9QP, UK. ³²⁸South Karelia Central Hospital, 53130 Lappeenranta, Finland. ³²⁹Pacific Biosciences, Menlo Park, California 94025, USA. ³³⁰Sage Bionetworks, Seattle, Washington 98109, USA. ³³¹Department of Genetics and Genomic Sciences, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, One Gustave L. Levy Place, Box 1498, New York, NY 10029-6574 USA. ³³²Institute of Genomics and Multiscale Biology, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, One Gustave L. Levy Place, Box 1498, New York, NY 10029-6574 USA. ³³³Institute for Community Medicine, University Medicine Greifswald, Greifswald, Germany. ³³⁴Laboratory of Genetics, National Institute on Aging, Baltimore, Maryland 21224, USA. ³³⁵Institut für Klinische Molekularbiologie, Christian-Albrechts Universität, Kiel, Germany. ³³⁶Department of Medicine III, Prevention and Care of Diabetes, University of Dresden, 01307 Dresden, Germany. ³³⁷Geriatrics Research and Education Clinical Center, Baltimore Veterans Administration Medical Center, Baltimore, Maryland 21201, USA. ³³⁸Department of Odontology, Umeå University, Sweden. ³³⁹Azienda ospedaliera di Desio e Vimercate, Milano, Italy. ³⁴⁰Institute of Preventive Medicine, Bispebjerg University Hospital, Copenhagen, and Novo Nordisk Foundation Center for Basic Metabolic Research, University of Copenhagen, Denmark. ³⁴¹Center for Computational Medicine and Bioinformatics, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. ³⁴²Department of Internal Medicine, Division of Gastroenterology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. ³⁴³University of Eastern Finland and Kuopio University Hospital, 70210 Kuopio, Finland. ³⁴⁴Regensburg University Medical Center, Clinic and Policlinic for Internal Medicine II, 93053 Regensburg, Germany. ³⁴⁵deCODE Genetics, 101 Reykjavik, Iceland. ³⁴⁶Faculty of Medicine, University of Iceland, 101 Reykjavik, Iceland. ³⁴⁷Division of Community Health Sciences, St George's, University of London, London, SW17 0RE, UK. ³⁴⁸Division of Population Health Sciences and Education, St George's, University of London, London, SW17 0RE, UK. ³⁴⁹Department of Medicine, University of Leipzig, 04103 Leipzig, Germany. ³⁵⁰LIFE Study Centre, University of Leipzig, Leipzig, Germany. ³⁵¹University of Leipzig, IFB Adiposity Diseases, Leipzig, Germany. ³⁵²Uppsala University / Dept. of Medical Sciences, Molecular Medicine, 751 85 Uppsala, Sweden. ³⁵³Coordination Centre for Clinical Trials, University of Leipzig, Härtelstr. 16-18, 04103 Leipzig, Germany. ³⁵⁴INSERM UMR_S 937, ICAN Institute, Pierre et Marie Curie Medical School, Paris 75013, France. ³⁵⁵Department of Pharmacological Sciences, University of Milan, Monzino Cardiology Center, IRCCS, Milan, Italy. ³⁵⁶Heart Failure Research Centre, Department of Clinical and Experimental Cardiology, Academic Medical Center, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. ³⁵⁷Department of Medicine, Helsinki University Central Hospital, 00290 Helsinki, Finland. ³⁵⁸Research Program of Molecular Medicine, University of Helsinki, 00014 Helsinki, Finland. ³⁵⁹Hjelt Institute, Department of Public Health, University of Helsinki, 00014 Helsinki, Finland. ³⁶⁰South Ostrobothnia Central Hospital, 60220 Seinäjoki, Finland. ³⁶¹Red RECAVA Grupo RD06/0014/0015, Hospital Universitario La Paz, 28046 Madrid, Spain. ³⁶²Centre for Vascular Prevention, Danube-University Krems, 3500 Krems, Austria. ³⁶³Department of Oncology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, CB1 8RN, UK. ³⁶⁴Department of Public Health and Clinical Nutrition, University of Eastern Finland, Finland. ³⁶⁵Research Unit, Kuopio University Hospital, Kuopio, Finland. ³⁶⁶Department of Human Genetics, Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Centre, PO Box 9101, 6500 HB Nijmegen, The Netherlands. ³⁶⁷Department of Medicine, University of Turku and Turku University Hospital, 20520 Turku, Finland. ³⁶⁸Queensland Statistical Genetics Laboratory, Queensland Institute of Medical Research, Queensland 4006, Australia. ³⁶⁹Department of Internal Medicine, Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Vaudois (CHUV) University Hospital, 1011 Lausanne, Switzerland. ³⁷⁰Institut für Community Medicine, 17489 Greifswald, Germany. ³⁷¹Institute for Community Medicine, Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-University Greifswald, Greifswald, Germany. ³⁷²Institut für Klinische Chemie und Laboratoriumsmedizin, Universität Greifswald, 17475 Greifswald, Germany. ³⁷³Institute of Clinical Chemistry and Laboratory Medicine, University Medicine Greifswald, 17475 Greifswald, Germany. ³⁷⁴Department of Preventive Medicine, Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California 90089, USA. ³⁷⁵Klinikum Grosshadern, 81377 Munich, Germany. ³⁷⁶Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Institute of Medical Informatics, Biometry and Epidemiology, Chair of Epidemiology, 81377 Munich, Germany. ³⁷⁷Institute of Medical Informatics, Biometry and Epidemiology, Chair of Epidemiology, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, and Klinikum Grosshadern, Munich, Germany. ³⁷⁸Klinikum Grosshadern, Munich, Germany. ³⁷⁹Cardiology Group, Frankfurt-Sachsenhausen, Germany. ³⁸⁰Steno Diabetes Center, 2820 Gentofte, Denmark. ³⁸¹Centre for Public Health, Queen's University, Belfast, UK. ³⁸²Department of Physiatrics, Lapland Central Hospital, 96101 Rovaniemi, Finland. ³⁸³Genetic and Genomic Epidemiology Unit, Wellcome Trust Centre for Human Genetics, OX3 7BN, Oxford.