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Genome Analyses of >200,000 Individuals Identify 58 Loci for Chronic Inflammation and Highlight Pathways that Link Inflammation and Complex Disorders

Symen Ligthart,¹ Ahmad Vaez,^{2,3} Urmo Vösa,^{4,5} Maria G. Stathopoulou,⁶ Paul S. de Vries,^{1,7} Bram P. Prins,⁸ Peter J. Van der Most,² Toshiko Tanaka,⁹ Elnaz Naderi,^{2,10} Lynda M. Rose,¹¹ Ying Wu,¹² Robert Karlsson,¹³ Maja Barbalic,¹⁴ Honghuang Lin,¹⁵ René Pool,^{16,17} Gu Zhu,¹⁸ Aurélien Macé,^{19,20,21} Carlo Sidore,²² Stella Trompet,^{23,24} Massimo Mangino,^{25,26} Maria Sabater-Lleal,^{27,28} John P. Kemp,^{29,30} Ali Abbasi,^{2,31,32} Tim Kacprowski,^{33,34} Niek Verweij,³⁵ Albert V. Smith,^{36,37} Tao Huang,^{38,39}

(Author list continued on next page)

C-reactive protein (CRP) is a sensitive biomarker of chronic low-grade inflammation and is associated with multiple complex diseases. The genetic determinants of chronic inflammation remain largely unknown, and the causal role of CRP in several clinical outcomes is debated. We performed two genome-wide association studies (GWASs), on HapMap and 1000 Genomes imputed data, of circulating amounts of CRP by using data from 88 studies comprising 204,402 European individuals. Additionally, we performed *in silico* functional analyses and Mendelian randomization analyses with several clinical outcomes. The GWAS meta-analyses of CRP revealed 58 distinct genetic loci ($p < 5 \times 10^{-8}$). After adjustment for body mass index in the regression analysis, the associations at all except three loci remained. The lead variants at the distinct loci explained up to 7.0% of the variance in circulating amounts of CRP. We identified 66 gene sets that were organized in two substantially correlated clusters, one mainly composed of immune pathways and the other characterized by metabolic pathways in the liver. Mendelian randomization analyses revealed a causal protective effect of CRP on schizophrenia and a risk-increasing effect on bipolar disorder. Our findings provide further insights into the biology of inflammation and could lead to interventions for treating inflammation and its clinical consequences.

Introduction

Inflammation plays a key role in the development of complex diseases, such as cardiovascular disease,¹ type 2 dia-

betes,² Alzheimer disease,³ and schizophrenia.⁴ C-reactive protein (CRP) is a sensitive marker of chronic low-grade inflammation,⁵ and elevated serum amounts of CRP have been associated with a wide range of diseases.^{6–8}

¹Department of Epidemiology, Erasmus University Medical Center, Rotterdam 3000 CA, the Netherlands; ²Department of Epidemiology, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, Groningen 9700 RB, the Netherlands; ³Department of Bioinformatics, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan 81746-73461, Iran; ⁴Department of Genetics, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, Groningen 9700 RB, the Netherlands; ⁵Estonian Genome Center, Institute of Genomics, University of Tartu, Tartu 51010, Estonia; ⁶Université de Lorraine, INSERM, IGE-PCV, 54000 Nancy, France; ⁷Human Genetics Center, Department of Epidemiology, Human Genetics, and Environmental Sciences, School of Public Health, University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, Houston, TX 77030, USA; ⁸Department of Human Genetics, Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute, Hinxton CB10 1SA, UK; ⁹Translational Gerontology Branch, National Institute on Aging, Baltimore, MD 21224, USA; ¹⁰Department of Radiation Oncology, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, Groningen 9713 GZ, the Netherlands; ¹¹Division of Preventive Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, MA 02215, USA; ¹²Department of Genetics, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA; ¹³Department of Medical Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm 17177, Sweden; ¹⁴University of Split School of Medicine, Split 21000, Croatia; ¹⁵Department of Medicine, Boston University School of Medicine, Boston, MA 02118, USA; ¹⁶Department of Biological Psychology, Netherlands Twin Register, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam 1081 BT, the Netherlands; ¹⁷Amsterdam Public Health research institute, VU University Medical Center, Amsterdam 1081 BT, the Netherlands; ¹⁸QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute, Brisbane, QLD 4006, Australia; ¹⁹Department of Computational Biology, University of Lausanne, Lausanne 1010, Switzerland; ²⁰Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics, Lausanne 1015, Switzerland; ²¹Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine, University Hospital of Lausanne, Lausanne 1010, Switzerland; ²²Istituto di Ricerca Genetica e Biomedica, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Sardinia 08045, Italy; ²³Department of Cardiology, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden 2300 RC, the Netherlands; ²⁴Department of Gerontology and Geriatrics, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden 2333 ZA, the Netherlands; ²⁵Department of Twin Research & Genetic Epidemiology, King's College London, London SE1 7EH, UK; ²⁶NIHR Biomedical Research Centre at Guy's and St. Thomas' Foundation Trust, London SE1 9RT, UK; ²⁷Unit of Genomics of Complex Diseases, Institut d'Investigació Biomèdica Sant Pau, Barcelona 08025, Spain; ²⁸Cardiovascular Medicine Unit, Department of Medicine, Center for Molecular Medicine, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm 17176, Sweden; ²⁹University of Queensland Diamantina Institute, Translational Research Institute, Brisbane, QLD 4102, Australia; ³⁰MRC Integrative Epidemiology Unit, Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol, Bristol BS8 2BN, UK; ³¹Department of Internal Medicine, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, Groningen 9713 GZ, the Netherlands; ³²MRC Epidemiology Unit, University of Cambridge School of Medicine, Institute of Metabolic Science, Cambridge Biomedical Campus, Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge CB2 0QQ, UK; ³³Department of Functional Genomics, Interfaculty Institute for Genetics and Functional Genomics, University Medicine and Ernst-Moritz-Arndt University Greifswald, Greifswald 17475, Germany; ³⁴German Centre for Cardiovascular Research, Partner Site Greifswald, Greifswald 17475, Germany; ³⁵University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, Department of Cardiology, Groningen 9713 AV, the Netherlands; ³⁶Icelandic Heart Association, Kopavogur 201, Iceland; ³⁷Faculty of Medicine, University of Iceland, Reykjavik 101, Iceland; ³⁸Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, School of Public Health, Peking University, Beijing 100191, China; ³⁹Department of Nutrition, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA 02115, USA; ⁴⁰Institute of Epidemiology II, Research Unit of Molecular Epidemiology, Helmholtz Zentrum München, German Research Center for Environmental Health, Neuherberg 85764, Germany; ⁴¹German Center for Diabetes Research, Partner Site Munich, Munich 85764, Germany; ⁴²Division of

(Affiliations continued on next page)



Carola Marzi,^{40,41} Mary F. Feitosa,⁴² Kurt K. Lohman,⁴³ Marcus E. Kleber,⁴⁴ Yuri Milaneschi,⁴⁵ Christian Mueller,^{46,47,48} Mahmudul Huq,² Efthymia Vlachopoulou,⁴⁹ Leo-Pekka Lyytikäinen,^{50,51} Christopher Oldmeadow,^{52,53} Joris Deelen,^{54,55} Markus Perola,⁵⁶ Jing Hua Zhao,⁵⁷ Bjarke Feenstra,⁵⁸ LifeLines Cohort Study,² Marzyeh Amini,² CHARGE Inflammation Working Group, Jari Lahti,^{59,60,61} Katharina E. Schraut,⁶² Myriam Fornage,⁶³ Bhoom Suktitipat,⁶⁴ Wei-Min Chen,⁶⁵ Xiaohui Li,⁶⁶ Teresa Nutile,⁶⁷ Giovanni Malerba,⁶⁸ Jian'an Luan,⁵⁷ Tom Bak,⁶⁹ Nicholas Schork,^{70,71} Fabiola Del Greco M.,⁷² Elisabeth Thiering,^{73,74} Anubha Mahajan,⁷⁵ Riccardo E. Marioni,^{76,77} Evelin Mihailov,⁵ Joel Eriksson,⁷⁸ Ayse Bilge Ozel,⁷⁹ Weihua Zhang,^{80,81} Maria Nethander,⁸² Yu-Ching Cheng,⁸³ Stella Aslibekyan,⁸⁴ Wei Ang,⁸⁵ Ilaria Gandin,⁸⁶ Loïc Yengo,^{87,88} Laura Portas,⁸⁹ Charles Kooperberg,⁹⁰ Edith Hofer,^{91,92} Kumar B. Rajan,⁹³ Claudia Schurmann,^{94,95} Wouter den Hollander,⁹⁶ Tarunveer S. Ahluwalia,^{97,98} Jing Zhao,⁹⁹ Harmen H.M. Draisma,^{16,17,100} Ian Ford,¹⁰¹ Nicholas Timpson,³⁰ Alexander Teumer,¹⁰² Hongyan Huang,¹⁰³ Simone Wahl,^{40,41} YongMei Liu,⁴³ Jie Huang,¹⁰⁴ Hae-Won Uh,¹⁰⁵ Frank Geller,⁵⁸ Peter K. Joshi,⁶² Lisa R. Yanek,¹⁰⁶ Elisabetta Trabetti,⁶⁸ Benjamin Lehne,⁸⁰ Diego Vozzi,¹⁰⁷ Marie Verbanck,⁸⁷ Ginevra Biino,¹⁰⁸ Yasaman Saba,¹⁰⁹ Ingrid Meulenbelt,⁹⁶ Jeff R. O'Connell,⁸³ Markku Laakso,¹¹⁰ Franco Giulianini,¹¹ Patrik K.E. Magnusson,¹³ Christie M. Ballantyne,^{111,112} Jouke Jan Hottenga,¹⁶ Grant W. Montgomery,¹⁸ Fernando Rivadineira,¹¹³ Rico Rueedi,^{19,20} Maristella Steri,²² Karl-Heinz Herzig,^{114,115,116} David J. Stott,¹¹⁷ Cristina Menni,²⁵ Mattias Frånberg,^{28,118} Beate St. Pourcain,^{30,119} Stephan B. Felix,^{34,120} Tune H. Pers,^{58,98} Stephan J.L. Bakker,³¹ Peter Kraft,¹⁰³

(Author list continued on next page)

Statistical Genomics, Department of Genetics, Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis, MO 63108-2212, USA; ⁴³Department of Epidemiology and Prevention, Public Health Sciences, Wake Forest University Health Sciences, Winston-Salem, NC 27157, USA; ⁴⁴Vth Department of Medicine, Medical Faculty Mannheim, Heidelberg University, Mannheim 68167, Germany; ⁴⁵Department of Psychiatry, Amsterdam Neuroscience and Amsterdam Public Health Research Institute, Amsterdam University Medical Center/GGZ inGeest Research & Innovation, Amsterdam 1081 HJ, the Netherlands; ⁴⁶Department of General and Interventional Cardiology, University Heart Center Hamburg, Hamburg 20246, Germany; ⁴⁷Institute of Medical Biometry and Statistics, University Medical Center Schleswig-Holstein, Campus Luebeck, Lübeck 23562, Germany; ⁴⁸German Center for Cardiovascular Research, Partner Site RhineMain, 55131 Mainz, Germany; ⁴⁹Transplantation Laboratory, Medicum, University of Helsinki, Helsinki 00014, Finland; ⁵⁰Department of Clinical Chemistry, Fimlab Laboratories, Tampere 33014, Finland; ⁵¹Department of Clinical Chemistry, Finnish Cardiovascular Research Center - Tampere, Faculty of Medicine and Life Sciences, University of Tampere, Tampere 33520, Finland; ⁵²Hunter Medical Research Institute, New Lambton Heights, NSW 2305, Australia; ⁵³Centre for Clinical Epidemiology & Biostatistics, Faculty of Health and Medicine, University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW 2308, Australia; ⁵⁴Molecular Epidemiology, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden 2333 ZC, the Netherlands; ⁵⁵Max Planck Institute for Biology of Ageing, Cologne 50931, Germany; ⁵⁶National Institute for Health and Welfare, Helsinki 00271, Finland; ⁵⁷MRC Epidemiology Unit, University of Cambridge School of Clinical Medicine, Institute of Metabolic Science, Cambridge CB2 0QQ, UK; ⁵⁸Department of Epidemiology Research, Statens Serum Institut, Copenhagen 2300, Denmark; ⁵⁹Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki, Helsinki 00014, Finland; ⁶⁰Department of Psychology and Logopedics, Faculty of Medicine, University of Helsinki, Helsinki 00014, Finland; ⁶¹Folkhälsan Research Centre, Helsinki 00250, Finland; ⁶²Centre for Global Health Research, Usher Institute of Population Health Sciences and Informatics, University of Edinburgh, Teviot Place, Edinburgh EH16 4UX, UK; ⁶³Human Genetics Center, School of Public Health and Brown Foundation Institute of Molecular Medicine, University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, Houston, TX 77030, USA; ⁶⁴Department of Biochemistry, Faculty of Medicine Siriraj Hospital, Mahidol University, Bangkok 10700, Thailand; ⁶⁵Center for Public Health Genomics, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22908, USA; ⁶⁶Institute for Translational Genomics and Population Sciences, Department of Pediatrics, Los Angeles Biomedical Research Institute at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, Torrance, CA 90502, USA; ⁶⁷Institute of Genetics and Biophysics "A. Buzzati-Traverso," Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Napoli 80131, Italy; ⁶⁸Department of Neurosciences, Biomedicine and Movement Sciences, University of Verona, Verona 37134, Italy; ⁶⁹Interdisciplinary Center Psychopathology and Emotion regulation, University Medical Center Groningen, University of Groningen, Groningen 9700 RB, the Netherlands; ⁷⁰Human Biology, J. Craig Venter Institute, La Jolla, CA 92037, USA; ⁷¹Quantitative Medicine, Translational Genomics Research Institute, Phoenix, AZ 85004, USA; ⁷²Institute for Biomedicine, Eurac Research, Affiliated Institute of the University of Lübeck, Bolzano 39100, Italy; ⁷³Institute of Epidemiology, Helmholtz Zentrum München – German Research Centre for Environmental Health, Neuherberg 85764, Germany; ⁷⁴Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Dr. von Hauner Children's Hospital, Munich 80337, Germany; ⁷⁵Wellcome Trust Centre for Human Genetics, University of Oxford, Oxford OX3 7BN, UK; ⁷⁶Centre for Cognitive Ageing and Cognitive Epidemiology, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 9JZ, UK; ⁷⁷Centre for Genomic and Experimental Medicine, Institute of Genetics and Molecular Medicine, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH4 2XU, UK; ⁷⁸Department of Internal Medicine and Clinical Nutrition, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg 41345, Sweden; ⁷⁹Department of Human Genetics, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-5618, USA; ⁸⁰Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Imperial College London, London W2 1PG, UK; ⁸¹Department of Cardiology, Ealing Hospital, Middlesex UB1 3HW, UK; ⁸²Bioinformatics Core Facility, Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg 413 90, Sweden; ⁸³Division of Endocrinology, Diabetes and Nutrition, Department of Medicine, University of Maryland School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD 21201, USA; ⁸⁴Department of Epidemiology, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, AL 35294-0022, USA; ⁸⁵Medical School, University of Western Australia, Perth, WA 6009, Australia; ⁸⁶AREA Science Park, Trieste 34149, Italy; ⁸⁷Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique UMR 8199, University of Lille, Institut Pasteur de Lille, European Genomic Institute for Diabetes, FR 3508, 59000 Lille, France; ⁸⁸Program in Complex Trait Genomics, Institute for Molecular Bioscience, University of Queensland, St. Lucia, Brisbane, QLD 4072, Australia; ⁸⁹Support OU, Institute of Genetic and Biomedical Research, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Sassari 7100, Italy; ⁹⁰Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Public Health Sciences Division, Mail Stop M3-A410, 1100 Fairview Ave. N., Seattle, WA, USA; ⁹¹Clinical Division of Neurogeriatrics, Department of Neurology, Medical University Graz, Graz 8036, Austria; ⁹²Institute of Medical Informatics, Statistics and Documentation, Medical University Graz, Graz 8036, Austria; ⁹³Department of Internal Medicine, Rush University Medical Center, Chicago, IL 60612, USA; ⁹⁴Charles Bronfman Institute for Personalized Medicine, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY 10029, USA; ⁹⁵Genetics of Obesity and Related Metabolic Traits Program, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY 10029, USA; ⁹⁶Department of Medical Statistics and Bio-informatics, Section Molecular Epidemiology, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden 2333 ZC, the Netherlands; ⁹⁷Steno Diabetes Center Copenhagen, Gentofte 2820, Denmark; ⁹⁸Novo Nordisk Foundation Centre for Basic Metabolic Research, Section of Metabolic Genetics, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen 2100, Denmark; ⁹⁹Center for Integrative Genomics, School of Biology, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA 30332, USA;

(Affiliations continued on next page)

Annette Peters,¹²¹ Dhananjay Vaidya,¹⁰⁶ Graciela Delgado,⁴⁴ Johannes H. Smit,⁴⁵ Vera Großmann,¹²² Juha Sinisalo,¹²³ Ilkka Seppälä,^{50,51} Stephen R. Williams,¹²⁴ Elizabeth G. Holliday,^{52,53} Matthijs Moed,⁵⁴ Claudia Langenberg,⁵⁷ Katri Räikkönen,⁶⁰ Jingzhong Ding,¹²⁵ Harry Campbell,⁶² Michele M. Sale,⁶⁵ Yii-Der I. Chen,⁶⁶ Alan L. James,^{126,127} Daniela Ruggiero,^{67,128} Nicole Soranzo,¹²⁹ Catharina A. Hartman,⁶⁹ Erin N. Smith,¹³⁰ Gerald S. Berenson,¹³¹ Christian Fuchsberger,⁷² Dena Hernandez,¹³² Carla M.T. Tiesler,^{73,74} Vilmantas Giedraitis,¹³³ David Liewald,⁷⁶ Krista Fischer,⁵ Dan Mellström,⁷⁸ Anders Larsson,¹³⁴ Yunmei Wang,¹³⁵ William R. Scott,⁸⁰ Matthias Lorentzon,^{78,136} John Beilby,^{137,138} Kathleen A. Ryan,⁸³ Craig E. Pennell,⁸⁵ Dragana Vuckovic,¹³⁹ Beverly Balkau,¹⁴⁰ Maria Pina Concas,¹⁰⁷ Reinhold Schmidt,⁹¹ Carlos F. Mendes de Leon,¹⁴¹ Erwin P. Bottinger,^{94,142} Margreet Kloppenburg,^{143,144} Lavinia Paternoster,³⁰ Michael Boehnke,¹⁴⁵ A.W. Musk,^{126,146} Gonneke Willemsen,¹⁶ David M. Evans,^{29,30} Pamela A.F. Madden,¹⁴⁷ Mika Kähönen,^{148,149} Zoltán Kutalik,^{20,21} Magdalena Zoledziewska,²² Ville Karhunen,¹⁵⁰ Stephen B. Kritchevsky,¹⁵¹ Naveed Sattar,¹⁵² Genevieve Lachance,²⁵ Robert Clarke,¹⁵³ Tamara B. Harris,¹⁵⁴ Olli T. Raitakari,^{155,156} John R. Attia,^{52,53,157} Diana van Heemst,²⁴ Eero Kajantie,^{158,159,160} Rossella Sorice,⁶⁷ Giovanni Gambaro,¹⁶¹ Robert A. Scott,⁵⁷ Andrew A. Hicks,⁷² Luigi Ferrucci,⁹ Marie Standl,⁷³ Cecilia M. Lindgren,^{75,162,163} John M. Starr,^{76,164} Magnus Karlsson,¹⁶⁵ Lars Lind,¹³⁴ Jun Z. Li,⁷⁹ John C. Chambers,^{80,81,166,167,168} Trevor A. Mori,⁸⁵ Eco J.C.N. de Geus,^{16,17} Andrew C. Heath,¹⁴⁷ Nicholas G. Martin,¹⁸ Juha Auvinen,^{150,169} Brendan M. Buckley,¹⁷⁰ Anton J.M. de Craen,^{24,231} Melanie Waldenberger,^{40,171} Konstantin Strauch,^{172,173} Thomas Meitinger,^{174,175,176} Rodney J. Scott,^{52,177} Mark McEvoy,^{52,53} Marian Beekman,⁵⁴ Cristina Bombieri,⁶⁸ Paul M. Ridker,^{11,178} Karen L. Mohlke,¹²

(Author list continued on next page)

¹⁰⁰Neuroscience Campus Amsterdam, Amsterdam 1081 HV, the Netherlands; ¹⁰¹Robertson Centre for Biostatistics, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK; ¹⁰²Department SHIP-KEF, Institute for Community Medicine, University Medicine Greifswald, Greifswald 17475, Germany; ¹⁰³Program in Genetic Epidemiology and Statistical Genetics, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA 02115, USA; ¹⁰⁴Boston VA Research Institute, Inc., Boston, MA 02130, USA; ¹⁰⁵Medical Statistics and Bioinformatics, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden 2333 ZC, the Netherlands; ¹⁰⁶GeneSTAR Research Center, Department of Medicine, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD 21287, USA; ¹⁰⁷Institute for Maternal and Child Health, IRCCS “Burlo Garofolo,” Trieste 34140, Italy; ¹⁰⁸Institute of Molecular Genetics, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Pavia 27100, Italy; ¹⁰⁹Gottfried Schatz Research Center, Institute for Molecular Biology and Biochemistry, 8010 Graz, Austria; ¹¹⁰Institute of Clinical Medicine, Internal Medicine, University of Eastern Finland and Kuopio University Hospital, Kuopio 70210, Finland; ¹¹¹Department of Medicine, Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, TX 77030, USA; ¹¹²Methodist DeBakey Heart and Vascular Center, Houston, TX 77030, USA; ¹¹³Department of Internal Medicine, Erasmus University Medical Center, Rotterdam 3015 CN, the Netherlands; ¹¹⁴Department of Physiology, Institute of Biomedicine, University of Oulu, Medical Research Center Oulu and Oulu University Hospital, Oulu 90014, Finland; ¹¹⁵Biocenter Oulu, University of Oulu, Oulu 90220, Finland; ¹¹⁶Department of Gastroenterology and Metabolism, Poznan University of Medical Sciences, Poznan 60-512, Poland; ¹¹⁷Institute of Cardiovascular and Medical Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK; ¹¹⁸Department of Numerical Analysis and Computer Science, Stockholm University, Stockholm 100 44, Sweden; ¹¹⁹Donders Institute, Radboud University, Nijmegen 6525 XD, the Netherlands; ¹²⁰Department for Internal Medicine B, University Medicine Greifswald, Greifswald 17475, Germany; ¹²¹Institute of Epidemiology II, Helmholtz Zentrum München, German Research Center for Environmental Health, Neuherber 85764, Germany; ¹²²Center for Thrombosis and Hemostasis, University Medical Center of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Mainz 55131, Germany; ¹²³Heart and Lung Center, Helsinki University Hospital and Helsinki University, Helsinki 00029, Finland; ¹²⁴Department of Neurology, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22908, USA; ¹²⁵Department of Internal Medicine/Geriatrics, Wake Forest University Health Sciences, Winston-Salem, NC 27157, USA; ¹²⁶Busselton Population Medical Research Institute, Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, Nedlands, WA 6009, Australia; ¹²⁷Department of Pulmonary Physiology and Sleep Medicine, Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, Nedlands, WA 6009, Australia; ¹²⁸IRCCS Neuromed, Pozzilli (IS) 86077, Italy; ¹²⁹Sanger Institute, Wellcome Trust Genome Campus, Hinxton CB10 1SA, UK; ¹³⁰Department of Pediatrics and Rady Children’s Hospital, School of Medicine, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92037, USA; ¹³¹Center for Cardiovascular Health, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA 70112, USA; ¹³²Laboratory of Neurogenetics, National Institute on Aging, Bethesda, MD 20892, USA; ¹³³Department of Public Health and Caring Sciences, Molecular Geriatrics, Uppsala University, Uppsala 752 37, Sweden; ¹³⁴Department of Medical Sciences, Uppsala University, Uppsala 751 41, Sweden; ¹³⁵Department of Medicine, Case Cardiovascular Research Institute, Case Western Reserve University, Harrington Heart & Vascular Institute, University Hospitals, Cleveland, OH 44106, USA; ¹³⁶Geriatric Medicine, Sahlgrenska University Hospital, Mölndal 431 80, Sweden; ¹³⁷PathWest Laboratory Medicine WA, Nedlands, WA 6009, Australia; ¹³⁸School of Biomedical Sciences, University of Western Australia, Crawley, Perth, WA 6009, Australia; ¹³⁹Medical Sciences, Surgical and Health Department, University of Trieste, Trieste 34137, Italy; ¹⁴⁰INSERM U1018, Centre de Recherche en Épidémiologie et Santé des Populations, Team 5 (EpReC, Renal, and Cardiovascular Epidemiology), Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, Université Paris-Saclay, Villejuif 94807, France; ¹⁴¹Department of Epidemiology, School of Public Health, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA; ¹⁴²Department of Pharmacology and Systems Therapeutics, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY 10029, USA; ¹⁴³Department of Rheumatology, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden 2300 RC, the Netherlands; ¹⁴⁴Department of Clinical Epidemiology, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden 2333 ZC, the Netherlands; ¹⁴⁵Department of Biostatistics and Center for Statistical Genetics, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA; ¹⁴⁶Department of Respiratory Medicine, Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, Nedlands, WA 6009, Australia; ¹⁴⁷Department of Psychiatry, Washington University School of Medicine, 4560 Clayton Ave., Suite 1000, St. Louis, MO 63110, USA; ¹⁴⁸Department of Clinical Physiology, Tampere University Hospital, Tampere 33520, Finland; ¹⁴⁹Department of Clinical Physiology, Finnish Cardiovascular Research Center - Tampere, Faculty of Medicine and Life Sciences, University of Tampere, Tampere 33520, Finland; ¹⁵⁰Center for Life Course Health Research, Faculty of Medicine, University of Oulu, 90014 Oulun yliopisto, Finland; ¹⁵¹Gerontology and Geriatric Medicine, Sticht Center on Aging and Rehabilitation, Wake Forest University Health Sciences, Winston-Salem, NC 27157, USA; ¹⁵²BHF Glasgow Cardiovascular Research Centre, Faculty of Medicine, Glasgow G12 8TA, UK; ¹⁵³Clinical Trial Service Unit, Nuffield Department of Population Health, University of Oxford, Oxford OX3 7LF, UK; ¹⁵⁴Laboratory of Epidemiology and Population Sciences, National Institute on Aging, Intramural Research Program, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD 20892, USA; ¹⁵⁵Department of Clinical Physiology and Nuclear Medicine, Turku University Hospital, Turku 20520, Finland; ¹⁵⁶Research Centre of Applied and Preventive Cardiovascular Medicine, University of Turku, Turku 20520, Finland; ¹⁵⁷John Hunter Hospital, New Lambton Heights, NWS 2305, Australia; ¹⁵⁸Chronic Disease Prevention Unit, National Institute for Health and

(Affiliations continued on next page)

Nancy L. Pedersen,¹³ Alanna C. Morrison,⁷ Dorret I. Boomsma,¹⁶ John B. Whitfield,¹⁸ David P. Strachan,¹⁷⁹ Albert Hofman,¹ Peter Vollenweider,¹⁸⁰ Francesco Cucca,²² Marjo-Riitta Jarvelin,^{115,150,169,181,182} J. Wouter Jukema,^{23,183,184} Tim D. Spector,²⁵ Anders Hamsten,²⁸ Tanja Zeller,^{46,48} André G. Uitterlinden,^{1,113} Matthias Nauck,^{34,185} Vilmondur Gudnason,^{36,37} Lu Qi,^{39,186} Harald Gallert,^{40,41} Ingrid B. Borecki,¹⁸⁷ Jerome I. Rotter,¹⁸⁸ Winfried März,^{44,189,190} Philipp S. Wild,^{48,122,191} Marja-Liisa Lokki,⁴⁹ Michael Boyle,¹⁵⁷ Veikko Salomaa,⁵⁶ Mads Melbye,^{58,192,193} Johan G. Eriksson,^{56,61,194} James F. Wilson,^{62,195} Brenda W.J.H. Penninx,⁴⁵ Diane M. Becker,¹⁰⁶ Bradford B. Worrall,¹⁹⁶ Greg Gibson,⁹⁹ Ronald M. Krauss,¹⁹⁷ Marina Ciullo,^{67,128} Gianluigi Zaza,¹⁹⁸ Nicholas J. Wareham,⁵⁷ Albertine J. Oldehinkel,⁶⁹ Lyle J. Palmer,¹⁹⁹ Sarah S. Murray,²⁰⁰ Peter P. Pramstaller,^{72,201,202} Stefania Bandinelli,²⁰³ Joachim Heinrich,^{73,204} Erik Ingelsson,^{205,206,207} Ian J. Deary,^{76,208} Reedik Mägi,⁵ Liesbeth Vandenput,⁷⁸ Pim van der Harst,³⁵ Karl C. Desch,²⁰⁹ Jaspal S. Kooner,^{81,166,168,210} Claes Ohlsson,⁷⁸ Caroline Hayward,¹⁹⁵ Terho Lehtimäki,^{50,51} Alan R. Shuldiner,⁸³ Donna K. Arnett,²¹¹ Lawrence J. Beilin,⁸⁵ Antonietta Robino,¹⁰⁷ Philippe Froguel,^{87,212} Mario Pirastu,⁸⁹ Tine Jess,²¹³ Wolfgang Koenig,^{171,214,215} Ruth J.F. Loos,^{94,95,216} Denis A. Evans,⁹³ Helena Schmidt,^{217,218} George Davey Smith,³⁰ P. Eline Slagboom,⁵⁴ Gudny Eiriksdottir,³⁶ Andrew P. Morris,^{75,219} Bruce M. Psaty,^{220,221,222,223} Russell P. Tracy,²²⁴ Ilja M. Nolte,² Eric Boerwinkle,^{225,226}

(Author list continued on next page)

Welfare, Helsinki 00014, Finland; ¹⁵⁹Hospital for Children and Adolescents, Helsinki University Central Hospital and University of Helsinki, Helsinki 00290, Finland; ¹⁶⁰Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, MRC Oulu, Oulu University Hospital and University of Oulu, Oulu 90014, Finland; ¹⁶¹Division of Nephrology and Dialysis, Columbus-Gemelli University Hospital, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Roma 168, Italy; ¹⁶²Big Data Institute, Li Ka Shing Centre for Health Information and Discovery, University of Oxford, Oxford OX3 7FZ, UK; ¹⁶³Program in Medical and Population Genetics, Broad Institute, Cambridge, MA 02142, USA; ¹⁶⁴Alzheimer's Scotland Dementia Research Centre, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 9JZ, UK; ¹⁶⁵Department of Clinical Sciences and Orthopaedic Surgery, Lund University, Malmö 20502, Sweden; ¹⁶⁶Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, London W12 0HS, UK; ¹⁶⁷Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore 308232, Singapore; ¹⁶⁸MRC-PHE Centre for Environment and Health, Imperial College London, London W2 1PG, UK; ¹⁶⁹Unit of Primary Health Care, Oulu University Hospital, Oulu 90220, Finland; ¹⁷⁰Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, University College Cork, Cork T12 K8AF, Ireland; ¹⁷¹German Center for Cardiovascular Research, Partner Site Munich Heart Alliance, 80636 Munich, Germany; ¹⁷²Institute of Genetic Epidemiology, Helmholtz Zentrum München, German Research Center for Environmental Health, Neuherberg 85764, Germany; ¹⁷³Genetic Epidemiology, Institute of Medical Informatics, Biometry, and Epidemiology, Faculty of Medicine, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Neuherberg 85764, Germany; ¹⁷⁴Institute of Human Genetics, Technische Universität München, Munich 85764, Germany; ¹⁷⁵Institute of Human Genetics, Helmholtz Zentrum München, Neuherberg 85764, Germany; ¹⁷⁶Munich Cluster for Systems Neurology (SyNergy), Munich 81377, Germany; ¹⁷⁷Information-Based Medicine Stream, Hunter Medical Research Institute, New Lambton Heights, NSW 2305, Australia; ¹⁷⁸Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA 02115, USA; ¹⁷⁹Population Health Research Institute, St. George's, University of London, London SW17 0RE, UK; ¹⁸⁰Department of Internal Medicine, Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Vaudois, Lausanne 1011, Switzerland; ¹⁸¹Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, MRC-PHE Centre for Environment & Health, School of Public Health, Imperial College London, London W2 1PG, UK; ¹⁸²Department of Life Sciences, College of Health and Life Sciences, Brunel University London, Kingston Lane, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH, UK; ¹⁸³Durrer Center for Cardiogenetic Research, Amsterdam 3501 DG, the Netherlands; ¹⁸⁴Interuniversity Cardiology Institute of the Netherlands, Utrecht 3511 EP, the Netherlands; ¹⁸⁵Institute for Clinical Chemistry and Laboratory Medicine, University Medicine Greifswald, Greifswald 17475, Germany; ¹⁸⁶Department of Epidemiology, Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, New Orleans, LA 70112, USA; ¹⁸⁷Analytical Genetics Group, Regeneron Genetics Center, Regeneron Pharmaceuticals, Inc., Tarrytown, NY 10591, USA; ¹⁸⁸Institute for Translational Genomics and Population Sciences, Departments of Pediatrics and Medicine, Los Angeles Biomedical Research Institute at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, Torrance, CA 90502, USA; ¹⁸⁹Synlab Academy, Synlab Holding Deutschland GmbH, Mannheim 68161, Germany; ¹⁹⁰Clinical Institute of Medical and Chemical Laboratory Diagnostics, Medical University of Graz, Graz 8036, Austria; ¹⁹¹Preventive Cardiology and Preventive Medicine, Center for Cardiology, University Medical Center of the Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, Mainz 55131, Germany; ¹⁹²Department of Clinical Medicine, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen 2300, Denmark; ¹⁹³Department of Medicine, Stanford University School of Medicine, Stanford, CA 94305, USA; ¹⁹⁴Department of General Practice and Primary Health Care, University of Helsinki and Helsinki University Hospital, Helsinki 00014, Finland; ¹⁹⁵MRC Human Genetics Unit, Institute for Genetics and Molecular Medicine, University of Edinburgh, Western General Hospital, Edinburgh EH4 2XU, UK; ¹⁹⁶Departments of Neurology and Public Health Sciences, University of Virginia Charlottesville, Charlottesville, VA 22908-0394, USA; ¹⁹⁷Children's Hospital Oakland Research Institute, Oakland, CA 94609, USA; ¹⁹⁸Renal Unit, Department of Medicine, Verona University Hospital, Verona 37126, Italy; ¹⁹⁹School of Public Health, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA 5000, Australia; ²⁰⁰Department of Pathology, University of California, San Diego, San Diego, CA 92121, USA; ²⁰¹General Central Hospital, Department of Neurology, Bolzano 39100, Italy; ²⁰²Department of Neurology, University of Lübeck, Lübeck 23538, Germany; ²⁰³Geriatric Unit, Azienda Sanitaria Firenze, Florence 50122, Italy; ²⁰⁴Institute and Clinic for Occupational, Social and Environmental Medicine, University Hospital, LMU Munich, Comprehensive Pneumology Center Munich, Member DZL, German Center for Lung Research, 81377 Munich, Germany; ²⁰⁵Department of Medical Sciences, Molecular Epidemiology and Science for Life Laboratory, Uppsala University, Uppsala 751 41, Sweden; ²⁰⁶Department of Medicine, Division of Cardiovascular Medicine, Stanford University School of Medicine, Stanford, CA 94305, USA; ²⁰⁷Stanford Cardiovascular Institute, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305, USA; ²⁰⁸Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 9JZ, UK; ²⁰⁹Department of Pediatrics and Communicable Diseases, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA; ²¹⁰National Heart and Lung Institute, Imperial College London, London W12 0NN, UK; ²¹¹University of Kentucky, College of Public Health, Lexington, KY 40508, USA; ²¹²Department of Genomics of Common Disease, School of Public Health, Imperial College London, London SW7 2AZ, UK; ²¹³Center for Clinical Research and Prevention, Bispebjerg and Frederiksberg Hospital, Frederiksberg 2200, Denmark; ²¹⁴Department of Internal Medicine II-Cardiology, University of Ulm Medical Center, 80801 Ulm, Germany; ²¹⁵Deutsches Herzzentrum München, Technische Universität München, 80636 Munich, Germany; ²¹⁶Mindich Child Health and Development Institute, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY 10029-6542, USA; ²¹⁷Department of Neurology, Medical University Graz, Graz 8010, Austria; ²¹⁸Institute of Molecular Biology and Biochemistry, Centre for Molecular Medicine, Medical University of Graz, Graz 8010, Austria; ²¹⁹Department of Biostatistics, University of Liverpool, Liverpool L69 3GL, UK; ²²⁰Cardiovascular Health Research Unit, Department of Medicine, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98101, USA; ²²¹Department of Epidemiology, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98101, USA; ²²²Department of Health Services, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195-7660, USA; ²²³Kaiser Permanente Washington Health Research Institute, Seattle, WA 98101, USA; ²²⁴Department of Pathology, University of Vermont, Colchester, VT 05405, USA; ²²⁵Human Genetics Center, School of Public Health, University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, Houston,

(Affiliations continued on next page)

Sophie Visvikis-Siest,⁶ Alex P. Reiner,²²¹ Myron Gross,²²⁷ Joshua C. Bis,²²⁰ Lude Franke,⁴ Oscar H. Franco,^{1,228} Emelia J. Benjamin,^{15,229} Daniel I. Chasman,^{11,178} Josée Dupuis,^{229,230} Harold Snieder,² Abbas Dehghan,^{1,181,*} and Behrooz Z. Alizadeh^{2,*}

Unraveling the genetics of inflammation could provide further insights into the underlying biology of inflammation and could identify therapeutic targets for attenuating inflammation.

The genetic determinants of CRP have only been partly characterized. In 2011, our group published a HapMap-based genome-wide association study (GWAS) meta-analysis including a discovery panel of up to 65,000 individuals and found 18 loci that were associated with amounts of CRP.⁹ Increasing GWAS sample size and denser mapping of the genome with further advanced imputation panels could help to identify further genes associated with the phenotypes of interest.^{10,11} Furthermore, by using genetic instrumental variables (i.e., a genetic score), Mendelian randomization (MR) allows investigation of the potential causal effect of an exposure on clinical outcomes and could help to elucidate the causal pathways that link the exposure with the outcome.¹² The causal role of CRP in the development of diseases is still controversial,¹³ and the causal pathways that link inflammation to complex disorders are only partly understood.

We applied two large-scale GWASs on circulatory amounts of CRP by using HapMap and 1000 Genomes (1KG) imputed data to identify genetic determinants of chronic inflammation. Because body mass index (BMI) is a major determinant of CRP amounts, we additionally conducted a GWAS adjusted for BMI to identify associated loci independent of BMI. To identify any sex differences in genetic determinants of chronic inflammation, we further conducted GWASs in men and women separately. We applied *in silico* functional analyses on the identified loci to obtain better insights into the biological processes potentially regulating chronic inflammation. Finally, we conducted MR analyses to provide an improved understanding of the causal relation between CRP and several related clinical outcomes.

Material and Methods

GWAS for Circulating Amounts of CRP

We conducted a meta-analysis of GWASs including individuals of European ancestry within the Cohorts for Heart and Aging Research in Genomic Epidemiology (CHARGE) Inflammation Working Group (CIWG).¹⁴ All participating studies were approved by an institutional review board (see details in the [Supplemental Data](#)). The CIWG invited cohorts for participation in the HapMap GWAS meta-analysis of CRP amounts in 2012. In 2014, in light of our assessment that showed complementary values of HapMap and

1KG imputed GWASs,¹⁰ we invited studies to participate in the 1KG GWAS meta-analysis. The 1KG GWAS could help to identify loci that were not covered in the HapMap GWAS and fine-map loci found in the HapMap GWAS. Cohorts were allowed to participate in either the HapMap or 1KG GWAS or both. Here, we present a meta-analysis of both HapMap (204,402 individuals from 78 studies) and 1KG (148,164 individuals from 49 studies) imputed-genotype GWASs. All participating cohorts implemented a pre-specified study plan comprising study design, data quality check, data analysis, and data sharing. We measured serum CRP in mg/L by using standard laboratory techniques ([Supplemental Data](#)) and transformed the values by natural log. Individuals with auto-immune diseases, individuals taking immune-modulating agents (if this information was available), and individuals with CRP amounts 4 SD or more away from the mean were excluded from all analyses. The characteristics of the participants are presented in [Table S1](#). We filtered individuals and genetic variants on the basis of study-specific quality-control criteria ([Table S2](#)). At each individual study site, we tested genetic variants for association with amounts of CRP by using an additive linear regression model adjusted for age, sex, and population substructure and accounting for relatedness, if relevant. Before meta-analysis, we filtered variants on the basis of imputation quality at an R^2 index > 0.4 . To avoid type I error inflation, we corrected study-specific GWASs for genomic inflation. For the HapMap study, we conducted fixed-effect meta-analyses for each genetic variant by using the inverse-variance-weighted (IVW) method implemented in GWAMA¹⁵ and performed a second genomic control on the meta-analysis level. For the 1KG imputed GWAS, we used METAL¹⁶ to perform a fixed-effect meta-analysis. We removed variants that were available in only $< 50\%$ of the samples. The HapMap meta-analysis included 2,437,193 variants, and the 1KG GWAS included 10,019,203 variants. We considered associations with $p < 5 \times 10^{-8}$ to be genome-wide significant. We used a stringent distance criterion—a minimum of 500 kb between two significant variants—to identify distinct loci. In each locus, the variant with the smallest p value was called the lead variant. Additionally, we performed sex-stratified analyses among HapMap imputed studies, and we tested for heterogeneity between sex-specific effect estimates as described previously¹⁷ by using the false-discovery rate (FDR) of Benjamini-Hochberg to assess significance of the p value for sex difference (< 0.05). We conducted BMI-adjusted analyses in the 1KG meta-analysis to determine the role of BMI in mediating the genetic associations with CRP and to increase power to detect associations not mediated by BMI.

LD Score Regression

Because population stratification is a major concern in GWASs and can lead to false-positive associations, we applied linkage disequilibrium (LD) score regression (LDSC) to distinguish whether the inflation of test statistics observed in the CRP GWAS was due to the polygenic architecture of CRP or reflected confounding bias

TX 77030, USA; ²²⁶Human Genome Sequencing Center, Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, TX 77030, USA; ²²⁷Department of Lab Medicine and Pathology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA; ²²⁸Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine, University of Bern, 3012 Bern, Switzerland; ²²⁹National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute's Framingham Heart Study, Framingham, MA 01702, USA; ²³⁰Department of Biostatistics, Boston University School of Public Health, Boston, MA 02118, USA

²³¹Deceased

*Correspondence: a.dehghan@imperial.ac.uk (A.D.), b.z.alizadeh@umcg.nl (B.Z.A.)
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due to cryptic relatedness or population stratification. The LD score measures collective genetic variation acquired from all genetic variants in LD with the index tagging (causal) variant.¹⁸ A higher LD score of an index variant implicates more nearby genetic variants in high LD with the index variant, which makes it more likely that the index variant tags causal variant(s). More genetic variants in LD with the index genetic variant (i.e., a higher LD score due to polygenicity) could yield higher (i.e., inflated) test statistics. In contrast, higher test statistics caused by cryptic population stratification will not be related to the LD score. LDSC analysis performs regression of the summary statistics from the GWAS meta-analysis (χ^2 statistics from the GWAS) on the LD scores across the genome. An LDSC intercept that equals 1 suggests no confounding bias, whereas an inflated intercept (larger than 1) suggests contribution of confounding due to relatedness to the test statistics. We used the LDHub web interface to perform LDSC.¹⁹ We filtered variants to the subset of HapMap 3 variants and excluded variants with duplicated rs numbers, ambiguous variants, minor allele frequency (MAF) < 0.01, and reported sample size < 66.7% of the total sample size. We used the default European LD score file based on the European 1KG reference panel.

Furthermore, we applied cross-trait LDSC to estimate genetic correlation of chronic inflammation (by using the HapMap GWAS meta-analysis) with other phenotypes by using published GWAS summary statistics.²⁰ In brief, the cross-product of two GWAS test statistics is calculated at each genetic variant, and this cross-product is regressed on the LD score. The slope of the regression is used for estimating the genetic covariance between two phenotypes.

Identification of Additional Distinct Variants in Associated Loci

To identify additional distinct variants in the associated loci, we performed joint approximate conditional analysis with the 1KG meta-analysis summary statistics and the LD matrix derived from the first cohort of the Rotterdam Study (RS-I) ($n = 5,974$). We used the Genome-wide Complex Trait Analysis (GCTA) tool, which performs a genome-wide stepwise procedure to identify variants according to their distinct association with CRP (i.e., conditional p).^{21,22} We only used variants with an imputation quality of $R^2 > 0.8$ in the reference set (RS-I). This approximate conditional analysis could reveal different lead signals in a locus where multiple associated variants were in the final joint association model. We tested the distinct variants identified in *CRP* jointly for an association with CRP by using individual-level data from the second and third cohorts of the Rotterdam Study (RS-II and RS-III, totaling 5,024 subjects) and the Women's Genome Health Study (WGHS) of 16,299 individuals.

Proportion of CRP Variance Explained

We estimated the variance explained in serum amounts of CRP by using the formula $(2 \times \text{MAF}(1 - \text{MAF})\beta^2)/\text{var}(\text{CRP})$, where β is the estimated effect of the individual variants on CRP²³ and $\text{var}(\text{CRP})$ is the estimated variance in natural-log-transformed CRP in the RS-I cohort. We calculated the variance explained for four combinations of associated variants: (1) the lead variant at just the *CRP* locus, (2) the distinct variants derived from the 1KG joint conditional analysis at the *CRP* locus, (3) all lead variants in the distinct loci, and (4) all lead variants in the distinct loci and, when applicable, the distinct variants derived from the approximate joint conditional analysis at associated loci.

Pathway Analysis and Gene Expression

We used Data-Driven Expression-Prioritized Integration for Complex Traits²⁴ (DEPICT v.1 rel173 beta) to systematically prioritize the most likely causal genes, highlight the pathways enriched with these genes, and identify tissues and cell types in which genes from associated loci are highly expressed. DEPICT requires summary statistics from the GWAS meta-analysis. First, we filtered genome-wide-associated variants from both GWAS meta-analyses by $\text{MAF} > 0.01$ and selected variants with a low correlation with other variants according to PLINK (v.1.90) by using a clumping distance of 500 kb between variants and/or index of LD r^2 threshold < 0.1. The settings for the analysis involved the usage of 1KG pilot phase data²⁵ (phase 1 integrated release v.3; unrelated CEU [Utah residents with ancestry from northern and western Europe], GBR [British in England and Scotland], and TSI [Toscani in Italia] individuals; November 23, 2010) with an $r^2 > 0.5$ LD threshold for locus definition, 10,000 permutations for bias correction, and 500 repetitions for FDR calculation. To summarize and visualize the results, we calculated pairwise Pearson correlation coefficients between all gene-specific Z scores for every pair of reconstituted DEPICT gene sets. We used Affinity Propagation Clustering (apcluster command; APCluster R package²⁶) to identify clusters and representative examples of the clusters and used Cytoscape v.3.2.1 to visualize the results. The DEPICT results of the pathway and gene prioritization are summarized as a heatmap (R v.2.3.3; pheatmap v.1.0.8 package²⁷). The gene-specific Z score describes the likelihood that a given gene is part of the corresponding Gene Ontology (GO) term, KEGG pathway, REACTOME pathway, Mouse Phenotype, or protein-protein interaction network.

Also, we performed Multi-marker Analysis of GenoMic Annotation (MAGMA).²⁸ MAGMA performs gene and gene-set analysis and requires the association results of all variants; therefore, we chose the larger HapMap GWAS for MAGMA. We used the Functional Mapping and Annotation (FUMA)²⁹ tool to perform MAGMA and applied standard settings for running MAGMA.

To prioritize the most likely trait-relevant gene for each GWAS locus, we ran colocalization analysis with the "coloc" R package v.3.1³⁰ separately for the HapMap and 1KG GWASs. We used publicly available genome-wide expression quantitative trait locus (eQTL) data from 5,311 whole-blood samples³¹ and from the Genome Tissue Expression (GTEx) V6p portal, which incorporates eQTL data from 44 post-mortem tissues.³² The coloc package uses approximate Bayes factors to estimate the posterior probability that GWAS and eQTL effects share a single causal variant. All significant *cis*-eGenes or *cis*-eProbes ($q < 0.05$ in GTEx; lowest *cis*-eQTL FDR < 0.05 in Westra et al.³¹) were extracted ± 1 Mb from the lead SNP of each locus. The HapMap SNP positions were converted to hg19 positions (UCSC Genome Browser) with the lift-Over command from the rtracklayer v.1.38.3 package. We used the SNPs present in both the GWAS and eQTL datasets. For the HapMap GWAS, the 1KG GWAS, and the GTEx eQTL datasets, we performed the test by using association β , standard error of β , and MAF. For the data from Westra et al.,³¹ we used association p value, MAF, and sample size and included only the subset of *cis*-eQTLs that are publicly available (up to a significance FDR < 0.5). We used default priors supplied by the coloc package ($P1 = 1 \times 10^{-4}$, $P2 = 1 \times 10^{-4}$, and $P12 = 1 \times 10^{-5}$; prior probabilities for association in the GWAS datasets, the eQTL datasets, and both). Full MAF data were not available for the eQTL datasets, so we used the GIANT 1KG p1v3 EUR reference panel instead. We visualized the results as a heatmap by using the pheatmap v.1.0.8 R package.²⁷

Mendelian Randomization

To assess the effect of CRP on complex disorders, we performed a two-sample MR study on nine clinical outcomes—Alzheimer disease (AD), bipolar disorder (BD), coronary artery disease (CAD), Crohn disease (CD), inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), rheumatoid arthritis (RA), schizophrenia, and diastolic blood pressure (DBP), and systolic blood pressure (SBP)—to which CRP showed a potentially causal association at a $p < 0.1$ in a previous MR study.¹³ We used the effect estimates of the 48 lead SNPs found to be associated with CRP in the HapMap GWAS and the effect estimates of the four SNPs that were additionally found to be associated with CRP in the 1KG GWAS in a multiple-instrument approach for the MR analyses ($n = 52$ SNPs). Additionally, we separately studied the effect of rs2794520 at the *CRP* locus to minimize the probability of introducing horizontal pleiotropy. We tested the statistical significance of the association between the instrument and CRP with the following formula:

$$F = \frac{R^2(n-1-k)}{(1-R^2) \times k}$$

R^2 is the CRP variance explained by the genetic instrument (0.014 for the rs2794520 SNP and 0.065 for the 52-SNP score), n is the number of individuals included in the CRP GWAS, and k is the number of variants included in the genetic score. The F statistic was 273 for the 52-SNP score and 2,902 for the rs2794520 SNP, indicating that both instruments were strong.

For the clinical outcomes, we used summary statistics from the most recent meta-analysis of GWASs. For DBP and SBP, we used data from the UK Biobank. The details of the outcome studies are summarized in [Table S12](#). We implemented four different methods of MR analyses: the IVW method, MR-Egger, weighted median (WM), and penalized weighted median (PWM). We used the Two-SampleMR package in R for the MR analyses.³³ Further, we applied the Bonferroni method to correct for multiple testing (0.05/9 phenotypes = 5.6×10^{-3}). When the Q statistic of the IVW analyses provided evidence for heterogeneity, the WM estimates were used for significance. The MR methods are described briefly below.

Inverse-Variance Weighted

The IVW method obtains the causal estimate by regressing the SNP associations with the outcome on the SNP associations with the risk factor; the intercept is set to 0, and weights are the inverse variances (IVs) of the SNP associations with the outcome. With a single genetic variant, the estimate is the ratio of coefficients β_Y/β_X , and the standard error is the first term of the Δ method approximation β_{Yse}/β_X . When all CRP SNPs are valid IVs, the IVW estimates converge to the true causal effect. When one or more invalid IVs are present (i.e., one SNP has an effect on an outcome through a different pathway than CRP), the IVW estimate deviates from the true causal effect.

MR-Egger

We used MR-Egger to account for potential unbalanced pleiotropy in the multiple-variant instrument.³⁴ When unbalanced pleiotropy is present, an alternative effect (positive or negative) is present between the SNP and the outcome, and it could bias the estimate of the causal association. The MR-Egger method is similar to the IVW analysis but does not force the intercept to pass through the origin. The slope of the MR-Egger regression provides the estimate of the causal association between CRP and the clinical outcome. An MR-Egger intercept that is significantly different from 0 suggests directional pleiotropic effects that could bias uncorrected estimates of the causal effect. MR-Egger regression depends on the InSIDE (instrument strength independent of direct effect) assumption, which states that the strengths of the effect

of the SNP on the outcome are uncorrelated with the direct pleiotropic effect of the SNP on the outcome.

Weighted Median and Penalized Weighted Median

We applied the median-based method to provide robust estimates of causal association even in the presence of horizontal pleiotropy when up to 50% of the information contributed by the genetic variants is invalid.³⁵ In PWM analysis, the effect of each variant is weighted by a factor that corresponds to the Q statistics (heterogeneity test) of the SNP; this means that most variants will not be affected by this correction, but the causal effect of the outlying variants, which are most likely to be invalid IVs, will be down-weighted.

We displayed the individual SNP estimates of causal effect and corresponding 95% confidence intervals (CIs) in a forest plot. To assess whether one of the variants used in the genetic score had disproportionate effects, we performed “leave-one-out” analyses, where one SNP at a time is removed from the score. We depicted the relationship between the SNP effect on CRP and the SNP effect on the clinical outcomes in a scatterplot and plotted the individual SNP effect against the inverse of their standard error in a funnel plot. When unbalanced pleiotropy is absent, the causal-effect estimates of the individual should center around the meta-analysis estimate in the funnel plot.

We used the proportion of CRP variance explained by the genetic instruments (0.014 for the rs2794520 SNP and 0.065 for the 52-SNP score) to perform power calculations for each outcome by using the online tool mRnd.³⁶ We calculated the power to detect a relative 5%, 10%, 15%, and 20% difference in outcome risk. For example, a 10% difference refers to an odds ratio (OR) of at least 0.90 or 1.10 in outcome risk ([Table S13](#)).

Results

HapMap GWAS Meta-analysis for Amounts of CRP

The HapMap meta-analysis identified 3,977 genome-wide-significant variants at $p < 5 \times 10^{-8}$ (quantile-quantile [Q-Q] plot, [Figure S1](#); Manhattan plot, [Figure S2](#)), which mapped to 48 distinct loci ([Table 1](#); [Table S3](#)). Of the previously reported 18 variants for CRP, 16 remained associated. Compared with the variants in the previous GWAS, the rs6901250 variant at the *GPRC6A* locus ($p = 0.09$) and the rs4705952 variants at the *IRF1* locus ($p = 2.7 \times 10^{-3}$) were not significant. The β estimates for natural-log-transformed CRP for each of the associated loci ranged from 0.020 to 0.229. We observed the strongest association for rs2794520 at *CRP* ($\beta = 0.182$ in the natural-log-transformed CRP [mg/L] per copy increment in the coded allele; $p = 4.17 \times 10^{-523}$), followed by rs4420638 at *APOC1* and *APOE* ($\beta = 0.229$, $p = 1.23 \times 10^{-305}$). As in previous GWAS meta-analysis, the lead variant within interleukin-6 receptor (*IL6R*) was rs4129267 ($\beta = 0.088$; $p = 1.2 \times 10^{-129}$). We identified rs1880241 upstream of *IL6* ($\beta = 0.028$; $p = 8.4 \times 10^{-14}$), related to the interleukin-6 pathway. In addition to the previously described interleukin-1 signaling, the *IL1RN-IL1F10* locus (interleukin-1 receptor antagonist and interleukin-1 family member 10), we found rs9284725 within interleukin-1 receptor 1 (*IL1R1*; $\beta = 0.02$; $p = 7.3 \times 10^{-11}$; [Table 1](#)). Compared with the overall meta-analysis including both sexes, the sex-specific meta-analyses did not identify

Table 1. Newly Identified Loci Associated with CRP

Variant ^a	Position ^b	Coded Allele	Frequency of Coded Allele	β^c	Standard Error	p Value	Closest Gene ^d	1KG Lead Variant ^e
Loci Found in the HapMap GWAS								
rs469772	chr1: 91,530,305	T	0.19	-0.031	0.005	5.54×10^{-12}	ZNF644	rs469882
rs12995480	chr2: 629,881	T	0.17	-0.031	0.005	1.24×10^{-10}	TMEM18	rs62105327
rs4246598	chr2: 88,438,050	A	0.46	0.022	0.004	5.11×10^{-10}	FABP1	-
rs9284725	chr2: 102,744,854	C	0.24	0.027	0.004	7.34×10^{-11}	IL1R1	rs1115282
rs1441169	chr2: 214,033,530	G	0.53	-0.025	0.004	2.27×10^{-11}	IKZF2	-
rs2352975	chr3: 49,891,885	C	0.30	0.025	0.004	6.43×10^{-10}	TRAIIP	rs10049413
rs17658229	chr5: 172,191,052	C	0.05	0.056	0.010	5.50×10^{-9}	DUSP1	rs34471628
rs9271608	chr6: 32,591,588	G	0.22	0.042	0.005	2.33×10^{-17}	HLA-DQA1	rs2647062
rs12202641	chr6: 116,314,634	T	0.39	-0.023	0.004	3.00×10^{-10}	FRK	-
rs1490384	chr6: 126,851,160	T	0.51	-0.025	0.004	2.65×10^{-12}	C6orf173	rs1490384
rs9385532	chr6: 130,371,227	T	0.33	-0.026	0.004	1.90×10^{-11}	L3MBTL3	-
rs1880241	chr7: 22,759,469	G	0.48	-0.028	0.004	8.41×10^{-14}	IL6	rs13241897
rs2710804	chr7: 36,084,529	C	0.37	0.021	0.004	1.30×10^{-8}	KIAA1706	-
rs2064009	chr8: 117,007,850	C	0.42	-0.027	0.004	2.28×10^{-14}	TRPS1	rs6987444
rs2891677	chr8: 126,344,208	C	0.46	-0.020	0.004	1.59×10^{-8}	NSMCE2	rs10956251
rs643434	chr9: 136,142,355	A	0.37	0.023	0.004	1.02×10^{-9}	ABO	9:136146061
rs1051338	chr10: 91,007,360	G	0.31	0.024	0.004	2.27×10^{-9}	LIPA	-
rs10832027	chr11: 13,357,183	G	0.33	-0.026	0.004	4.43×10^{-12}	ARNTL	rs10832027
rs10838687	chr11: 47,312,892	G	0.22	-0.031	0.004	9.12×10^{-13}	MADD	rs7125468
rs1582763	chr11: 60,021,948	A	0.37	-0.022	0.004	2.37×10^{-9}	MS4A4A	rs1582763
rs7121935	chr11: 72,496,148	A	0.38	-0.022	0.004	5.28×10^{-9}	STARD10	-
rs11108056	chr11: 95,855,385	G	0.42	-0.028	0.004	5.42×10^{-14}	METAP2	rs12813389
rs2239222	chr14: 73,011,885	G	0.36	0.035	0.004	9.87×10^{-20}	RGS6	rs2239222
rs4774590	chr15: 51,745,277	A	0.35	-0.022	0.004	2.71×10^{-8}	DMXL2	rs1189402
rs1558902	chr16: 53,803,574	A	0.41	0.034	0.004	5.20×10^{-20}	FTO	rs55872725
rs178810	chr17: 16,097,430	T	0.56	0.020	0.004	2.95×10^{-8}	NCOR1	-
rs10512597	chr17: 72,699,833	T	0.18	-0.037	0.005	4.44×10^{-14}	CD300LF, RAB37	rs2384955
rs4092465	chr18: 55,080,437	A	0.35	-0.027	0.004	3.11×10^{-10}	ONECUT2	-
rs12960928	chr18: 57,897,803	C	0.27	0.024	0.004	1.91×10^{-9}	MC4R	-
rs2315008	chr20: 62,343,956	T	0.31	-0.023	0.004	5.36×10^{-10}	ZGPAT	-
rs2836878	chr21: 40,465,534	G	0.27	0.043	0.004	7.71×10^{-26}	DSCR2	rs4817984
rs6001193	chr22: 39,074,737	G	0.35	-0.028	0.004	6.53×10^{-14}	TOMM22	rs4821816
Additional Loci Found in the 1KG GWAS								
rs75460349	chr1: 27,180,088	A	0.97	0.086	0.014	4.50×10^{-10}	ZDHHC18	-
rs1514895	chr3: 170,705,693	A	0.71	-0.027	0.004	2.70×10^{-9}	EIF5A2	-
rs112635299	chr14: 94,838,142	T	0.02	-0.107	0.017	2.10×10^{-10}	SERPINA1, SERPINA2	-
rs1189402	chr15: 53,728,154	A	0.62	0.025	0.004	3.90×10^{-9}	ONECUT1	-
Additional Loci Found in the BMI-Adjusted 1KG GWAS								
3:47431869	chr3: 47,431,869	D	0.59	0.024	0.004	1.10×10^{-8}	PTPN23	-
rs687339	chr3: 135,932,359	T	0.78	-0.030	0.005	2.80×10^{-10}	MSL2	-

(Continued on next page)

Table 1. Continued

Variant ^a	Position ^b	Coded Allele	Frequency of Coded Allele	β^c	Standard Error	p Value	Closest Gene ^d	1KG Lead Variant ^e
rs7795281	chr7: 74,122,854	A	0.76	0.028	0.005	3.10×10^{-8}	<i>GTF2I</i>	–
rs1736060	chr8: 11,664,738	T	0.60	0.029	0.004	2.60×10^{-13}	<i>FDFT1</i>	–
17:58001690	chr17: 58,001,690	D	0.44	–0.026	0.004	9.50×10^{-10}	<i>RPS6KB1</i>	–
rs9611441	chr22: 41,339,367	C	0.49	–0.022	0.004	1.40×10^{-8}	<i>XPNPEP3</i>	–

^aHapMap variants are presented, except for the 1KG additional findings.

^bPositions are according to UCSC Genome Browser build hg19.

^c β coefficients represent a 1-unit change in the natural-log-transformed CRP (mg/L) per copy increment in allele A1.

^dThe closest gene represents either the gene in which the variant is located or the closest gene.

^eFor HapMap loci, the lead variant from the 1KG GWAS is presented when the loci were also found in the 1KG GWAS.

additional loci for CRP. However, at four genetic variants, we found evidence for heterogeneity in effect estimates between women and men (Table S4), although the directions of associations were consistent.

1KG GWAS Meta-analysis for Amounts of CRP

In the 1KG meta-analysis, 8,002 variants were associated with CRP at $p < 5 \times 10^{-8}$ (Q-Q plot, Figure S3; Manhattan plot, Figure S4). This resulted in 40 distinct loci, of which 36 overlapped the HapMap meta-analysis (Table 1). The lead variant at the *CRP* locus in the 1KG GWAS was rs4287174 ($\beta = -0.185$; $p = 1.95 \times 10^{-398}$), which was in high LD with rs2794520 ($r^2 = 0.98$), the lead variant at the *CRP* locus in the HapMap GWAS. Among eight of the overlapping loci (rs1260326, rs1490384, rs10832027, rs1582763, rs7310409, rs2239222, rs340005, and rs1800961), the lead variant was at the same position in both GWASs. Compared with HapMap variants, the four additional variants identified in 1KG were rs75460349, rs1514895, rs112635299, and rs1189402. The variants rs1514895 and rs1189402 were available in the HapMap GWAS but were not associated at the genome-wide threshold ($p = 1.2 \times 10^{-7}$ and $p = 8.1 \times 10^{-3}$, respectively). The two variants rs75460349 and rs112635299 were not available in the HapMap GWAS or in high LD ($r^2 < 0.8$). rs75460349 is a low-frequency variant with a coded allele frequency of 0.97 ($\beta = 0.086$; $p = 4.5 \times 10^{-10}$). Also, rs112635299 near *SERPINA1* and *SERPINA2* is a low-frequency variant with a MAF of 0.02 ($\beta = 0.107$; $p = 2.1 \times 10^{-10}$). Adjustment for BMI in the 1KG GWAS ($n = 147,827$) revealed six additional loci that were not associated with CRP in the HapMap or 1KG primary analyses (Table 1; Table S5; Q-Q plot, Figure S5; Manhattan plot, Figure S6). The associations at three lead variants were much reduced after adjustment for BMI (rs1558902 [*FTO*], $p_{\text{adjusted}} = 0.40$; rs12995480 [*TMEM18*], $p_{\text{adjusted}} = 0.02$; rs64343 [*ABO*], $p_{\text{adjusted}} = 1.0 \times 10^{-7}$). Both *FTO* and *TMEM18* are well-known obesity-related genes. Except for the *FTO*, *TMEM18*, and *ABO* loci, all distinct loci identified in the primary 1KG analysis were also associated with CRP in the BMI-adjusted 1KG analysis. No genome-wide-significant association was observed on the X chromosome in the 1KG GWAS, which included 102,086 individuals.

LD Score Regression

The HapMap GWAS LDSC intercept was 1.03 (standard error = 0.013), and the 1KG intercept was 1.02 (standard error = 0.011). This suggests that a small proportion of the inflation is attributable to confounding bias (~12% for the HapMap GWAS and ~13% for the 1KG GWAS). Hence, the vast majority of inflation is due to the polygenic architecture of circulating amounts of CRP. As depicted in Figure 1, CRP showed strong positive genetic correlations with anthropometric traits (e.g., $R_g = 0.43$ and $p = 5.4 \times 10^{-15}$ for BMI), glycemic phenotypes (e.g., $R_g = 0.33$ and $p = 3.1 \times 10^{-6}$ for type 2 diabetes), lipid phenotypes (e.g., $R_g = 0.29$ and $p = 7.9 \times 10^{-5}$ for triglycerides), and CAD ($R_g = 0.23$ and $p = 2.4 \times 10^{-5}$) (Table S6). By comparison, CRP showed inverse genetic correlations with educational attainment (e.g., $R_g = -0.27$ and $p = 9.2 \times 10^{-7}$ for college completion), lung function (e.g., $R_g = -0.24$ and $p = 4.6 \times 10^{-12}$ for forced vital capacity), and high-density lipoprotein cholesterol ($R_g = -0.30$ and $p = 4.8 \times 10^{-9}$).

Additional Signals at Distinct Loci

Approximate conditional analyses in the 1KG GWAS revealed additional signals at nine loci (Table S7). Five loci showed one secondary signal (*IL6R*, *NLRP3*, *HNF1A*, *CD300LE*, and *APOE* and *APOC1*), the *PPP1R3B* locus had two additional signals, the *LEPR* locus had three additional signals, and the *SALL1* locus had four additional signals, whereas the *CRP* locus showed a total of 13 distinct associated variants. Interestingly, the rs149520992 rare variant (MAF = 0.01) mapping to the *CRP* locus showed an association at $p_{\text{conditional}} = 3.7 \times 10^{-15}$ with $\beta = -0.272$ for the T allele. The GCTA effect estimates for the ten distinct variants identified in the vicinity of *CRP* by the 1KG conditional analysis are highly correlated with these variants' effect estimates obtained from the RS-I and WGHS individual-level data ($r_{\text{RS}} = 0.97$ and $r_{\text{WGHS}} = 0.84$), confirming the reliability of the GCTA estimates.

Explained CRP Variance

The lead variant at the *CRP* locus in both the HapMap (rs2794520) and 1KG (rs4287174) GWASs explained 1.4% of the variance in natural-log-transformed CRP amounts. The distinct *CRP* variants derived from the joint

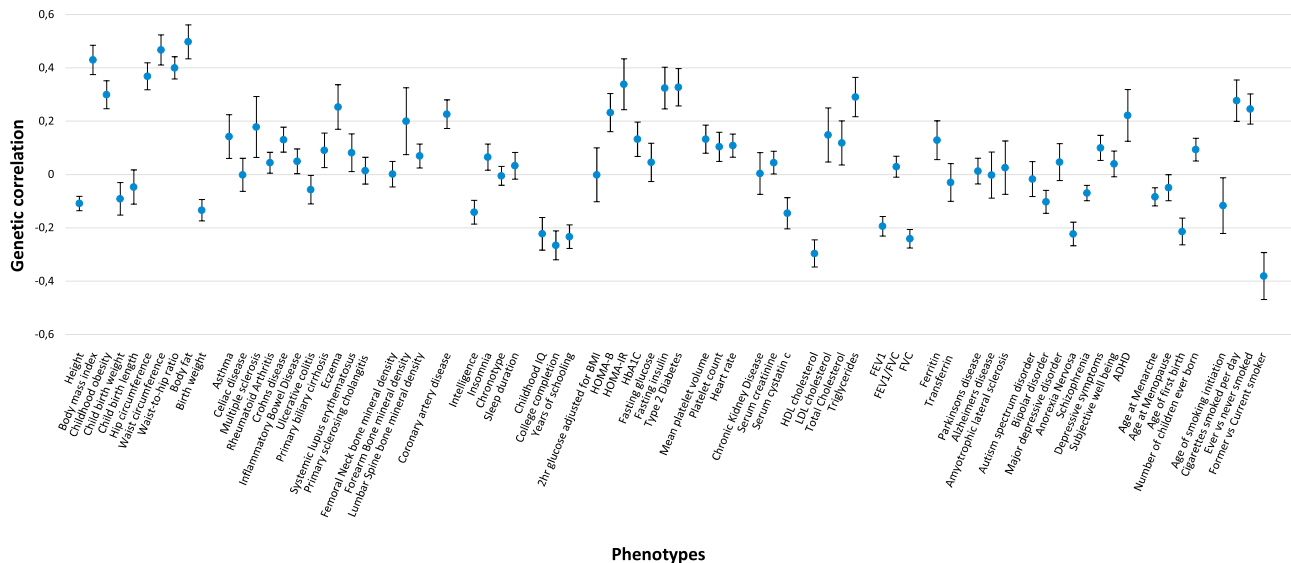


Figure 1. Genome-wide Genetic Correlation between Serum Amounts of CRP and Different Phenotypes and Clinical Diseases
 The genetic correlation and its standard error are estimated by LDSC analysis. Abbreviations are as follows: ADHD, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder; FEV1, forced expiratory volume in 1 s; FVC, forced vital capacity; HOMA-B, homeostatic model assessment β cell function; HOMA-IR, homeostatic model assessment insulin resistance; and HbA1c, hemoglobin A1c.

conditional analysis in the 1KG GWAS explained 4.3% of the variance. The lead variants at all distinct loci together explained 6.2% of the CRP variance in the HapMap GWAS and 6.5% in the 1KG GWAS. When we added the distinct variants derived from the conditional analysis at associated loci, the variance explained by all associated loci was 11.0% in the 1KG GWAS.

Functional Annotation

We applied DEPICT and MAGMA analyses for functional annotation and biological interpretation of the findings. The DEPICT analysis included 9,497 genome-wide-significant variants covering 283 genes and prioritized 55 candidate genes across 29 regions ($FDR < 0.05$; Table S8). The prioritized genes included *IL6R*, which mapped to the 1q21.3 locus (represented by rs4129267), and *APCS*, which mapped to the 1q32.2 locus. Investigating 10,968 reconstituted gene sets for enrichment, DEPICT highlighted 583 (5.3%) gene sets to be significantly enriched among CRP-associated loci at $FDR < 0.05$ (Table S9). Using further clustering, we identified 66 groups of gene sets that substantially correlated and clustered in two sets, one mainly composed of immune pathways and the other enriched with metabolic pathways (Figure 2). In Figure 3, we present the prioritized genes and the most significant gene sets. We found synovial fluid, liver tissue, and monocytes to be enriched with expression of the prioritized genes ($FDR < 0.05$). We applied MAGMA analysis to the HapMap GWAS, identifying five significantly enriched gene sets (Bonferroni-corrected $p < 0.05$; Table S10). Results included consequences of EGF induction, positive regulation of gene expression, and the interleukin-6 signaling pathway, in line with the most strongly prioritized gene from DEPICT gene prioritization. MAGMA analysis prioritized liver as a sole enriched tissue ($p = 0.048$).

To prioritize the most likely trait-relevant gene for each GWAS locus, we interrogated the GWAS data with *cis*-eQTL data identified from 44 post-mortem tissues and a large whole-blood eQTL meta-analysis by using colocalization analysis (Table S11). Figure S7 presents the GWAS loci that colocalize with *cis*-eQTLs with the corresponding tissue, the colocalizing gene, and the posterior probability that one shared underlying variant drives both associations. Out of the 58 lead gSNPs, 25 SNPs (43%) showed evidence of colocalization with one or more local eQTL effects (posterior probability > 0.9). For example, the rs2293476 locus colocalized with several *cis*-eQTL effects for *PABC4* and pseudogenes *OXCT2P1*, *RP11-69E11.4*, and *RP11-69E11.8*. The rs10925027 locus colocalized with the *cis*-eQTL effect for *NLRP3* exclusively in the highly powered blood meta-analysis. Out of 25 loci, nine loci had only one colocalizing gene. Altogether, gSNP-associated *cis*-eQTL effects were present in up to 14 different tissues, of which whole blood, esophagus mucosa, skin, and tibial nerve were the most frequent.

Mendelian Randomization Analyses

We observed a protective effect of genetically determined variance in CRP with schizophrenia with an IVW OR of the 52-SNP score of 0.89 (95% CI = 0.81–0.97; $p = 6.6 \times 10^{-3}$; Tables S14 and S15; Figure S8–S11). The MR-Egger intercept was compatible with no unbalanced pleiotropy ($p = 0.48$). The estimate of the rs2794520 variant was comparable to the 52-SNP score estimate (OR = 0.89; 95% CI = 0.84–0.94; $p = 0.046$). The WM and PWM estimates were comparable to the IVW estimate (OR_{WM} = 0.89 and $P_{WM} = 5.1 \times 10^{-3}$; OR_{PWM} = 0.89 and $P_{PWM} = 4.4 \times 10^{-3}$). The “leave-one-out” analysis provided evidence that no single variant was driving the IVW

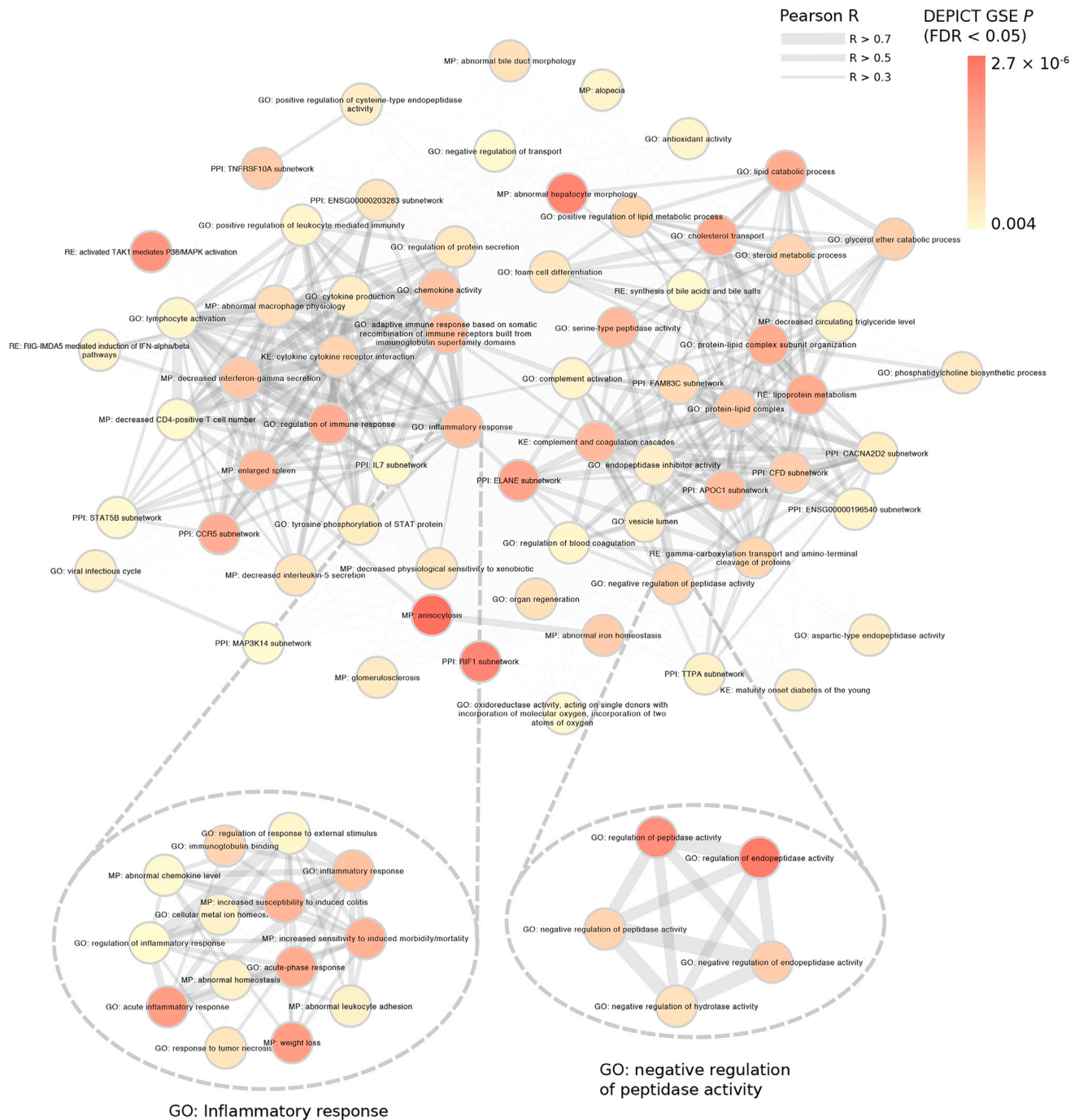


Figure 2. Results of the DEPICT Functional Annotation Analysis

Each node represents an exemplar gene set from affinity-propagation clustering, and links represent corresponding Pearson correlation coefficients between individual enriched gene sets (only the links with $r > 0.3$ are shown). DEPICT GSE P refers to the gene-set enrichment p value for that DEPICT gene-set generated by DEPICT. As an example, outlined are the individual gene sets inside two clusters (“inflammatory response” and “negative regulation of peptidase activity”).

point estimate (Figure S10). The causal OR between the rs2794520 variant and BD was 1.33 (95% CI = 1.03–1.73; $p = 0.032$). For the 52-SNP score, the IVW OR was 1.16 (95% CI = 1.00–1.35; $p = 0.054$). The MR-Egger intercept was compatible with unbalanced pleiotropy ($p = 0.049$). The MR-Egger estimate OR of the 52-SNP score was comparable to the rs2794520 estimate (OR = 1.36; 95% CI = 1.10–1.69; $p = 6.7 \times 10^{-3}$), as were the WM and

PWM estimates (OR_{WM} = 1.33 and $P_{WM} = 3.4 \times 10^{-3}$; OR_{PWM} = 1.32 and $P_{PWM} = 4.3 \times 10^{-3}$).

We observed evidence against a causal association between either *CRP* rs2794520 (OR = 1.01; 95% CI = 0.91–1.12; $p = 0.88$) or the 52-SNP instrument (OR = 0.96; 95% CI = 0.84–1.09; $p = 0.51$) and CAD. An Egger intercept of 0.014 suggested the presence of unbalanced pleiotropy ($p = 5.8 \times 10^{-3}$), and the MR-Egger causal estimate

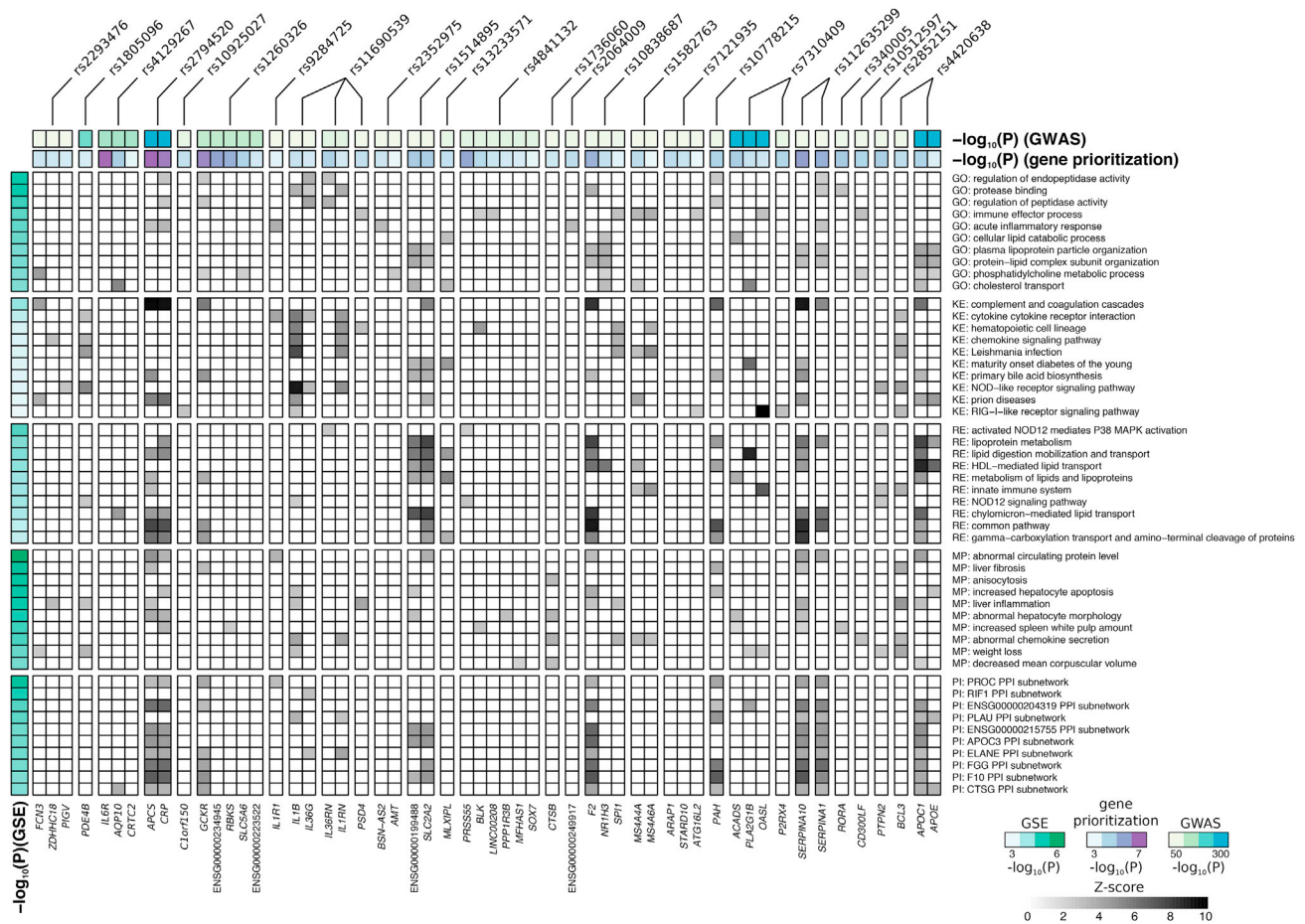


Figure 3. Heatmap Representing the Results of DEPICT Functional Annotation Analysis

Each row represents enriched (FDR < 0.05) gene sets, and each column represents prioritized (FDR < 0.05) genes. Colors on the heatmap represent each gene's contribution to gene-set enrichment (GSE; depicted as a Z score; only the top ten highest Z scores per gene set are visualized). Sidebars represent p values for GWAS, GSE, and gene prioritization (nominal p value on log₁₀ scale). The top ten gene sets per annotation category are visualized. Abbreviations are as follows: GO, Gene Ontology; KE, Kyoto Encyclopedia of Gene and Genomes; RE, REACTOME pathways; MP, mouse phenotype; and PI, protein-protein interaction.

was OR = 0.79 (95% CI = 0.67–0.94; p = 0.012). However, the WM and PWM showed no association between CRP and CAD. For AD, there was evidence against an association with rs2794520 (p = 0.592), although the IVW OR showed a protective effect (OR = 0.51; 95% CI = 0.30–0.88; p = 0.015). The Egger intercept of 0.046 suggested unbalanced pleiotropy (p = 0.042), and the MR-Egger OR was 0.27 (95% CI = 0.12–0.60). However, the association was null for the WM and PWM analyses (OR_{WM} = 1.04 and P_{WM} = 0.61; OR_{PWM} = 1.05 and P_{PWM} = 0.53). We observed evidence against an effect for CD, DBP, IBD, RA, and SBP for the rs2794520 variant and the IVW, MR-Egger, WM, and PWM analyses.

Discussion

Using genomic data from >200,000 individuals, we have identified 58 distinct signals for circulating amounts of CRP, confirming 16 previously identified CRP loci. BMI-adjusted GWASs suggested that the vast majority of

genetic risk variants affect CRP amounts independently of its main determinant (BMI). The genome-wide *in silico* functional annotation analysis highlights 55 genes that are likely to explain the association between 29 signals and amounts of CRP. The data identified gene sets involved in the biology of the immune system and liver as main regulators of serum amounts of CRP. MR analyses supported causal associations between genetically increased CRP and a protective effect on schizophrenia and increased risk of BD.

Obesity is one of the main determinants of chronic low-grade inflammation in the general population.^{37,38} Adjustment for BMI in the CRP GWAS abolished the association at only three lead variants, suggesting that the genetic regulation of chronic low-grade inflammation is largely independent of BMI. Notably, BMI adjustment resulted in the identification of six variants that were not associated with CRP in the BMI-unadjusted GWAS. This supports the notion that adjustment for covariates that explain phenotypic variance could improve the statistical power in linear model analyses of quantitative traits.³⁹ Although adjustment for heritable correlated traits in GWASs could

bias effect estimates (collider bias),⁴⁰ there is consistent evidence in the literature that BMI has a causal direct effect on CRP amounts,⁴¹ and therefore, collider bias in CRP GWASs adjusted for BMI is less likely.

The sex-stratified analyses revealed significant heterogeneity in effect estimates between men and women at only four lead variants, which represent fewer than 10% of all CRP loci. Even among these four loci, the effect directions were similar; thus, the heterogeneity was limited to effect sizes. The data suggest that the difference between men and women in amounts of CRP is less likely to be explained by genetic factors. Furthermore, two signals identified in the former HapMap GWAS of CRP amounts were not significant in the current HapMap GWAS. The effect estimates in the current analyses were too small to identify with our sample size.

The top variant at the *CRP* locus in both the HapMap and 1KG GWASs explained 1.4% of the variance in circulating amounts of CRP. The approximate conditional analysis resulted in 13 variants jointly associated within the *CRP* locus in the 1KG GWAS. With respect to locus definition, we used a more conservative distance criterion than other GWASs, which often use ± 500 kb surrounding the GWAS peak.⁴² Here, we used the criterion that the minimum distance between the boundaries of loci is 500 kb. In order to identify further variants associated with amounts of CRP, we performed approximate conditional analyses, which resulted in multiple putative additional variants also inside and near genes that were not identified in the primary GWAS. As an example, the *CRP* locus spanned >2 Mb according to our criterion. Approximate conditional analysis revealed that two variants, namely rs3027012 near *DARC* and rs56288844 near *FCERIA*, both downstream of *CRP*, were associated with CRP amounts. Furthermore, upstream of *CRP*, we identified a variant near *FCGR2A* (immunoglobulin G Fc receptor II). These results show that for a given lead variant, potentially multiple causal loci—here *DARC*, *FCERIA*, and *FCGRA2* alongside *CRP*—contribute to chronic low-grade inflammation and variation in circulating amounts of CRP.

DEPICT analysis provided further evidence that the genes annotated to the associated CRP variants mainly cluster in the immune and liver biological systems. Notably, the gene set “inflammatory response,” which captures both immune response and liver metabolism, was the main connector network between the two networks. This is in line with the observation that CRP is mainly produced by liver cells in response to inflammatory cytokines during acute and chronic inflammation.⁴³ Interestingly, the analysis highlighted iron homeostasis as an enriched gene set. In agreement, the conditional analysis highlighted a distinct genetic association at the hemochromatosis gene *HFE*, encoding a transmembrane protein of the major histocompatibility complex (MHC) class I family. Previous studies have shown that iron metabolism plays a pivotal role in inflammation.^{44,45} However, genetic pleiotropy could highlight co-regulated pathway-analysis networks

that do not cause inflammation per se. It is also important to note that the results of DEPICT analyses apply to reconstituted gene sets that might sometimes have slightly different overlaying biological themes than the original gene-set annotation.

The MR analyses validate previous evidence that genetically elevated CRP is protective for the risk of schizophrenia,^{13,46} although observational data suggest a positive association between CRP and risk of schizophrenia.⁴⁷ For BD, we observed a positive causal effect, which is in line with previous MR and observational studies.^{13,48} Although the causal underlying mechanisms remain to be elucidated, a hypothesis for the schizophrenia observation might be the immune response to infections early in life. Amounts of acute-phase response proteins in dry blood spots collected at birth are lower for individuals with non-affective psychosis, which includes schizophrenia, than for control individuals, suggesting a weaker immune response at birth.⁴⁹ Also, neonates who have been exposed to a maternal infection and have low amounts of acute-phase response proteins have a higher risk of schizophrenia.⁵⁰ Altogether, the evidence suggests that a deficient immune response could contribute to chronic infection in children and the development of schizophrenia. For AD and CAD, the Egger intercept showed evidence of unbalanced pleiotropy, and the Egger estimate showed a protective effect of CRP on the risk of AD and CAD. However, for both outcomes, the effects of the WM and PWM analyses, as well as analyses using the single rs2794520 variant (which is least likely to be affected by pleiotropy), were null. The MR-Egger estimate relies on the InSIDE assumption, which states that the strength of the association between the genetic variants and CRP is independent of the strength of the direct pleiotropic effects of the genetic variants on the outcome. This assumption can be violated when the genetic variants are associated with a confounder of the CRP-outcome association. Such a scenario can occur when the genetic variants are associated with an exposure that is causally upstream of the exposure under study. In the context of the association between CRP and either AD or CAD, this could be lipids or glycemic phenotypes. Several genetic variants used in the 52-SNP instrument are associated with metabolic phenotypes that might affect amounts of CRP. In agreement, the WM and PWM, in which the InSIDE assumption is relaxed, and the single-variant analysis showed no association. Furthermore, the observation that CRP is not causally related to CAD in the MR analyses is comparable to the findings of previous published studies.⁵¹ Power calculation showed that we had 100% power to detect a 10% difference in CAD risk, so the probability of a false-negative finding is small. Also, CRP is associated with future CAD in observational studies, and randomized trials have shown a beneficial effect of lowering inflammation with the use of statins⁵² and canakinumab⁵³ on CAD risk, but this effect is unlikely to be attributable to CRP.

The strengths of our study are the use of a very large sample size for CRP and the use of both HapMap and 1KG imputed data. Furthermore, we conducted sex-specific and BMI-adjusted analyses to study the effect of sex and body mass on the associations between genetic variants and CRP. To maximize power and to efficiently use the data, we meta-analyzed all available samples in a discovery setting without replication. The consistent association of the variants in >50 studies at a strict Bonferroni-corrected threshold provide confidence that our findings represent true associations. We used both HapMap and 1KG imputed data to identify genetic variants for circulating amounts of CRP. At the start of the project, more studies had HapMap imputed data available. Hence, the sample size and thus power in the HapMap GWAS was higher than that in the 1KG. Also, HapMap could have identified variants that were not identified by the 1KG GWAS.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, 1KG offers better coverage of uncommon variants and includes indels, which are not included in the HapMap reference panel. Including both reference panels, we used all available samples and maximized the possibility of identifying both common and uncommon genetic variants for CRP.

However, we note limitations to our study. GWAS merely identify loci associated with complex phenotypes, and the identification of causal genes remains challenging. We included only individuals of European ancestry; the generalizability of our findings to other races and ethnicities is uncertain. In addition, although our analyses provide support for causal associations, we acknowledge that we might not have identified the causal variants, and we might not have eliminated residual confounding. The colocalization analyses provide evidence for colocalization of CRP GWAS signals and eQTLs; however, they do not provide evidence that the GWAS signal functions on CRP through gene expression. We further note that the method assumes identical LD structure from the GWAS and eQTL datasets. Given that non-European samples make up ~14% of the full dataset, this assumption might be violated for some tissues. Last, we meta-analyzed all available samples in one meta-analysis and did not replicate our findings in an independent sample. Therefore, our findings might need replication.

In conclusion, we performed a large GWAS meta-analysis to identify genetic loci associated with circulating amounts of CRP, a sensitive marker of chronic low-grade inflammation, and found support for a causal relationship between CRP and decreased risk of schizophrenia and increased risk of BD. Given that inflammation is implicated in the pathogenesis of multiple complex diseases, our insights into the biology of inflammation could contribute to future therapies and interventions.

Accession Numbers

All GWAS data reported in this paper are publicly available. Please email s.ligthart@erasmusmc.nl to get more information on how to gain access and download the data.

Supplemental Data

Supplemental Data include 11 figures, 15 tables, and study-specific descriptives and acknowledgments and can be found with this article online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajhg.2018.09.009>.

Consortia

The members of the LifeLines Cohort Study are Behrooz Z. Alizadeh, H. Marika Boezen, Lude Franke, Pim van der Harst, Gerjan Navis, Marianne Rots, Harold Snieder, Morris Swertz, Bruce H.R. Wolfenbutter, and Cisca Wijmenga.

The members of the CHARGE Inflammation Working Group are Emelia Benjamin, Daniel I. Chasman, Abbas Dehghan, Tarunveer Singh Ahluwalia, James Meigs, Russell Tracy, Behrooz Z. Alizadeh, Symen Ligthart, Josh Bis, Gudny Eiriksdottir, Nathan Pankratz, Myron Gross, Alex Rainer, Harold Snieder, James G. Wilson, Bruce M. Psaty, Josee Dupuis, Bram Prins, Urmo Vaso, Maria Stathopoulou, Lude Franke, Terho Lehtimäki, Wolfgang Koenig, Yalda Jamshidi, Sophie Siest, Ali Abbasi, Andre G. Uitterlinden, Mohammadreza Abdollahi, Renate Schnabel, Ursula M. Schick, Ilja M. Nolte, Aldi Kraja, Yi-Hsiang Hsu, Daniel S. Tylee, Alyson Zwickler, Rudolf Uher, George Davey-Smith, Alanna C. Morrison, Andrew Hicks, Cornelia M. van Duijn, Cavin Ward-Caviness, Eric Boerwinkle, J. Rotter, Ken Rice, Leslie Lange, Markus Perola, Eco de Geus, Andrew P. Morris, Kari Matti Makela, David Stacey, Johan Eriksson, Tim M. Frayling, and Eline P. Slagboom.

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Declaration of interests

O.H.F. works at ErasmusAGE, a center for aging research across the life course funded by Nestlé Nutrition (Nestec Ltd.), Metagenics Inc., and AXA. Nestec Ltd., Metagenics Inc., and AXA had no role in the design or conduct of the study; collection, management, analysis, or interpretation of the data; or preparation, review or approval of the manuscript. Bruce M. Psaty serves on the data and safety monitoring board of a clinical trial funded by Zoll LifeCor and on the steering committee of the Yale Open Data Access Project, funded by Johnson & Johnson.

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Web Resources

DEPICT, <https://data.broadinstitute.org/mpg/depict/>

GCTA, <http://cnsgenomics.com/software/gcta/>

GIANT 1KG p1v3 EUR reference panel, <http://csg.sph.umich.edu/abecasis/mach/download/1000G.2012-03-14.html>

GTE Portal, <https://www.gtportal.org/>

GWAMA, <https://www.geenivaramu.ee/en/tools/gwama>

LD Hub, <http://ldsc.broadinstitute.org/ldhub/>

METAL, [https://genome.sph.umich.edu/wiki/METAL_](https://genome.sph.umich.edu/wiki/METAL_Documentation)

[Documentation](#)

mRnd power calculations for Mendelian randomization, <http://cnsgenomics.com/shiny/mRnd/>

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