



ARTICLE

Epidemiology

Adult height is associated with increased risk of ovarian cancer: a Mendelian randomisation study

Suzanne C. Dixon-Suen et al.

BACKGROUND: Observational studies suggest greater height is associated with increased ovarian cancer risk, but cannot exclude bias and/or confounding as explanations for this. Mendelian randomisation (MR) can provide evidence which may be less prone to bias.

METHODS: We pooled data from 39 Ovarian Cancer Association Consortium studies (16,395 cases; 23,003 controls). We applied two-stage predictor-substitution MR, using a weighted genetic risk score combining 609 single-nucleotide polymorphisms. Study-specific odds ratios (OR) and 95% confidence intervals (CI) for the association between genetically predicted height and risk were pooled using random-effects meta-analysis.

RESULTS: Greater genetically predicted height was associated with increased ovarian cancer risk overall (pooled-OR (pOR) = 1.06; 95% CI: 1.01–1.11 per 5 cm increase in height), and separately for invasive (pOR = 1.06; 95% CI: 1.01–1.11) and borderline (pOR = 1.15; 95% CI: 1.02–1.29) tumours.

CONCLUSIONS: Women with a genetic propensity to being taller have increased risk of ovarian cancer. This suggests genes influencing height are involved in pathways promoting ovarian carcinogenesis.

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INTRODUCTION

Observational studies have reported a positive association between adult height and ovarian cancer risk.^{1–4} However, these studies were subject to the biases inherent in conventional observational studies, including selection bias, differential and non-differential reporting bias and confounding. The degree to which these factors could account for the observed association is uncertain. Mendelian randomisation (MR) uses genetic markers as proxies for environmental exposures and, due to the singular qualities of genotype data, can provide complementary evidence by overcoming many biases affecting conventional studies.⁵ We used MR to examine the relationship between height and ovarian cancer risk in the Ovarian Cancer Association Consortium (OCAC),⁶ aiming to provide more certainty about the relationship between height and ovarian cancer risk. We hypothesised that greater genetically predicted height would be associated with increased risk.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study population and outcomes

We pooled data from 16,395 genetically European women with primary ovarian/fallopian tube/peritoneal cancer and 23,003 controls from 39 OCAC studies (Table 1; Supplementary Table 1). The data set and methods have been described previously.⁷ Participants were genotyped via the Collaborative Oncological Gene-Environment Study.⁸ Twenty-two studies provided height

data (16 provided parity, oral contraceptive (OC) use, education and age at menarche information) for >50% of their participants. We first considered all cases, then stratified by tumour behaviour. Secondary analyses stratified by histologic subtype/behaviour.

Genetic risk score

The Genetic Investigation of ANthropometric Traits (GIANT) Consortium had previously identified 697 single-nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) significantly associated with height.⁹ In our sample, 92 of these SNPs had been genotyped and the remainder were imputed using 1000 Genome Project data.^{8, 10} After excluding poorly-imputed SNPs (quality $r^2 < 0.6$), 609 remained (92 genotyped/517 imputed) (Supplementary Table 2). In controls, minor allele frequencies (MAFs) were >5% (except for 16 SNPs, MAFs 1.7–4.9%).

We constructed a weighted genetic risk score (GRS) for height by summing height-increasing alleles across the 609 SNPs ('GRS-609'/the GRS'), weighting alleles by β -coefficients for their association with height reported by GIANT. The score represents predicted additional height conferred by these variants, compared to having no height-increasing alleles. We report results for 5 cm increments.

Statistical analysis

Statistical methods have been described previously.⁷ Briefly, we used individual-level OCAC data for two-stage predictor-substitution MR^{11, 12}: first, we predicted height from the weighted GRS for

Correspondence: Suzanne C. Dixon-Suen (Suzanne.Dixon@qimrberghofer.edu.au)

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

Deceased: Helga B. Salvesen, Kenneth D. Swenerton, Catherine Phelan

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Table 1. Characteristics of 39 OCAC studies and 39,398 participants of European ancestry included in the Mendelian randomisation analysis

Study acronym ^a	Country	Diagnosis (years)	Median (range) age at diagnosis/interview	Invasive cases (N)	Borderline cases (N)	All cases (N) ^b	Controls (N)	Mean (SD) height (cm) ^c
AUS	Australia	2002–2006	58 (19–80)	859	1	860	977	163 (6.9)
BAV	Germany	2002–2008	58 (24–83)	96	5	102	143	164 (5.8)
BEL	Belgium	2007–2010	46 (19–87)	275	0	275	1347	—
DOV	USA	2002–2009	57 (35–74)	904	327	1231	1487	166 (6.5)
GER	Germany	1993–1998	57 (21–75)	189	24	213	413	163 (6.0)
GRR	USA	1981–2012	48 (21–83)	125	0	125	0	—
HAW	USA	1993–2008	56 (27–87)	60	20	80	157	163 (6.6)
HJO	Germany	2007–2011	54 (18–88)	261	13	290	273	—
HMO	Belarus	2006–2011	45 (22–76)	142	0	143	138	—
HOC	Finland	1975–1999	46 (18–86)	210	8	239	447	—
HOP	USA	2003–2009	58 (25–94)	567	71	723	1464	163 (6.8)
HSK	Germany	2000–2007	58 (18–81)	147	9	156	0	165 (5.6)
LAX	USA	1989–2008	58 (31–88)	278	0	278	0	—
MAL	Denmark	1994–1999	57 (31–80)	440	138	578	828	166 (6.1)
MAY	USA	2000–2010	61 (20–93)	699	79	778	743	165 (6.3)
MCC	Australia	1990–2008	65 (45–79)	66	0	66	66	159 (7.0)
MDA	USA	1997–2009	62 (23–88)	375	0	375	384	—
MSK	USA	1997–2010	57 (18–89)	450	0	450	593	—
NCO	USA	1999–2008	57 (20–75)	722	171	896	792	163 (6.4)
NEC	USA	1992–2003	52 (21–78)	654	232	904	1009	163 (6.7)
NJO	USA	2002–2009	60 (25–88)	169	0	169	181	163 (6.9)
NOR	Norway	2001–2010	51 (18–86)	236	12	248	371	—
NTH	Netherlands	1997–2008	55 (18–83)	292	3	295	323	167 (6.0)
ORE	USA	2007–2011	58 (22–86)	55	9	65	0	—
OVA	Canada	2002–2009	58 (19–80)	640	161	801	748	—
POC	Poland	1998–2008	55 (23–82)	423	0	423	417	—
POL	Poland	2000–2004	56 (24–74)	236	0	236	223	162 (5.6)
PVD	Denmark	2004–2009	63 (30–88)	168	0	168	0	165 (6.5)
RMH	UK	1993–1996	52 (26–73)	148	7	155	0	—
SEA	UK	1998–2011	57 (19–78)	1447	76	1530	6004	162 (6.3)
SOC	UK	1993–1998	62 (22–92)	268	20	288	0	—
SRO	UK	1999–2001	59 (34–84)	158	0	158	0	—
STA	USA	1997–2002	50 (20–64)	251	10	261	313	165 (6.7)
TOR	Canada	1995–2007	58 (26–85)	603	0	605	440	163 (7.1)
UCI	USA	1993–2005	56 (18–86)	277	141	418	367	165 (6.6)
UKO	UK	2006–2010	63 (19–89)	718	0	718	1104	162 (6.7)
UKR	UK	1991–2009	54 (24–77)	47	0	47	0	—
USC	USA	1992–2010	57 (22–82)	693	152	845	1047	165 (6.8)
WOC	Poland	1997–2010	44 (20–81)	201	2	203	204	—

All participants were of >90% European ancestry according to genetic markers of ancestry. ^aOCAC is an international collaboration of largely case-control studies. See Supplementary Table 1 for study names and references. To maximise power, nine case-only studies were grouped for analysis with case-control studies from the same region: HSK combined with GER; GRR with HOP; PVD with MAL; RMH, SOC, SRO, UKR with SEA and UKO ('UK group'); ORE with DOV; LAX with UCI. ^bCases had primary ovarian ($n = 15,636$), fallopian tube ($n = 180$) or peritoneal ($n = 552$) cancer or ovarian/tubal/peritoneal tumours of undetermined site ($n = 27$). ^cUsual adult height. Height is summarised for 22 studies (20 case-control studies) where >50% participants had data available (AUS, BAV, DOV, GER, HAW, HOP, HSK, MAL, MAY, MCC, NCO, NEC, NJO, NTH, POL, PVD, SEA, STA, TOR, UCI, UKO, USC). Sixteen of these 22 studies were also used in conventional height analyses, as they provided data on potential confounders (age, parity, use of oral contraceptives, education, and age at menarche) for >50% of participants (AUS, DOV, GER, HAW, HOP, MAL, NCO, NEC, NJO, NTH, POL, STA, TOR, UCI, UKO, USC). OCAC Ovarian Cancer Association Consortium, SD standard deviation

all participants using coefficients from linear regression in 17,649 controls with height data; second, within each study, we used logistic regression to model disease status on GRS-predicted height. Models adjusted for age and five principal components for population structure.⁸ We combined study-specific estimates using meta-analysis,¹³ generating pooled odds ratios (pOR) and

95% confidence intervals (CI) for the trend in risk per 5 cm increase in predicted height. We had 97% power to detect an OR of 1.10 (mRnd tool).¹⁴

Sensitivity analyses included removing 16 SNPs with MAFs <5%, and restricting to SNPs with imputation $r^2 \geq 0.9$ ('GRS-363'), SNPs representing distinct loci⁹ ('GRS-377'), and directly-genotyped

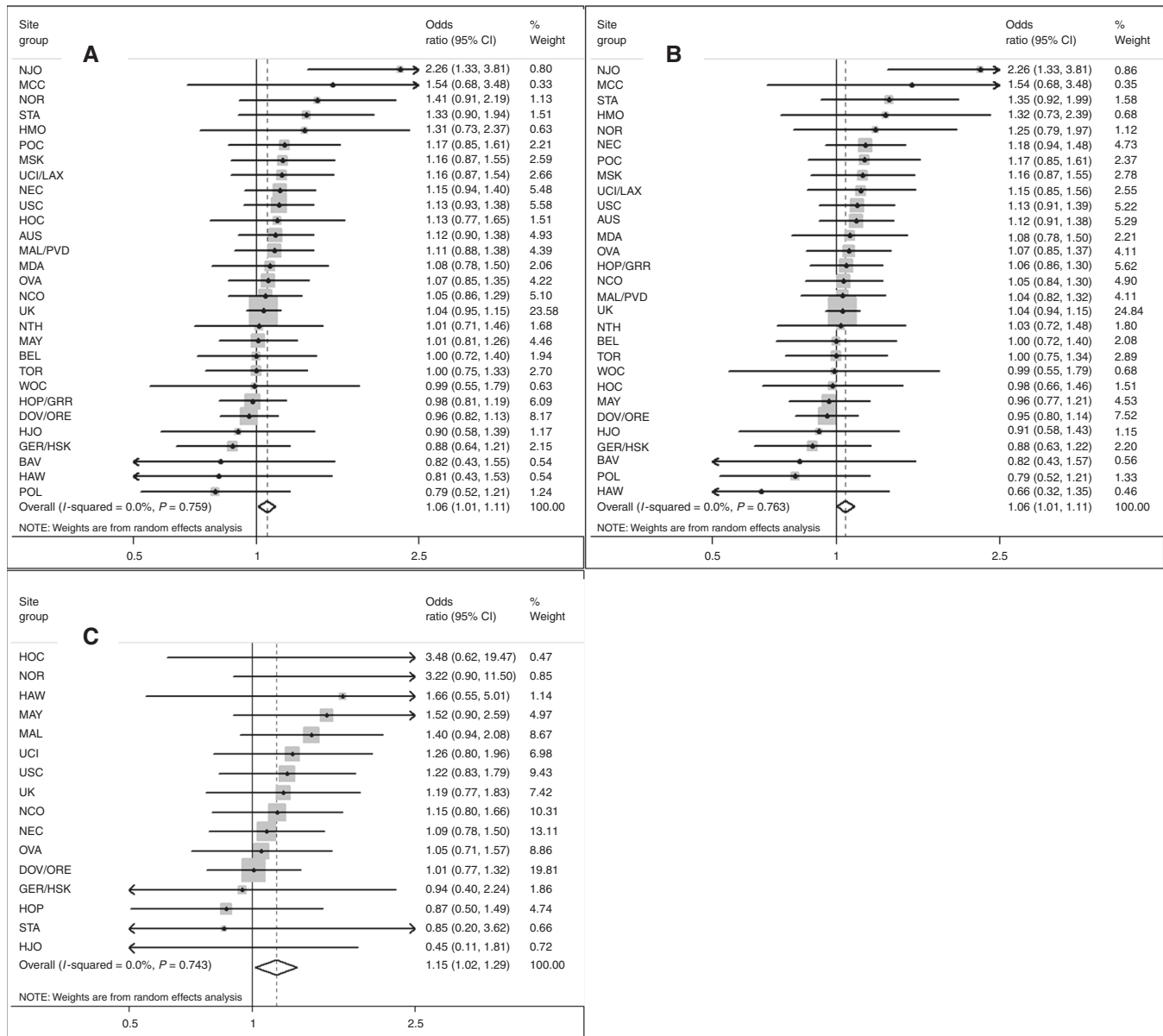


Fig. 1 Association between increasing genetically predicted height and risks of all, invasive and borderline ovarian tumours. Increasing height per 5 cm predicted by weighted 609-locus genetic risk score among 39 studies. Risk of **a** all, **b** invasive and **c** borderline ovarian tumours. The UK grouping includes RMH, SOC, SRO, UKR, SEA and UKO for **a** and **b**, and RMH, SOC and SEA for **c**

SNPs ('GRS-92'). We examined whether potential confounders of the association in observational studies were associated with the GRS. To assess robustness to pleiotropy (where SNPs may influence risk via pathways not mediated through height), we conducted MR-Egger regression¹⁵ and assessed smaller GRSs excluding SNPs with the highest probability of acting via other pathways from GRS to outcome (SNPs associated with ovarian/other hormonal cancers (breast, prostate), hormone levels and in/near tumour initiation/growth genes). We identified these potentially pleiotropic, pathway-specific SNPs via the NHGRI GWAS Catalog,¹⁶ the UCSC Genome/Table Browsers^{17, 18} and from lists of SNPs nominated for iCOGS genotyping by ovarian, breast and prostate cancer researchers (to capture SNPs of interest unpublished at the time of analysis).

Secondary analyses defined cases by histologic subtype/behaviour. Among 16 studies with height/confounder data, we conducted conventional analysis (adjusted for parity, OC use, education, menarche age; stratified by study, 5-year age group)

and compared results with MR-estimates among the same women.

Analyses were performed using SAS 9.2 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC) and Stata 13.0 (StataCorp LP, College Station, TX). This work and each contributing study was approved by the appropriate institutional review board/ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent.

RESULTS

Population characteristics

We included 16,395 cases (14,549 invasive tumours, 1691 borderline, 155 of unknown behaviour) and 23,003 controls (Table 1). The median diagnosis year was 2003, with 74% diagnosed post-2000. Participants were aged 18–94 (median 56) years at diagnosis/interview. Mean height ranged from 159 to 167 cm across 22 studies with data, and was 163 (standard error (SE) = 0.05) cm for controls and 164 (SE = 0.06) cm for cases ($p < 0.0001$).

Table 2. Association between increasing height (per 5 cm)—predicted by a weighted 609-locus genetic risk score—and risk of ovarian cancer, stratified by study

Histologic subtype ^a	N studies	N controls	N cases	Odds ratios (95% CI) ^b
Primary outcomes				
All ovarian cancers	39	23,003	16,395	1.06 (1.01–1.11)
Invasive	39	23,003	14,549	1.06 (1.01–1.11)
Borderline ^c	20	16,463	1680	1.15 (1.02–1.29)
Secondary outcomes, by histologic subtype and behaviour				
Serous				
High-grade ^d	39	23,003	7933	1.05 (0.99–1.11)
Invasive low-grade and borderline	32	21,131	1408	1.15 (1.01–1.30)
Mucinous (invasive and borderline)	38	22,410	1567	1.08 (0.96–1.21)
Endometrioid (invasive)	39	23,003	2059	1.05 (0.95–1.16)
Clear cell (invasive)	35	22,051	948	1.20 (1.04–1.38)

Weights applied were β -coefficients for the relationship between each SNP and height as reported in the meta-analysis of genome-wide association studies conducted by the Genetic Investigation of ANthropometric Traits (GIANT) Consortium.⁹ On the basis of the additive SNP effects suggested by GIANT, the score summed alleles across the 609 SNPs. For the 92 genotyped SNPs, where values were missing (<2.5% per SNP), we used imputed probabilities. ^aIncludes studies with >5 cases. ^bPooled study-specific odds ratios are reported for primary outcomes; odds ratios stratified by study are reported for secondary outcomes (secondary analyses used single models stratified by study to maximise power). ^cOf the 1691 borderline tumours included in the all-case analysis, 1680 were from 20 studies with >5 cases each. ^dIncludes all invasive serous cancers except low-grade (G1) ($n = 469$) as well as invasive serous cancers of unknown grade ($n = 1957$) and primary peritoneal cancers of unknown behaviour ($n = 44$), because in both instances the majority would be high-grade serous. CI confidence interval

Genetic risk score characteristics

The GRS-609 was normally distributed in controls, ranging from 15.45 to 18.99 (median = 17.23; interquartile range = 16.92–17.54). It explained 13% of variance in height, 17% after adjusting for age and principal components (partial- $R^2 = 12\%$; first-stage regression partial- F -statistic = 2505.8 (df = 1), $p < 0.001$). A 1-unit GRS-609 increase was associated with 5.2 cm greater height. Average height was 6.2 cm greater in the highest vs. lowest GRS quartile.

Cochran's I^2 and p -values for heterogeneity¹⁹ showed no evidence of inter-study heterogeneity in the relationship between either the GRS-609 ($I^2 = 34\%$, p -heterogeneity = 0.07) or the simplified GRS-363 ($I^2 = 32\%$, p -heterogeneity = 0.08) and height among controls (Supplementary Figure 1a, b). The GRS-609 was not associated with most potential confounders of the height-ovarian cancer association in observational studies, including age, parity, OC use and education (Supplementary Table 3). The GRS was marginally positively associated with age at menarche ($p = 0.03$), consistent with known genetic overlap between these traits.²⁰

Primary outcomes

Women with greater genetically predicted height had a modestly increased risk of developing ovarian cancer (pOR = 1.06, 95% CI: 1.01–1.11 per 5 cm) (Fig. 1a; Table 2) with a greater magnitude of association for borderline (pOR = 1.15; 95% CI: 1.02–1.29) than invasive tumours (pOR = 1.06; 95% CI: 1.01–1.11; Fig. 1b, c; Table 2). No significant inter-study heterogeneity was noted (Fig. 1a–c). GRS-363 (pOR = 1.06, 95% CI: 1.00–1.11, all tumours) and GRS-377 (OR = 1.07; 95% CI: 1.01–1.12) results were similar to the GRS-609. The association was stronger when we restricted to 92 genotyped SNPs (pOR = 1.14; 95% CI: 1.04–1.25). Estimates from analyses excluding low-MAF SNPs, excluding case-only studies, or adjusting for age at menarche, were similar to primary analyses. When we sequentially excluded SNPs associated with ovarian or other hormonal cancers, hormone levels and tumour development, estimates were similar or stronger than GRS-609 results. MR-Egger suggested minimal bias from pleiotropy ($p = 0.1$; MR-Egger beta = 0.163 corresponded to an OR per 5 cm of 1.13 (95% CI: 1.02–1.25), confirming a significant positive association).

In contrast, for women with height and confounder data (16 studies), the conventional analysis suggested no association (adjusted-OR = 1.01, 95% CI: 0.99–1.04 per 5 cm). Conducting MR within the same 16 studies yielded results similar to overall analyses (OR = 1.06, 95% CI: 1.00–1.13) (Supplementary Table 4).

Secondary outcomes

After stratifying by subtype/behaviour, the strongest associations were seen for clear cell (OR = 1.20, 95% CI: 1.04–1.38) and low-grade/borderline serous cancers (OR = 1.15, 95% CI: 1.01–1.30) (Table 2). However, CIs were wide and overlapping due to lower statistical power in these subgroup analyses. The estimate for clear cell cancers was also significantly elevated in our conventional analyses (Supplementary Table 4).

DISCUSSION

We used a 609-SNP GRS to examine the relationship between height and ovarian cancer risk for women of European ancestry. Our data indicate a modest positive association between genetically predicted height and ovarian cancer risk, which may be stronger for borderline cancers. Height may be relevant to cancer risk as a marker for lifetime growth-factor levels (e.g. IGF-1) and/or early-life exposures (socio-economic/environmental/nutritional).^{3, 21, 22}

Observational studies are subject to biases (reverse causality, selection bias, differential/non-differential reporting, confounding) which cannot be ruled out as possible explanations for observed associations. By using genotype, the MR technique can overcome some of these biases, given three assumptions. We confirmed the two verifiable assumptions: the GRS was associated with height, and not with most known confounders. The GRS-menarche age association is unlikely to explain the observed association, because age at menarche is only weakly associated with ovarian cancer, and women with later menarche have if anything lower ovarian cancer risk, so if this affected our results, we would expect the true effect to be at least as strong as the reported association. Also, removing hormone-related SNPs, or adjusting for menarche age, did not attenuate estimates. Owing to the limited current biological understanding of all 609 SNPs, we could not

conclusively exclude the presence of alternate pathways from height genes to ovarian cancer (assumption three). However, MR-Egger and sensitivity analyses excluding pathway-specific SNPs provided some evidence for their absence, minimising the likelihood that our observed association is explained by pathways separate from height/growth. Although height data were not available for the entire population, this is unlikely to have affected our results as we used these data only to refine the height predictions from the GRS, and there is no reason to believe the GRS-height relationship would be different for women with and without height data. Further strengths of our analysis include the large number of SNPs and power to detect modest differences.

Despite potential limitations of conventional observational studies, our MR-estimate is almost identical to previously reported associations, suggesting previous estimates were not appreciably biased. The World Cancer Research Fund/American Institute for Cancer Research meta-analysis of 24 prospective studies, and a study pooling 47 prospective/case-control studies, both reported a significant 7–8% increase in risk (combining invasive/borderline cancers) per 5 cm height increase.^{3, 4} The lack of association seen in the OCAC conventional height analysis reflects the greater potential for bias in case-control studies and illustrates the value of MR in overcoming these biases. Few previous studies have examined borderline cancers separately, a strength of our analysis. Previous observational studies have not reported consistent patterns by histologic subtype^{2, 4, 23}; our secondary analyses were under-powered to resolve this question.

Using MR, we have established that the previously observed association between height and ovarian cancer risk is unlikely to have been explained by bias, and that genetic factors influencing height play roles in ovarian cancer development. Height could therefore be used, with other risk factors, to identify women at elevated risk. Further research should continue to explore mechanisms underpinning this association.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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AFFILIATIONS

Suzanne C. Dixon-Suen^{1,2}, Christina M. Nagle^{1,2}, Aaron P. Thrift³, Paul D. P. Pharoah⁴, Ailith Ewing⁴, Celeste Leigh Pearce^{5,6}, Wei Zheng⁷, Australian Ovarian Cancer Study Group^{1,8}, Georgia Chenevix-Trench⁹, Peter A. Fasching^{10,11}, Matthias W. Beckmann¹¹, Diether Lambrechts^{12,13}, Ignace Vergote¹⁴, Sandrina Lambrechts¹⁴, Els Van Nieuwenhuysen¹⁴, Mary Anne Rossing^{15,16}, Jennifer A. Doherty¹⁷, Kristine G. Wicklund¹⁵, Jenny Chang-Claude^{18,19}, Audrey Y. Jung¹⁸, Kirsten B. Moysich²⁰, Kunle Odunsi²¹, Marc T. Goodman^{22,23}, Lynne R. Wilkens²⁴, Pamela J. Thompson²², Yurii B. Shvetsov²⁴, Thilo Dörk²⁵, Tjong-Won Park-Simon²⁵, Peter Hillemanns²⁵, Natalia Bogdanova²⁶, Ralf Butzow²⁷, Heli Nevanlinna²⁸, Liisa M. Pelttari²⁸, Arto Leminen²⁸, Francesmary Modugno^{29,30,31}, Roberta B. Ness³², Robert P. Edwards^{29,30}, Joseph L. Kelley²⁹, Florian Heitz^{33,34}, Andreas du Bois^{33,34}, Philipp Harter^{33,34}, Ira Schwaab³⁵, Beth Y. Karlan³⁶, Jenny Lester³⁶, Sandra Orsulic³⁶, Bobbie J. Rime!³⁶, Susanne K. Kjær^{37,38}, Estrid Høgdall^{37,39}, Allan Jensen³⁷, Ellen L. Goode⁴⁰, Brooke L. Fridley⁴¹, Julie M. Cunningham⁴², Stacey J. Winham⁴³, Graham G. Giles^{44,45,46}, Fiona Bruinsma⁴⁴, Roger L. Milne^{44,45}, Melissa C. Southey⁴⁷, Michelle A. T. Hildebrandt⁴⁸, Xifeng Wu⁴⁸, Karen H. Lu⁴⁹, Dong Liang⁵⁰, Douglas A. Levine⁵¹, Maria Bisogna⁵², Joellen M. Schildkraut⁵³, Andrew Berchuck⁵⁴, Daniel W. Cramer⁵⁵, Kathryn L. Terry^{55,56}, Elisa V. Bandera^{57,58}, Sara H. Olson⁵⁹, Helga B. Salvesen^{60,61}, Liv Cecilie Vestrheim Thomsen^{60,61}, Reidun K. Kopperud^{60,61}, Line Bjorge^{60,61}, Lambertus A. Kiemeny⁶², Leon F. A. G. Massuger⁶³, Tanja Pejovic^{64,65}, Amanda Bruegl⁶⁴, Linda S. Cook⁶⁶, Nhu D. Le⁶⁷, Kenneth D. Swenerton⁶⁸, Angela Brooks-Wilson^{69,70}, Linda E. Kelemen⁷¹, Jan Lubiński⁷², Tomasz Huzarski⁷², Jacek Gronwald⁷², Janusz Menkiszak⁷³, Nicolas Wentzensen⁷⁴, Louise Brinton⁷⁴, Hannah Yang⁷⁴, Jolanta Lissowska⁷⁵, Claus K. Høgdall³⁸, Lene Lundvall³⁸, Honglin Song⁴, Jonathan P. Tyrer⁴, Ian Campbell^{76,77}, Diana Eccles⁷⁸, James Paul⁷⁹, Rosalind Glasspool⁸⁰, Nadeem Siddiqui⁸¹, Alice S. Whittemore⁸², Weiva Sieh⁸³, Valerie McGuire⁸², Joseph H. Rothstein⁸³, Steven A. Narod⁸⁴, Catherine Phelan⁸⁵, Harvey A. Risch⁸⁶, John R. McLaughlin⁸⁷, Hoda Anton-Culver^{88,89}, Argyrios Ziogas⁸⁸, Usha Menon⁹⁰, Simon A. Gayther⁹¹, Susan J. Ramus^{92,93}, Aleksandra Gentry-Maharaj⁹⁰, Anna H. Wu⁶, Malcolm C. Pike^{6,59}, Chiu-Chen Tseng⁶, Jolanta Kupryjanczyk⁹⁴, Agnieszka Dansonka-Mieszkowska⁹⁴, Agnieszka Budzilowska⁹⁴, Iwona K. Rzepecka⁹⁴ and Penelope M. Webb^{1,2}, on behalf of the Ovarian Cancer Association Consortium

¹Gynaecological Cancers Group, QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute, 300 Herston Road, Brisbane QLD 4006, Australia; ²The University of Queensland, School of Public Health, Level 2 Public Health Building (887), Corner of Herston Road & Wyndham Street, Brisbane QLD 4006, Australia; ³Department of Medicine and Dan L Duncan Comprehensive Cancer Center, Baylor College of Medicine, One Baylor Plaza, Houston, TX 77030, USA; ⁴Strangeways Research Laboratory, Centre for Cancer Genetic Epidemiology, Department of Public Health & Primary Care/Department of Oncology, University of Cambridge, Worts Causeway, Cambridge CB1 8RN, UK; ⁵Department of Epidemiology, University of Michigan School of Public Health, 1415 Washington Heights, SPH Tower, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2029, USA; ⁶Department of Preventive Medicine, Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center, 1441 Eastlake Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90033, USA; ⁷Vanderbilt Epidemiology Center, Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, 2525 West End Ave., Nashville, TN 37203, USA; ⁸Cancer Genetics and Genomics Laboratory, Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, St Andrews Place, Melbourne, VIC 3002, Australia; ⁹Cancer Genetics Group, QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute, 300 Herston Road, Brisbane QLD 4006, Australia; ¹⁰Department of Medicine, Division of Hematology and Oncology, David Geffen School of Medicine, University of California at Los Angeles, 10833 Le Conte Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA; ¹¹Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics, University Hospital Erlangen, Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg, Comprehensive Cancer Center Erlangen-EMN, Universitätsstrasse 21-23, 91054 Erlangen, Germany; ¹²Vesalius Research Center, VIB, Herestraat 49, bus 912, 3000 Leuven, Belgium; ¹³Laboratory for Translational Genetics, Department of Oncology, University of Leuven, O&N IV Herestraat 49—Box 912, 3000 Leuven, Belgium; ¹⁴Division of Gynecologic Oncology, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology and Leuven Cancer Institute, University Hospitals Leuven, Herestraat 49, Leuven 3000, Belgium; ¹⁵Program in Epidemiology, Division of Public Health Sciences, Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, 1100 Fairview Ave. N., Seattle, WA 98109-1024, USA; ¹⁶Department of Epidemiology, University of Washington, 1959 NE Pacific Street, Health Sciences Bldg, F-262, Seattle, WA 98195, USA; ¹⁷Department of Epidemiology, The Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth, 1 Medical Center Drive, 7927 Ruben Building, Lebanon, NH 03756, USA; ¹⁸Division of Cancer Epidemiology, German Cancer Research Center, Im Neuenheimer Feld 581, Heidelberg 69120, Germany; ¹⁹University Cancer Center Hamburg, University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf, Martinistr. 52, 20246 Hamburg, Germany; ²⁰Department of Cancer Prevention and Control, Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Elm and Carlton Streets, Buffalo, NY 14263, USA; ²¹Department of Gynecological Oncology, Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Elm and Carlton Streets, Buffalo, NY 14263, USA; ²²Cancer Prevention and Control, Samuel Oschin Comprehensive Cancer Institute, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, 8700 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90048, USA; ²³Community and Population Health Research Institute, Department of Biomedical Sciences, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, 8700 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90048, USA; ²⁴Cancer Epidemiology Program, University of Hawaii Cancer Center, 701 Ilalo Street, Honolulu, HI 96813, USA; ²⁵Clinics of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Hannover Medical School, Carl-Neuberg-Str. 1, D-30625 Hannover, Germany; ²⁶Radiation Oncology Research Unit, Hannover Medical School, Carl-Neuberg-Str. 1, D-30625 Hannover, Germany; ²⁷Department of Pathology, University of Helsinki and Helsinki University Hospital,

Haartmaninkatu 8, 00029 Helsinki, Finland; ²⁸Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, University of Helsinki and Helsinki University Hospital, Haartmaninkatu 8, 00029 Helsinki, Finland; ²⁹Division of Gynecologic Oncology, Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, 300 Halket Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA; ³⁰Ovarian Cancer Center of Excellence, Women's Cancer Research Program, Magee-Women's Research Institute and University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute, 204 Craft Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA; ³¹Department of Epidemiology, University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health, 130 De Soto Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15261, USA; ³²The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, School of Public Health, 1200 Herman Pressler, Suite E-1015, Houston, TX 77030, USA; ³³Department of Gynecology and Gynecologic Oncology, Kliniken Essen-Mitte/ Evang. Huysdens-Stiftung/ Knappschaft GmbH, Henricistrasse 92, 45136 Essen, Germany; ³⁴Department of Gynecology and Gynecologic Oncology, Dr. Horst Schmidt Kliniken Wiesbaden, Ludwig-Erhard-Strasse 100, 65199 Wiesbaden, Germany; ³⁵Praxis für Humangenetik, Biebricher Allee 117, 65187 Wiesbaden, Germany; ³⁶Women's Cancer Program at the Samuel Oschin Comprehensive Cancer Institute, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, 8635 West Third Street, Los Angeles, CA 90048, USA; ³⁷Department of Virus, Lifestyle and Genes, Danish Cancer Society Research Center, Strandboulevarden 49, DK-2100 Copenhagen, Denmark; ³⁸Department of Gynaecology, Rigshospitalet, University of Copenhagen, Blegdamsvej 9, DK-2100 Copenhagen, Denmark; ³⁹Molecular Unit, Department of Pathology, Herlev Hospital, University of Copenhagen, Herlev Ringvej 75, DK-2370 Herlev, Denmark; ⁴⁰Department of Health Science Research, Division of Epidemiology, Mayo Clinic, 200 First Street SW, Charlton 6, Rochester, MN 55905, USA; ⁴¹Department of Biostatistics and Bioinformatics, Moffitt Cancer Center, 12902 Magnolia Drive, Tampa, FL 33612, USA; ⁴²Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology, Mayo Clinic, 200 First Street SW, Stable 13, Rochester, MN 55905, USA; ⁴³Division of Biomedical Statistics and Informatics, Department of Health Science Research, Mayo Clinic, 200 First Street SW, Charlton 6, Rochester, MN 55905, USA; ⁴⁴Cancer Epidemiology and Intelligence Division, Cancer Council Victoria, 615 St Kilda Road, Melbourne VIC 3004, Australia; ⁴⁵Centre for Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, The University of Melbourne, Grattan Street, Parkville VIC 3010, Australia; ⁴⁶Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, The Alfred Centre, 99 Commercial Road, Melbourne VIC 3004, Australia; ⁴⁷Genetic Epidemiology Laboratory, Department of Pathology, The University of Melbourne, Grattan Street, Carlton VIC 3053, Australia; ⁴⁸Department of Epidemiology, The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, 1155 Pressler Blvd—Unit 1340, Houston, TX 77030, USA; ⁴⁹Department of Gynecologic Oncology, The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, 1155 Pressler Blvd - Unit 1340, Houston, TX 77030, USA; ⁵⁰College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, Texas Southern University, 3100 Cleburne St, Houston, TX 77004, USA; ⁵¹Division of Gynecologic Oncology, Department of Obstetrics And Gynecology, NYU Langone Medical Center, 240 East 38th Street, New York, NY 10016, USA; ⁵²Gynecology Service, Department of Surgery, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, 417 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065, USA; ⁵³Department of Public Health Sciences, The University of Virginia, Box 800717, Charlottesville, VA 22908, USA; ⁵⁴Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Duke University Medical Center, 25171 Morris Bldg, Durham, NC 27710, USA; ⁵⁵Obstetrics and Gynecology Epidemiology Center, Brigham and Women's Hospital, 221 Longwood Avenue, Richardson Fuller Building, Boston, MA 02115, USA; ⁵⁶Department of Epidemiology, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 677 Huntington Ave, Boston, MA 02115, USA; ⁵⁷Cancer Prevention and Control Program, Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey, 195 Little Albany Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08903, USA; ⁵⁸Rutgers School of Public Health, 683 Hoes Lane West, Piscataway, NJ 08854, USA; ⁵⁹Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, 485 Lexington Ave, New York, NY 10017, USA; ⁶⁰Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Haukeland University Hospital, Kvinnekliviken, Jonas Liesvei 72, 5058 Bergen, Norway; ⁶¹Centre for Cancer Biomarkers, Department of Clinical Science, University of Bergen, Postboks 7804, N-5020 Bergen, Norway; ⁶²Radboud University Medical Center, Radboud Institute for Health Sciences, PO Box 9101, 6500 HB Nijmegen, The Netherlands; ⁶³Radboud University Medical Center, Radboud Institute for Molecular Life Sciences, Department of Gynaecology, PO Box 9101, 6500 HB Nijmegen, The Netherlands; ⁶⁴Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology, Oregon Health & Science University, 3181 SW Sam Jackson Park Road, Portland, OR 97239, USA; ⁶⁵Knight Cancer Institute, Oregon Health & Science University, 3181 SW Sam Jackson Park Road, Portland, OR 97239, USA; ⁶⁶Division of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Department of Internal Medicine, University of New Mexico, 2703 Frontier Ave NE, Albuquerque, NM 87131, USA; ⁶⁷Cancer Control Research, BC Cancer Agency, 675 West 10th Avenue, Vancouver, BC, Canada; ⁶⁸Department of Medicine, University of British Columbia, 2775 Laurel Street, Vancouver, BC V5Z 1M9, Canada; ⁶⁹Canada's Michael Smith Genome Sciences Centre, BC Cancer Agency, 675 West 10th Avenue, Vancouver, BC, Canada; ⁷⁰Department of Biomedical Physiology and Kinesiology, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6, Canada; ⁷¹Department of Public Health Sciences, Medical University of South Carolina, 68 President Street, Bioengineering Building, Charleston, SC 29425, USA; ⁷²International Hereditary Cancer Center, Department of Genetics and Pathology, Pomeranian Medical University, ul. Polabska 4, Szczecin 70-115, Poland; ⁷³Department of Gynecological Surgery and Gynecological Oncology of Adults and Adolescents, Pomeranian Medical University, ul. Powstańców Wlkp 72, 70-111 Szczecin, Poland; ⁷⁴Division of Cancer Epidemiology and Genetics, National Cancer Institute, 9609 Medical Center Drive, Rockville, MD 20850, USA; ⁷⁵Department of Cancer Epidemiology and Prevention, The Maria Skłodowska-Curie Memorial Cancer Center and Institute of Oncology, Wawelska 15B, 02-034 Warsaw, Poland; ⁷⁶Cancer Genetics Laboratory, Research Division, Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, St Andrews Place, Melbourne VIC 3002, Australia; ⁷⁷Department of Pathology, University of Melbourne, Grattan Street, Carlton, VIC 3053, Australia; ⁷⁸Faculty of Medicine, Southampton University Hospitals Trust, Princess Anne Hospital, University of Southampton, Southampton SO16 5YA, UK; ⁷⁹Cancer Research UK Clinical Trials Unit Glasgow, Institute of Cancer Sciences, University of Glasgow, 1053 Gt. Western Road, Glasgow G12 0YN, UK; ⁸⁰The Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Centre, 1053 Gt. Western Road, Glasgow G12 0YN, UK; ⁸¹Department of Gynaecological Oncology, Glasgow Royal Infirmary, Alexandra Parade, Glasgow G31 2ER, UK; ⁸²Department of Health Research and Policy—Epidemiology, Stanford University School of Medicine, HRP Redwood Building, 259 Campus Drive, Stanford, CA 94305, USA; ⁸³Departments of Population Health Science & Policy and Genetics & Genomic Sciences, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, 1 Gustave L. Levy Place, New York, NY 10029, USA; ⁸⁴Women's College Research Institute, University of Toronto, 790 Bay Street, Toronto, ON M5G 1N8, Canada; ⁸⁵Department of Cancer Epidemiology, Moffitt Cancer Center, 12902 Magnolia Drive, Tampa, FL 33612, USA; ⁸⁶Department of Chronic Disease Epidemiology, Yale School of Public Health, LEPH 413, 60 College Street, New Haven, CT 06510, USA; ⁸⁷Public Health Ontario, 480 University Avenue (/300), Toronto, ON M5G1V2, Canada; ⁸⁸Department of Epidemiology, University of California Irvine, 224 Irvine Hall, Irvine, CA 92697-7550, USA; ⁸⁹Genetic Epidemiology Research Institute, UCI Center for Cancer Genetics Research & Prevention, School of Medicine, University of California Irvine, 224 Irvine Hall, Irvine, CA 92697-7550, USA; ⁹⁰Women's Cancer, Institute for Women's Health, University College London, Maple House 1st Floor, 149 Tottenham Court Road, London W1T 7DN, UK; ⁹¹Center for Cancer Prevention and Translational Genomics, Samuel Oschin Cancer Institute, Spielberg Building, 8725 Alden Dr., Los Angeles, CA 90048, USA; ⁹²School of Women's and Children's Health, University of New South Wales, Level 1, Women's Health Institute, Royal Hospital for Women, Barker Street, Randwick, NSW 2031, Australia; ⁹³The Kinghorn Cancer Centre, Garvan Institute of Medical Research, 384 Victoria Street, Darlinghurst, NSW 2010, Australia and ⁹⁴Department of Pathology and Laboratory Diagnostics, The Maria Skłodowska-Curie Memorial Cancer Center and Institute of Oncology, Roentgena 5, 02-781 Warsaw, Poland

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Author/s:

Dixon-Suen, SC; Nagle, CM; Thrift, AP; Pharoah, PDP; Ewing, A; Pearce, CL; Zheng, W; Chenevix-Trench, G; Fasching, PA; Beckmann, MW; Lambrechts, D; Vergote, I; Lambrechts, S; Van Nieuwenhuysen, E; Rossing, MA; Doherty, JA; Wicklund, KG; Chang-Claude, J; Jung, AY; Moysich, KB; Odunsi, K; Goodman, MT; Wilkens, LR; Thompson, PJ; Shvetsov, YB; Doerk, T; Park-Simon, T-W; Hillemanns, P; Bogdanova, N; Butzow, R; Nevanlinna, H; Pelttari, LM; Leminen, A; Modugno, F; Ness, RB; Edwards, RP; Kelley, JL; Heitz, F; du Bois, A; Harter, P; Schwaab, I; Karlan, BY; Lester, J; Orsulic, S; Rimel, BJ; Kjaer, SK; Hogdall, E; Jensen, A; Goode, EL; Fridley, BL; Cunningham, JM; Winham, SJ; Giles, GG; Bruinsma, F; Milne, RL; Southey, MC; Hildebrandt, MAT; Wu, X; Lu, KH; Liang, D; Levine, DA; Bisogna, M; Schildkraut, JM; Berchuck, A; Cramer, DW; Terry, KL; Bandera, EV; Olson, SH; Salvesen, HB; Thomsen, LCV; Kopperud, RK; Bjorge, L; Kiemenev, LA; Massuger, LFAG; Pejovic, T; Bruegl, A; Cook, LS; Le, ND; Swenerton, KD; Brooks-Wilson, A; Kelemen, LE; Lubinski, J; Huzarski, T; Gronwald, J; Menkiszak, J; Wentzensen, N; Brinton, L; Yang, H; Lissowska, J; Hogdall, CK; Lundvall, L; Song, H; Tyrer, JP; Campbell, I; Eccles, D; Paul, J; Glasspool, R; Siddiqui, N; Whitemore, AS; Sieh, W; McGuire, V; Rothstein, JH; Narod, SA; Phelan, C; Risch, HA; McLaughlin, JR; Anton-Culver, H; Ziogas, A; Menon, U; Gayther, SA; Ramus, SJ; Gentry-Maharaj, A; Wu, AH; Pike, MC; Tseng, C-C; Kupryjanczyk, J; Dansonka-Mieszkowska, A; Budzilowska, A; Rzepecka, IK; Webb, PM

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