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Exploiting the GTEx resources to decipher the mechanisms at GWAS loci

Alvaro N. Barbeira^{1†}, Rodrigo Bonazzola^{1†}, Eric R. Gamazon^{2,3,4,5†}, Yanyu Liang^{1†}, YoSon Park^{6,7†}, Sarah Kim-Hellmuth^{8,9,10}, Gao Wang¹¹, Zhuoxun Jiang¹, Dan Zhou², Farhad Hormozdiari^{12,13}, Boxiang Liu¹⁴, Abhiram Rao¹⁴, Andrew R. Hamel^{12,15}, Milton D. Pividori¹, François Aguet¹², GTEx GWAS Working Group, Lisa Bastarache^{16,17}, Daniel M. Jordan^{18,19,20}, Marie Verbanck^{18,19,20,21}, Ron Do^{18,19,20}, GTEx Consortium, Matthew Stephens¹¹, Kristin Ardlie¹², Mark McCarthy²², Stephen B. Montgomery^{23,24}, Ayellet V. Segre^{12,15}, Christopher D. Brown⁶, Tuuli Lappalainen^{9,10}, Xiaoquan Wen²⁵ and Hae Kyung Im^{1*} 

*Correspondence:

haky@uchicago.edu

[†]Alvaro N. Barbeira, Rodrigo Bonazzola, Eric R. Gamazon, Yanyu Liang, and YoSon Park contributed equally to this work.

¹Section of Genetic Medicine, Department of Medicine, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

Full list of author information is available at the end of the article

Abstract

The resources generated by the GTEx consortium offer unprecedented opportunities to advance our understanding of the biology of human diseases. Here, we present an in-depth examination of the phenotypic consequences of transcriptome regulation and a blueprint for the functional interpretation of genome-wide association study-discovered loci. Across a broad set of complex traits and diseases, we demonstrate widespread dose-dependent effects of RNA expression and splicing. We develop a data-driven framework to benchmark methods that prioritize causal genes and find no single approach outperforms the combination of multiple approaches. Using colocalization and association approaches that take into account the observed allelic heterogeneity of gene expression, we propose potential target genes for 47% (2519 out of 5385) of the GWAS loci examined.

Introduction

In the last decade, the number of reproducible genetic associations with complex human traits that have emerged from genome-wide association studies (GWAS) has substantially grown. Many of the identified associations lie in non-coding regions of the genome, suggesting that they influence disease pathophysiology and complex traits via gene regulatory changes. Integrative studies of molecular quantitative trait loci (QTL) [1] have established gene expression as a key intermediate molecular phenotype, and improved functional interpretation of GWAS findings, spanning immunological diseases [2], various cancers [3, 4], lipid traits [5, 6], and a broad array of other complex traits.

Large-scale international efforts such as the Genotype-Tissue Expression (GTEx) Consortium have provided an atlas of the regulatory landscape of gene expression and splicing



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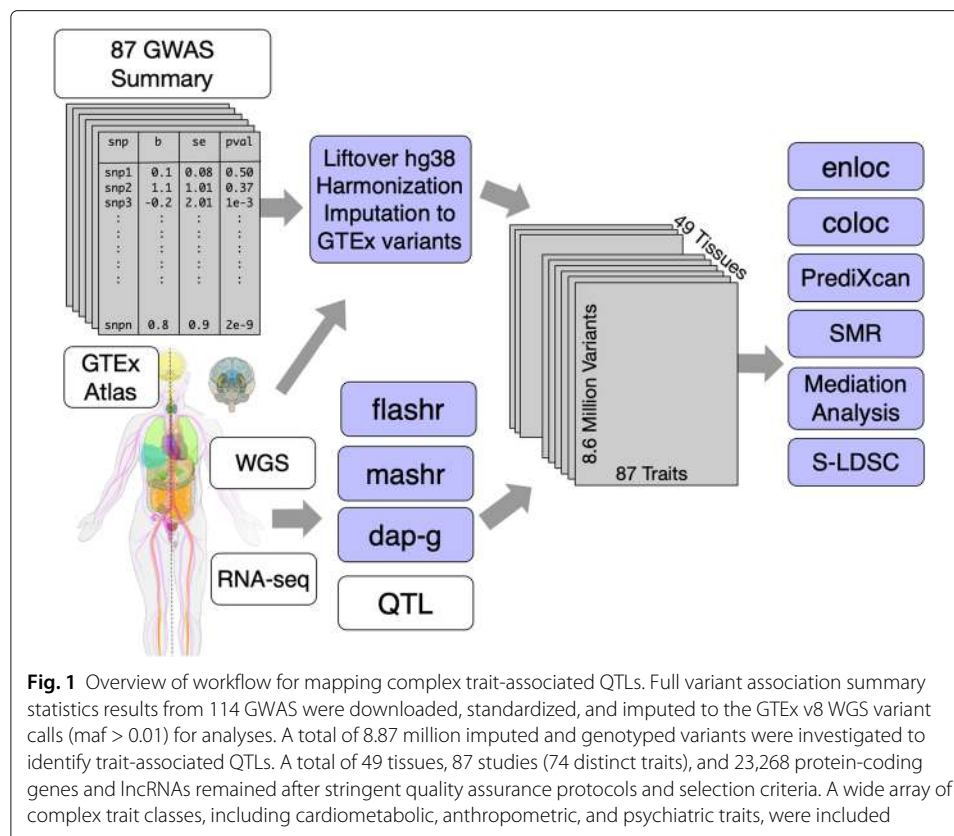
variation in a broad collection of primary human tissues [7–9]. Nearly all protein-coding genes in the genome now have at least one local variant associated with expression changes and the majority also have common variants affecting alternative splicing (FDR < 5%) [9]. In parallel, there has been an explosive growth in the number of genetic discoveries across a large number of traits, prompting the development of integrative approaches to characterize the function of GWAS findings [10–14]. Nevertheless, our understanding of underlying biological mechanisms for most complex traits substantially lags behind the improved efficiency of the discovery of genetic associations, made possible by large-scale biobanks and GWAS meta-analyses.

One of the primary tools for the functional interpretation of GWAS associations has been the integrative analysis of molecular QTLs. Colocalization approaches that seek to establish shared causal variants (e.g., eCaviar [15], *enloc* [16], and *coloc* [17]), enrichment analysis (S-LDSC [18] and QTLEnrich [11]), or mediation and association methods (SMR [12], TWAS [13], and PrediXcan [19]) have provided important insights, but they are often used in isolation, and there have been limited prior assessments of power and error rates associated with each [20]. Their applications often fail to provide a comprehensive, biologically interpretable view across multiple methods, traits, and tissues or offer guidelines that are generalizable to other contexts. Thus, a comprehensive assessment of expression and splicing QTLs for their contributions to disease susceptibility and other complex traits requires the development of novel methodologies with improved resolution and interpretability.

Here, we present methods and resources that help elucidate how genetic variants associated with gene expression (cis-eQTLs) or splicing (cis-sQTLs) contribute to, or mediate, the functional mechanisms underlying a wide array of complex diseases and quantitative traits. Since splicing QTLs have largely been understudied, we perform a comprehensive integrative study of this class of QTLs, in a broad collection of tissues, and disease associations. We provide predictions of functional mechanisms for 74 distinct complex traits from 87 GWA study results and demonstrate independent validation and evaluation of findings using likely causal gene-disease relationships in the Online Mendelian Inheritance of Man (OMIM) database. Notably, we find widespread dose-dependent effects of cis-QTLs on traits through multiple lines of evidence. We examine the importance of considering, or correcting for, false functional links attributed to GWAS loci due to neighboring but distinct causal variants. We call this confounding LD contamination for the remainder of the paper. To identify predicted causal effects among the complex trait-associated QTLs, we conduct systematic evaluation across different methods. Furthermore, we provide guidelines for employing complementary methods to map the regulatory mechanisms underlying genetic associations with complex traits.

Mapping the regulatory landscape of complex traits

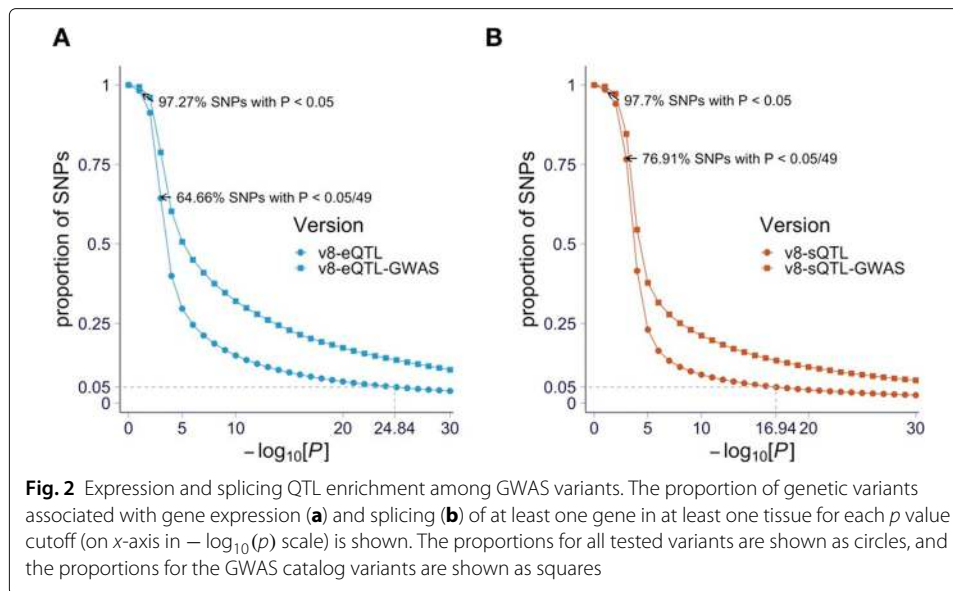
The final GTEx data release (v8) included 54 primary human tissues, 49 of which included at least 70 samples with both whole genome sequencing (WGS) and tissue-specific RNA-seq data. A total of 15,253 samples from 838 individuals were used for cis-QTL mapping (Fig. 1) [9]. In addition to the expression quantitative trait loci (eQTL) mapping, we also evaluated genetic variation associated with alternative splicing (sQTL) and their impact on complex traits.



We downloaded and processed 114 publicly available GWAS datasets with genome-wide variant association summary statistics (here onwards, summary statistics). After data harmonization, format standardization, missing data imputation, and other quality assurance steps (Additional file 1: Fig. S1, Fig. S2, and Fig. S3), we retained 87 datasets representing 74 distinct complex traits including cardiometabolic, hematologic, neuropsychiatric, and anthropometric traits (Additional file 1: Fig. S4). We provide the full list of datasets used in our study and all processing scripts as a resource to the community (Additional file 2: Table S1 and Additional file 1: Table S2).

Using these resources, we sought to identify likely causal associations among these gene- and alternatively spliced transcript-associated variants (eVariants and sVariants, respectively). For this purpose, we applied colocalization, enrichment, and association analyses, and provide a resource to enable investigations into gene prioritization approaches for disease associations.

Gene expression and alternative splicing dysregulations have been proposed as the underlying mechanism of the association signals in many diseases [5, 11, 21–24]. Similar to previous reports [8], we observed robust and widespread enrichment of eQTLs and sQTLs among disease-associated variants (Fig. 2). This observation suggests a causal role for expression and splicing regulation in complex traits. Figure 2 also illustrates the dangers of using a naive approach to assigning causal genes to GWAS variants that are associated with expression or splicing, especially when using loose p value thresholds. For example, with a p value threshold of 0.05, over 97% of common variants will be assigned some gene in some tissue associated at that level.

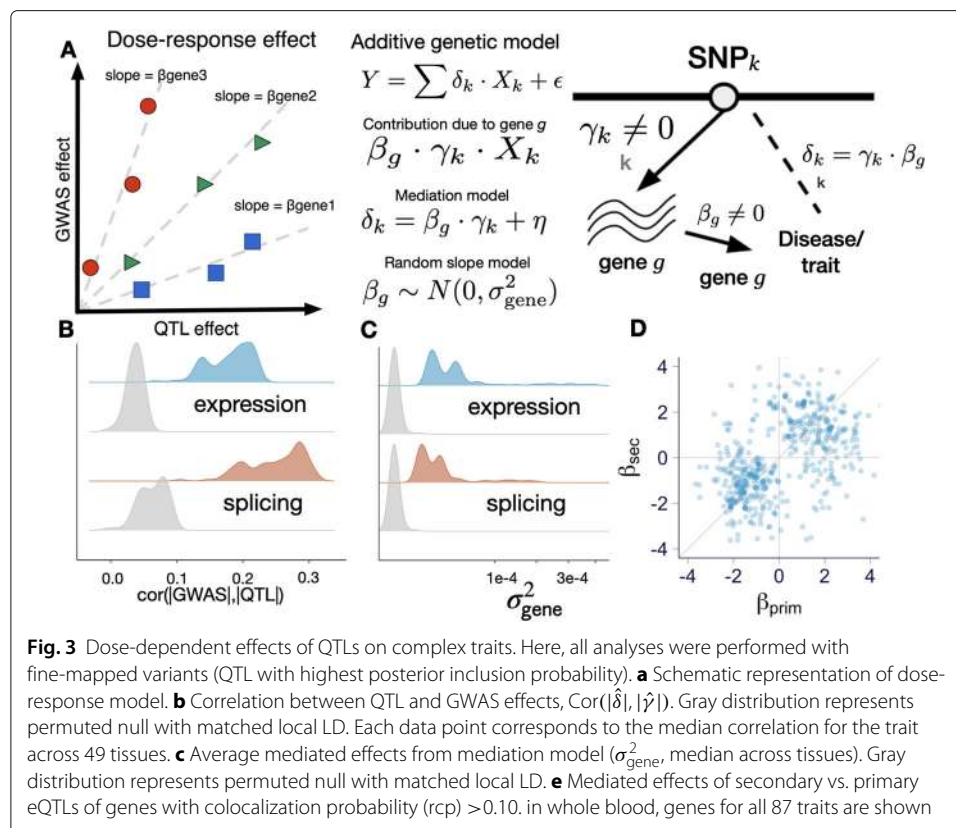


Dose-dependent regulatory effects of expression and alternative splicing on complex traits

Nevertheless, enrichment studies can be confounded by many unknown factors. Therefore, we sought to gather stronger evidence for a causal link by testing whether there is a dose-dependent effect of expression and splicing QTLs on complex traits. Figure 3a illustrates schematically our approach. We examined whether expression or splicing associated variants (referred to as e/sVariants for the remainder of the paper) with higher impact on gene expression or splicing lead to higher impact on a complex trait, i.e., a larger GWAS effect (Fig. 3a). The impact of the regulation of a gene on a trait is quantified by the slope β_{gene} . That is, a null hypothesis of no dose-dependent effect is equivalent to $\beta_{\text{gene}} = 0$.

To reduce unnecessary noise in the analysis, we included only the most likely causal e/sVariant within each credible set as determined by the e/sQTL fine-mapping (denoted “fine-mapped variants” throughout the remainder of the paper; see Methods on QTL fine-mapping).

First, we quantified dose-dependent effect of expression and splicing regulation on the trait as the average mediating effect size, $\bar{\beta}$. We calculated this average effect using the Pearson correlation between the absolute values of the molecular and complex trait effect sizes ($\text{cor}(|\gamma|, |\delta|)$) across all fine-mapped variants (for any gene) for each trait-tissue pair. As hypothesized, we found, consistently across all tissue-trait pairs, a positive correlation between the GWAS and QTL effects, which was significantly larger than the permuted null with matched local LD. The average correlations were 0.18 (s.e. = 0.004, $p < 1 \times 10^{-30}$) and 0.25 (s.e. = 0.006, $p < 1 \times 10^{-30}$) for expression and splicing, respectively with the distribution of the median correlation across tissues for each trait shown in Fig. 3b. Averages and standard errors were calculated taking into account correlation between tissues, and p values were calculated against permuted null with matched local LD (Supplementary Text). The non-negative permuted correlation values indicate that local LD contributed to inflate the estimated mediation effect. These results provide the first line of evidence of the dose-response effect.



To test and account for mediation effect heterogeneity (different slope/dosage sensitivity for different genes), we modeled the gene-specific mediation effect, β_g , as a random variable following a normal distribution $\beta_g \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_{\text{gene}}^2)$. Under this random-effects model, the null hypothesis can be stated as $\sigma_{\text{gene}}^2 = 0$ (Supplementary Text; Fig. 3c). As shown in Fig. 3c, these effects were significantly larger than expected from the permuted null (expression $p = 1.8 \times 10^{-9}$; splicing $p = 2.5 \times 10^{-7}$). These results indicate that strong genetic effects on expression or splicing are more likely to have a strong association to complex traits, adding strong support to a dose-dependent relationship between gene regulation and downstream traits.

Importantly, by averaging across all genes, the estimates, from both the average and the random-effects approach, of the mediating effect are robust to confounding due to LD, as discussed in the Supplementary Text.

Another way to account for mediation effect heterogeneity is to make use of the allelic series of independent eQTLs identified for over half of the eGenes [9]. We examined whether the mediating effect ($\beta = \delta/\gamma$) inferred from the primary eQTL (β_{prim}) was consistent with the one inferred from the secondary eQTL (β_{sec}). Among the independent eQTLs for a given gene, we called primary the one with the larger effect size. We considered only fine-mapped eQTLs given the low power to detect multiple independent sQTLs. We confirmed this concordance, as reported by the GTEx consortium [9], demonstrating that the correlation between the primary and secondary mediating effects is larger than expected given the LD between them. To better visualize this concordance, we plotted the estimated mediating effects of primary against the secondary eQTLs (whole

blood shown here but other tissues look similar) in Fig. 3d and showed that they cluster in the first and third quadrants. All gene-trait pairs with relatively high regional colocalization probability ($rcp > 0.10$, see colocalization details below) are shown here to facilitate visualization, but the clustering around the diagonal line was observed even without the filtering. This provides a third confirmatory evidence for the widespread dose-dependent effects of eQTLs on complex traits.

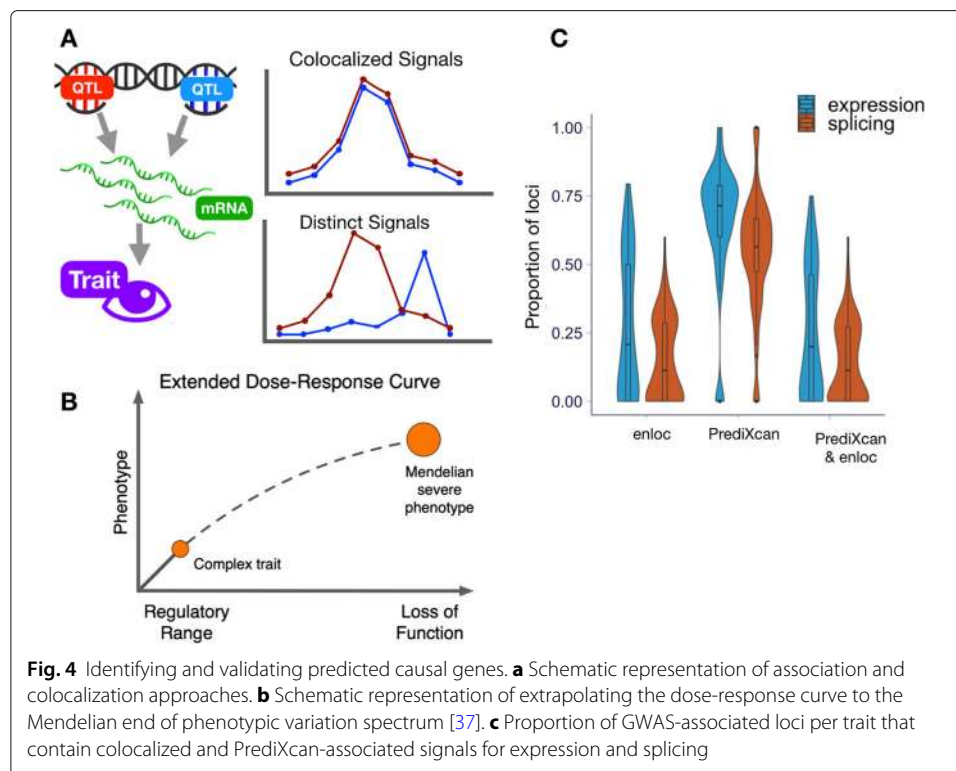
Note that genes with discordant effects within the allelic series would be harder to detect and suggest more complex causal relationship or context specificity.

Causal gene prediction and prioritization

In addition to genome-wide analyses that shed light on the molecular architecture of complex traits, QTL analysis of GWAS data can identify potential causal genes and molecular changes in individual GWAS loci. Towards this end, we performed association analysis with genetically predicted regulation and colocalization (Fig. 4a). After evaluating the performance of *coloc* and *enloc* [16, 17], we chose *enloc* as our primary approach, due to its use of hierarchical models to estimate colocalization priors [16] and its ability to account for multiple causal variants. The *coloc* assumption of a single causal variant drastically reduces performance especially in large QTL datasets such as GTEx with widespread allelic heterogeneity. For a more extensive discussion on the benefits of Bayesian colocalization methods and comparison of *enloc* to other colocalization approaches including SMR-HEIDI, see [25]. We estimated the posterior regional colocalization probability (rcp), using *enloc*, for 12,072,964 tissue-gene-GWAS locus-trait tuples and 67,943,800 tissue-splicing event-GWAS locus-trait tuples. For the tally of colocalized genes, we used $rcp > 0.5$ as a stringent cutoff as demonstrated below with the low colocalization probabilities of height loci using two different datasets.

In total, we identified 3477 (15% of 23,963) unique genes colocalizing with GWAS hits ($rcp > 0.5$) across all traits and tissues analyzed. Similarly, 3157 splicing events (1% out of 310,042) colocalized with GWAS hits, corresponding to 1226 genes with at least one colocalized splicing event (5% of 23,963).

Colocalization of e/sQTLs with GWAS variants provides important causal support for molecular traits. However, we found their estimates to be overly conservative. To illustrate this point, we tested the colocalization of height with itself, using two large-scale studies of individuals of European-ancestry individuals: GIANT [26] and UK Biobank. We started by performing fine-mapping of both GWAS results using *susier* [27]. Notably, only 416 (39%) of GIANT's fine-mapped credible sets overlapped with the corresponding UK Biobank credible sets. We estimated the colocalization probability as the sum of the product of posterior inclusion probabilities of variants for each of the 1069 independent credible sets in GIANT, which is similar to the approach used by eCAVIAR [15]. Two thirds of the GIANT credible sets (66.2%) had a colocalization probability below 0.01, and about half (48.9%) had a colocalization probability below 0.001. In other words, two thirds of the loci found by GIANT would be considered not to be colocalized with UK Biobank's loci when using a seemingly very loose colocalization probability cutoff of 0.01. Given the larger sample size of the UK Biobank GWAS ($n = 337,119$ UKB GWAS vs. $n = 253,288$ for GIANT), the low colocalization cannot be attributed to lack of power. This result is likely due in part to the sensitivity to small LD differences between different EUR populations that make up large GWAS meta-analysis cohorts such as GIANT. Our



analysis illustrates the fact that colocalization probability estimates are highly conservative and may miss many causal genes, and low colocalization probability should not be interpreted as evidence of lack of a causal link between the molecular phenotype and the GWAS trait. Notice that this limitation is not inherent to the colocalization method itself but the limitation of currently available large-scale GWAS meta-analysis results.

A complementary approach to colocalization is to estimate the GWAS trait association with genetically predicted gene expression or splicing [19]. The GTEx v8 data provides an important expansion of these analyses, allowing generation of prediction models in 49 tissues with whole genome sequencing data to impute gene expression and splicing variation. We trained prediction models using a variety of approaches and selected the top performing one based on precision, recall, and other metrics [28]. Briefly, the optimal model uses fine-mapping probabilities for feature selection and exploits global patterns of tissue sharing of regulation (Supplementary Text) to improve prediction. In-depth comparison of these fine-mapped models with Elastic Net-based and CTIMP [29] models is described in [28]. The analysis presented here uses these improved models (fine-mapped-*mashr*) instead of Elastic Net as reported in the main GTEx publication [9]. Multi-SNP prediction models were generated for a total of 686,241 gene-tissue and 1,816,703 splicing event-tissue pairs. The larger sample size and improved models led to an increase in the number of expression models to a median across tissues of 14,062, from a median of 4776 GTEx v7 Elastic Net models (median increase at 191%, Additional file 1: Fig. S5). Splicing models are available only for the v8 release.

Next, we computed the association between an imputed molecular phenotype (expression or splicing) and a trait to estimate the genic effect on the trait, using the summary

statistics-based PrediXcan [24]. Given the widespread tissue sharing of regulatory variation [8], we also computed MultiXcan scores to integrate patterns of associations from multiple tissues and increase statistical power [10]. Out of the 22,518 genes tested with PrediXcan, 6407 (28%) showed a significant association with at least one of the 87 traits at Bonferroni-corrected p value threshold ($p < 0.05/686,241$, where the denominator is the number of gene-tissue pairs tested; Additional file 1: Fig. S6). For splicing, about 15% (20,364 of 138,890) of tested splicing events showed a significant association ($p < 0.05/1,816,703$, where the denominator is the number of intron-tissue pairs tested). Nearly all traits (94%; 82 out of 87) showed at least one significant gene-level PrediXcan association in at least one tissue (Additional file 1: Figs. S7 and S8); the median number of associated genes across traits was 974. This resource of PrediXcan associations can be used to prioritize a list of putatively causal genes for follow-up studies.

To replicate the PrediXcan expression associations in an independent dataset, BioVU, which is a large-scale biobank tied to Electronic Health Records [30, 31], we selected seven traits with predicted high statistical power. Out of 947 gene-tissue-trait discoveries tested, 458 unique gene-tissue-trait triplets (48%) showed replication in this independent biobank (PrediXcan association $p < 0.05$; see [Supplementary Text](#)). Further confirming this statistical replication in BioVU, we used the PheWAS [32] catalog as the silver standard and found an AUC curve of 0.62. [33].

Altogether, these results provide abundant links between gene regulation and GWAS loci. To further quantify this, we split the genome into approximately LD-independent blocks [34] and identified blocks with a significant GWAS variant for each trait (at Bonferroni threshold adjusted for number of variants $0.05/8.8 \times 10^6 \sim 5.7 \times 10^{-9}$); we refer to any such region-trait pair by “GWAS locus.” We calculated the proportion of GWAS loci that contain a significantly associated gene via PrediXcan or a colocalized gene via *enloc* ($\text{rcp} > 0.5$). Briefly, the LD blocks are defined by analyzing empirical patterns of LD observed in 1000 Genomes [35] and variants in different regions are unlikely to be correlated, thus providing us with a data-driven criterion to distinguish independent genomic signals.

Across the traits, 72% (3899/5385) of GWAS loci had a PrediXcan expression association in the same LD block, of which 55% (2125/3899) had evidence of colocalization with an eQTL; for splicing, 62% (3345/5385) had a PrediXcan association of which 34% (1135/3345) colocalized with an sQTL (Additional file 1: Table S3). From the combined list of eGenes and sGenes, 47% of loci have a gene with both *enloc* and PrediXcan support. The distribution of the proportion of associated and colocalized GWAS loci across 87 traits is summarized in Fig. 4c; for a typical complex trait, about 20% of GWAS loci contained a colocalized, significantly associated gene while 11% contained a colocalized, significantly associated splicing event. These results propose function for a large number of GWAS loci, but most loci remain without candidate genes, highlighting the need to expand the resolution of transcriptome studies.

A recent report estimates that the proportion of trait variance explained by the assayed transcriptome is on average 11% [36]. Even though this number is not directly comparable with the proportion of loci with support from PrediXcan and *enloc*, some discussion is warranted. Differences may arise with our analysis from the fact that (1) GTEx v8 doubles the number of samples with both genotype and RNA-seq relative to v7, (2) we include links based on splicing in addition to expression, (3) a variant may act through

both regulation of expression levels and other undetected mechanisms (pleiotropy), and (4) attenuation bias may reduce the estimates given the error in eQTL effect sizes.

Of note, two members of the sterolin family, *ABCG5* and *ABCG8*, showed highly significant predicted causal associations using both PrediXcan and *enloc* for LDL-C levels and self-reported high cholesterol levels. *ABCG8* showed more significant associations in both datasets (chr2: 43838964–43878466; UKB self-reported high cholesterol: $-\log_{10}(p_{\text{PrediXcan}}) = 38.43$, $\text{rcp} = 0.985$; GLGC LDL-C: $-\log_{10}(p_{\text{PrediXcan}}) = 71.40$, $\text{rcp} = 0.789$), compared to *ABCG5* (chr2: 43812472–43838865; $-\log_{10}(p_{\text{PrediXcan}}) = 36.85$, $\text{rcp} = 0.941$; $-\log_{10}(p_{\text{PrediXcan}}) = 80.80$, $\text{rcp} = 0.705$). Mutations in either of the two ATP-binding cassette (ABC) half-transporters, *ABCG5* and *ABCG8*, lead to reduced secretion of sterols into bile and, ultimately, obstruct cholesterol and other sterols exiting the body [38]. In mice with disrupted *Abcg5* and *Abcg8* (*G5G8*^{-/-}), a 2- to 3-fold increase in the fractional absorption of dietary plant sterols and extremely low biliary cholesterol levels was observed, indicating that disrupting these genes contributes greatly to plasma cholesterol levels [39]. The overexpression of human *ABCG5* and *ABCG8* in transgenic *Ldlr*^{-/-} mice resulted in 30% reduction in hepatic cholesterol levels and 70% reduced atherosclerotic lesion in the aortic root and arch [40] after 6 months on a Western diet.

Several other lipid-associated loci were also consistently predicted as causal across OMIM, the rare variant derived set, PrediXcan and *enloc*. Rare protein-truncating variants in *APOB* have been previously associated with reduced LDL-C and triglyceride levels and reduced coronary heart disease risk [41]. Interestingly, *APOB* has been predicted as a causal gene in four related traits, coronary artery disease, LDL-C levels, triglyceride levels, and self-reported high cholesterol levels. Among the four traits, PrediXcan showed the highest association to LDL-C levels ($-\log_{10}(p_{\text{PrediXcan}}) = 130.89$; $\text{rcp} = 0.485$) while self-reported high cholesterol showed the strongest evidence using *enloc* at nearly maximum posterior probability ($-\log_{10}(p_{\text{PrediXcan}}) = 93.66$; $\text{rcp} = 0.969$). Although *APOB* has been suggested as a better molecular indicator of predicted cardiac events in place of LDL-C levels [42, 43], its translation has been surprisingly slow in clinical practice [44]. Here, we provide an additional support for the crucial role *APOB* may play in predicting lipid traits.

Performance for identifying “ground truth” genes

To compare the ability of different approaches to identify the causal gene that mediates the association between GWAS loci and the traits, we sought to curate sets of “ground truth” genes using information that is independent of GWAS results (Additional file 1: Fig. S9). We call these sets “silver standards” as a reminder of their imperfect nature. The first silver standard was based on the OMIM (Online Mendelian Inheritance in Man) database [45], and the second one was based on publicly available rare variant tests from exome-wide association studies [46–48], resulting in 1592 OMIM gene-trait pairs and 101 rare variant-based gene-trait pairs (Additional file 3: Table S4, Additional file 4: Table S5).

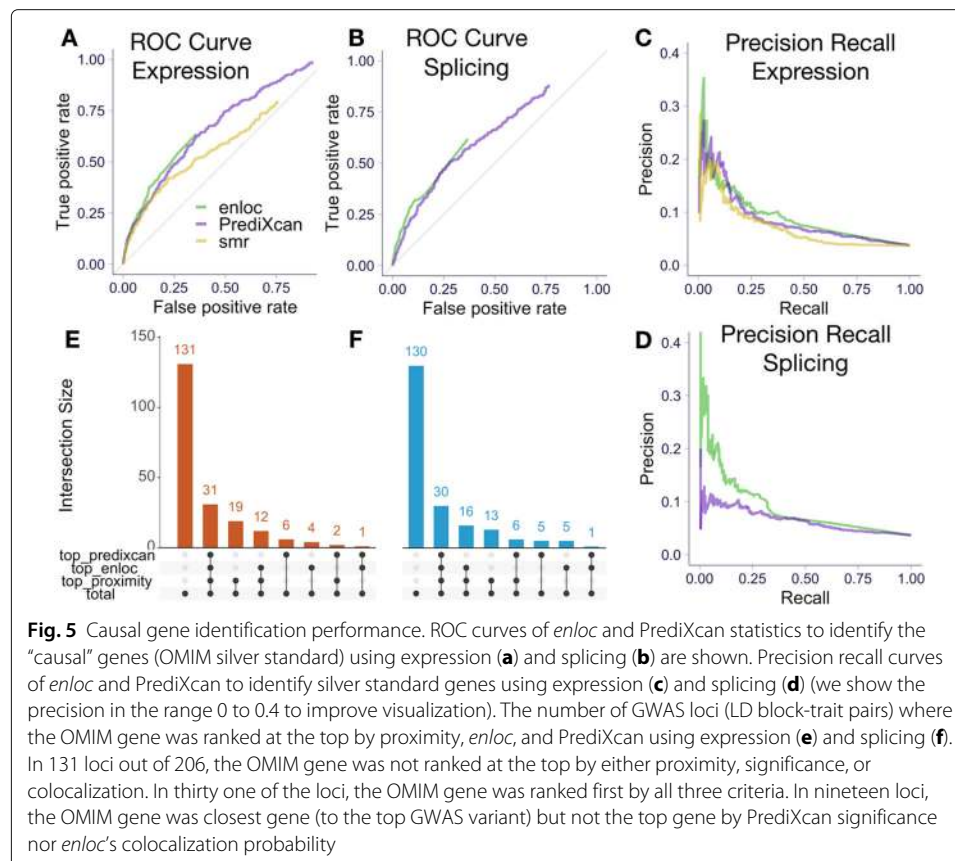
The rationale behind the choice of the OMIM database is the comorbidity among Mendelian and complex diseases suggesting that genes whose loss of function cause Mendelian diseases also manifest in milder phenotypic variation when modified to a lesser degree by regulatory variation [49, 50]. In other words, that the dose-response curve at the regulatory range may be extrapolated to the rare, loss-of-function end (Fig. 4b). The rationale behind the use of the rare variant association study results is the excess of

deleterious rare variants associated with complex traits in genes that are in the vicinity of common variants associated with the same trait [46, 51, 52]. Note that rare variant associations are nearly independent of common variants due to the allele frequency difference between them.

For the analysis, we partitioned the genome into approximately independent LD blocks [34] and considered all the blocks where a silver standard gene was available for the trait. Since only genes in the vicinity of an index gene can be discovered with cis-regulatory information, we only considered the LD blocks with a GWAS significant variant (Additional file 1: Fig. S10). This selection resulted in 228 OMIM gene-trait pairs (28 distinct traits) and 80 rare variant-associated gene-trait pairs (5 distinct traits) that are located within the same LD block as the GWAS locus for a matched trait.

Both PrediXcan and *enloc* based on expression and splicing showed good sensitivity and specificity for identifying the silver standard genes as demonstrated by the ROC curves in Fig. 5a, b. These are well above the gray random guess lines indicating the predictive ability of these methods to find causal genes (see comparison with permuted null in Additional file 1: Fig. S11).

For applications such as target selection for drug development or follow-up experiments, another relevant metric is the precision or, equivalently, positive predictive value (PPV)—the probability that the gene-trait link is causal given that it is called significant



or colocalized. Precision recall curves for expression- and splicing-based predictions are shown in Fig. 5c, d. With more stringent threshold (towards the left in the recall axis), higher precision is obtained.

For example, 8.7% of genes with PrediXcan significant genes ($p < 0.05/49 \times$ number of gene/trait pairs) were OMIM genes and 14.8% of genes with high colocalization probability ($rcp > 0.5$) were also OMIM genes for matched traits.

Multiple factors contribute to the rather low precision. One of them is the widespread molecular pleiotropy [9], i.e., multiple genes affected by the same trait-associated variants. Another factor reducing the overall causal gene detection performance is the inherent bias of the OMIM gene list. Our current understanding of gene function is biased towards protein-coding variants with very large effects, as reflected in the list of OMIM genes. Genes associated to rare severe disease tend to be depleted of regulatory variation [53, 54], which will decrease the performance of a QTL-based method [54].

Among the 206 loci with at least one OMIM gene (a few loci contained multiple OMIM genes), an OMIM gene was the closest to the top GWAS SNP in 31.6% of the loci, it was the most colocalized in 24.8% of the loci, and it was the most significant in 20.4% of the loci (Fig. 5e, f).

To further investigate whether this predictive power could be improved by combining multiple criteria, we performed a joint logistic regression of OMIM gene status on (1) the proximity of the top GWAS variant to the nearest gene (distance to the gene body), (2) posterior probability of colocalization, and (3) PrediXcan association significance between QTL and GWAS variants. To make the scale of the three features more comparable, we used their respective ranking. When genes did not have an *enloc* or PrediXcan score, they were assigned to the last position in the ranking. All three features were significant predictors of OMIM gene status, with better ranked genes more likely to be OMIM genes (proximity $p = 2.0 \times 10^{-2}$, *enloc* $p = 6.1 \times 10^{-3}$, PrediXcan $p = 2.5 \times 10^{-4}$), indicating that each method provides an additional source of causal evidence even after conditioning on the others. Similar results were obtained using splicing colocalization and association scores and the rare variant-based silver standard, as shown in Additional file 1: Table S6. These results provide further empirical evidence that a combination of colocalization and association methods will perform better than individual ones. The significance of the proximity score even after accounting for significance and colocalization indicates missing regulatory events, i.e., mechanisms that may be uncovered by assaying other tissue or cell type contexts, larger samples, and other molecular traits, underscoring the need to expand the size and breadth of QTL studies. Proximity criterion also helps resolve cases when QTL data indicates multiple genes with similar significance.

Predicted OMIM genes included well-known findings such as *PCSK9* for LDLR, with *PCSK9* significant and colocalized for relevant GWAS traits (LDL-C levels, coronary artery disease, and self-reported high cholesterol), and *Interleukins* and *HLA* subunits for asthma, both significant and colocalized for related immunological traits. Significantly associated and colocalized genes that predicted OMIM genes also included *FLG* (eczema), *TPO* (hypothyroidism), and *NOD2* (inflammatory bowel disease) (see Additional file 1: Table S4 for complete list). Analysis with rare variant-based silver standard yielded similar conclusions (Supplementary Text; Additional file 1: Fig. S12).

Tissue enrichment of GWAS signals

The broad sharing of regulatory variation across tissues and the reduced significance of tissue-specific eQTLs make causal tissue identification challenging. To address this problem, we devised a novel approach to identify tissues of relevance for the etiology of complex traits. We investigated the patterns of tissue specificity and tissue sharing of PrediXcan association results across 49 tissues. For each trait-gene pair, the PrediXcan z -score can be represented as a 49×1 vector with each entry being the gene-level z -score in the corresponding tissue (if the prediction model of the gene is not available in that tissue, we filled in zero). To explore the tissue specificity of the PrediXcan z -score vector, we proceeded by assigning the z -score vector to a tissue-pattern category and tested whether certain tissue-pattern categories were over-represented among colocalized PrediXcan genes as compared to non-colocalized genes. We used the FLASH factors identified from matrix factorization applied to the cis-eQTL effect size matrix, as PrediXcan and cis-eQTL shared similar tissue-sharing pattern (Supplementary Text). To obtain a set of detailed and biologically interpretable tissue-pattern categories from the 31 FLASH factors, we manually merged them into 18 categories as shown in Additional file 1: Fig. S13. For each trait, we projected the z -score vector of each gene to one of the 31 FLASH factors (as described in Section 9 of Additional file 1) so that the gene was assigned to the corresponding tissue-pattern category. We defined a “positive” set of genes as the ones with PrediXcan p value that meets Bonferroni significance at $\alpha = 0.05$ in at least one tissue and $enloc\ rcp > 0.01$ in at least one tissue, which could be thought as a set of candidate genes affecting the trait through expression level. We chose a rather low threshold used for the rcp due to the stringent conservative nature of colocalization probabilities. We also constructed a “negative” set of genes with $enloc\ rcp = 0$, which could be thought as a set of genes whose expressions were unlikely to affect the trait. We proceeded to test whether certain tissue-pattern categories were enriched in “positive” set as compared to “negative” set. Since the main focus of this analysis was tissue-specific patterns, we excluded *Factor1* (the cross-tissue factor) and *Factor25* (likely to be a tissue-shared factor capturing tissues with large sample size). Additionally, we excluded *Factor7* (testis), as it was unlikely to be the mediating tissue but might introduce false positives. We tested the enrichment of each tissue-pattern category by Fisher’s exact test (“positive”/“negative” sets and in/not in tissue-pattern category). Among 87 traits, 82 traits had $enloc$ signal and the enrichment of these was calculated accordingly.

Using the pattern of tissue classes of non-colocalized genes ($rcp = 0$) as the expected null, we assessed whether significantly associated and colocalized genes (PrediXcan significant and $rcp > 0.01$) were over-represented in certain tissue classes (Fig. 6). Consistent with previous reports [11, 55], we identified several instances in which the most significant tissue is supported by current biological knowledge. For example, blood cell count traits were enriched in whole blood, neuroticism and fluid intelligence in brain/pituitary, hypothyroidism in thyroid, coronary artery disease in artery, and cholesterol-related traits in liver. Taken together, these results show the potential of leveraging regulatory variation to help identify tissues of relevance for complex traits.

Discussion

We performed in-depth examination of the phenotypic consequences of the genetic regulation of the transcriptome and provide data-driven analytical approaches to benchmark

potential target genes for nearly half of the GWAS loci investigated here that provides a rich basis for studies on the functional mechanisms of complex diseases and traits. We provide a database of optimal gene expression imputation models that were built on the fine-mapping probabilities for feature selection and that leverage the global patterns of tissue sharing of regulation to improve the weights. These imputation models of expression and splicing, which to date has been challenging to study, provide a foundation for transcriptome-wide association studies of the human phenome—the collection of all human diseases and traits—to further accelerate discovery of trait-associated genes. Collectively, these data thus represent a valuable resource, enabling novel biological insights and facilitating follow-up studies of causal mechanisms.

Authors

* alphabetic order

Lead Analysts* *Equal contribution* Alvaro N Barbeira, Rodrigo Bonazzola, Eric R Gamazon, Yanyu Liang, YoSon Park

Analysts* François Aguet, Lisa Bastarache, Ron Do, Gao Wang, Andrew R Hamel, Farhad Hormozdiari, Zhuoxun Jiang, Daniel Jordan, Sarah Kim-Hellmuth, Boxiang Liu, Milton D Pividori, Abhiram Rao, Marie Verbanck, Dan Zhou

GTEx GWAS Working Group* François Aguet, Kristin Ardlie, Alvaro N Barbeira, Rodrigo Bonazzola, Christopher D Brown, Lin Chen, Eric R Gamazon, Kevin Gleason, Andrew R Hamel, Farhad Hormozdiari, Hae Kyung Im, Sarah Kim-Hellmuth, Tuuli Lappalainen, Yanyu Liang, Boxiang Liu, Dan L Nicolae, Yoson Park, Milton D Pividori, Abhiram Rao, John M. Rouhana, Ayellet V Segrè, Xiaoquan Wen

Senior Leadership* Kristin Ardlie, Christopher D. Brown, Hae Kyung Im, Tuuli Lappalainen, Mark McCarthy, Stephen Montgomery, Ayellet V Segrè, Matthew Stephens, Xiaoquan Wen

Manuscript Writing Group* Eric R Gamazon, Hae Kyung Im, Tuuli Lappalainen, Yanyu Liang, YoSon Park

Corresponding Author* Hae Kyung Im

GTEx Consortium

Laboratory and Data Analysis Coordinating Center (LDACC): François Aguet¹, Shankara Anand¹, Kristin G Ardlie¹, Stacey Gabriel¹, Gad Getz^{1,2}, Aaron Graubert¹, Kane Hadley¹, Robert E Handsaker^{3,4,5}, Katherine H Huang¹, Seva Kashin^{3,4,5}, Xiao Li¹, Daniel G MacArthur^{4,6}, Samuel R Meier¹, Jared L Nedzel¹, Duyen Y Nguyen¹, Ayellet V Segrè^{1,7}, Ellen Todres¹

Analysis Working Group (funded by GTEx project grants): François Aguet¹, Shankara Anand¹, Kristin G Ardlie¹, Brunilda Balliu⁸, Alvaro N Barbeira⁹, Alexis Battle^{10,11}, Rodrigo Bonazzola⁹, Andrew Brown^{12,13}, Christopher D Brown¹⁴, Stephane

E Castel^{15,16}, Don Conrad^{17,18}, Daniel J Cotter¹⁹, Nancy Cox²⁰, Sayantan Das²¹, Olivia M de Goede¹⁹, Emmanouil T Dermitzakis^{12,22,23}, Barbara E Engelhardt^{24,25}, Eleazar Eskin²⁶, Tiffany Y Eulalio²⁷, Nicole M Ferraro²⁷, Elise Flynn^{15,16}, Laure Fresard²⁸, Eric R Gamazon^{29,30,31,20}, Diego Garrido-Martín³², Nicole R Gay¹⁹, Gad Getz^{1,2}, Aaron Graubert¹, Roderic Guigó^{32,33}, Kane Hadley¹, Andrew R Hamel^{7,1}, Robert E Handsaker^{3,4,5}, Yuan He¹⁰, Paul J Hoffman¹⁵, Farhad Hormozdiari^{34,1}, Lei Hou^{35,1}, Katherine H Huang¹, Hae Kyung Im⁹, Brian Jo^{24,25}, Silva Kasela^{15,16}, Seva Kashin^{3,4,5}, Manolis Kellis^{35,1}, Sarah Kim-Hellmuth^{15,16,36}, Alan Kwong²¹, Tuuli Lappalainen^{15,16}, Xiao Li¹, Xin Li²⁸, Yanyu Liang⁹, Daniel G MacArthur^{4,6}, Serghei Mangul^{26,37}, Samuel R Meier¹, Pejman Mohammadi^{15,16,38,39}, Stephen B Montgomery^{28,19}, Manuel Muñoz-Aguirre^{32,40}, Daniel C Nachun²⁸, Jared L Nedzel¹, Duyen Y Nguyen¹, Andrew B Nobel⁴¹, Meritxell Oliva^{9,42}, YoSon Park^{14,43}, Yongjin Park^{35,1}, Princy Parsana¹¹, Ferran Reverter⁴⁴, John M Rouhana^{7,1}, Chiara Sabatti⁴⁵, Ashis Saha¹¹, Ayellet V Segrè^{1,7}, Andrew D Skol^{9,46}, Matthew Stephens⁴⁷, Barbara E Stranger^{9,48}, Benjamin J Strober¹⁰, Nicole A Teran²⁸, Ellen Todres¹, Ana Viñuela^{49,12,22,23}, Gao Wang⁴⁷, Xiaoquan Wen²¹, Fred Wright⁵⁰, Valentin Wucher³², Yuxin Zou⁵¹

Analysis Working Group (not funded by GTEx project grants): Pedro G Ferreira^{52,53,54}, Gen Li⁵⁵, Marta Melé⁵⁶, Esti Yeger-Lotem^{57,58}

Leidos Biomedical - Project Management: Mary E Barcus⁵⁹, Debra Bradbury⁶⁰, Tanya Krubit⁶⁰, Jeffrey A McLean⁶⁰, Liqun Qi⁶⁰, Karna Robinson⁶⁰, Nancy V Roche⁶⁰, Anna M Smith⁶⁰, Leslie Sobin⁶⁰, David E Tabor⁶⁰, Anita Undale⁶⁰

Biospecimen collection source sites: Jason Bridge⁶¹, Lori E Brigham⁶², Barbara A Foster⁶³, Bryan M Gillard⁶³, Richard Hasz⁶⁴, Marcus Hunter⁶⁵, Christopher Johns⁶⁶, Mark Johnson⁶⁷, Ellen Karasik⁶³, Gene Kopen⁶⁸, William F Leinweber⁶⁸, Alisa McDonald⁶⁸, Michael T Moser⁶³, Kevin Myer⁶⁵, Kimberley D Ramsey⁶³, Brian Roe⁶⁵, Saboor Shad⁶⁸, Jeffrey A Thomas^{68,67}, Gary Walters⁶⁷, Michael Washington⁶⁷, Joseph Wheeler⁶⁶

Biospecimen core resource: Scott D Jewell⁶⁹, Daniel C Rohrer⁶⁹, Dana R Valley⁶⁹

Brain bank repository: David A Davis⁷⁰, Deborah C Mash⁷⁰

Pathology Mary E Barcus⁵⁹, Philip A Branton⁷¹, Leslie Sobin⁶⁰

ELSI study: Laura K Barker⁷², Heather M Gardiner⁷², Maghboeba Mosavel⁷³, Laura A Siminoff⁷²

Genome Browser Data Integration & Visualization: Paul Flicek⁷⁴, Maximilian Haeussler⁷⁵, Thomas Juettemann⁷⁴, W James Kent⁷⁵, Christopher M Lee⁷⁵, Conner C Powell⁷⁵, Kate R Rosenbloom⁷⁵, Magali Ruffier⁷⁴, Dan Sheppard⁷⁴, Kieron Taylor⁷⁴, Stephen J Trevanion⁷⁴, Daniel R Zerbino⁷⁴

eGTEx groups: Nathan S Abell¹⁹, Joshua Akey⁷⁶, Lin Chen⁴², Kathryn Demanelis⁴², Jennifer A Doherty⁷⁷, Andrew P Feinberg⁷⁸, Kasper D Hansen⁷⁹, Peter F Hickey⁸⁰, Lei Hou^{35,1}, Farzana Jasmine⁴², Lihua Jiang¹⁹, Rajinder Kaul^{81,82}, Manolis Kellis^{35,1}, Muhammad G Kibriya⁴², Jin Billy Li¹⁹, Qin Li¹⁹, Shin Lin⁸³, Sandra E Linder¹⁹, Stephen B Montgomery^{28,19}, Meritxell Oliva^{9,42}, Yongjin Park^{35,1}, Brandon L Pierce⁴², Lindsay F Rizzardi⁸⁴, Andrew D Skol^{9,46}, Kevin S Smith²⁸, Michael Snyder¹⁹, John Stamatoyannopoulos^{81,85}, Barbara E Stranger^{9,48}, Hua Tang¹⁹, Meng Wang¹⁹

NIH program management: Philip A Branton⁷¹, Latarsha J Carithers^{71,86}, Ping Guan⁷¹, Susan E Koester⁸⁷, A. Roger Little⁸⁸, Helen M Moore⁷¹, Concepcion R Nierras⁸⁹, Abhi K Rao⁷¹, Jimmie B Vaught⁷¹, Simona Volpi⁹⁰

Affiliations

1. The Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, Cambridge, MA, USA
2. Cancer Center and Department of Pathology, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA, USA
3. Department of Genetics, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA
4. Program in Medical and Population Genetics, The Broad Institute of Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA
5. Stanley Center for Psychiatric Research, Broad Institute, Cambridge, MA, USA
6. Analytic and Translational Genetics Unit, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA, USA
7. Ocular Genomics Institute, Massachusetts Eye and Ear, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA
8. Department of Biomathematics, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, USA
9. Section of Genetic Medicine, Department of Medicine, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA v 10. Department of Biomedical Engineering, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA
11. Department of Computer Science, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA
12. Department of Genetic Medicine and Development, University of Geneva Medical School, Geneva, Switzerland
13. Population Health and Genomics, University of Dundee, Dundee, Scotland, UK
14. Department of Genetics, University of Pennsylvania, Perelman School of Medicine, Philadelphia, PA, USA
15. New York Genome Center, New York, NY, USA
16. Department of Systems Biology, Columbia University, New York, NY, USA
17. Department of Genetics, Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis, MO, USA
18. Department of Pathology & Immunology, Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis, MO, USA
19. Department of Genetics, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA
20. Division of Genetic Medicine, Department of Medicine, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nashville, TN, USA
21. Department of Biostatistics, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA
22. Institute for Genetics and Genomics in Geneva (iGE3), University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

23. Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics, Geneva, Switzerland
24. Department of Computer Science, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA
25. Center for Statistics and Machine Learning, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA
26. Department of Computer Science, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, USA
27. Program in Biomedical Informatics, Stanford University School of Medicine, Stanford, CA, USA
28. Department of Pathology, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA
29. Data Science Institute, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA
30. Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
31. MRC Epidemiology Unit, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
32. Centre for Genomic Regulation (CRG), The Barcelona Institute for Science and Technology, Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain
33. Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF), Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain
34. Department of Epidemiology, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA, USA
35. Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA
36. Statistical Genetics, Max Planck Institute of Psychiatry, Munich, Germany
37. Department of Clinical Pharmacy, School of Pharmacy, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA
38. Scripps Research Translational Institute, La Jolla, CA, USA
39. Department of Integrative Structural and Computational Biology, The Scripps Research Institute, La Jolla, CA, USA
40. Department of Statistics and Operations Research, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya (UPC), Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain
41. Department of Statistics and Operations Research and Department of Biostatistics, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, USA
42. Department of Public Health Sciences, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA
43. Department of Systems Pharmacology and Translational Therapeutics, University of Pennsylvania, Perelman School of Medicine, Philadelphia, PA, USA
44. Department of Genetics, Microbiology and Statistics, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain
45. Departments of Biomedical Data Science and Statistics, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA
46. Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA
47. Department of Human Genetics, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA
48. Center for Genetic Medicine, Department of Pharmacology, Northwestern University, Feinberg School of Medicine, Chicago, IL, USA
49. Department of Twin Research and Genetic Epidemiology, King's College London, London, UK
50. Bioinformatics Research Center and Departments of Statistics and Biological Sciences, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, USA
51. Department of Statistics, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA
52. Department of Computer Sciences, Faculty of Sciences, University of Porto, Porto,

Portugal

53. Instituto de Investigação e Inovação em Saúde, Universidade do Porto, Porto, Portugal
54. Institute of Molecular Pathology and Immunology, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal
55. Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, New York, NY, USA
56. Life Sciences Department, Barcelona Supercomputing Center, Barcelona, Spain
57. Department of Clinical Biochemistry and Pharmacology, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel
58. National Institute for Biotechnology in the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel
59. Leidos Biomedical, Frederick, MD, USA
60. Leidos Biomedical, Rockville, MD, USA
61. UNYTS, Buffalo, NY, USA
62. Washington Regional Transplant Community, Annandale, VA, USA
63. Therapeutics, Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center, Buffalo, NY, USA
64. Gift of Life Donor Program, Philadelphia, PA, USA
65. LifeGift, Houston, TX, USA
66. Center for Organ Recovery and Education, Pittsburgh, PA, USA
67. LifeNet Health, Virginia Beach, VA, USA v 68. National Disease Research Interchange, Philadelphia, PA, USA v 69. Van Andel Research Institute, Grand Rapids, MI, USA
70. Department of Neurology, University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, Miami, FL, USA
71. Biorepositories and Biospecimen Research Branch, Division of Cancer Treatment and Diagnosis, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, MD, USA
72. Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, USA
73. Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, USA
74. European Molecular Biology Laboratory, European Bioinformatics Institute, Hinxton, UK v 75. Genomics Institute, UC Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA, USA
76. Carl Icahn Laboratory, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA
77. Department of Population Health Sciences, The University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA
78. Schools of Medicine, Engineering, and Public Health, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA
79. Department of Biostatistics, Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA
80. Department of Medical Biology, The Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research, Parkville, Victoria, Australia
81. Altius Institute for Biomedical Sciences, Seattle, WA, USA v 82. Division of Genetics, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA
83. Department of Cardiology, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA
84. HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology, Huntsville, AL, USA
85. Genome Sciences, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA
86. National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, Bethesda, MD, USA
87. Division of Neuroscience and Basic Behavioral Science, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, USA
88. National Institute on Drug Abuse, Bethesda, MD, USA

89. Office of Strategic Coordination, Division of Program Coordination, Planning and Strategic Initiatives, Office of the Director, National Institutes of Health, Rockville, MD, USA

90. Division of Genomic Medicine, National Human Genome Research Institute, Bethesda, MD, USA

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13059-020-02252-4>.

Additional file 1: Supplementary Materials including detailed methods, tables, and figures

Additional file 2: The metadata of the full list of 114 GWASs

Additional file 3: Presumed causal genes included in the OMIM database

Additional file 4: Genes suggested as causal by rare variant association studies

Additional file 5: BioVU table

Additional file 6: OMIM genes included in the analysis

Additional file 7: Rare variant silver standard genes included in the analysis

Additional file 8: PrediXcan and enloc results for predicted causal genes selected based on OMIM

Additional file 9: PrediXcan and enloc results for presumed causal genes in the rare variant based silver standard

Additional file 10: Review history

Peer review information

Tim Sands was the primary editor of this article and managed its editorial process and peer review in collaboration with the rest of the editorial team.

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Review history

The review history is available as Additional file 10.

Authors' contributions

ANB, RB, ERG, YL, YP designed the computational experiments, led and performed major components of the data wrangling, statistical analysis, visualization, and interpretation of the results; they wrote the manuscript. The GTEx GWAS Working Group discussed and interpreted the analysis results and proposed computational experiments. The GTEx Consortium collected the samples and provided pre-processed RNAseq and WGS data. SKH, GW, ZJ, DZ, FH, BL, AR, ARH, MDP, and FA contributed data analysis and figures. LB, DMJ, MV, RD provided processed data and figures. MS, KA, MM, SBM, AVS, CDB, TL, XW supervised portions of the analyses. HKI supervised the full project, designed the computational experiments, performed analyses, and wrote the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

Genotype-Tissue Expression (GTEx) project's raw whole transcriptome and genome sequencing data are available via dbGaP accession number phs000424.v8.p2 [57]. All processed GTEx data are available via GTEx portal (<http://gtexportal.org/>). All the code used for the reproducible analysis is available, under MIT license, on Zenodo with the access code DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4321149> [58] and GitHub <https://github.com/hakyimlab/gtex-gwas-analysis> [59]. The softwares for imputed summary results, *enloc*, *coloc*, PrediXcan, MultiXcan, *dap-g*, prediction models are available at links there in. 1000 Genomes Project Reference for LDSC, https://data.broadinstitute.org/alkesgroup/LDSCORE/1000G_Phase3_plinkfiles.tgz; 1000 Genomes Project Reference with regression weights for LDSC, https://data.broadinstitute.org/alkesgroup/LDSCORE/1000G_Phase3_weights_hm3_no_MHC.tgz; BioVU, <https://victor.vanderbilt.edu/pub/biovu/?sid=194>; eCAVIAR, <https://github.com/fhormoz/caviar>; QTLEnrich, <https://github.com/segrelabgenomics/eQTLEnrich>; flashr, https://gaow.github.io/mnm-gtex-v8/analysis/mashr_flashr_workflow.html#flashr-prior-covariances; Gencode, <https://www.gencodegenes.org/releases/26.html>; GTEx GWAS subgroup repository, <https://github.com/broadinstitute/gtex-v8>; GTEx portal, <http://gtexportal.org>; Hail, <https://github.com/hail-is/hail>; HapMap Reference for LDSC, https://data.broadinstitute.org/alkesgroup/LDSCORE/w_hm3.snplist.bz2; LD score regression (LDS regression), <https://github.com/bulik/ldsc>; MetaXcan, <https://github.com/hakyimlab/MetaXcan>; Mouse Phenotype Ontology, http://www.informatics.jax.org/vocab/mp_ontology; NHGRI-EBI GWAS catalog, <https://www.ebi.ac.uk/gwas/>; picard, <http://picard.sourceforge.net/>; PLINK 1.90, <https://www.cog-genomics.org/plink2>; PrediXcan, <https://github.com/hakyim/PrediXcan>; pyliftover, <https://pypi.org/project/pyliftover/>; Storey's qvalue R package, <https://github.com/StoreyLab/qvalue>; Summary GWAS imputation, <https://github.com/hakyimlab/summary-gwas-imputation>; TORUS, <https://github.com/xqwen/torus>; UK Biobank GWAS, <http://www.nealelab.is/uk-biobank/>; UK Biobank, <http://www.ukbiobank.ac.uk/>

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Competing interests

F.A. is an inventor on a patent application related to TensorQTL; S.E.C. is a co-founder, chief technology officer, and stock owner at Variant Bio; E.R.G. is on the Editorial Board of Circulation Research, and does consulting for the City of Hope/Beckman Research Institute; E.T.D. is chairman and member of the board of Hybridstat LTD.; B.E.E. is on the scientific advisory boards of Celsius Therapeutics and Freenome; G.G. receives research funds from IBM and Pharmacyclics, and is an inventor on patent applications related to MuTect, ABSOLUTE, MutSig, MSMuTect, MSMuTect, POLYSOLVER, and TensorQTL. G.G. is a founder, consultant and holds privately held equity in Scorpion Therapeutics; S.B.M. is on the scientific advisory board of MyOme; D.G.M. is a co-founder with equity in Goldfinch Bio, and has received research support from AbbVie, Astellas, Biogen, BioMarin, Eisai, Merck, Pfizer, and Sanofi-Genzyme; H.K.I. has received speaker honoraria from GSK and AbbVie; T.L. is a scientific advisory board member of Variant Bio with equity and Goldfinch Bio. P.F. is a member of the scientific advisory boards of Fabric Genomics, Inc., and Eagle Genomes, Ltd. P.G.F. is a partner of Bioinf2Bio.

Author details

¹Section of Genetic Medicine, Department of Medicine, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA. ²Division of Genetic Medicine, Department of Medicine, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nashville, TN, USA. ³Data Science Institute, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA. ⁴Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK. ⁵MRC Epidemiology Unit, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK. ⁶Department of Genetics, University of Pennsylvania, Perelman School of Medicine, Philadelphia, PA, USA. ⁷Department of Systems Pharmacology and Translational Therapeutics, University of Pennsylvania, Perelman School of Medicine, Philadelphia, PA, USA. ⁸Statistical Genetics, Max Planck Institute of Psychiatry, Munich, Germany. ⁹New York Genome Center, New York, NY, USA. ¹⁰Department of Systems Biology, Columbia University, New York, NY, USA. ¹¹Department of Human Genetics, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA. ¹²The Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, Cambridge, MA, USA. ¹³Department of Epidemiology, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA, USA. ¹⁴Department of Biology, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 94305, USA. ¹⁵Ocular Genomics Institute, Massachusetts Eye and Ear, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA. ¹⁶Department of Biomedical Informatics, Department of Medicine, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA. ¹⁷Center for Human Genetics Research, Department of Molecular Physiology and Biophysics, Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, Nashville, TN, USA. ¹⁸Department of Genetics and Genomic Sciences, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY, USA. ¹⁹Institute for Genomics and Multiscale Biology, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY, USA. ²⁰The Charles Bronfman Institute for Personalized Medicine, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY, USA. ²¹Université de Paris - EA 7537 BIOSTM, Paris, France. ²²University of Oxford, Oxford, UK. ²³Department of Genetics, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA. ²⁴Department of Pathology, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA. ²⁵Department of Biostatistics, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA.

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