Pharmacogenetic meta-analysis of genome-wide association studies of LDL cholesterol response to statins

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ARTICLE
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Pharmacogenetic meta-analysis of genome-wide association studies of LDL cholesterol response to statins


Our findings advance the understanding of the pharmacogenetic architecture of statin response.

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The 3-hydroxymethyl-3-methylglutaryl coenzyme A (HMG-CoA) reductase inhibitors, also known as statins, are widely prescribed and are highly effective in the management and prevention of cardiovascular disease. Statin therapy results in a lowering of low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C) levels by up to 55% \(^2\) and a 20–30% reduction of cardiovascular events \(^2\). Despite the clinical efficacy of statins in a wide range of patients \(^2\), interindividual variability exists with regard to LDL-C-lowering response as well as efficacy in reducing major cardiovascular events \(^2\). The suggestion that some of this variability may be due, in part, to common pharmacogenetic variation is supported by previous studies that have identified genetic variants associated with differential LDL-C response to statin therapy \(^3,4\).

A small number of genome-wide association studies (GWAS) have previously identified loci associated with statin response on a genome-wide level. A GWAS in the JUPITER trial identified three genetic loci, ABCG2 (rs2199936), LPA (rs10455872) and APOE (rs7412), that were associated with percentage LDL-C SNPs, that attained genome-wide significance \((P \leq 5 \times 10^{-8})\) and off-treatment as the response variable (see Methods). We performed a GWAS among statin users, using the differential LDL-C response to statin therapy, each study independently performed a GWAS among statin users, using the differential LDL-C response to statin therapy, each study independently performed a GWAS among statin users, using the differential LDL-C response to statin therapy, each study independently performed a GWAS among statin users, using the differential LDL-C response to atorvastatin treatment \(^4\). A combined GWAS in three statin trials identified a SNP within CLMN (rs8014194) that is associated with the magnitude of statin-induced reduction in plasma cholesterol \(^9\). However, two other GWAS identified no genetic determinants of LDL-C response to statin therapy at a genome-wide significant level \(^6,10\).

On the basis of these studies, as well as previous candidate gene studies \(^4,6\), the only genetic variants that have been consistently identified to be associated with variation in LDL-C response to statin therapy, irrespective of statin formulation, are located at or nearby APOE and LPA. To determine whether additional loci may influence LDL-C response to statins, we formed the Genomic Investigation of Statin Therapy (GIST) consortium and conducted a pharmacogenetic meta-analysis using GWAS data sets from randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and observational studies. We identify two loci not previously identified in GWAS, SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC1 and SLCO1B1. In addition, we confirm the associations within the APOE and LPA genes. These findings will extend the knowledge of the pharmacogenetic architecture of statin response.

Results

First-stage meta-analysis. The GIST consortium includes 6 RCTs \((n = 8,421\) statin recipients) and 10 observational studies \((n = 10,175\) statin recipients) that participated in the first stage (see Methods; Supplementary Tables 1 and 2; Supplementary Notes 1 and 2). To search for genetic variants associated with differential LDL-C response to statin therapy, each study independently performed a GWAS among statin users, using the difference between the natural log-transformed LDL-C levels on- and off-treatment as the response variable (see Methods).

The first-stage meta-analysis identified three loci, including 13 SNPs, that attained genome-wide significance \((P \leq 5 \times 10^{-8})\) for association with LDL-C response to statin treatment (Fig. 1; Table 1). The most significant association was for a SNP on chromosome 19, at APOE (rs445925, minor allele frequency (MAF) = 0.098, \(\beta = -0.043\), s.e. = 0.005, \(P = 1.58 \times 10^{-18}\); Fig. 2a), indicating that carriers of the rs445925 SNP respond to statins with an additional 4.3% increase per allele in LDL-C lowering effect compared with non-carriers. The second strongest association was with a SNP on LPA on chromosome 6 (rs10455872, MAF = 0.069, \(\beta = 0.041\), s.e. = 0.006, \(P = 1.95 \times 10^{-11}\); Fig. 2b), indicating a 5.9% smaller LDL-C lowering per minor allele for carriers of the SNP compared with non-carriers. Associations at both loci have previously been described \(^7,8\). A third genome-wide significant association was found with a SNP at RICTOR on chromosome 5 (rs13166647, MAF = 0.230, \(\beta = -0.253\), s.e. = 0.046, \(P = 4.50 \times 10^{-8}\)), although genotypes for this SNP were only available in two studies within the first stage \((n = 2,144)\).

Second-stage meta-analysis. We selected 246 SNPs with \(P \leq 5 \times 10^{-8}\) from 158 loci for further investigation in three additional studies comprising up to 22,318 statin-treated subjects (see Methods; Supplementary Tables 1 and 5; Supplementary Note 3). This second stage confirmed the genome-wide significant associations between variations within the APOE and LPA loci and LDL-C response, as observed in the first stage (Table 1; Supplementary Fig. 2; Supplementary Table 5). In addition, SNPs at two new loci with \(P\) values between 6.70 \(\times 10^{-7}\) and 2.26 \(\times 10^{-6}\) in the first phase were shown to be significantly associated with statin-induced LDL-C lowering after statin treatment in the total combined meta-analysis at a genome-wide level: SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC1 (rs646776, \(\beta = -0.013\), s.e. = 0.002, \(P = 1.05 \times 10^{-9}\) and rs12740374, \(\beta = -0.013\), s.e. = 0.002, \(P = 1.05 \times 10^{-9}\); Fig 2c) and SLCO1B1 (rs2900478, \(\beta = 0.016\), s.e. = 0.003, \(P = 1.22 \times 10^{-9}\); Fig 2d), indicating an additional 1.5% increase per allele in LDL-C lowering effect for carriers of the SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC1 SNP and a 1.6% smaller LDL-C lowering per minor allele for carriers of the SLCO1B1 SNP.

The six next-ranked SNPs with \(P\) values just below \(5 \times 10^{-8}\) in the combined meta-analysis, including the two SNPs at RICTOR (rs13166647 and rs13172966), were selected for additional genotyping in the Scandinavian ASCOT participants (see Methods). None of these six SNPs reached genome-wide significance after this additional genotyping (Supplementary Table 6). Therefore, our overall genome-wide significant findings were the SNPs at APOE, LPA, SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC1 and SLCO1B1.

Subfraction analyses. To extend our results for the novel GWAS finding SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC1, we performed additional association analyses, using measurements of cholesterol levels in four LDL subfractions (large, medium, small and very small) from two of the trials in GIST, CAP and PRINCE (Table 2; see Methods). The minor allele of SORT1 rs646776 was associated with greater statin-induced reductions in levels of all LDL subfractions, and there was a nonsignificant trend for larger effect sizes and greater statistical significance for lowering of small and very small LDL (Table 2). In contrast, the APOE SNP associated with greater...
LDL-C response to statins (rs445925) showed a small and non-significant association with change in very small LDL (Table 2). For the minor allele of rs2900478 (SLCO1B1), the borderline significant association with smaller magnitude of LDL-C reduction showed a trend for preferential association with larger versus smaller LDL subfractions. The lack of association of rs10455872 (LPA) with changes in LDL subfractions is consistent with evidence discussed below that this locus affects levels of lipoprotein(a) (Lp(a)) and not LDL particles. Using generalized estimating equations, we tested the association of log change in each of the LDL subfractions with interactions of the four SNPs. For very small LDL, the association with the rs646776 minor allele was significantly different from that of the other minor alleles ($P = 0.03$ after adjustment for multiple testing).

**Effects of off-treatment LDL-C.** To demonstrate that our findings for LDL-C response to statin treatment are unlikely to be explained through associations with baseline LDL-C levels, we performed a number of additional analyses (see Methods). First, Supplementary Table 7 shows regression coefficients for baseline-measured in response to statin treatment in a range of cell lines and modelling measurement noise at baseline reduced the apparent effect only slightly for all the markers, suggesting that there is little effect of measurement noise. Next, within the CARDS data set. Correcting our effect size estimate further explained through associations with baseline LDL-C levels, we performed a conditional analysis across the genome using the four SNPs, 6 were genome-wide significant in the combined GWAS meta-analysis (Supplementary Table 5).

**Previous findings.** In Supplementary Table 10, we performed a look-up in our GWAS meta-analysis for SNPs previously described in the literature (NHGRI Catalogue of Published GWAS and Candidate gene studies) to be associated with statin response, besides the loci associated at a genome-wide level in the current study. None of these SNPs was associated with statin response in our GWAS after correcting for multiple testing.

**Functional analyses.** Functional characterization of the 246 SNPs selected for the second stage was performed using a range of bioinformatics tools (see Methods). A total of 420 expression quantitative trait loci (eQTL) associations were identified across a wide range of tissues (Supplementary Data 1), which comprised 67 independent gene eQTL associations. Eleven genes, including APOE, SORT1, CELSR2 and PSRC1, showed eQTLs in liver, which considering its primary role in mediating statin-induced LDL reduction may be particularly relevant to statin response. Putative gene eQTLs were combined with genes annotated to variants in linkage disequilibrium (LD) with LDL-C response-associated variants, resulting in a list of 185 candidate gene loci, defined by 2,681 SNPs (Supplementary Data 2 and 3). To identify statin responsive genes among the candidate loci, gene expression data measured in response to statin treatment in a range of cell lines was retrieved from the Connectivity Map resource (see Methods). Five genes (APOE, BRCA1, GRPEL1, ADRB2 and ETV1) showed convincing evidence of statin responsiveness on the basis of greater than twofold differential expression in response to statin treatment. Eight genes showed suggestive evidence (1.5- to 2-fold change; TOMM40, SREBP1, PSRC1, BCL3, BCAM, ANK3, SIVA1 and RANBP9; Supplementary Data 3).

Finally, involvement in statin response was investigated at a pathway level using GeneGo Metacore (Thomson Reuters). Briefly, 87 literature-reported genes linked to statin response were combined with the 185 candidate gene loci reported here

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**Table 1 | Genome-wide significant associations in stage 1, stage 2 and combined meta-analysis.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chr</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Lead SNP</th>
<th>Gene</th>
<th>Coding allele</th>
<th>Noncoding allele</th>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Frequency-coding allele</th>
<th>Beta*</th>
<th>s.e.</th>
<th>% Extra reduction</th>
<th>$P$ value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>109620053</td>
<td>rs646776</td>
<td>SOR/T/CERS2/PSRC1</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>Stage 1</td>
<td>16,697</td>
<td>0.230</td>
<td>-0.015</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>$6.70 \times 10^{-7}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>21,902</td>
<td>0.216</td>
<td>-0.010</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>38,599</td>
<td>-0.013</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>$1.05 \times 10^{-9}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>160930108</td>
<td>rs10455872</td>
<td>LPA</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Stage 1</td>
<td>12,981</td>
<td>0.069</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>-4.1</td>
<td>$1.95 \times 10^{-7}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>18,075</td>
<td>0.087</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>-5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>31,056</td>
<td>0.052</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>-5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>21260064</td>
<td>rs2900478</td>
<td>SLCO1B1</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>Stage 1</td>
<td>16,749</td>
<td>0.165</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>-1.6</td>
<td>$2.26 \times 10^{-6}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>7,504</td>
<td>0.164</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>-1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>24,253</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>-1.6</td>
<td>$1.22 \times 10^{-9}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>50107480</td>
<td>rs445925</td>
<td>APOE</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Stage 1</td>
<td>13,909</td>
<td>0.098</td>
<td>-0.043</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>$1.58 \times 10^{-18}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>3,613</td>
<td>0.157</td>
<td>-0.088</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>17,522</td>
<td>-0.051</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>$8.52 \times 10^{-29}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chr, chromosome; SNP, single nucleotide polymorphism.

*Beta for difference between the natural log-transformed on- and off-treatment low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C) levels adjusted for natural log-transformed off-treatment LDL-C, age-, sex- and study-specific covariates. The beta reflects the fraction of differential LDL-C lowering in carriers versus non-carriers of the SNP; a positive beta indicates a better statin response (stronger LDL-C reduction), a positive beta a worse statin response. Betas and $P$ values were generated using linear regression analysis.

†This percentage reflects the $1\%$ extra LDL-C lowering in carriers versus non-carriers of the SNP.
We have performed a meta-analysis of GWAS including more than 40,000 subjects, investigating genetic variants associated with variation in LDL-C lowering on statin treatment independent from associations with baseline LDL-C. We identified four loci at genome-wide significance, including the previously identified APOE and LPA, and the novel GWAS loci SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC1 and SLC01B1. Nine SNPs in the APOE gene region reached genome-wide significance for LDL-C response. The minor allele of the lead SNP rs445925, which is a proxy for the apoE ε2 protein variant defining SNP rs7412 (ref. 14), was associated with a larger LDL-C-lowering response to statins compared with carriers of the major allele. The magnitude and direction of the effect size was similar to previously reported findings for the rs445925 variant in

(Supplementary Data 3). A conservative network of direct interactions was constructed between query genes (Supplementary Data 4). The network included 24 genes located in the LDL-C-associated loci (Supplementary Fig. 4). Collectively, our functional and pathway analysis confirms a strong biological and functional role in statin response for several strongly associated gene loci, including APOE/TOMM40/PVRL2 and SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC2.

**Discussion**

We have performed a meta-analysis of GWAS including more than 40,000 subjects, investigating genetic variants associated with variation in LDL-C lowering on statin treatment independent from associations with baseline LDL-C. We identified four loci at genome-wide significance, including the previously identified APOE and LPA, and the novel GWAS loci SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC1 and SLC01B1.

Nine SNPs in the APOE gene region reached genome-wide significance for LDL-C response. The minor allele of the lead SNP rs445925, which is a proxy for the apoE ε2 protein variant defining SNP rs7412 (ref. 14), was associated with a larger LDL-C-lowering response to statins compared with carriers of the major allele. The magnitude and direction of the effect size was similar to previously reported findings for the rs445925 variant in

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**Table 2** | Associations of the minor alleles of rs646776, rs445925, rs2900478 and rs10455872 with changes in LDL-C and LDL subfractions in response to statin in the combined CAP and PRINCE studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change*</th>
<th>SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC1 (rs646776 MAF 0.2)</th>
<th>APOE (rs445925 MAF 0.086)</th>
<th>SLCO1B1 (rs2900478 MAF 0.16)</th>
<th>LPA (rs10455872 MAF 0.056)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LDL-C total</td>
<td>–0.023 0.008 0.003</td>
<td>–0.046 0.018 0.008</td>
<td>0.010 0.005 0.04</td>
<td>0.032 0.019 0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large LDL-C</td>
<td>–0.028 0.014 0.042</td>
<td>–0.075 0.029 0.009</td>
<td>0.02 0.008 0.01</td>
<td>0.036 0.031 0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium LDL-C</td>
<td>–0.027 0.015 0.075</td>
<td>–0.079 0.032 0.012</td>
<td>0.016 0.009 0.07</td>
<td>0.010 0.034 0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small LDL-C</td>
<td>–0.047 0.018 0.009</td>
<td>–0.071 0.037 0.050</td>
<td>0.002 0.010 0.83</td>
<td>–0.024 0.039 0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very small LDL-C</td>
<td>–0.034 0.009 0.00006</td>
<td>–0.022 0.017 0.202</td>
<td>0.001 0.005 0.90</td>
<td>0.008 0.019 0.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LDL-C, low-density lipoprotein cholesterol; MAF, minor allele frequency.

*Change: ln (on treatment) – ln (baseline) models adjusted for log (baseline variable), age, sex, body mass index, smoking(y/n) and study (CAP versus PRINCE). Betas and P values were assessed using a generalized estimating equation method.

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**Figure 2** | Regional association plots of the genome-wide significant associations with LDL-C response after statin treatment. The plots show the genome-wide significant associated loci in the combined meta-analysis (n = 40,914), the APOE locus (a), the LPA locus (b), the SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC1 locus (c) and the SLC01B1 locus (d) (generated using LocusZoom (http://genome.sph.umich.edu/wiki/LocusZoom)). The colour of the SNPs is based on the LD with the lead SNP (shown in purple). The RefSeq genes in the region are shown in the lower panel. P values were generated using linear regression analysis.

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**LDL-C**

- Large LDL-C
- Medium LDL-C
- Small LDL-C
- Very small LDL-C

**LPA**

- LPA locus

**SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC1**

- SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC1 locus

**SLCO1B1**

- SLCO1B1 locus

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**Artificial Neural Network**

A partial artificial neural network with biological meaningful pathway labels is shown in Supplementary Figure 4. The colour of the edges is based on the LocusZoom score (http://genome.sph.umich.edu/wiki/LocusZoom). The colour of the SNPs is based on the LD with the lead SNP (shown in purple). The RefSeq genes in the region are shown in the lower panel. P values were generated using linear regression analysis.

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**Figure 3** | Heatmap of associations between variants in the APOE region and the LDL-C response. The heatmaps were constructed using a conservative network of direct interactions between query genes (Supplementary Data 3). The network included 24 genes located in the LDL-C-associated loci (Supplementary Fig. 4). Collectively, our functional and pathway analysis confirms a strong biological and functional role in statin response for several strongly associated gene loci, including APOE/TOMM40/PVRL2 and SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC2.

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**Table 3** | Associations of the minor alleles of rs646776, rs445925, rs2900478 and rs10455872 with changes in LDL-C and LDL subfractions in response to statin in the combined CAP and PRINCE studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change*</th>
<th>SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC1 (rs646776 MAF 0.2)</th>
<th>APOE (rs445925 MAF 0.086)</th>
<th>SLCO1B1 (rs2900478 MAF 0.16)</th>
<th>LPA (rs10455872 MAF 0.056)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LDL-C total</td>
<td>–0.023 0.008 0.003</td>
<td>–0.046 0.018 0.008</td>
<td>0.010 0.005 0.04</td>
<td>0.032 0.019 0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large LDL-C</td>
<td>–0.028 0.014 0.042</td>
<td>–0.075 0.029 0.009</td>
<td>0.02 0.008 0.01</td>
<td>0.036 0.031 0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium LDL-C</td>
<td>–0.027 0.015 0.075</td>
<td>–0.079 0.032 0.012</td>
<td>0.016 0.009 0.07</td>
<td>0.010 0.034 0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small LDL-C</td>
<td>–0.047 0.018 0.009</td>
<td>–0.071 0.037 0.050</td>
<td>0.002 0.010 0.83</td>
<td>–0.024 0.039 0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very small LDL-C</td>
<td>–0.034 0.009 0.00006</td>
<td>–0.022 0.017 0.202</td>
<td>0.001 0.005 0.90</td>
<td>0.008 0.019 0.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LDL-C, low-density lipoprotein cholesterol; MAF, minor allele frequency.

*Change: ln (on treatment) – ln (baseline) models adjusted for log (baseline variable), age, sex, body mass index, smoking(y/n) and study (CAP versus PRINCE). Betas and P values were assessed using a generalized estimating equation method.
the GWAS study performed in CARDS and ASCOT\textsuperscript{8} and of the SNP rs7412 in JUPITER\textsuperscript{2}. Since the apoE e2 protein results in increased hepatic cholesterol synthesis, it may also predispose to stronger inhibition of cholesterol synthesis by statin treatment\textsuperscript{10,15}.

Three independent SNPs at LPA were significantly associated with LDL-C response to statins. The minor G allele of the lead SNP rs10455872 was associated with smaller LDL-C reduction than the major allele. This result was similar to the previous GWAS findings for this SNP in the JUPITER trial and the combined ASCOT and CARDS study\textsuperscript{2,8}. The rs10455872 SNP was strongly associated with the KIV-2 copy number variant in Lp(a), which encodes variability in apo(a) size and is responsible for ~30\% of variance in Lp(a) levels\textsuperscript{8,13}. Furthermore, rs10455872 was shown to be strongly associated with plasma Lp(a) levels\textsuperscript{16}. Standard assays of LDL-C, as well as the Friedewald formula, include cholesterol that resides in Lp(a)\textsuperscript{6,8}. Carriers of this LPA variant are characterized by higher Lp(a) levels and a larger proportion of their measured LDL-C resides in Lp(a) particles\textsuperscript{3,10}. Since statin therapy does not reduce the number of Lp(a) particles\textsuperscript{17}, their presence attenuates the measured LDL-C response to statins.

Two SNPs at SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC1 (rs646776 and rs12740374) on chromosome 1p were associated with an enhanced statin LDL-C response. A similar association was previously observed in a large candidate gene study in HPS\textsuperscript{5}; however, we demonstrate this finding now first at a genome-wide significance level. The minor allele of rs12740374 has been shown to generate a binding site for the transcription factor C/EBP\textsuperscript{a}\textsuperscript{18}. Transcription results in upregulation of hepatic expression of three genes at this locus, SORT1, CELSR2 and PSRC1 (ref. 18), which we also showed in our eQTL analysis (Supplementary Data 1). Of these, SORT1 is most notable, in that it encodes the multifunctional intracellular trafficking protein sortilin, which has been shown to bind tightly to apoB\textsuperscript{19}. Sortilin-induced lowering of plasma LDL-C results from two mechanisms: reduced secretion of apoB-containing precursors, and, perhaps of greater importance, increased hepatic LDL uptake via binding to sortilin at the cell surface, with subsequent internalization and lysosomal degradation\textsuperscript{19}. Notably, the minor allele of rs646776 is preferentially associated with lower levels of small and very small LDL (Table 2), suggesting that sortilin is of particular importance for regulating levels of these particles\textsuperscript{18}. Smaller LDL subfractions have been shown to be relatively enriched in particles with reduced LDL receptor binding affinity and cellular uptake\textsuperscript{20}, a property that may contribute to their associations with increased risk for cardiovascular disease\textsuperscript{21}. This property may also underlie the diminished efficacy of statins for reduction of these particles (Supplementary Fig. 3)\textsuperscript{22}, since statins act to reduce LDL-C levels to a large extent by increasing LDL receptor expression as a result of upregulation of the transcription factor SREBP2, whereas SORT1 is not regulated by this mechanism. Hence, the greater statin-mediated reduction of LDL-C among carriers of the rs646776 minor allele could be attributed to relative depletion of LDL particles dependent on sortilin for clearance and hence a residually greater proportion of those LDL particles whose uptake is more dependent on the LDL receptor than on sortilin.

Notably, the strong association of rs646776 with statin-induced reductions in small and very small LDL particles contrasts to the weaker associations of changes in these particles with rs445925, likely the result of differing mechanisms underlying the effects of these SNPs on statin response. As noted above, rs445925 is a proxy for the SNP defining the apoE e2 protein variant that is thought to predispose to heightened statin response as a result of greater statin inhibition of cholesterol synthesis and hence upregulation of SREBP and LDL receptor activity.

The SLCO1B1 rs2900478 minor allele was associated with a smaller LDL-C reduction in response to statin treatment. SLCO1B1 encodes the organic anion-transporting polypeptide OATP1B1 and facilitates the hepatic uptake of statins\textsuperscript{23}. SNP rs2900478 is in strong LD ($r^2 = 0.89$) with rs4149056, which represents the Val174Ala substitution resulting in complete loss of function. In the HPS trial, which used simvastatin, this candidate gene SNP was associated with a 1\% lower LDL-C reduction per allele\textsuperscript{24}. Single-dose studies have shown that the observed area under the curve of plasma level of active simvastatin after a dose of 40 mg was 221\% higher in rs4149056 CC homozygotes compared with rs4149056 TT homozygotes, as compared with atorvastatin 20 mg (144\% higher for CC versus TT) and rosuvastatin 40 mg (117\% higher for CC versus TT)\textsuperscript{24}. This finding results from the slower hepatic uptake of statins caused by the genetic variant, which would also be expected to result in a reduction in the cholesterol-lowering effect\textsuperscript{25}. In a GWAS of the genetic risk factors for simvastatin-induced myopathy, SLCO1B1 showed the strongest association\textsuperscript{25}. Homozygous carriers of the SLCO1B1 variant had a 16.9 times higher risk for myopathy compared with non-carriers. This might have led to a decrease in study medication adherence, and consequently a decreased effect on LDL-C in carriers of this SNP. In addition, previous analysis in the GoDARTS study showed that the effect of the SLCO1B1 gene on statin efficacy was abolished after removal of individuals who showed signs of intolerance\textsuperscript{26}.

GWCA identified three independent loci in the APOE gene region and two loci in the LPA gene region (Supplementary Table 9). GWCA also showed several other loci with $P < 5 < 10^{-8}$ that were not GWAS significant on single-SNP analysis (HGD, RNF175, ISCA1-HTR1A, GLIS3-SLC1A1, LOC100128657, NXX2-1-SLC25A28 and PEL12). These findings will require replication in independent, larger data sets. The significant SNPs in the GWCA analysis explained ~5\% of the variation in LDL-C response to statin treatment. Whether this 5\% is clinically relevant should be investigated by other studies. For example, it would be of interest to investigate whether this differential LDL-C lowering is also associated with differential event reduction by statin treatment.

In the current study, we combined the results of 6 randomized clinical trials and 10 observational studies in the first stage. This approach resulted also in combining several types of statins, since different statins were studied in the trials and within the observational studies (Supplementary Table 2). This, and the variation in statin dosage during follow-up for an individual, is a limitation, the individual study analyses were adjusted for statin type and dose\textsuperscript{24,27}. To overcome this limitation, the individual study analyses were adjusted for statin dose. Dividing the actual statin dose given by the statin-specific dose equivalent (Supplementary Table 3) gives the statin-adjusted equivalent based on the daily dosages required to achieve a mean 30\% LDL-C reduction. Using this table, we made the different statin dosages and types comparable within the studies. To correct for between-study variance, we used a fixed effect meta-analysis with inverse variance weighting as an example.
Another possible limitation of the current study is the influence of the identified genetic variants on baseline LDL-C levels. In pharmacogenetic studies investigating the LDL-C-lowering response to statins, it is important to eliminate the effect of association between the genetic variant and baseline LDL-C levels, since those findings may confound the response to treatment associations. Previous large GWAS studies have shown strong associations between baseline LDL-C levels and genetic variants in 445925 and SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC1 and SLC01B1, also having a modest but genome-wide significant effect on LDL-C response. The minor alleles of the APOE rs7455872 and SORT1/CELSR2/PSRC1 SNPs were associated with a larger statin response, whereas the minor alleles of the LPA rs10455872 and SLC01B1 rs2900478 SNPs were associated with a smaller statin response. Our findings advance the understanding of the pharmacogenetic architecture of statin response.

Methods

Study populations. The meta-analysis was conducted in the GIST consortium, which includes data from 8 randomized controlled statin trials (RCTs) and 11 prospective, population-based studies. The initial analysis (first stage) was performed in 8,421 statin-treated subjects from 6 RCTs (ASCOT, CAP, CARDS, GoDARTS I, GoDARTS II, and Health ABC, HVH and MESA). Further investigation (second stage) was performed in 21,975 statin-treated subjects from two randomized trials (HPS and JUPITER) and one observational study (Rotterdam Study). Six SNPs were additionally genotyped in the Scandinavian participants of the ASCOT study. The details of the first- and second-stage studies can be found in the Supplementary Tables 1 and 2 and Supplementary Notes 1 and 2.

Subjects. Response to statin treatment was studied in statin-treated subjects only and not in those treated with placebo. Subjects included in the observational studies’ analysis should be treated with statins and have LDL-C measurements before and after start of statin treatment. Subjects of reported or suspected non-European ancestry were excluded. All participants gave written informed consent and the study was approved by all institutional ethics committees.

Outcome measurements. The response to statin treatment was defined as the difference between the natural log-transformed on- and off-treatment LDL-C levels. The beta of the corresponding regression reflects the fraction of differential LDL lowering in carriers versus non-carriers of the SNP. For observational studies, the on-treatment LDL-C levels were taken into account for all kinds of prescribed statins, at any dosage, for any indication and for at least 4 weeks before measurement. Characteristics of on- and off-treatment LDL-C levels and statins used in each study are shown in Supplementary Table 2. For each individual, at least one on-treatment LDL-C measurement and at least one off-treatment LDL-C measurement were required. When multiple on- or off-treatment measurements were available, the mean of the cholesterol measurements was used. Subjects with missing on- or off-treatment measurements were excluded, with the exception of the GoDARTS cohorts for which missing off-treatment LDL-C levels were estimated using imputation methods (Supplementary Note 2). In the HPS, proportional LDL-C response was defined by the changes in natural log lipid levels from the screening visit before starting statin therapy to the randomization visit.

Genotyping and imputation. Genotyping, quality control, data cleaning and imputation were performed independently in each study using different genetic platforms and software as outlined in Supplementary Table 4. In all studies, genotyping was performed using Illumina, Affymetrix or Perlegen genotyping arrays, and MACH, Impute or BIMBAM software was used for imputation.

GWAS analysis. Each study independently performed the GWAS on the difference between natural log-transformed on- and off-treatment LDL-C levels. To control for possible associations with off-treatment LDL-C levels, analyses were adjusted for the natural log-transformed off-treatment LDL-C level. An additive genetic model was assumed using linear regression. Genotyped SNPs, regression analysis was performed on expected allele dosage. Analyses were additionally adjusted for age, sex and study-specific covariates (for example, ancestry principal components or country). Analyses in the observational studies were, if available, additionally adjusted for the statin dose by the natural logarithm of the dose equivalent as defined in Supplementary Table 3. This table shows the dose equivalent per statin type, dividing the statin dosage of an individual by the dose equivalent shown in Supplementary Table 3 will give the adjusted statin dosage.

Quality control and meta-analysis. Centrally, within each study, SNPs with MAF <1% or imputation quality <0.3 were excluded from the analysis. QQ-plots were assessed for each study to identify batch effects (Supplementary Fig. 1). The software package METAL was used for performing the meta-analysis (http://www.sph.umich.edu/csg/abecasis/Metal/index.html). A fixed effects, inverse variance weighted approach was used. Using an inverse variance weighted meta-analysis will give smaller weights to studies with large s.e. To correct for possible population stratification, genomic control was performed by adjusting the within-study findings and the meta-analysis results for the genomic inflation factor.

Second stage. SNPs with P values ≤ 5 × 10^{-8} in the first-stage meta-analysis were selected for further investigation in a second stage. A maximum of two SNPs per locus were selected, based on statistical significance, except for the APOE locus, for which all genome-wide significant associated SNPs were selected for validation. A total of 37 SNPs, within 16 independent loci, were included in the second stage, which was performed in the JUPITER trial, HPS study and the Rotterdam Study, which all had GWAS data and response to statin treatment available. For 2 of the 246 SNPs, a proxy was used in the JUPITER trial, and 31 SNPs were not available, nor was a proxy SNP. HPS provided data on 151 directly genotyped SNPs from GWAS and iPLEX experiments, including 48 of the first- and 103 proxy SNPs (r^2 > 0.8). Analysis in HPS was not adjusted for ln baseline LDL-C levels. In addition, the number of subjects with data varied from SNP-to-SNP and ranges from ~4,000 for variants with GWAS data to ~18,000 for some candidate genes. Results of the first and second stage were combined using fixed effects, inverse variance weighted meta-analysis and analysed by METAL. As a third stage, six SNPs with P values 5 × 10^{-8} < P ≤ 5 × 10^{-7} in the combined meta-analysis were selected for additional genotyping in the Scandinavian participants of the ASCOT study. Kaspar assays were designed for four of the SNPs using the KBioscience Primerpicker software, and oligos were provided by Ingenuity Technologies (http://eu.ingenuity.com/site). Full Kaspar methodology is available from LGC SNP genotyping (http://www.lgcgenomics.com/genotyping/kasp-genotyping- reagents/). Two SNPs (rs818844 and rs13166647) were genotyped using Taqman assays supplied by Life Technologies (http://www.lifetechnologies.com/en/home.html) using the standard Taqman protocol. Results of the additional genotyping were combined with results from the first and second stages using a fixed effects, inverse variance weighted meta-analysis and analysed by METAL.

Determination of changes in LDL subfractions. LDL subclasses were analysed as described previously using non-denaturing gradient gel electrophoresis of fasting plasma samples taken at baseline and after 6 weeks of simvastatin 40 mg per day (CAP study, n = 579) or 12 weeks of pravastatin 40 mg per day (PRINCE study, n = 1,284). Aliquots of 0.1 ml of whole plasma were mixed 1:1 with a sampling buffer of 20% sucrose and 0.25% bromophenol blue. Electrophoresis of samples and size calibration standards were performed using 2-14% polyacrylamide gradients at 150 V for 3 h following a 15 min pre-run at 75 V. Gels were stained with 0.07% Sudan black for 1 h and stored in a 0.81% acetic acid, 4% methanol solution until they were scanned by computer-assisted densitometry for determination of areas of LDL IVb (22.0–23.2 nm), LDL IVa (23.3–24.1 nm), LDL IIIb (24.2–24.6 nm), LDL IIIa (24.7–25.5 nm), LDL IIb (25.6–26.4 nm), LDL IIa (26.5–27.1 nm) and LDL I (27.2–28.5 nm). The cholesterol concentrations of the subfractions (mg dl^{-1} plasma) were determined by multiplying percent of the total stained LDL area for each subfraction by the LDL-C for that sample. For genetic association analyses, subfractions were grouped into large LDL (LDL I + IIa), small LDL (LDL IIIa + IIb), LDL IVa, LDL IVb and small LDL (LDL I) as described previously. A generalized estimating equation method was used to test the association of log change with the interaction of the four SNPs by LDL subfraction.

Effect of off-treatment LDL-C. Effects of genetic variation on treatment response as measured by on-treatment LDL-C could be mediated through effects on the off-treatment LDL-C. To evaluate whether genetic on-treatment LDL-C likely reflects residual effect on off-treatment LDL-C, it is necessary to adjust for the off-treatment LDL-C levels and to correct the maximum likelihood estimate of the adjusted effect of genotype on on-treatment value for the noise in off-treatment values (the noise is both random measurement error and intra-individual variation in usual LDL-C). This analysis was only done within studies where baseline measurements were available. From the rules of path analysis, we calculated the direct effect of genotype on on-treatment trait value as β = α0 (1 – π)p, where

\[ \beta = \alpha_0 (1 - \pi)p \]
β is the coefficient of regression for on-treatment trait value on genotype adjusted for measured off-treatment value, x is the coefficient of regression of baseline LDL on genotype, v is the total variance between individuals, and σ is the coefficient of regression of on-treatment trait value on observed off-treatment value. For these calculations, we used ρ = 0.8 as a plausible value for the intra-class correlation based on the within-person correlation in LDL-C values taken over two off-treatment visits in CARDS. The interaction of each candidate SNP with statin versus placebo allocation was assessed in the JUPITER trial, since this study was not involved in the first-stage meta-analysis. Regression models were applied to the combined population of statin- and placebo-treated subjects by including extra terms encoding placebo allocation and the product of placebo allocation with SNP minor allele dose.

GWCA using Genome-Complex Trait Analysis. There may be multiple causal variants in a gene and the total variation that could be explained at a locus may be underestimated if only the most significant SNP in the region is selected. To identify independent SNPs, we ideally can perform a conditional analysis, starting with the top associated SNP, across the whole genome followed by a stepwise procedure of selecting additional SNPs, one by one, according to their conditional P values. Such a strategy should allow the discovery of more than two associated SNPs at a locus. To identify independent SNPs across the genome-wide data, we used an approximate conditional and joint analysis approach implemented in Genome-Complex Trait Analysis (GCTA) software (http://www.complextraitgenomics.com/software/gcta/). We used summary-level statistics from the first- and second-stage GWCA to construct meta-analysis between correlations between SNPs estimated from CARDS GWAS data. SNPs on different chromosomes or more than 10 Mb distant are assumed to be in linkage equilibrium. The model selection process in GCTA starts with the most significant SNP in the single-SNP meta-analysis across the whole genome with P value < 5 × 10−8. In the next step, it calculates the P values of all the remaining SNPs conditional on the top SNP that have already been selected in the model. To avoid problems due to colinearity, if the squared multiple correlations between a SNP to be tested and the selected SNPs(s) is larger than a cut-off value, such as 0.9, the conditional P value for that SNP will be set to 1. Select the SNPs with minimum conditional P value that is lower than the cut-off P value. Fit all the selected SNPs jointly in a model and drop the SNPs with the P value that is greater than the cut-off P value. This process is repeated until no SNPs can be added or removed from the model.

Pathway analysis and construction of a statin response network. Genes showing evidence of association (based on direct association or LD (HapMap CEU r2 > 0.8)) were reviewed for evidence of involvement in statin response at a pathway level using GeneGo MetaCore (Thomson Reuters:portal.genego.com). A statin response network was constructed in two stages. First, all genes with a literature-reported involvement in statin response (based on Medical Subject Headings (MeSH)) were identified using GeneGo MetaCore (Supplementary Data 3). Second, these genes were combined with all genes in associated loci (including genes in LD) and a network was constructed based on direct interactions only. To create a conservative network of direct gene interactions that have been consistently linked to statin response in the literature.

eQTL analysis. LDL-C-associated index SNPs (246 SNPs) were used to identify 1,443 LD proxy SNPs displaying complete LD (r2 = 1) across four HapMap builds in European ancestry samples (CEU) using the SNP tool (http://www.broadinstitute.org/mpg/snap/). The primary index SNPs and LD proxies were selected against a collected database of expression eSNP (eSNP) results, including the following: tissue fresh lymphocytes, fresh leukocytes, leukocyte samples in individuals with Celiac disease, whole-blood samples, lymphoblastoid cell lines (LCL) derived from asthmatic children, HapMap LCL from European ancestry samples (CEU) using the SNAP tool (http://www.broadinstitute.org/mpg/snap/). There may be multiple causal variants in a gene and the total variation that could be explained at a locus may be underestimated if only the most significant SNP in the region is selected. To identify independent SNPs, we ideally can perform a conditional analysis, starting with the top associated SNP, across the whole genome followed by a stepwise procedure of selecting additional SNPs, one by one, according to their conditional P values. Such a strategy should allow the discovery of more than two associated SNPs at a locus. To identify independent SNPs across the genome-wide data, we used an approximate conditional and joint analysis approach implemented in Genome-Complex Trait Analysis (GCTA) software (http://www.complextraitgenomics.com/software/gcta/). We used summary-level statistics from the first- and second-stage GWCA to construct meta-analysis between correlations between SNPs estimated from CARDS GWAS data. SNPs on different chromosomes or more than 10 Mb distant are assumed to be in linkage equilibrium. The model selection process in GCTA starts with the most significant SNP in the single-SNP meta-analysis across the whole genome with P value < 5 × 10−8. In the next step, it calculates the P values of all the remaining SNPs conditional on the top SNP that have already been selected in the model. To avoid problems due to colinearity, if the squared multiple correlations between a SNP to be tested and the selected SNPs(s) is larger than a cut-off value, such as 0.9, the conditional P value for that SNP will be set to 1. Select the SNPs with minimum conditional P value that is lower than the cut-off P value. Fit all the selected SNPs jointly in a model and drop the SNPs with the P value that is greater than the cut-off P value. This process is repeated until no SNPs can be added or removed from the model.

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Author contributions


Additional information

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