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**Authors:** Chaker L, Baumgartner C, den Elzen WP, Collet TH, Ikram MA, Blum MR, Dehghan A, Drechsler C, Luben RN, Portegies ML, Iervasi G, Medici M, Stott DJ, Dullaart RP, Ford I, Bremner A, Newman AB, Wanner C, Sgarbi JA, Dörr M, Longstreth WT Jr, Psaty BM, Ferrucci L, Maciel RM, Westendorp RG, Jukema JW, Ceresini G, Imaizumi M, Hofman A, Bakker SJ, Franklyn JA, Khaw KT, Bauer DC, Walsh JP, Razvi S, Gussekloo J, Völzke H, Franco OH, Cappola AR, Rodondi N, Peeters RP, Thyroid Studies Collaboration.

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# Thyroid Function within the Reference Range and the Risk of Stroke: An Individual Participant Data Analysis

Layal Chaker, MD; Christine Baumgartner, MD; Wendy P. J. den Elzen, PhD; Tinh-Hai Collet, MD; M. Arfan Ikram, MD, PhD; Manuel R. Blum, MD; Abbas Dehghan, MD, PhD; Christiane Drechsler, MD, PhD; Robert N. Luben, PhD; Marileen L. P. Portegies, MD; Giorgio Iervasi, MD; Marco Medici, MD, PhD; David J. Stott, MD; Robin P. Dullaart, MD, PhD; Ian Ford, PhD; Alexandra Bremner, PhD; Anne B. Newman, MD, MPH; Christoph Wanner, MD PhD; José A. Sgarbi, MD, PhD; Marcus Dörr, MD, PhD; W.T. Longstreth, Jr., MD; Bruce M. Psaty, MD, PhD; Luigi Ferrucci, MD, PhD; Rui M. B. Maciel, MD, PhD; Rudi G. Westendorp, MD, PhD; J. Wouter Jukema MD, PhD; Graziano Ceresini, MD, PhD; Misa Imaizumi, MD, PhD; Albert Hofman, MD, PhD; Stephan J. L. Bakker, MD, PhD; Jayne A. Franklyn, MD, PhD, FRCP; Kay-Tee Khaw, MD, PhD; Douglas C. Bauer, MD; John P. Walsh, MBBS, FRACP, PhD; Salman Razvi, MD, FRCP; Jacobijn Gussekloo MD, PhD; Henry Völzke, MD, PhD; Oscar H. Franco, MD, PhD; Anne R. Cappola, MD, ScM; Nicolas Rodondi, MD, MAS; Robin P. Peeters, MD, PhD; for the Thyroid Studies Collaboration

**Author affiliations** are described elsewhere in the manuscript

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**Corresponding author:**

R.P. Peeters MD, PhD,

Rotterdam Thyroid Center, Department of Internal Medicine, Department of Epidemiology

Erasmus University Medical Center, Room NA28-18, PO Box 2040,

3000 CA Rotterdam, The Netherlands, Tel: +31-10-7043363;

email: r.peeters@erasmusmc.nl.

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*Study concept and design:* Peeters, Rodondi

*Acquisition of data:* Chaker, Baumgartner, den Elzen, Ikram, Blum, Bakker, Dehghan, Collet, Drechsler, Luben, Hofman, Portegies, Medici, Iervasi, Stott, Ford, Bremner, Wanner, Ferrucci, Newman, Dullaart, Sgarbi, Dörr, Longstreth, Psaty, Ceresini, Maciel, Westendorp, Jukema, Imaizumi, Franklyn, Bauer, Walsh, Razvi, Khaw, Cappola, Völzke, Franco, Gussekloo, Rodondi, Peeters

*Analysis and interpretation of data:* Chaker, Baumgartner, Peeters, Dehghan, Franco, Ikram, Collet, Blum, Rodondi

*Drafting of the Manuscript:* Chaker, Peeters

*Critical Revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content:* Chaker, Baumgartner, den Elzen, Ikram, Blum, Bakker, Dehghan, Collet, Drechsler, Luben, Hofman, Portegies, Medici, Iervasi, Stott, Ford, Bremner, Wanner, Ferrucci, Newman, Dullaart, Sgarbi, Dörr, Longstreth, Psaty, Ceresini, Maciel, Westendorp, Jukema, Imaizumi, Franklyn, Bauer, Walsh, Razvi, Khaw, Cappola, Völzke, Franco, Gussekloo, Rodondi, Peeters

*Statistical analysis:* Chaker, Peeters

*Obtained Funding:* Peeters, Franco, Rodondi

*Administrative, technical, or material support:* Chaker, Blum, Portegies, Medici, den Elzen, Rodondi

*Study Supervision*: Peeters, Franco, Dehghan, Ikram, Rodondi

**Abstract**

**Context:** The currently applied reference ranges for thyroid function are under debate. Despite evidence that thyroid function within the reference range is related with several cardiovascular disorders, its association with the risk of stroke has not been evaluated previously.

**Design and Setting:** We identified studies through systematic literature search and the Thyroid Studies Collaboration, a collaboration of prospective cohort studies. Studies measuring baseline thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH), free thyroxine (FT4) and stroke outcomes were included and we collected IPD from each study, including thyroid function measurements and incident all stroke (combined fatal and non-fatal) and fatal stroke. The applied reference range for TSH levels was between 0.45-4.49 mIU/L.

**Results:** We collected IPD on 43,598 adults with TSH within the reference range from 17 cohorts, with median follow-up of 11.6 years (interquartile range 5.1-13.9), including 449,908 person-years. Age- and sex-adjusted pooled HR for TSH was 0.78 (95% Confidence Interval [CI], 0.65-0.95, across the reference range of TSH) for all stroke and 0.83 (95% CI, 0.62-1.09) for fatal stroke. For the FT4 analyses, the HR was 1.08 (95% CI, 0.99-1.15, per SD increase) for all stroke and 1.10 (95% CI, 1.04-1.19) for fatal stroke. This was independent of cardiovascular risk factors including systolic blood pressure, total cholesterol, smoking and prevalent diabetes.

**Conclusion:** Higher levels of TSH within the reference range may decrease risk of stroke, highlighting the need for further research focusing on the clinical consequences associated with differences within the reference range of thyroid function.

## Introduction

Subclinical hypothyroidism is associated with hypertension, hyperlipidemia, atherosclerosis and an increased risk of coronary artery disease (CAD) whereas subclinical hyperthyroidism is associated with an increased risk of atrial fibrillation and CAD (1-4). Subclinical thyroid dysfunction is defined by a thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) outside the reference range with a free thyroxine (FT4) within the reference range.

However, the currently applied reference ranges for thyroid function are under debate (5,6) as thyroid function within these reference ranges is also associated with several adverse health outcomes (7-9). A previous systematic review found that lower TSH values and higher FT4 values within the reference range are associated with reduced bone mineral density, atrial fibrillation and an increased risk of fractures (8). Furthermore, higher levels of TSH and lower levels of FT4 within the reference range are associated with cardiovascular events and an unfavorable metabolic profile (8). On the other hand, a previous individual participant data (IPD) analysis provided no evidence for a higher risk of coronary heart disease within the reference range as currently defined (10).

A considerable amount of data exist on the association of thyroid function within the reference range and cardiovascular risk factors such as atrial fibrillation, hypercholesterolemia and hypertension (8). While these risk factors related to differences within the reference range are also associated with cardiovascular disease, few data are available on clinical outcomes and no data are available on the risk of stroke, the second major vascular cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide (11). A previous study-level meta-analysis on the association of subclinical thyroid dysfunction and stroke risk included only a small number of studies and did not include any analyses on TSH within the reference range (12). Assessing the consequences of differences within the reference range of thyroid function on clinical outcomes is important for understanding the definition of the reference range and to improve care and preventive measures. Furthermore, it can help identify clinical outcomes that need to be addressed in future randomized controlled trials assessing the benefits and risks of thyroid treatment in subclinical thyroid dysfunction (13).

Therefore we aimed to investigate the association between TSH and FT4 differences within the reference range and the risk of stroke (fatal and non-fatal) in an IPD analysis. An IPD analysis provides the opportunity to standardize definitions of thyroid function and statistical analyses, include unpublished data and pool results from several cohorts. Also, an IPD can provide the opportunity to conduct subgroup analyses due to the large number of events included.

## Material and methods

### *Data Sources and Study Selection*

Studies were identified through the Thyroid Studies Collaboration (TSC). The TSC is a consortium of cohorts with thyroid function measurements at baseline and prospective follow-up of cardiovascular outcomes (1,4,10,14-16). Its primary purpose is to examine the association of subclinical thyroid dysfunction and cardiovascular disease. Eligible cohorts were originally identified through systematic literature reviews (1) and this has been described in detail previously (12). From the 19 cohorts identified by these two literature searches, 17 cohorts had information available on baseline thyroid function and follow-up stroke incidence, agreed to participate and were therefore eligible for the current study. No additional inclusion criteria were applied. None of the cohorts has previously published on the risk of stroke within the reference range of thyroid function, and 5 cohorts (17-21) previously published on the association of subclinical thyroid dysfunction and the risk of stroke (**Table 1**). Investigators from the 17 eligible studies were invited to join the IPD analysis. The local Medical Ethics Committees of each included study approved the distinct original study protocols, and informed consent was obtained from all study participants by the original cohort studies.

### *Data Extraction*

We requested individual participant characteristics related to prior cardiovascular risk factors and disease, including systolic blood pressure, serum total cholesterol, history of diabetes, smoking, previous cardiovascular disease and previous stroke. We also collected available information on demographic information (age, sex, race), anthropometric measurements (height and weight), medication use (thyroid

hormone replacement, lipid-lowering and anti-hypertensive therapy) and the outcome. Individual participant information from all cohorts were collected and analyzed in one center (Rotterdam, The Netherlands). The primary outcome measures were all stroke (combined fatal and non-fatal) and fatal stroke. Stroke was defined according to World Health Organization (WHO) criteria as a syndrome of rapidly developing clinical signs of focal (or global) disturbance of cerebral function, with symptoms lasting 24 hours or longer or leading to death, with no apparent cause other than of vascular origin, including ischemic or hemorrhagic strokes.

***Thyroid Function Testing Definition***

We used a common definition of the reference range of thyroid function (i.e. euthyroidism) in order to increase comparability among the different studies and in concordance with previous analyses, (1,4,16) expert reviews (22,23) and several large cohorts (17,24,25). Euthyroidism was defined as TSH level between 0.45 and 4.49 mIU/L (1). Most studies used a third-generation TSH radioimmunoassay, but the Whickham Survey used a first-generation assay that reports higher measured TSH values than current assays, (26) for which we adjusted the range to 0.5-6.0 mIU/L to define euthyroidism, as previously described (1,15,27). In addition, the Whickham Survey was the only study to perform total T4 assays (27); the remainder of the cohorts performed FT4 assays.

For FT4 values, we excluded studies that only measured FT4 in TSH values outside of the reference range for these analyses (17,20,21,28). In studies that measured FT4 independent of TSH values, we used all FT4 levels with individuals with TSH in the reference range, not limited by the FT4 reference range.

***Data synthesis and Statistical Analysis***

We performed a Cox proportional hazards model in each cohort separately to assess the association of TSH or FT4 continuously with all stroke and fatal stroke (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 21.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp). We investigated the linearity assumption using cubic restricted splines (rms package, R-project, Institute for Statistics and Mathematics, R Core Team (2013), Vienna, Austria, version 3.0.2). Due to departure from linearity for the TSH analysis in the 4D cohort (p for non-linearity = 0.03), TSH was log transformed for all continuous analyses (natural logarithm). We found no departure

from non-linearity in the transformed TSH or any of the FT4 analyses and no threshold effect was therefore detected. The analyses are presented as Hazard Ratios (HR) across the reference range of TSH (0.45-4.49 mIU/L). This corresponds to the HR when comparing participants with a TSH in the upper limit of the reference range (4.49 mIU/L) to participants with a TSH in the lower limit of the reference range (0.45 mIU/L). The FT4 analyses were performed in a standardized manner (per SD) as well as per 1 ng/dL increase, for which the Whickham study (27) was excluded. We assessed the proportional hazard assumption in each cohort for each outcome, by Schoenfeld residual plots and the Schoenfeld test. All studies met the proportional hazard assumption except for the Birmingham study and PROSPER trial for the analyses with TSH, for which we performed a sensitivity analysis excluding these two cohorts. There was no interaction between FT4 and TSH levels for the all stroke events or stroke mortality analyses ($p=0.099$ and $p = 0.28$ respectively), as assessed by introducing an interaction term between FT4 (ng/dL) and TSH values.

We used a random-effects model according to DerSimonian and Laird (29) to pool outcomes estimates (two-step approach). Pooled estimates were summarized in forest plots using the metafor package for R (R-project, Institute for Statistics and Mathematics, R Core Team (2013), Vienna, Austria, version 3.0.2). Heterogeneity across studies was measured using the $I^2$ statistic and 95% confidence interval (95% CI) (30).

The primary analyses were adjusted for age and sex. We also conducted multivariable analyses additionally adjusting for systolic blood pressure, smoking, total cholesterol and diabetes. These covariates were available in all cohorts except for the Birmingham cohort, where none was available (20). We conducted multiple imputation of covariates in cohorts when there was $\geq 5\%$ of missing data for the smoking, total cholesterol, systolic blood pressure or prevalent diabetes covariates, which was the case for one study (19). We considered the age and sex adjusted analysis the primary analysis because 1) covariates used in the multivariable analyses could also be considered as mediators 2) it includes all studies, whereas the multivariable analysis does not include the Birmingham cohort.

In order to evaluate the robustness of our findings and identify possible sources of heterogeneity and populations at risk, we conducted pre-defined subgroup and sensitivity analyses. We performed stratified analyses by age, sex, history of stroke, subtype of stroke (including only classified strokes) and race, in concordance with previous reports (1,4). If the parameter estimates were infinite due to a small number of events in a stratified study-specific analysis, we used Firth's penalized maximum likelihood bias reduction method for the Cox proportional hazards model (31,32) to estimate hazard ratios (HRs) and 95% CIs. For the continuous TSH analyses, we conducted the following sensitivity analyses: 1) excluding participants who had thyroid-hormone replacement at baseline and during follow-up 2) excluding studies that included transient ischemic attack as a stroke event 3) excluding studies with self-reported stroke data 4) excluding studies that did not meet the proportional hazard assumption 5) excluding cohorts with potential co-morbidities (e.g. diabetes patients) and 6) excluding studies without formal adjudication procedures. We also conducted additional multivariable analyses including prevalent atrial fibrillation, prevalent cardiovascular disease, body mass index (BMI) or lipid-lowering, and anti-hypertensive therapy at baseline to the previous multivariable model. Furthermore, we performed the following methodological sensitivity analyses: 1) perform the meta-analysis in a two-step approach using the restricted maximum-likelihood estimator also using the metafor package and 2) calculate the risk estimates using a one-step frailty Cox proportional hazards model (coxme package, R-project, Institute for Statistics and Mathematics, R Core Team (2013), Vienna, Austria, version 3.0.2.) We assessed age- and sex-adjusted funnel plots and conducted Egger tests (33) to evaluate potential publication bias statistically. There was no specific funding for this study.

## Results

We identified 17 cohorts from the United States (17,21,34), Europe (18,20,24,27,28,35-40), Australia (25), Brazil (41) and Japan (19) that assessed stroke outcomes prospectively and agreed to share IPD (**Table 1**). The included studies provided information on a total of 43,598 participants with thyroid function within the reference range and a follow-up from 1972 to 2014, a median follow-up ranging

between 1.5 and 20 years and a total follow-up of 450,684 person-years. All studies, except one (34), included both female (49.6%) and male participants. All cohorts reported fatal stroke and 12 studies reported both fatal and non-fatal stroke, contributing to the all stroke analyses among 34,853 participants. During follow-up, 2271 participants had a stroke, with an incidence rate of 6.3 per 1000 person-years and 907 a fatal stroke with 2.0 per 1000 person-years. The FT4 analyses included 24,888 participants for all stroke and 32,580 for fatal stroke. Two studies (25,39) used variations of the WHO criteria to define all stroke and fatal stroke (**Supplemental Table 1**) and four studies included information on type of stroke (hemorrhagic versus ischemic) (17,21,28,40). One study (39) used questionnaires for the assessment of non-fatal stroke. Formal adjudication, defined as having clear criteria for the outcomes that were reviewed by experts for each potential case, was used for all stroke in six studies (17,21,28,36,42,43) and for fatal stroke in two additional studies (34,38).

All but three cohorts had information on participants' race (18,24,25). For the additional multivariate analyses, information on AF at baseline was available for eight studies (17,18,21,25,35,36,39,40,42). Data on lipid-lowering and hypertensive medications were not available in all but two studies (19,24). Data on history of cardiovascular disease were not available for two studies (34,35).

All studies provided information on the proportion of participants taking thyroid hormone medication at baseline. In all but four cohorts, none of the participants used thyroid medication at baseline. In the cohorts where thyroid medication was used, the proportion varied from 1 to 6%. All but six studies also provided follow-up information on thyroid hormone replacement use, with a range between 0 and 3%.

***The association between TSH and the risk of stroke***

The age- and sex-adjusted pooled HR for all stroke was 0.78 (95% CI, 0.65-0.95, across the reference range of TSH mIU/L) and for fatal stroke 0.83 (95% CI, 0.62-1.09) (**Figure 1**). This corresponds to a 1.28-fold and 1.20-fold increase in all and fatal stroke risk respectively for a participant with a TSH in the lower limit of the reference range (0.45 mIU/L) compared to a participant with a TSH in the upper limit of the reference range (4.49 mIU/L).We found no heterogeneity for the analyses of all stroke or fatal stroke analyses ($I^2$=0%). Multivariable analyses, adjusting for sex, age, smoking, total cholesterol,

systolic blood pressure and history of diabetes yielded similar results with a HR of 0.76 (95% CI, 0.63-0.91) for all stroke and 0.78 (95 % CI, 0.58-1.07) for fatal stroke (**Table 2**). Subsequent subgroup analyses did not show a differential risk when stratifying by sex, age groups, history of stroke or race (**Table 2**). The information on type of stroke was available in a subgroup of 11,192 participants in four studies (17,21,28,40). Stratifying by type of stroke showed a lower estimate in hemorrhagic fatal stroke compared to ischemic stroke (HR 0.37, 95% CI 0.12-1.12 vs HR 0.78, 95% CI 0.33-1.80), but with an insignificant p for interaction (p= 0.30). Sensitivity analyses excluding specific studies or participants using thyroid hormone replacement therapy did not meaningfully affect the risk estimates (**Supplemental Table 2**). Additional adjustment for prevalent atrial fibrillation, prevalent cardiovascular disease (defined as previous coronary heart disease or stroke), BMI or lipid-lowering and anti-hypertensive therapy did not attenuate the associations. Estimates derived by the methodological sensitivity analyses were similar to the results of the two-step random-effects model according to DerSimonian and Laird (**Supplemental Table 3**). We did not find any evidence of publication bias for the TSH analyses, either with visual assessment of age- and sex-adjusted funnel plots or with the Egger test for all stroke (p = 0.75) or fatal stroke (p = 0.29).

***The association between FT4 and the risk of stroke***

The age- and sex-adjusted pooled HR for the per SD increase of FT4 and stroke analyses were 1.08 (95% CI, 0.99-1.15) for all stroke and 1.10 (95% CI, 1.04-1.19) for fatal stroke (**Table 3, Figure 2**). We found substantial heterogeneity for the analyses on all stroke ($I^2$=55%) but no heterogeneity for fatal stroke ($I^2$=0%,). When analyzing the association per 1 ng/dL FT4 increase and risk of stroke, the age- and sex-adjusted pooled HRs were 1.40 (95% CI, 0.95-2.05) for all stroke and 1.44 (95% CI, 1.10-1.89) for fatal stroke (**Supplemental Table 4**). Multivariable analyses, adjusting for sex, age, smoking, total cholesterol, systolic blood pressure and history of diabetes did not change risk estimates substantially (**Table 3**). Subsequent subgroup analyses showed a differential risk for the different age categories, where the risk estimates went from protective to deleterious with increasing age (p for trend 0.024, **Table 3**). When stratifying by sex, history of stroke or race no differential effects were detected. Stratifying for type of

stroke also did not show differential risk (**Table 3**), but this was only possible in one study that was included in the FT4 analyses. We did not find any evidence of publication bias for the FT4 and stroke analyses, either with visual assessment of age- and sex-adjusted funnel plots or with the Egger test for all stroke ($p = 0.41$) or for fatal stroke ($p = 0.28$).

## Discussion

In the current IPD analysis of 43,598 participants from 17 prospective cohort studies, higher levels of TSH within the reference range of thyroid function were significantly associated with a lower risk of stroke in age- and sex-adjusted and in multivariable analyses. The analyses concerning the association between TSH levels and fatal stroke were qualitatively similar but did not reach statistical significance. The analyses on the association between FT4 and all stroke and fatal stroke support the finding of a higher risk of stroke with differences within the reference range of thyroid function.

Thyroid dysfunction is defined by the biochemical reference ranges for TSH and FT4. These reference ranges, defining the normal range, depend on the assay used, the distribution of thyroid measurements in the population, or both. A thyroid function within the "normal range" would imply that the levels of circulating thyroid hormone are not accompanied by symptoms, an increased risk of disease or adverse events. In recent years, the applied reference ranges have been debated in the context of mainly the latter two: adverse events and diseases. Higher levels of TSH within the reference range are associated with an increase in systolic and diastolic blood pressure (44,45). Moreover, increased TSH levels within the reference range are linearly associated with an unfavorable serum lipid profile (46). On the other hand, lower TSH levels within the reference range are associated with an increased risk of heart failure, coronary heart disease and atrial fibrillation in an elderly population (7). The arbitrary nature of the cut-offs currently used is an important factor hampering decision making on screening and treatment of thyroid dysfunction (13). In the context of defining the reference range of thyroid function, our study provides additional evidence that lower levels of TSH and higher levels of FT4 within the reference range are associated with a negative clinical outcome, namely stroke, a major cause of morbidity and mortality.

In contrast to blood pressure or cholesterol, reference ranges for thyroid function are currently based on distribution in the population rather than risks of major diseases. It is more challenging to establish reference ranges for thyroid function based on risk of outcomes than for cardiovascular risk factors such as blood pressure and cholesterol, where the increase in risk mainly occurs for values higher than the upper limit. However, both low and high thyroid function is associated with clinical disease, also within the reference range. Furthermore, a previous study from the TSC provided no evidence for a higher risk of coronary heart disease within the normal reference range as currently defined (10). Also, thyroid function is not solely associated with cardiovascular disease but also a wide variety of clinical outcomes including fracture risk and possibly cognitive function decline (7,14). Therefore, future research should investigate if re-evaluation of the currently used reference ranges for thyroid function is meaningful, and if so, to what extent this should be done for specific populations or subgroups (e.g. elderly).

Several pathways could explain the relation between thyroid function and stroke. Thyroid hormone has direct effects on the cardiovascular system and is known to decrease systemic vascular resistance (47), increase left ventricular contractile function and alter systolic and diastolic cardiac function (48). Differences in thyroid hormone function are associated with the risk of several cardiovascular risk factors including hypertension, (49) dyslipidemia (50) and atherosclerosis (51). These changes have also been reported in subjects with subclinical thyroid dysfunction (42) and some also with differences of thyroid function within the reference range (44-46). The fact that adjustment for these cardiovascular risk factors in our multivariable analyses did not substantially alter risk estimates, suggests an effect on the risk of stroke, which is independent of classical risk factors such as hypertension.

Another explanation might be that the lack of effect of multivariable adjustment is due to residual confounding or unmeasured mediators. For example, in the current analysis, additional adjustment for atrial fibrillation, a plausible biological mediator for the association between thyroid function and the risk of stroke (52), did not alter risk estimates substantially. However, detecting an effect may have been hampered by the lack of information on prevalent atrial fibrillation in nine studies and insufficient

346 incidence information. There was no sufficient information available on anti-coagulant medication use of
347 participants, which did not allow for further exploration of possible mediating and confounding effects.
348 Various abnormalities in the hemostatic system have been reported in overt (53) and subclinical thyroid
349 dysfunction (54). Hypercoagulability is seen in hyperthyroidism while hypothyroidism has been
350 associated with mainly hypocoagulability (55,56). Alterations in coagulability and the fibrinolytic system
351 have been linked to a higher risk of cardiovascular disease (57). Whether hemostasis is also affected
352 within the reference range of thyroid function is not known but might be one of the pathways that play a
353 role in the increased risk of stroke associated with differences in thyroid function within the reference
354 range. Changes in coagulation patterns due to thyroid hormone could imply that thyroid function tending
355 towards hyperthyroidism might increase the risk of ischemic stroke mainly. We only had a small
356 subgroup of studies including information on type of stroke (hemorrhagic vs ischemic), limiting our
357 analysis on type of stroke. The exact mechanism explaining the association between differences in thyroid
358 function within the reference range and the risk of stroke therefore remains to be determined.
359 Previous studies have reported that the association of thyroid dysfunction with the risk of cardiovascular
360 disease is influenced by age or sex. A study on the association of thyroid disorders and stroke found a
361 decreased risk of ischemic stroke in treated male patients with thyroid disorders, but not in females (Sex-
362 Merker et al). A study level meta-analysis found that subclinical hypothyroidism was associated with
363 increased risk of ischemic heart disease and cardiovascular mortality only in younger populations (Razvi
364 et al). In line, a study in participants of 85 years in the general population, revealed no adverse effects of
365 abnormally high levels of TSH (Gussekloo et al). In contrast, an IPD meta-analysis of 55 287 participants
366 did not show significant trend in risk of CHD across different age groups (Rodondi et al). In our study,
367 stratification by age, sex and race did not reveal differential risk patterns. It should however be noted that
368 no study to date has looked at the association of thyroid function within the reference range and stroke by
369 age or sex and this could be one of the reasons for the discrepancies found between previous literature and
370 our study.

The association of TSH with the risk of stroke in participants without a prior history of stroke was similar to the overall analyses, while in participants with a prior stroke, the association was not present. The total number of participants with a history of stroke was small and therefore, the power to detect a possible differential risk between participants with and without history of stroke could have been limited. The risk of all stroke associated with FT4 levels seemed to increase with older age. However, this finding was not replicated in the TSH or fatal stroke analyses.

Strengths of our study include the ability to perform an IPD analysis including 43,598 participants from 17 studies, based on published and unpublished data. By performing an IPD analysis we were able to standardize the definition of reference range thyroid function and covariates within our study for the analyses. There were differences between the study populations regarding age and sex distribution, amongst others. Nevertheless, there was limited to no heterogeneity of the outcome estimates between the studies. This could indicate the robustness of the findings.

Despite the large number of participants, we had limited numbers of events in those with a history of stroke and only four studies included data on type of stroke. Information needed for certain stratification and sensitivity analyses e.g. by race or prevalent atrial fibrillation was not available for some cohorts. Also, there was no information available on anti-coagulant use or anticoagulant factor levels, hampering analyses concerning possible underlying pathways. Furthermore, TSH and FT4 measurements were performed only at baseline and data on thyroid medication use during follow-up were not complete, which could change risk over time, in almost all cohorts and therefore it was not possible to take changes of thyroid function over time into account. Residual confounding cannot be excluded, as is the case in all observational studies.

*Conclusions*

In summary, higher TSH levels within the reference range were associated with a lower risk of all stroke. The analyses for fatal stroke and FT4 were qualitatively similar. These data provide additional evidence that differences within the reference range of thyroid function, as currently defined, are associated with an increased risk of a major adverse event. Future studies should investigate if re-evaluation of the currently

used reference ranges for thyroid function, which are based on fixed biochemical parameters instead of health and treatment outcomes and risk of disease and mortality, should be considered. This is pivotal information when designing randomized controlled trials sufficiently equipped to address possible risks and benefits of thyroid function treatment.

**Authors Affiliations:** Department of Internal Medicine, Erasmus Medical Center, Rotterdam, The Netherlands (Drs Peeters, Chaker and Medici); Rotterdam Thyroid Center, Erasmus Medical Center, Rotterdam, The Netherlands (Drs Peeters, Chaker and Medici); Department of General Internal Medicine, Inselspital, Bern University Hospital, University of Bern, Switzerland (Drs Rodondi, Baumgartner, and Blum); Service of Endocrinology, Diabetes and Metabolism, University Hospital of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland (Dr Collet); Department of Clinical Chemistry and Laboratory Medicine, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, the Netherlands (Dr. den Elzen); Department of Public Health and Primary Care, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, the Netherlands (Dr Gussekloo); Department of Radiology and Neurology, Erasmus University Medical Center, Rotterdam, The Netherlands (Dr. Ikram); Departments of Medicine and Epidemiology & Biostatistics, University of California, San Francisco(Dr. Bauer); Division of Endocrinology, Diabetes, and Metabolism, Department of Medicine, School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (Dr Cappola); Department of Epidemiology, Erasmus University Medical Center, Rotterdam, The Netherlands (Drs Peeters, Franco, Dehghan, Hofman, Ikram, Chaker and Portegies); Department of Epidemiology, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA, USA (Dr. Hofman); Department of Endocrinology, Gateshead Health Foundation NHS Trust, Gateshead, England (Dr Razvi); Department of Endocrinology and Diabetes, Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, Nedlands, Western Australia (Dr Walsh); Schools of Medicine and Pharmacology (Dr Walsh) and Population Health, University of Western Australia, Crawley (Dr Bremner); National Council Research Institute of Clinical Physiology, Pisa, Italy (Dr Iervasi); Robertson Centre for Biostatistics, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland (Dr. Ford); Institute of Cardiovascular and Medical Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, University of Glasgow, Scotland (Dr. Stott); Department of Epidemiology,

423 University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Dr Newman); Department of Internal Medicine,
424 University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, The Netherlands (Drs Bakker and
425 Dullaart); Department of Medicine, Division of Nephrology University Hospital of Würzburg, Germany
426 and Comprehensive Heart Failure Centre, Würzburg, Germany (Drs Wanner and Drechsler); Department
427 of Clinical Studies, Radiation Effects Research Foundation, Nagasaki, Japan (Dr Imaizumi); Department
428 of Clinical and Experimental Medicine, University of Parma, Parma, Italy (Dr. Ceresini); National
429 Institute on Aging, Baltimore, MD, U.S.A (Dr. Ferrucci); Institute for Community Medicine, Clinical-
430 Epidemiological Research/SHIP, University Medicine, Greifswald and German Centre of Cardiovascular
431 Research, Partner Site Greifswald, Germany (Dr Völzke); Department of Internal Medicine, University
432 Medicine, Greifswald and German Centre of Cardiovascular Research, Partner Site Greifswald, Germany
433 (Dr Dörr); Departments of Neurology and Epidemiology, University of Washington, Seattle, WA; (Dr
434 Longstreth); Cardiovascular Health Research Unit, Departments of Medicine, Epidemiology, and Health
435 Services, University of Washington, Seattle, WA; Group Health Research Institute, Group Health
436 Cooperative, Seattle, WA (Dr Psaty); Division of Endocrinology, Department of Medicine, Federal
437 University of Sao Paulo, Brazil (Drs Maciel and Sgarbi); Division of Endocrinology, Faculdade de
438 Medicina de Marília, Marília, Brazil (Dr Sgarbi); Department of Public Health and Primary Care,
439 University of Cambridge, Cambridge, England (Drs Luben and Khaw); Department of Cardiology,
440 Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden and Interuniversity Cardiology Institute of the Netherlands,
441 Utrecht, The Netherlands (Dr Jukema); School of Clinical and Experimental Medicine, College of
442 Medical and Dental Sciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, England (Dr Franklyn); and
443 Department of Public Health, and, Center for Healthy Ageing, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences,
444 University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark. (Dr Westendorp).

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**Legend of Figures**

**Figure 1.** **The association between TSH and Risk of All Stroke and Fatal Stroke***

* Hazard ratios (HRs) and their 95% confidence intervals (CIs) are represented by squares and are across the range of TSH (0.45 and 4.49 mIU/L). Sizes of data markers are proportional to the inverse of the variance of the hazard ratios.

Data for all stroke were available in 12 studies. Three hundred ninety-three participants were excluded from the analysis of all stroke due to missing follow-up data. Data for fatal stroke were available in 17 studies. Two hundred sixty-five participants were excluded from the analysis of fatal stroke, due to missing cause of death.

Abbreviations: TSH = thyroid-stimulating hormone.

**Figure 2.** **The association between standardized FT4 and Risk of All Stroke and Fatal Stroke***

* Hazard ratios (HRs) and their 95% confidence intervals (CIs) are represented by squares and are per one increase of one standard deviation of FT4. Sizes of data markers are proportional to the inverse of the variance of the hazard ratios.

Data for all stroke were available in 9 studies. Three hundred eighty-seven participants were excluded from the analysis of all stroke due to missing follow-up data. Data for fatal stroke were available in 13 studies. Twenty-seven participants were excluded from the analysis of fatal stroke, due to missing cause of death.

Abbreviations: FT4 = free thyroxine

**Table 1. Baseline Characteristics of Individuals in the Included Studies (n = 43,598)**

| Study, Year (Reference) | Description of Study Sample | No. | Median Age (Range), years* | Women No. (%) | Thyroid Medication No. (%) at baseline† | Thyroid Medication No. (%) follow up‡ | TSH, Median (IQR) | FT4 Mean (SD) § | Follow-up median (IQR) | Pe y |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4D Study, 1998, (18) | Trial of atorvastatin in type 2 diabetes and hemodialysis patients, Germany | 841 | 66 (30-83) | 368 (43.8) | 0 | 11 (1.3) | 1.10 (0.77-1.60) | 13.90 pmol/L (2.92) | 1.5 (0.2-3.6) | 1 |
| Birmingham Study, 1988, (20) | CDA's aged ≥ 60 y from primary care practice in Birmingham, England | 1015 | 69 (60-94) | 550 (54.2) | 0 | NA | 1.60 (1.10-1.20) | NA | 10.2 (5.7-10.6) | 8 |
| Brazilian Thyroid Study, 1999, (41) | Adults from Japanese descent living in São Paulo, Brazil | 890 | 56 (30-92) | 459 (51.6) | 0 | NA | 1.40 (0.90-2.20) | 1.07 ng/dL (0.18) | 7.3 (7.1-7.5) | 6 |
| Busselton Health Study, 1981, (25) | Adults in Busselton, Western Australia | 1902 | 50 (18-90) | 912 (47.9) | 0 | 11 (0.6) | 1.42 (1.00-1.96) | 16.35 pmol/L (2.89) | 20.0 (19.9-20.0) | 33 |
| Cardiovascular Health Study, 1989, (17) | CDA's with Medicare eligibility in 4 US communities | 2526 | 71 (64-100) | 1488 (58.9) | 0 | 52 (2.1) | 2.05 (1.45-2.89) | NA | 14.1 (8.6-16.4) | 31 |
| EPIC-Norfolk Study, 1995, (24) | Adults living in Norfolk, England | 11,986 | 58 (40-78) | 6365 (53.1) | 0 | NA | 1.70 (1.20-2.30) | 12.58 pmol/L (3.17) | 13.4 (12.6-14.3) | 15 |
| Health ABC Study, 1997, (21) | CDA's with Medicare eligibility in 2 US communities | 2170 | 74 (69-81) | 1033 (47.6) | 0 | 37 (1.7) | 2.00 (1.37-2.72) | NA | 11.8 (7.5-12.2) | 21 |

**Table 1. Baseline Characteristics of Individuals in the Included Studies (n = 43,598) (continued)**

| Study, Year (Reference) | Description of Study Sample | No. | Median Age (Range), years* | Women No. (%) | Thyroid Medication No. (%) at baseline† | Thyroid Medication No. (%) follow up‡ | TSH, Median (IQR) | FT4 Mean (SD) § | Follow-up median (IQR) | Pe y |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| InCHIANTI Study, 1998, (35) | Adults aged 20-102 years living in Chianti geographic area, Italy | 1049 | 71 (21-102) | 575 (54.8) | 11 (1.0) | NA | 1.38 (0.96-1.98) | 1.42 ng/dL (0.29) | 9.1 (8.2-9.2) | 8 |
| Leiden 85-plus Study, 1997, (36) | Adults aged 85 years living in Leiden, The Netherlands | 452 | 85 (NA) | 290 (60.4) | 0 | 6 (1.3) | 1.65 (1.15-2.31) | 14.5 pmol/L (2.26) | 5.2 (2.5-8.5) | 2 |
| MrOS Study, 2000, (34) | Community-dwelling U.S. men aged 65 years and older | 1410 | 73 (65-99) | 0 | 83 (5.9) | NA | 1.97 (1.36-2.72) | 0.99 ng/dL (0.15) | 12.0 (8.5-12.7) | 14 |
| Nagasaki Adult Health Study, 1984, (19) | Atomic bomb survivors in Nagasaki, Japan | 2342 | 57 (38-92) | 1419 (60.6) | 27 (1.2) | NA | 2.60 (2.00-3.40) | 1.45 ng/dL (0.46) | 13.0 (12.3-13.7) | 28 |
| Pisa cohort, 2000, (38) | Patients admitted to cardiology department in Pisa, Italy II | 2695 | 63 (19-92) | 840 (31.2) | 0 | 0 | 1.53 (1.02-2.30) | 1.19 ng/dL (0.24) | 2.6 (1.6-3.8) | 7 |
| PREVEND Study, 1997, (37) | Adults living in Groningen, The Netherlands | 2493 | 46 (28-75) | 1255 (50.3) | 0 | 4 (0.2) | 1.37 (0.99-1.90) | 12.81 pmol/L (2.25) | 10.9 (10.6 - 11.1) | 24 |
| PROSPER trial, 1997, (28) | Trial on the benefits of pravastatin vs placebo in adults | 4953 | 75 (69-83) | 2403 (48.5) | 0 | 28 (0.6) | 1.80 (1.26-2.51) | NA | 3.3 (3.0 - 3.5) | 15 |

**Table 1. Baseline Characteristics of Individuals in the Included Studies (n = 43,598) (continued)**

| Study, Year (Reference) | Description of Study Sample | No. | Median Age (Range), years* | Women No. (%) | Thyroid Medication No. (%) at baseline† | Thyroid Medication No. (%) follow up‡ | TSH, Median (IQR) | FT4 Mean (SD) § | Follow-up median (IQR) | Pe y |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rotterdam Study, 1989 (40) | Adults ≥55 years living in Rotterdam, The Netherlands | 1577 | 68 (55-93) | 934 (59.2) | 0 | NA | 1.54 (1.06-2.26) | 16.29 pmol/L (2.93) | 17.0 (11.2 - 18.9) | 23 |
| SHIP Study, 1997 (39) | Adults in West Pomerania, North-East of Germany | 2977 | 47 (20-81) | 1476 (49.6) | 0 | 90 (3.0) | 0.79 (0.61-1.07) | 12.67 pmol/L (3.42) | 11.3 (10.6 - 11.8) | 32 |
| Whickham Survey **, 1974 (27) | Adults living in and near Newcastle upon Tyne, England | 2320 | 46 (18-92) | 1213 (52.3) | 92 (4.0) | 54 (2.3) | 2.10 (1.20-3.00) | 8.41 pmol/L (1.95) | 19.0 (15.8-20.0) | 37 |
| Overall | | 43,598 | 64.9 (18-102) | 21,580 (49.6) | 213 (0.5) | 293 (1.4) | 1.65 (1.10-2.40) | 13.6 pmol/L (2.6) | 11.6 (5.1-13.9) | 45 |

Abbreviations: CDA = community-dwelling adult; IQR = interquartile range (25th-75th percentile); NA = not applicable; FT4 = free thyroxine; TSH = thyroid-stimulating hormon

* Participants younger than 18 years of age were not included

† Participants with missing information on thyroid medication at baseline: Health ABC Study 7, MrOs Study 59, Rotterdam Study 463, Whickham Survey 3

‡ Participants with missing information on thyroid medication at follow-up: Whickham Survey 1430

§ 1 pmol/L is 0.0777 ng/dL

ǁ Excluded patients with acute coronary syndrome or severe illness

**The Whickham Survey used a first-generation assay for the measurement of TSH and did not measure FT4 but total T4.

**Table 2. Stratified Analyses for the Associations between TSH and the Risk of All Stroke and Fatal Stroke**

| | | All Stroke* | | | | Fatal Stroke† | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | No. events/ Total participants | Age and sex adjusted HR (95% CI) | Multivariable‡ HR (95% CI) | $I^2$ | No. events/ Total participants | Age and sex adjusted HR (95% CI) | Multivariable‡ HR (95% CI) | |
| Total Population TSH | | 2271/34,853 | **0.78 (0.65, 0.95)** | **0.76 (0.63, 0.91)** | 0% | 907/43,333 | 0.83 (0.62, 1.09) | 0.78 (0.58, 1.07) | 0 |
| Sex§ | Men | 1091/16723 | 0.80 (0.62, 1.07) | 0.78 (0.60, 1.02) | 0% | 422/21874 | 0.85 (0.50, 1.41) | 0.85 (0.50, 1.35) | 0 |
| | Women | 1180/18130 | 0.78 (0.58, 1.07) | 0.75 (0.55, 1.02) | 25% | 485/21459 | 0.80 (0.52, 1.25) | 0.80 (0.52, 1.22) | 1 |
| | *p for interaction* | | 0.90 | 0.85 | | | 0.86 | 0.85 | |
| Age ll | 18. – 49 | 60/8305 | 0.95 (0.31, 2.86) | 1.45 (0.37, 4.17) | 0% | 12/9,525 | 0.71 (0.07, 7.47) | 1.14 (0.06, 23.85) | 0 |
| | 50 – 64 | 358/9145 | 0.75 (0.47, 1.19) | 0.75 (0.47, 1.22) | 0% | 104/12,303 | 1.35 (0.55, 3.25) | 1.22 (0.48, 3.16) | 0 |
| | 65 -79 | 1588/15,667 | 0.83 (0.67, 1.05) | **0.80 (0.63, 1.00)** | 0% | 623/19,198 | 0.89 (0.62, 1.27) | 0.95 (0.85, 1.09) | 0 |
| | ≥80 | 265/1736 | 0.69 (0.40, 1.17) | 0.63 (0.36, 1.09) | 0% | 168/2,307 | **0.43 (0.22, 0.85)** | **0.36 (0.17, 0.78)** | 0 |
| | *p for trend* | | 0.66 | 0.28 | | | 0.61 | 0.43 | |
| Stroke history¶ | No | 1875/31,626 | **0.78 (0.63, 0.98)** | **0.75 (0.60, 0.93)** | 0% | 710/36,222 | 0.71 (0.47, 1.07) | 0.71 (0.47, 1.05) | 2 |
| | Yes | 206/1266 | 1.00 (0.53, 1.83) | 1.14 (0.60, 2.20) | 0% | 92/1440 | 0.83 (0.26, 2.50) | 1.58 (0.47, 5.27) | 2 |
| | *p for interaction* | | 0.47 | 0.23 | | | 0.80 | 0.22 | |
| Stroke type** | Hemorrhagic | 129/11,192 | **0.47 (0.26, 0.83)** | **0.47 (0.25, 0.89)** | 5% | 87/11,192 | 0.38 (0.14, 1.07) | 0.37 (0.12, 1.12) | 2 |
| | Ischemic | 817/11,192 | 0.71 (0.50, 1.00) | 0.69 (0.48,0.98) | 0% | 182/11,192 | 0.69 (0.34, 1.35) | 0.78 (0.33-1.80) | 0 |
| | *p for interaction* | | 0.24 | 0.30 | | | 0.34 | 0.30 | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Race‡‡ | White | 1430/19,037 | **0.76 (0.60, 0.95)** | **0.73 (0.58, 0.91)** | 0% | 520/23,213 | 0.71 (0.48, 1.02) | 0.67 (0.47 1.00) | 0 |
| | Asian | NA | NA | NA | | 63/3230 | 0.48 (0.06, 11.22) | 0.62 (0.10, 3.97) | 4 |
| | Black | 150/1090 | 0.85 (0.26, 2.78) | 0.91 (0.41, 1.99) | 47% | 59/1055 | 0.95 (0.30, 3.12) | 0.89 (0.26, 2.91) | 0 |
| | *p for interaction* | | 0.88 | 0.60 | | | 0.83 | 0.91 | |

Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; HR, hazard ratio; TSH, thyroid-stimulating hormone. The HR's are across the reference range of TSH mIU/L (0.45-4.49)

*Data were available from 12 studies, 393 participants were excluded due to missing stroke event data.

† 265 participants were excluded due to missing data on cause of death.

‡ Adjusted for sex, age, systolic blood pressure, total cholesterol, smoking and prevalent diabetes at baseline. The Birmingham Study was excluded in this analysis because of lack of da cardiovascular risk factors.

§ These analyses were not adjusted for sex.

‖ These HRs were adjusted for sex and age as continuous variable to avoid residual confounding within age strata.

¶ Information on history of stroke was not available for the Pisa cohort, Birmingham Study and Busselton Health Study. Data concerning history of stroke were missing for 64 participa n total.

** Information on type of stroke was available for the Cardiovascular Health Study, Health ABC Study, PROSPER and the Rotterdam Study.

‡‡Information on race was not available for the 4D study, Birmingham study. Busselton Health Study and EPIC-Norfolk Study. Excluded 96 participants from MrOs Study due to no ev n subgroup.

**Table 3. Stratified Analyses for the Associations between standardized FT4 and the Risk of All Stroke and Fatal Stroke***

| | | All Stroke† | | | | Fatal Stroke‡ | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **No. events/ Total participants** | **Age and Sex adjusted HR (95% CI)** | **Multivariable § HR (95% CI)** | **$I^2$** | **No. events/ Total participants** | **Age and Sex adjusted HR (95% CI)** | **Multivariable § HR (95% CI)** | **$I^2$** |
| Total Population FT4 per SD | | 1307/24,888 | 1.08 (0.99, 1.17) | 1.06 (0.99, 1.15) | 55% | 598/32,580 | **1.10 (1.04, 1,19)** | **1.09 (1.02, 1.18)** | 0% |
| Sex ‖ | Men | 639/11,848 | 1.02 (0.94, 1.11) | 1.00 (0.92, 1.08) | 0% | 284/16,651 | 1.10 (0.99, 1.24) | 1.08 (0.96, 1.21) | 0% |
| | Women | 668/13,040 | 1.10 (0.99, 1.22) | **1.10 (1.01, 1.20)** | 52% | 314/15,929 | **1.12 (1.03, 1.23)** | **1.12 (1.01, 1.24)** | 0% |
| | *p for interaction* | | 0.27 | 0.12 | | | 0.79 | 0.65 | |
| Age¶ | 18 – 49y | 59/8289 | 0.81 (0.61, 1.07) | 0.75 (0.55, 1.03) | 0% | 12/9507 | 1.50 (0.62, 3.67) | 0.93 (0.32, 2.71) | 36% |
| | 50 – 64y | 342/9019 | 1.03 (0.93, 1.29) | 1.03 (0.84, 1.27) | 66% | 99/11,929 | 1.09 (0.88, 1.35) | 1.06 (0.84, 1.32) | 0% |
| | 65 -79y | 759/6803 | **1.12 (1.05, 1.19)** | **1.10 (1.04, 1.17)** | 0% | 376/9897 | **1.11 (1.01, 1.22)** | 1.09 (0.99, 1.21) | 0% |
| | ≥80 | 147/777 | 1.15 (0.98, 1.35) | 1.15 (0.96, 1.38) | 0% | 111/1247 | 1.12 (0.94, 1.33) | 1.09 (0.89, 1.33) | 0% |
| | *p for trend* | | 0.024 | 0.015 | | | 0.54 | 0.76 | |
| Stroke history** | No | 1013/22,446 | 1.06 (0.95, 1.18) | 1.05 (0.95, 1.15) | 58% | 472/27,256 | **1.10 (1.02, 1.19)** | **1.09 (1.00, 1.18)** | 0% |
| | Yes | 104/483 | 1.11 (0.95, 1.29) | 1.12 (0.95, 1.32) | 0% | 60/668 | 1.07 (0.78, 1.45) | 1.15 (0.77, 1.73) | 26% |
| | *p for interaction* | | 0.64 | 0.51 | | | 0.87 | 0.80 | |
| Stroke type‡‡ | Hemorrhagic | 17/1577 | 1.37 (0.82-2.29) | 1.15 (0.64-2.07) | NA | 10/1577 | 1.15 (0.63-2.12) | 1.01 (0.49, 2.07) | NA |
| | Ischemic | 157/1577 | **1.30 (1.14-1.47)** | **1.20 (1.06-1.37)** | NA | 39/1577 | 1.00 (0.71-1.41) | 0.90 (0.62-1.28) | NA |
| | *p for interaction* | | 0.84 | 0.88 | | | 0.70 | 0.77 | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Race§§ | White | 617/10,208 | 1.12 (0.99, 1.26) | 1.11 (0.99 1.23) | 51% | 319/14,528 | **1.13 (1.03, 1.23)** | **1.10 (1.00 1.21)** | 0% |
| | Asian | NA | NA | NA | NA | 63/3228 | 1.27 (0.74, 2.18) | 1.27 (0.74, 2.18) | 58% |
| | Black | NA | NA | NA | NA | 2/48 | 0.94 (0.23, 3.88) | 1.00 (0.14, 7.09) | NA |
| | *p for interaction* | | NA | NA | | | 0.89 | 0.87 | |

Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; HR, hazard ratio; FT4, free thyroxine. NA, not applicable. The HRs are per one increase in standard deviation of FT4.

*The Whickham Survey did not measure FT4 but total T4.

† Data were available from 12 studies, 384 participants were excluded due to missing stroke event data.

‡27 participants were excluded due to missing data on cause of death.

§ Adjusted for sex, age, systolic blood pressure, total cholesterol, smoking and prevalent diabetes at baseline.

ll These analyses were not adjusted for sex.

¶ These HRs were adjusted for sex and age as continuous variable to avoid residual confounding within age strata.

** Information on stroke history was not available for the Pisa cohort, Birmingham Study and Busselton Health Study. Data on stroke history were missing for 64 subjects.

‡‡ Information on type of stroke was available for the Rotterdam Study.

§§Information on race was not available for the 4D study, Busselton Health Study and EPIC-Norfolk Study. Excluded 96 participants from MrOs Study due to no events in subgroup