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Published in:
Diabetologia

DOI:
[10.1007/s00125-022-05652-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s00125-022-05652-2)

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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2022

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Fraszczyk, E., Spijkerman, A. M. W., Zhang, Y., Brandmaier, S., Day, F. R., Zhou, L., Wackers, P., Dollé, M. E. T., Bloks, V. W., Gào, X., Gieger, C., Kooner, J., Kriebel, J., Picavet, H. S. J., Rathmann, W., Schöttker, B., Loh, M., Verschuren, W. M. M., van Vliet-Ostaptchouk, J. V., ... Snieder, H. (2022). Epigenome-wide association study of incident type 2 diabetes: a meta-analysis of five prospective European cohorts. *Diabetologia*, 763-776. [65]. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00125-022-05652-2>

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Epigenome-wide association study of incident type 2 diabetes: a meta-analysis of five prospective European cohorts

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Received: 14 December 2020 / Accepted: 15 November 2021 / Published online: 15 February 2022

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Abstract

Aims/hypothesis Type 2 diabetes is a complex metabolic disease with increasing prevalence worldwide. Improving the prediction of incident type 2 diabetes using epigenetic markers could help tailor prevention efforts to those at the highest risk. The aim of this study was to identify predictive methylation markers for incident type 2 diabetes by combining epigenome-wide association study (EWAS) results from five prospective European cohorts.

Methods We conducted a meta-analysis of EWASs in blood collected 7–10 years prior to type 2 diabetes diagnosis. DNA methylation was measured with Illumina Infinium Methylation arrays. A total of 1250 cases and 1950 controls from five longitudinal cohorts were included: Doetinchem, ESTHER, KORA1, KORA2 and EPIC-Norfolk. Associations between DNA methylation and incident type 2 diabetes were examined using robust linear regression with adjustment for potential confounders. Inverse-variance fixed-effects meta-analysis of cohort-level individual CpG EWAS estimates was performed using METAL. The methylGSA R package was used for gene set enrichment analysis. Confirmation of genome-wide significant CpG sites was performed in a cohort of Indian Asians (LOLIPOP, UK).

Results The meta-analysis identified 76 CpG sites that were differentially methylated in individuals with incident type 2 diabetes compared with control individuals (p values $< 1.1 \times 10^{-7}$). Sixty-four out of 76 (84.2%) CpG sites were confirmed by directionally consistent effects and p values < 0.05 in an independent cohort of Indian Asians. However, on adjustment for baseline BMI only four CpG sites remained genome-wide significant, and addition of the 76 CpG methylation risk score to a prediction model including established predictors of type 2 diabetes (age, sex, BMI and HbA_{1c}) showed no improvement (AUC 0.757 vs 0.753). Gene set enrichment analysis of the full epigenome-wide results clearly showed enrichment of processes linked to insulin signalling, lipid homeostasis and inflammation.

Conclusions/interpretation By combining results from five European cohorts, and thus significantly increasing study sample size, we identified 76 CpG sites associated with incident type 2 diabetes. Replication of 64 CpGs in an independent cohort of Indian Asians suggests that the association between DNA methylation levels and incident type 2 diabetes is robust and independent of ethnicity. Our data also indicate that BMI partly explains the association between DNA methylation and incident type 2 diabetes. Further studies are required to elucidate the underlying biological mechanisms and to determine potential causal roles of the differentially methylated CpG sites in type 2 diabetes development.

Mirjam Luijten and Harold Snieder contributed equally to this work.

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Research in context

What is already known about this subject?

- Epigenetics may play a role in type 2 diabetes development
- Predictive DNA methylation markers (CpG sites) could be useful for prevention efforts in type 2 diabetes
- Several CpG sites have been associated with type 2 diabetes in epigenome-wide association studies

What is the key question?

- Can we identify additional predictive DNA methylation markers for incident type 2 diabetes by combining results from five European prospective cohorts?

What are the new findings?

- We identified 76 DNA methylation markers for incident type 2 diabetes, including 63 novel CpG sites
- Over 80% of the markers identified were confirmed in an independent cohort of Indian Asians

How might this impact on clinical practice in the foreseeable future?

- Epigenetics has the potential to elucidate new biological pathways underlying type 2 diabetes pathogenesis

Keywords Biomarkers · DNA methylation · Epigenetics · Epigenome-wide association studies · Meta-analysis · Prediction · Prospective studies · Type 2 diabetes

Abbreviations

DMS	Differentially methylated CpG sites
eQTM	Expression quantitative trait methylation
EWAS	Epigenome-wide association study
FDR	False discovery rate
GO	Gene Ontology
KEGG	Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes
meQTL	Methylation quantitative trait loci
MRS	Methylation risk score
PCA	Principal component analysis
TF	Transcription factor

Introduction

Type 2 diabetes is a complex metabolic disease characterised by chronically elevated blood glucose levels, insulin resistance and beta cell failure and their interaction with obesity and physical inactivity [1–3]. Recent genome-wide association studies identified over 400 genetic variants associated with type 2 diabetes; however, these variants explain only a minor part of the type 2 diabetes heritability [4]. To identify missing components of type 2 diabetes aetiology, researchers started to examine gene–environment interactions and epigenetic mechanisms [5–7]. Improving the prediction of incident type 2 diabetes using epigenetic markers could help tailor

prevention efforts focused on those at the highest risk. Moreover, epigenetics could also elucidate new pathophysiological pathways involved in type 2 diabetes development.

Recent epigenome-wide association studies (EWASs) in blood have identified differentially methylated CpG sites (DMS), in individuals with vs without type 2 diabetes, in genes such as *TXNIP*, *ABCG1* and *SREBF1* [8–10]. Further replication in a case–control sample of an independent cohort study confirmed the robustness of those associations with type 2 diabetes [11]. However, most of the EWASs reported so far used a cross-sectional approach, whereas it is well-known that type 2 diabetes develops over a timespan of many years before it is clinically manifest [1]. At present, only two studies examining methylation changes prior to type 2 diabetes onset have been reported: the first in the LOLIPOP cohort including 2664 participants [8]; and the second in EPIC-Norfolk including 1264 participants [12]. In both studies, increased methylation in the *ABCG1* and *SREBF1* genes and decreased methylation in the *TXNIP* gene at baseline were associated with incident type 2 diabetes.

The aim of this study was to identify additional DNA methylation markers for incident type 2 diabetes. For this, we combined results from five European prospective cohorts to increase statistical power with a focus on European ancestry in the discovery stage. The cohorts involved are the Doetinchem Cohort Study [13] from the Netherlands, the ESTHER (Epidemiologische Studie zu Chancen der Verhütung, Früherkennung und optimierten Therapie chronischer

Table 1 Characteristics of the cohorts included in the meta-analysis for incident type 2 diabetes

Characteristic	Doetinchem Cohort Study	ESTHER	KORAI	KORAI	KORA2	EPIC-Norfolk	LOLIPOP cohort - replication
Cohort design	Population-based cohort study	Population-based cohort study	Population-based cohort study	Population-based cohort study	Population-based cohort study	Population-based cohort study	Population-based cohort study
Ancestry	European	European	European	European	European	European	Indian Asian
Country	Netherlands	Germany	Germany	Germany	Germany	UK	England
Exclusion of prevalent T2D cases at baseline	Based on self-reported prevalent T2D diagnosis/T2D drug use/random glucose ≥ 11.1 mmol/l	Based on self- or GP-reported prevalent T2D diagnosis/T2D drug use and HbA _{1c} ≥ 48 mmol/mol (6.5%)	Based on OGTT ≥ 11.1 mmol/l	Based on OGTT ≥ 11.1 mmol/l and/or self- or GP-reported prevalent T2D diagnosis/T2D drug use	Based on OGTT ≥ 11.1 mmol/l and/or self- or GP-reported prevalent T2D diagnosis/T2D drug use	Based on self-report of T2D, doctor-diagnosed T2D, T2D drug use or evidence of T2D after baseline with a date of diagnosis earlier than the baseline recruitment date	Based on T2D drug use/ fasting glucose concentration > 7 mmol/l and HbA _{1c} > 48 mmol/mol (6.5%)
Definition used for incident T2D during follow-up	Self-reported, confirmed by the GP	Self- or GP-reported usage of glucose-lowering drugs during 14 years of follow-up	GP diagnosis based on OGTT test (plasma glucose ≤ 11.1 mmol/l)	Self-reported, confirmed by the GP	Self-reported, confirmed by the GP or other sources (general practice diabetes register, local hospital diabetes register, hospital admissions data and Office of National Statistics mortality data with coding for diabetes)	GP diagnosis based on fasting glucose > 7 mmol/l, or HbA _{1c} > 48 mmol/mol (6.5%)	GP diagnosis based on fasting glucose > 7 mmol/l, or HbA _{1c} > 48 mmol/mol (6.5%)
Control definition	Healthy, no family history of T2D, no gestational diabetes and normoglycaemic throughout cohort	Lack of self- or GP-reported prescriptions of glucose-lowering drugs and HbA _{1c} levels < 48 mmol/mol (6.5%) at baseline and follow-up	No T2D at baseline and follow-up based on OGTT test (plasma glucose ≤ 11.1 mmol/l)	Lack of self- or GP-reported T2D, no glucose-lowering medication	Random sub-cohort of non-cases	Not receiving treatment for T2D and with a fasting glucose < 7 mmol/l and HbA _{1c} < 48 mmol/mol (6.5%)	Not receiving treatment for T2D and with a fasting glucose < 7 mmol/l and HbA _{1c} < 48 mmol/mol (6.5%)
Case-control matching	Age (± 2 years), sex and measurement round	Age (± 2 years), sex and measurement round	Age (± 2 years), sex and measurement round	Age (± 2 years), sex, measurement round and observation time until diagnosis (years)	Age (± 2 years), sex, measurement round and observation time until diagnosis (years)	Age (groups of 5 years) and sex	Age (groups of 5 years) and sex
DNA methylation array	Illumina Infinium Methylation EPIC (450 K subset used)	Illumina Infinium HumanMethylation450K	Illumina Infinium HumanMethylation450K	Illumina Infinium HumanMethylation450K	Illumina Infinium HumanMethylation450K	Illumina Infinium HumanMethylation450K	Illumina Infinium HumanMethylation450K
Total no. of CpG sites included in meta-analysis	424,750	416,716	450,549	470,870	442,920	466,186	466,186

GP, general practitioner; T2D, type 2 diabetes

Table 2 Baseline characteristics of incident type 2 diabetes cases and controls per cohort in the meta-analysis

Characteristic	Doetinchem Cohort Study		ESTHER		KORAI		KORA2		EPIC-Norfolk		LOLIPOP - replication	
	Incident T2D	Control	Incident T2D	Control	Incident T2D	Control	Incident T2D	Control	Incident T2D	Control	Incident T2D	Control
<i>n</i>	132	133	255	724	103	206	197	186	563	701	1072	1587
Age, years	50.4±9.2	50.3±9.2	62±6.5	62±6.3	62.7±8.6	62.5±8.3	57.7±9.0	57.3±8.9	61.6±8.1	59.1±9.2	52.6±10.2	49.9±9.8
Men, <i>n</i> (%)	71 (54)	72 (54)	120 (47.1)	344 (47.5)	62 (60)	124 (60)	107 (54)	100 (54)	326 (58)	294 (42)	721 (67.3)	1081 (68.1)
Follow-up time, years ^a	10.5±2.1	9.8±1.8	7.2±3.5	8.9±5.0	7	7	7	7	6.25±2.4	NA	NA	NA
Fasting glucose, mmol/l	NA	NA	5.5±0.9	5.0±0.8	5.9±0.6	5.2±0.4	NA	NA	6.7±3.6	4.4±1.0	5.5±0.6	5.1±0.5
Random glucose, mmol/l	6.0±1.0	5.0±0.7	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
HbA _{1c} , mmol/mol ^b	NA	NA	38.5	35.8	NA	NA	NA	NA	47.4	36.2	39.9	34.4
HbA _{1c} , %	NA	NA	5.67±0.37	5.43±0.38	NA	NA	NA	NA	6.49±1.30	5.46±0.33	5.80±0.50	5.30±0.90
BMI, kg/m ²	28.4±4	25.5±3.7	29.3±4.5	26.6±4.1	30.4±4.4	28.1±4.4	31.0±4.6	27.5±4.1	29.2±4.5	25.6±3.6	28.9±4.6	26.7±3.9
Current smoking, <i>n</i> (%)	48 (36.4)	39 (29.3)	42 (16.4)	153 (21.1)	10 (10)	21 (10)	49 (25)	28 (15)	82 (14.6)	104 (14.8)	101 (9.4)	134 (8.4)
HDL-cholesterol, mmol/l	1.14±0.3	1.32±0.4	1.26±0.3	1.39±0.4	NA	NA	1.21±0.34	1.43±0.43	1.21±0.37	1.50±0.46	1.2±0.3	1.3±0.3
SBP, mmHg	132±18	124±17	142±19	139±20	NA	NA	140±20	134±20	144±18	135±19	134.6±19.1	129.6±18.6
DBP, mmHg	84±11	78±9	85±9	83±10	NA	NA	84±12	82±11	87±13	83±11	82.9±11.1	81.1±10.4

Data are shown as mean ± SD or *n* (%)^a Follow-up time exactly 7 years in KORAI and KORA2^b HbA_{1c} calculated based on equation: $(10.93 \times \text{HbA}_{1c} \text{ in } \%) - 23.5$

DBP, diastolic BP; NA, data not available; SBP, systolic BP; T2D: type 2 diabetes

Erkrankungen in der älteren Bevölkerung) [14] and KORA (Cooperative Health Research in the Region Augsburg) [15] cohort studies from Germany and the EPIC (European Prospective Investigation into Cancer) Norfolk [16] study from the UK. We conducted a meta-analysis using DNA methylation data from EWASs obtained from blood samples collected 7–10 years prior to type 2 diabetes diagnosis. A total of 1250 cases and 1950 controls were included in this meta-analysis. Furthermore, the significant DMS obtained from the meta-analysis were tested for replication in a longitudinal cohort of Indian Asians (The London Life Sciences Prospective Population Study [LOLIPOP]) to evaluate the robustness of the associations observed [8].

Methods

Participating cohorts In the EWAS meta-analysis we included five European cohorts (one from the Netherlands, three from Germany and one from the UK). The cohorts involved were the Doetinchem Cohort Study [13], ESTHER [14], KORA [15] and EPIC-Norfolk [16]. Two independent subcohorts from the KORA cohort were selected for EWAS analyses, designated as KORA1 (including KORA F4 and FF4 studies) and KORA2 (including KORA S3 and S4 studies). In total, five independent EWASs for incident type 2 diabetes were performed. Replication was performed in a cohort study of Indian Asians (LOLIPOP) from London, UK [8]. A general description of the cohort and characteristics of the individuals included in the current study are presented in Tables 1 and 2 (see electronic supplementary material [ESM] Methods for further details). All participants provided informed consent and the studies were approved by ethics committees.

Type 2 diabetes diagnosis The EWAS in Doetinchem, ESTHER, KORA1, KORA2 and LOLIPOP were performed as nested case–control studies of incident type 2 diabetes, with controls matched on age, sex and measurement round. In EPIC-Norfolk, EWAS was performed as a nested case-cohort study with random selection of non-cases. In all cohorts, participants with prevalent type 2 diabetes at baseline were excluded (Table 1). Definitions of incident type 2 diabetes cases and controls varied between cohorts (Table 1). Further details are listed in Table 1 and ESM Methods (Phenotype and covariates).

Methylation measurements and quality control DNA extracted from whole blood was bisulphite converted and hybridised to Illumina Infinium Methylation arrays (either the 450K array [KORA, ESTHER, EPIC-Norfolk, LOLIPOP] or the EPIC array [Doetinchem]). Quality control and normalisation of methylation data was conducted by each cohort separately

using their own pipeline; details for each cohort are given in ESM Methods.

Cohort-specific statistical analysis For each cohort, we independently ran EWAS models according to the same standardised analysis plan (ESM Methods), using robust linear regression models. Normalised β values for methylation intensity at each individual CpG site were modelled as the dependent variable and incident type 2 diabetes as a binary predictor variable. Additional covariates included age, sex, estimated cell types using the Houseman algorithm [17] and batches (model 1). Additionally, we adjusted the model for baseline BMI (model 2). In sensitivity analyses, both model 1 (model 1.1) and model 2 (model 2.1) were additionally adjusted for smoking (three categories: current; never; ever smoker) and follow-up time (years between sample collection for DNA methylation measurements and diagnosis of type 2 diabetes [equivalent year for matched controls]). For additional models we calculated percentile reduction/attenuation of effect sizes compared with model 1.

Meta-analysis and replication Inverse-variance fixed-effects meta-analyses of cohort-level individual CpG EWAS estimates were performed using METAL [18]. We corrected for multiple testing by applying a stringent genome-wide significant p value $< 1.1 \times 10^{-7}$ (i.e. 0.05/450k). Potential heterogeneity between studies was quantified using the I^2 measure (the percentage of variance explained by study heterogeneity) and CpG sites with $I^2 > 60\%$ and heterogeneity p value < 0.05 were highlighted. We also highlighted all significant DMS listed as polymorphic or cross-hybridising CpG sites [19]. For polymorphic CpG sites, we used Hartigan's dip test to evaluate the possible binomial distribution of DNA methylation levels in methylation data of the Doetinchem cohort [20]. We used the HumanMethylation450 v1.2 Manifest File (https://support.illumina.com/downloads/infinium_humanmethylation450_product_files.html) and the R package 'FDb.InfiniumMethylation.hg19' version 2.2.0 (<https://bioconductor.org/packages/FDb.InfiniumMethylation.hg19/>) to annotate to the nearest gene for each CpG. Furthermore, we checked for overlap between our significant DMS and previously published EWAS results related to blood-based incident and prevalent type 2 diabetes, blood lipids, BMI and BP [8, 11, 12, 21–30]. All genome-wide significant CpG sites associated with incident type 2 diabetes were used for replication in an independent cohort of Indian Asians (LOLIPOP). CpGs were considered replicated if they had directionally consistent effects and a p value < 0.05 (nominal significance). Furthermore, we checked the correlation of effect sizes between discovery and replication stages. To test the predictive ability of the 76 markers for incident type 2 diabetes as an outcome, a methylation risk score (MRS) was calculated based on the summation of the 76 CpGs weighted

Table 3 The 76 genome-wide significant DMS for incident type 2 diabetes from meta-analysis based on five European discovery cohorts

Illumina ID	Nearest gene	CHR	Position	Gene position	Relation to CpG island	Effect size	SE	<i>p</i> value	FDR	Direction across studies ^a	Heterogeneity <i>I</i> ²	Heterogeneity <i>p</i> value	GWAS catalog reported metabolic traits	Correlation with gene expression in blood (FDR)
cg19693031	<i>TXNP</i>	1	145441552	3'UTR		-0.0198	0.0020	4.4×10 ⁻²⁴	1.6×10 ⁻¹⁸	-----	89.2	1.8×10 ⁻⁷		9.3×10 ⁻⁶
cg06500161	<i>ABCG1</i>	21	43656587	Body	S_Shore	0.0111	0.0011	6.8×10 ⁻²⁴	1.6×10 ⁻¹⁸	+++++	68	0.01		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg11024682 ^b	<i>SREBF1</i>	17	17730094	Body	S_Shelf	0.0094	0.0011	4.8×10 ⁻¹⁷	7.6×10 ⁻¹²	+++++	46	0.12		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg00574958	<i>CPT1A</i>	11	68607622	5'UTR	N_Shore	-0.0053	0.0007	1.4×10 ⁻¹⁴	1.7×10 ⁻⁹	-----	76.3	0.002	Lipid metabolism phenotypes Lipid traits (pleiotropy) (HFO component 1)	<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg05778424	<i>AKAP1</i>	17	55169508	5'UTR	S_Shore	0.0080	0.0011	4.4×10 ⁻¹³	4.2×10 ⁻⁸	+++++	60.9	0.04		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg14476101	<i>PHGDH</i>	1	120255992	Body	S_Shore	-0.0151	0.0022	1.1×10 ⁻¹¹	8.1×10 ⁻⁷	-----	49.6	0.09	Metabolic traits Total cholesterol levels LDL-cholesterol	<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg04816311	<i>C7orf50</i>	7	1066650	Body	N_Shore	0.0118	0.0017	1.2×10 ⁻¹¹	8.1×10 ⁻⁷	+++++	70.8	0.01		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg07504977 ^c	<i>OLMALINC</i>	10	102131012		N_Shelf	0.0114	0.0017	2.1×10 ⁻¹¹	1.2×10 ⁻⁶	+++++	0	0.60		0.02
cg19750657 ^c	<i>UFMI</i>	13	38935967	3'UTR	N_Shelf	0.0096	0.0015	5.4×10 ⁻¹¹	2.7×10 ⁻⁶	+++++	0	0.54		0.02
cg06378491 ^c	<i>MAP4K2</i>	11	64564012	Body	N_Shelf	0.0047	0.0007	5.8×10 ⁻¹¹	2.7×10 ⁻⁶	+++++	46.8	0.11		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg14020176 ^b	<i>SLC9A3R1</i>	17	72764985	3'UTR	N_Shelf	0.0087	0.0013	7.0×10 ⁻¹¹	3.0×10 ⁻⁶	+?++++	34.9	0.20		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg06397161	<i>SYNGRI</i>	22	39760059	Body	N_Shelf	0.0095	0.0015	7.8×10 ⁻¹¹	3.1×10 ⁻⁶	?+++++	54.1	0.09		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg06940720 ^c	<i>LPCA7I</i>	5	1526929	Body	N_Shelf	0.0072	0.0011	8.8×10 ⁻¹¹	3.2×10 ⁻⁶	+++++	0	0.64		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg02711608 ^b	<i>SLCIA5</i>	19	47287964	1st Exon	N_Shelf	-0.0094	0.0015	1.2×10 ⁻¹⁰	4.1×10 ⁻⁶	?+---	13.8	0.31		0.02
cg06192883 ^c	<i>MYO5C</i>	15	52554171	Body	N_Shelf	0.0085	0.0013	1.3×10 ⁻¹⁰	4.2×10 ⁻⁶	+++++	77	0.002		0.02
cg09664445 ^c	<i>CLUH</i>	17	2612406	5'UTR	N_Shore	0.0059	0.0009	1.6×10 ⁻¹⁰	4.9×10 ⁻⁶	+++++	0	0.41		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg14870271 ^{nc}	<i>LGALS3BP</i>	17	76976010	1st Exon	N_Shelf	0.0084	0.0013	2.0×10 ⁻¹⁰	5.7×10 ⁻⁶	+++++	51.7	0.08		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg18568872 ^c	<i>ZNF710</i>	15	90606494	5'UTR	N_Shelf	0.0060	0.0009	2.4×10 ⁻¹⁰	6.2×10 ⁻⁶	+++++	0	0.60		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg12257439 ^c	<i>FER1L5</i>	2	97360893	Body	N_Shelf	0.0055	0.0009	2.8×10 ⁻¹⁰	7.1×10 ⁻⁶	+++++	22.2	0.27		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg11269166 ^c	<i>METTL8</i>	2	172203847	Body	N_Shelf	0.0068	0.0011	3.1×10 ⁻¹⁰	7.4×10 ⁻⁶	+++++	79.7	0.001		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg14956201 ^c	<i>TRIO</i>	5	14358153	Body	N_Shelf	0.0082	0.0013	4.0×10 ⁻¹⁰	8.8×10 ⁻⁶	+++++	0	0.56		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg17540192 ^c	<i>TECPRI</i>	7	97875259	Body	N_Shelf	0.0051	0.0008	4.1×10 ⁻¹⁰	8.8×10 ⁻⁶	+++++	72.9	0.01		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg27243685 ^c	<i>ABCG1</i>	21	43642366	Body	S_Shelf	0.0060	0.0010	5.4×10 ⁻¹⁰	1.1×10 ⁻⁵	+++++	0	0.89		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg11202345 ^c	<i>LGALS3BP</i>	17	76976057	1st Exon	N_Shelf	0.0078	0.0013	8.4×10 ⁻¹⁰	1.7×10 ⁻⁵	+++++	0	0.41		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg15020801 ^c	<i>PNPO</i>	17	46022809	Body	N_Shelf	0.0073	0.0012	1.0×10 ⁻⁹	2.0×10 ⁻⁵	+++++	43.6	0.13	Diastolic BP	0.002
cg21480264 ^c	<i>POLN</i>	4	2137264	Body	N_Shelf	0.0059	0.0010	1.2×10 ⁻⁹	2.1×10 ⁻⁵	+++++	0	0.82		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg08788930 ^c	<i>DENDN3</i>	8	142201685	Body	N_Shelf	0.0074	0.0012	1.7×10 ⁻⁹	3.0×10 ⁻⁵	+++++	26.5	0.24		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg25217710 ^c	<i>BCAN</i>	1	156609523	Body	N_Shelf	0.0054	0.0009	1.8×10 ⁻⁹	3.1×10 ⁻⁵	+++++	56.9	0.05	Cholesteryl ester levels	3.0×10 ⁻⁴
cg22650271 ^c	<i>SYNGRI</i>	22	39760165	Body	N_Shelf	0.0056	0.0010	3.2×10 ⁻⁹	5.2×10 ⁻⁵	+++++	69.9	0.01		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg10639435 ^{bc}	<i>ZNF250</i>	8	146104221	3'UTR	N_Shelf	0.0080	0.0014	3.9×10 ⁻⁹	6.0×10 ⁻⁵	+++++	0	0.92		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg01101459 ^c	<i>LINC01132</i>	1	234871477		N_Shelf	0.0070	0.0012	4.0×10 ⁻⁹	6.0×10 ⁻⁵	+++++	75.4	0.003	LDL-cholesterol, LDL-cholesterol levels, Total cholesterol levels	<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg03691549 ^c	<i>LOC283333</i>	12	53443911	5'UTR	S_Shelf	0.0059	0.0010	4.2×10 ⁻⁹	6.3×10 ⁻⁵	+++++	0	0.58		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg26262157 ^c	<i>PFKFB3</i>	10	6214079	Body	S_Shelf	-0.0084	0.0014	4.4×10 ⁻⁹	6.4×10 ⁻⁵	-----	61.2	0.04	Latent autoimmune diabetes	<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg04927537 ^c	<i>LGALS3BP</i>	17	76976091	TSS200	S_Shelf	0.0107	0.0018	5.2×10 ⁻⁹	7.3×10 ⁻⁵	+++++	0	0.51		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg08994060	<i>PFKFB3</i>	10	6214026	Body	S_Shelf	-0.0101	0.0017	5.4×10 ⁻⁹	7.4×10 ⁻⁵	-----	63.7	0.03	Latent autoimmune diabetes	<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg13059136 ^c	<i>NAPIL4</i>	11	2986541	TSS1500	S_Shelf	0.0080	0.0014	6.5×10 ⁻⁹	8.5×10 ⁻⁵	+++++	64.8	0.02	T2D HDL-cholesterol levels	4.7×10 ⁻⁴
cg21234053 ^{bc}	<i>CFL2</i>	14	35163420		N_Shelf	0.0150	0.0026	6.7×10 ⁻⁹	8.5×10 ⁻⁵	?+?++	51.7	0.13		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg08309687	<i>LINC00649</i>	21	35320596		N_Shelf	-0.0112	0.0019	7.9×10 ⁻⁹	9.9×10 ⁻⁵	-----	42.8	0.14		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg02879453 ^{bc}	<i>ADCY7</i>	16	50321818	TSS200	N_Shelf	0.0080	0.0014	9.8×10 ⁻⁹	1.2×10 ⁻⁴	+++++	48.3	0.10		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg24259291 ^c	<i>ZNFXY1</i>	20	47874072	Body	N_Shelf	0.0046	0.0008	1.0×10 ⁻⁸	1.2×10 ⁻⁴	+++++	0	0.49		<1×10 ⁻⁷

Table 3 (continued)

Illumina ID	Nearest gene	CHR	Position	Gene position	Relation to CpG island	Effect size	SE	p value	FDR	Direction across studies ^a	Heterogeneity I ²	Heterogeneity p value	GWAS catalog reported metabolic traits	Correlation with gene expression in blood (FDR)
cg26846781 ^{b,c}	KCNH6	17	61620942	Body		0.0045	0.0008	1.1×10 ⁻⁸	1.3×10 ⁻⁴	++++	49.8	0.09		
cg16097041 ^c	FLAD1	1	154965544	3'UTR		0.0061	0.0011	1.2×10 ⁻⁸	1.3×10 ⁻⁴	++++	0	0.51		
cg01373896 ^c	KLF16	19	1854724	Body	Island	0.0062	0.0011	1.2×10 ⁻⁸	1.3×10 ⁻⁴	++++	48.9	0.10	BMI	
cg19169154 ^c	MFAP4	17	19287978	Body		0.0049	0.0009	1.2×10 ⁻⁸	1.3×10 ⁻⁴	++++	66.2	0.02		
cg13300580 ^c	SLC9A1	1	27440539	Body		0.0047	0.0008	1.3×10 ⁻⁸	1.4×10 ⁻⁴	++++	70.2	0.01		
cg23021329 ^c	TLR9	3	52256186	Body	S_Shore	0.0051	0.0009	1.4×10 ⁻⁸	1.4×10 ⁻⁴	++++	34.4	0.19		
cg25001190 ^c	NFA	1	61668835	Body		-0.0100	0.0018	1.4×10 ⁻⁸	1.4×10 ⁻⁴	----	0	0.80	HDL-cholesterol levels	
cg02050917 ^c	SKI	1	2173571	Body		0.0069	0.0012	1.5×10 ⁻⁸	1.5×10 ⁻⁴	++++	55.1	0.06	Systolic BP	
cg07719604 ^c	E2F4	16	67232460	TSS1500	N_Shore	0.0074	0.0013	1.9×10 ⁻⁸	1.8×10 ⁻⁴	++++	0	0.45	HDL-cholesterol	
cg26663590 ^c	NFATC2IP	16	28959310	TSS1500	S_Shore	0.0083	0.0015	1.9×10 ⁻⁸	1.8×10 ⁻⁴	++++	63.2	0.03	BMI	<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg17836612 ^c	LGALS3BP	17	76976357	TSS1500		0.0063	0.0011	1.9×10 ⁻⁸	1.8×10 ⁻⁴	++++	10.3	0.35		
cg20507228 ^{b,c}	MAN2A2	15	91460071	Body	N_Shore	0.0126	0.0022	2.0×10 ⁻⁸	1.8×10 ⁻⁴	+?+++	0	0.78		
cg04682775 ^c	SLC6A9	1	44495089	5'UTR		0.0065	0.0012	2.3×10 ⁻⁸	2.0×10 ⁻⁴	++++	0	0.44		
cg24145109 ^{b,c}	MIR4689	1	5806951	Body		0.0152	0.0027	2.4×10 ⁻⁸	2.1×10 ⁻⁴	++++	0	0.42		
cg10192877 ^c	ABCG1	21	43641690	Body	S_Shore	0.0038	0.0007	2.6×10 ⁻⁸	2.2×10 ⁻⁴	++++	55.1	0.06		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg21703988 ^c	EP400	12	132549404	Body		0.0050	0.0009	2.6×10 ⁻⁸	2.2×10 ⁻⁴	++++	6.6	0.37		
cg17901584 ^c	DHCR24	1	55353706	TSS1500	S_Shore	-0.0093	0.0017	2.9×10 ⁻⁸	2.4×10 ⁻⁴	----	15.7	0.31		
cg25178683 ^c	LGALS3BP	17	76976267	TSS1500		0.0084	0.0015	3.4×10 ⁻⁸	2.8×10 ⁻⁴	++++	0	0.42		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg25130381	SLC9A1	1	27440721	Body		0.0056	0.0010	3.6×10 ⁻⁸	2.9×10 ⁻⁴	++++	50.5	0.09		
cg25649826 ^c	USP22	17	20938740	Body		0.0058	0.0011	4.1×10 ⁻⁸	3.2×10 ⁻⁴	++++	16.8	0.31		
cg20212624 ^c	CNP	17	40123227	Body	S_Shelf	0.0067	0.0012	4.8×10 ⁻⁸	3.7×10 ⁻⁴	++++	0	0.93		
cg07567724 ^c	GATAD2B	1	15377721	3'UTR		0.0076	0.0014	5.0×10 ⁻⁸	3.8×10 ⁻⁴	++++	0	0.75		
cg16861241 ^c	RNF157-AS1	17	74138396	TSS1500	S_Shore	0.0052	0.0010	5.2×10 ⁻⁸	3.9×10 ⁻⁴	++++	0	0.82		
cg03819286 ^c	MGRN1	16	4673974	TSS1500	N_Shore	0.0060	0.0011	5.3×10 ⁻⁸	3.9×10 ⁻⁴	++++	67.1	0.02		
cg02079413 ^c	NAP1L4	11	2986505	TSS1500		0.0073	0.0014	5.4×10 ⁻⁸	3.9×10 ⁻⁴	++++	0	0.46	T2D	
cg23722778 ^c	ENPP4	6	46112967	3'UTR		-0.0086	0.0016	6.9×10 ⁻⁸	5.0×10 ⁻⁴	-?-?	0	0.60	HDL-cholesterol levels	<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg11800635 ^{b,c}	DOK1	2	74783088	Body	S_Shore	0.0088	0.0016	7.1×10 ⁻⁸	5.0×10 ⁻⁴	+?+++	0	0.98		<1×10 ⁻⁷
cg25316512 ^c	ENO2	12	7032991	TSS1500	N_Shelf	0.0045	0.0008	7.3×10 ⁻⁸	5.1×10 ⁻⁴	++++	0	0.42		6.16×10 ⁻⁵
cg09294084 ^c	MCF2L	13	113646732	Body		0.0107	0.0020	7.6×10 ⁻⁸	5.3×10 ⁻⁴	++++	0	0.68	Systolic BP	
cg20784591 ^c	PILRA	7	99972461	Body		0.0041	0.0008	8.2×10 ⁻⁸	5.5×10 ⁻⁴	++++	73.3	0.005		
cg03497652 ^c	ANKK3	16	4751569	Body		0.0085	0.0016	8.3×10 ⁻⁸	5.6×10 ⁻⁴	++++	51.7	0.08	HDL-cholesterol levels	0.02
cg24678869 ^c	DEVND4B	1	153919638	TSS1500	S_Shore	0.0042	0.0008	8.6×10 ⁻⁸	5.6×10 ⁻⁴	++++	71.4	0.01		
cg1232877 ^c	ASPSCR1	17	79963213	Body	S_Shore	0.0115	0.0022	8.7×10 ⁻⁸	5.6×10 ⁻⁴	++++	66.6	0.02	Waist/hip ratio	
cg09072148 ^{b,c}	NRXN2	11	64491639	TSS1500	S_Shore	0.0036	0.0007	8.7×10 ⁻⁸	5.6×10 ⁻⁴	++++	24.9	0.26	BMI	
cg14524754 ^{b,c}	B3GNTL1	17	80925103	Body	N_Shelf	0.0069	0.0013	9.1×10 ⁻⁸	5.8×10 ⁻⁴	++++	0	0.81		
cg17194270 ^c	SYNGR1	22	39759992	Body		0.0092	0.0017	1.0×10 ⁻⁷	0.0006	++++	0	0.58	Cholesteryl ester levels	0.01

^a Order of the studies: Doetinchem, ESTHER, KORAI, KOR2, EPIC-Norfolk

^b Polymorphic or non-specific probe

^c Novel findings

CHR, chromosome; T2D, type 2 diabetes

by the effect sizes from an alternative model of the EPIC-Norfolk dataset [12], which used incident type 2 diabetes as the dependent variable (β values represented the OR per 1% methylation change). Then, receiver operating characteristic curve analyses were performed to provide estimates for AUC in the independent LOLIPOP cohort. We tested models predicting incident type 2 diabetes by the MRS only (model M1), by established phenotypic risk factors only, including age, sex, BMI and HbA_{1c} (model M2) and combining both (model M3). We additionally adjusted models M1, M2 and M3 for cell type distributions (models M4, M5, M6, respectively). To investigate the predictive capacity of CpG sites not reaching genome-wide significance (i.e. $p > 1 \times 10^{-7}$), we compared AUC values from MRSs based on four increasingly lenient p value thresholds ($p < 1 \times 10^{-7}$, $p < 1 \times 10^{-6}$, $p < 1 \times 10^{-5}$ and $p < 1 \times 10^{-4}$) with increasing numbers of CpG sites. We performed those analyses in the European-ancestry Doetinchem cohort based on results from leave-one-cohort-out EWAS meta-analysis (see ESM Methods for details).

Gene set enrichment analysis, transcription factor analysis and association with gene expression Using the full genome-wide results of model 1 from the meta-analysis, we performed gene set enrichment analysis with the methylGSA R package to relate CpG sites to their biological function [31]. We included Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes

(KEGG) and Reactome pathways as well as Gene Ontology (GO) terms available in the package. We corrected for multiple testing using false discovery rate (FDR) $< 5\%$ [32].

Next, we focused on the 76 genome-wide significant DMS and performed a transcription factor (TF) enrichment analysis using the web-based ChIP-X Enrichment Analysis 3 (ChEA3) tool [33]. The enriched TFs were ranked based on Fisher's exact test (p value < 0.01).

To additionally look-up previously reported associations of phenotypes/diseases with genetic variants located in or near associated CpG sites, we submitted a list of gene names nearest to the 76 DMS from our EWAS meta-analysis to the NHGRI-EBI GWAS Catalog (<https://www.ebi.ac.uk/gwas/>, accessed 25 May 2020). Similarly, we queried the list of 76 DMS in the EWAS catalog (<http://www.ewascatalog.org/>, accessed 15 February 2021). We highlighted associations related to metabolic traits, lipid traits, BP and obesity.

Furthermore, we investigated the association between our 76 genome-wide significant DMS, gene expression levels in blood and SNPs using publicly available expression quantitative trait methylation (eQTM) results from the BIOS consortium (<https://www.genenetwork.nl/biosqtlbrowser/>, accessed 9 July 2020) and methylation quantitative trait loci (meQTL) from GoDMC (<http://mqtl.db.godmc.org.uk/>, accessed 20 July 2021).

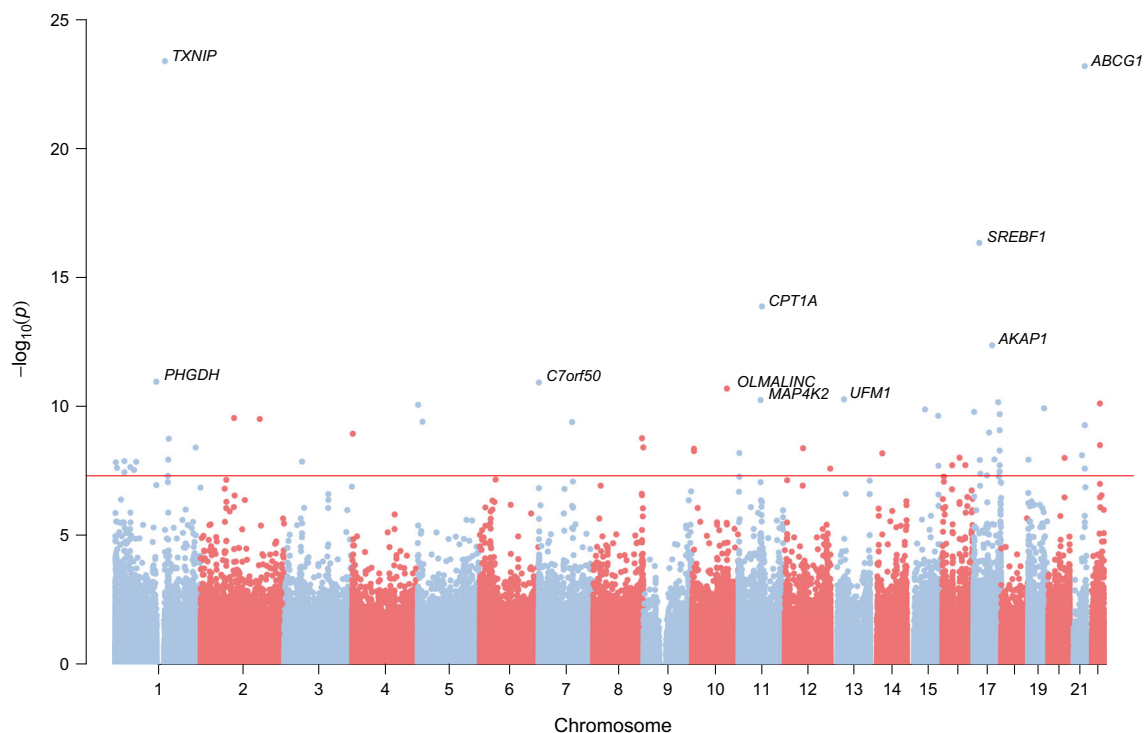


Fig. 1 Manhattan plot showing 76 genome-wide significant CpG sites (above red line, $p < 1.1 \times 10^{-7}$) associated with incident type 2 diabetes in five European cohorts ($N = 1250$ cases/1950 controls). Gene annotations

for the ten most significant CpG sites are indicated in the plot; y-axis shows negative log of associated p value

Results

Characteristics of the meta-analysis cohorts Baseline characteristics of the cohorts participating in the discovery meta-analysis and replication are presented in Table 2. The mean age at baseline ranged from 50.3 to 62.7 years across cohorts, and the proportion of men ranged from 42% to 68.1% for both incident type 2 diabetes cases and controls. The mean follow-up time between DNA methylation measurements in blood and type 2 diabetes diagnosis ranged from 6.25 to 10.5 years across cohorts. Already at baseline, we observed a higher mean BMI in incident type 2 diabetes cases compared with controls in all cohorts. Similarly, baseline indicators of hyperglycaemia (i.e. fasting glucose and/or HbA_{1c}) were higher in incident type 2 diabetes cases compared with controls in ESTHER, KORA1, EPIC-Norfolk and LOLIPOP. We observed differences in smoking status between incident type 2 diabetes cases across cohorts, with the proportion of current smokers ranging from 9.4% in LOLIPOP to 36.4% in the Doetinchem cohort (Table 2).

Meta-analysis results of discovery Combining the results of the five discovery EWAS, we identified 76 genome-wide significant DMS using model 1 ($\lambda = 1.189$; QQ plots per cohort and for the whole meta-analysis for all models are presented in ESM Fig. 1). Of these, 63 DMS have not been previously reported to be associated with incident type 2 diabetes. The 76 DMS were annotated to 65 genes. Some of these genes had multiple CpG sites annotated to them: *LGALS3BP* (5); *ABCG1* (3); *SYNGR1* (3); *SLC9A1* (2); *PFKFB3* (2); and *NAP1L4* (2) (Table 3). The results are summarised in a Manhattan plot (Fig. 1), showing the distribution of CpG sites across the genome. Based on principal component analysis (PCA) performed in the Doetinchem dataset, 32 out of the 76 CpG sites were considered independent signals (90% of variance explained). CpG site cg11800635 was listed as a probe with potential cross-hybridisation and 11 CpG sites were listed as polymorphic CpGs (Table 3). However, for eight out of those 11 CpG sites available in the Doetinchem dataset, we found no evidence of binomial methylation distributions, suggesting lack of confounding by the underlying SNP (dip-test p values 0.5–0.99). Of the 76 DMS identified, 20 DMS (26%) showed $I^2 > 60\%$ suggesting considerable heterogeneity between studies ($p < 0.05$; Table 3); for each of these 20 CpG sites, we made forest plots (ESM Fig. 2). Despite high, statistically significant heterogeneity estimates, only one site showed a difference in the direction of the association between cohorts (cg19169154 in KORA1; $I^2 = 66.2\%$). Also, KORA1 showed large differences in effect size for cg19693031 ($I^2 = 89.2\%$) and cg11269166 ($I^2 = 79.7\%$). For some sites, two clusters of

cohorts with similar effect sizes seemed to be present (e.g. cg24678869 [$I^2 = 71.4\%$]). Otherwise, despite the high heterogeneity estimates, effect estimates were broadly consistent between cohorts.

As a sensitivity analysis, we evaluated the impact of smoking and follow-up time from sample collection until type 2 diabetes diagnosis. With this additional adjustment (model 1.1) there was a reduction in the number of significant DMS from 76 to 47 (ESM Table 1; follow-up time not available for EPIC-Norfolk non-cases and LOLIPOP). Adjustment for baseline BMI (model 2) and for BMI, smoking and follow-up time (model 2.1) revealed that the number of significant DMS associated with incident type 2 diabetes decreased from 76 to 4 and 3, respectively (still including the two top CpG sites at the *TXNIP* and *ABCG1* genes; ESM Tables 2 and 3). The attenuation of effect sizes across all models per CpG site is presented in ESM Table 4. Mean attenuation for all 76 CpG sites was 3% in model 1.1, while in models 2 and 2.1 the mean attenuation of effects was 22% and 26%, respectively. The correlation of effect sizes between models for all 76 DMS was very high and varied between 0.98 and 0.99 (ESM Fig. 3).

Comparison with previous EWASs of incident and prevalent type 2 diabetes, lipids, BMI and BP Previously, 13 of the 76 DMS had been reported to be associated with incident type 2 diabetes [8, 12] and nine with prevalent type 2 diabetes [11, 24], all with consistent directions of effect (ESM Table 5). Furthermore, 33 of the 76 DMS (43%) overlapped with BMI EWAS results [21, 27–30], with consistent direction of the effects, and 12 DMS (16%) overlapped with blood lipid EWAS results, including triacylglycerols, total cholesterol, LDL-cholesterol and HDL-cholesterol [25, 26]. Additionally, five DMS (7%) had previously been reported in EWASs on BP [22, 23] (ESM Table 5).

Replication Out of the 76 genome-wide significant DMS, 64 (84.2%) showed significant, directionally consistent association with incident type 2 diabetes in Indian Asians in model 1 ($p < 0.05$; ESM Table 6). Using models 1.1, 2 and 2.1, 40 out of 47 (85%), three out of four (75%) and two out of three (67%) DMS, respectively, were replicated in the LOLIPOP cohort (ESM Tables 1–3). Although we observed a substantial attenuation of effect sizes of 47% in our replication (ESM Table 4), the correlation of effect sizes between discovery and replication stages was high ($r = 0.91$; ESM Fig. 3). Next, we combined the effects from the discovery and replication cohorts for the 76 DMS in a meta-analysis. In model 1, 63 DMS showed genome-wide significant associations with incident type 2 diabetes ($p < 1.1 \times 10^{-7}$), whereas in models 1.1, 2 and 2.1 the number of genome-wide significant DMS increased, respectively, from 47, 4 and 3 in discovery only to 59, 18 and 10 in discovery and replication combined (ESM Table 6). Despite the high replication rate of 84.2%,

we did observe considerable heterogeneity between discovery and replication, greater than that seen between discovery cohorts alone (in model 1, 53% of DMS showed significant [$p < 0.05$] heterogeneity in combined analysis compared with 26% in discovery cohorts only).

The MRS based on 76 CpG sites showed limited predictive ability for incident type 2 diabetes (model M1, AUC = 0.591) in the LOLIPOP cohort (ESM Fig. 4). Moreover, the addition of the MRS to a prediction model including established predictors of type 2 diabetes (age, sex, BMI and HbA_{1c}) showed no improvement (model M2, AUC = 0.753 vs model M3, AUC = 0.757). Additional adjustment for cell type distributions in these models did not change these conclusions (models M4, M5, M6). In the Doetinchem cohort we observed a slight improvement in AUC after adding an MRS based on genome-wide significant CpG sites (model M1 [age, sex, BMI, cell types, batch], AUC = 0.735; model M2 [age, sex, BMI, cell types, batch and MRS], AUC = 0.755; ESM Fig. 5). However, adding additional CpG sites based on less-stringent p value thresholds did not improve the AUC, indicating the limited predictive capacity of CpG sites that did not achieve genome-wide significance in the current meta-analysis (ESM Fig. 6).

Gene set enrichment analysis and associations with gene expression and SNPs The results of gene set enrichment analyses based on genome-wide DNA methylation results from model 1 are presented in ESM Tables 7–9. The insulin signaling pathway was enriched in KEGG analysis, although the association did not survive the FDR correction (FDR = 0.12). Furthermore, fatty acid and lipid homeostasis appear to be perturbed in future type 2 diabetes cases, since pathways such as phospholipid metabolism and metabolism of steroids were found to be enriched (Reactome analysis, FDR = 0.04; GO terms, FDR < 0.05). As a sensitivity analysis we repeated the gene set enrichment analyses on the fully adjusted model 2.1 (adjusted for BMI, smoking and follow-up time). As expected, similar pathways came up; however, the FDR significance level was not reached due to the higher p values of individual CpG sites from model 2 (ESM Tables 7–9).

Analysis of enrichment of TFs for the 65 annotated gene names out of 76 DMS, using the ChEA3 online tool, resulted in 48 TFs ($p < 0.01$; ESM Table 10).

Further, we queried the list of 65 annotated gene names in the GWAS catalog to find previously reported associations of phenotypes/diseases with genetic variants at those loci. Seventeen out of 65 (26%) genes harboured genetic variant associations with at least one metabolic trait or disease, such as lipid traits, BP and obesity (Table 3; ESM Table 11).

Next, we queried the list of 76 genome-wide significant CpG sites in the EWAS catalog to find previously reported associations with phenotypes/diseases. Fifty-three out of 76 (70%) CpG sites were identified in EWAS studies of at least

one metabolic trait and 24 (31.6%) CpG sites were previously reported to be associated with smoking (ESM Table 12).

We investigated whether DNA methylation levels of the 76 CpG sites were significantly associated with gene expression levels in blood. Of the 76 DMS identified, 21 CpG sites (28%) were associated with expression levels of 23 genes, including top signals at genes such as *TXNIP*, *ABCG1*, *SREBF1* and *CPT1A* (Table 3; ESM Table 13). Additionally, we performed a look-up of known meQTL. Of the 76 DMS, DNA methylation at 59 CpG sites (78%) showed significant association with at least one SNP and, in total, 14,813 *cis* associations were found with 13,121 SNPs ($p < 5 \times 10^{-8}$). Of these, 80 mQTL were identified after clumping (ESM Table 14).

Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first meta-analysis of methylation markers for incident type 2 diabetes. Previous studies have investigated the association between DNA methylation and incident type 2 diabetes in single cohorts [8, 12]. By combining DNA methylation data from five EWASs from European cohorts we successfully increased the power of the study and identified 76 DMS that were associated with incident type 2 diabetes.

Type 2 diabetes is a complex disease that exhibits metabolic changes many years prior to clinical disease onset. Using a prospective study design, we identified multiple changes in DNA methylation levels preceding the onset of type 2 diabetes. After adjustment for baseline BMI, we observed a large attenuation of significant CpG sites in the discovery phase. The EPIC-Norfolk study also investigated the effects of baseline BMI on their EWAS results and detected a similar reduction in the number of significant DMS [12]. However, a modest mean attenuation of effect sizes after BMI adjustment of 22% and the strong correlation of adjusted effect sizes with those of the primary discovery model ($r = 0.983$) suggested a smaller effect of BMI than might have been expected based only on the large reduction in number of genome-wide significant signals (reduction of 95%). Findings from a recent large EWAS focusing on BMI suggest that changes in DNA methylation profiles are a consequence of adiposity rather than a cause [27]. A look-up in the EWAS catalog revealed that 24 of our 76 top CpG sites were previously reported to be associated with smoking. This result is in line with the observed reduction in the number of significant DMS from 76 to 47 after adjustment for smoking (and follow-up time) and highlights the relevance of smoking, which not only impacts methylation but has also been reported as a risk factor for type 2 diabetes [34]. Our results show the importance of confounders such as smoking and BMI in the association between DNA methylation and type 2 diabetes. Although after adjustment for BMI effect sizes attenuate by about 20% and most CpGs lose

genome-wide significance, attenuation is modest compared with the large reduction in the number of genome-wide significant signals, offering promise for future meta-analyses of larger size to significantly detect the DNA methylation signals predictive of incident type 2 diabetes that are independent of BMI.

Gene set enrichment and TF analyses performed to obtain better insight into biological mechanisms revealed perturbation of biological processes linked to insulin signalling, and fatty acid and lipid homeostasis. The results from our meta-analysis included CpG sites at genes that are known to be associated with type 2 diabetes, such as *TXNIP*, *ABCG1*, *SREBF1* and *CPT1A*, showing consistency between cross-sectional and longitudinal studies and also between ethnicities [9, 10, 35]. However, these findings are accompanied by 63 CpG sites novel for incident type 2 diabetes annotated to a number of genes that, at least partly, also seem to be relevant for type 2 diabetes. Examples include *OLMALINC*, *UFMI*, *LGALS3BP*, *TRIO* and *CFL2*. *OLMALINC* (oligodendrocyte maturation-associated long intergenic non-coding RNA) is a long intervening non-coding RNA that was recently reported to function as an epigenetic regulator of lipid metabolism [36]. *UFMI* (encoding ubiquitin-fold modifier 1) may play a crucial role in various cellular processes including endothelial reticulum stress-induced apoptosis of pancreatic beta cells [37]. *LGALS3BP* encodes a glycoprotein belonging to the family of galectins, which are presumed to be involved in regulating processes linked to the immune response and inflammation [38–40]. *TRIO* encodes a guanine exchange factor (trio rho guanine nucleotide exchange factor), which is a component of the Rho GTPase nucleotide cycle. Rho GTPases play a crucial role in metabolic homeostasis [41]. *CFL2* has been reported to be involved in actin remodelling required for recruitment of vesicles containing GLUT4 upon insulin stimulation [42]. Thus, this meta-analysis resulted in the identification of additional DNA methylation markers for incident type 2 diabetes. However, we also observed that a large proportion of those CpG sites have previously been identified in BMI, lipid and BP EWASs, suggesting common or related (epi)genetic mechanisms underlying those associations.

We recognise several limitations of the study presented here. First, although all cohorts excluded prevalent cases of type 2 diabetes at baseline based on a number of criteria (Table 1), this was not cross-validated by glycaemic measures in the EPIC-Norfolk and parts of the KORA2 and Doetinchem cohorts. As such we cannot exclude that some incident cases in these cohorts may have had prediabetes or even undiagnosed type 2 diabetes at baseline. However, forest plots of the 20 CpG sites showing considerable heterogeneity between studies failed to reveal consistent differences due to specific cohorts, suggesting that the high heterogeneity was not primarily driven by these cohorts. Second, we focused on whole-blood DNA methylation, which may not fully

represent methylation patterns in other more metabolically relevant tissues such as adipose tissue, liver or muscle. Next, we cannot rule out the possibility of reverse causation, where the DNA methylation changes we identified are a consequence of raised blood glucose levels and adiposity rather than a cause. Gradually rising levels of blood glucose and adiposity in the years prior to clinical diagnosis of type 2 diabetes may elicit compensatory epigenetic changes, reflecting increased levels of metabolic dysregulation. We chose to correct our meta-analysis results for multiple testing using the commonly applied Bonferroni correction; however, we acknowledge that other methods would have yielded other sets of significant CpG sites (e.g. Saffari et al's [43] cut-off of $p < 3.6 \times 10^{-8}$ would have decreased the number of significant CpGs from 76 to 59). Additionally, if we had corrected our replication analysis either for 76 tests (i.e. Bonferroni) or the number of independent signals identified through PCA (i.e. 32), the set of replicated CpG sites would have decreased from 64 to 39 and 46, respectively. Importantly, this meta-analysis of results from multiple cohorts increased the statistical power of associations between DNA methylation and type 2 diabetes compared with previous single-cohort studies.

Taken together, this large meta-analysis of EWASs resulted in the identification of 76 DMS associated with incident type 2 diabetes. The results from the replication analysis in a cohort of Indian Asians suggest that the association between DNA methylation levels and incident type 2 diabetes is independent of ethnicity. Our data also show that BMI partly explains the association between DNA methylation and incident type 2 diabetes. Functional analyses revealed multiple biological pathways involved in fatty acid and lipid metabolism, immune response and inflammation, which partly underlie impaired glucose metabolism. Further studies are required to evaluate the relevance to other tissues and to determine whether these DMS have a causal role in type 2 diabetes development. In addition, a more detailed analysis of their biological function is warranted. Future work could assess correlations between our poly-epigenetic predictor of incident type 2 diabetes and DNA methylation-based predictors of BMI and related traits, including waist/hip ratio and per cent body fat such as those generated by McCartney et al [44]. It would also be interesting to test whether such DNA methylation-based predictors add information in prediction models over and above available phenotypic analogues.

Supplementary Information The online version contains peer-reviewed but unedited supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00125-022-05652-2>.

Acknowledgements We thank the participants of the Doetinchem Cohort Study, as well as the field workers of the Municipal Health Services in Doetinchem (C. te Boekhorst, I. Hengeveld, L. de Klerk, I. Thus, and C. de Rover) for their contribution to the data collection of this study. We also thank M. Stijnenbosch and H. Hodemaekers-Goossens for isolating

and measuring the DNA samples, and we are grateful to H. S. J. Picavet who has coordinated the fieldwork since 2007, P. Vissink for logistic management and A. Blokstra for data management (all from the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment). The authors are grateful to all ESTHER participants and gratefully acknowledge the microarray unit of the Genomics and Proteomics Core Facility of the German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ) for providing the Illumina Human Methylation arrays and related services. The authors are grateful to all KORA participants and thank all members of the KORA study team. The authors are grateful to all of the participants and staff of the EPIC-Norfolk cohort. We thank the participants and research staff who made the LOLIPOP study possible.

Data availability The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Funding The Doetinchem Cohort Study was supported by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport of the Netherlands, the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (grant no. S/132005) and by Biobanking and Biomolecular Resources Research Infrastructure-NL (grant no. CP2011-27). The ESTHER study was supported by the Baden-Württemberg State Ministry of Science, Research and Arts (Stuttgart, Germany), the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Berlin, Germany) and the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (Berlin, Germany). The KORA study was initiated and financed by the Helmholtz Zentrum München – German Research Center for Environmental Health, which is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and by the State of Bavaria. Furthermore, KORA research was financed by a grant from the BMBF to the German Center for Diabetes Research (DZD) and a grant from the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State North Rhine-Westphalia (Düsseldorf, Germany). The diabetes part of the KORA study was partly funded by a grant from Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft to WR (RA 459/3-1). It was also supported within the Munich Center of Health Sciences (MC-Health), Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, as part of LMUinnovativ. EPIC-Norfolk is supported by programme grants from the Medical Research Council (MRC) (G9502233) and Cancer Research UK (C864/A8257). The methylation data in EPIC-Norfolk was supported through the MRC Cambridge Initiative in Metabolomic Science (MR/100002/1). EPIC-Norfolk is also supported by MRC programme awards (MC_UU_12015/1 and MC_UU_12015/2). The LOLIPOP study is supported by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Comprehensive Biomedical Research Centre Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, the NIHR Official Development Assistance (ODA, award 16/136/68), the European Union FP7 (EpiMigrant, 279143) and H2020 programmes (iHealth-T2D, 643774). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health. JC is supported by the Singapore Ministry of Health's National Medical Research Council under its Singapore Translational Research Investigator (STaR) Award (NMRC/STaR/0028/2017).

Authors' relationships and activities The authors declare that there are no relationships or activities that might bias, or be perceived to bias, their work.

Contribution statement EF, AMWS, MLu and HS conceived the research question. EF conducted the analysis, wrote the initial draft of the paper and incorporated co-author comments. AMWS, MLu, JvV-O and HS provided critical feedback on the analysis and revised the manuscript for important intellectual content. JCC, KKO, HG and HB

contributed the data and reviewed the manuscript. VWB, YZ, JKr, SB, FD, LZ, PW and MLo conducted the analysis. YZ, SB, FD, LZ, PW, METD, XG, CG, JKo, JKr, HS P, WR, BS, MLo, WMMV and NJW provided critical feedback on the results and reviewed the manuscript. All co-authors approved the final version of the paper. MLu and HS are the guarantors of this work and, as such, had full access to all the data in the study and take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

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