

REVIEW



Human Genetics Informing Drug Development in Cardiovascular Disease: Interleukin-6 Signaling as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT: Cardiovascular disease remains the leading cause of death worldwide, calling for the development of novel therapeutics. Over the past 3 decades, substantial investments in human genetic research have unveiled the genetic architecture of cardiovascular disease, offering promising novel therapeutic targets. These discoveries have been instrumental in the development of several cardiovascular drug development programs, such as those targeting proprotein convertase subtilisin/kexin type 9, lipoprotein (a), apo C₃, and angiopoietin-like 3. Large-scale resources such as population-based biobanks and data repositories, now enable human genetic data to be leveraged at scale and inform not only target selection, but also clinical drug development. This review highlights the transformative potential of human genetics in cardiovascular drug development, focusing on IL (interleukin)-6 signaling as a case study. Specifically, we discuss how IL-6 signaling was pinpointed as a key causal mediator of atherosclerosis by genetic data, shaping the current development landscape for anti-IL-6 therapeutics in cardiovascular disease. Recent genetic studies employing innovative methodologies have provided key insights into prioritizing indications for clinical testing, informing repurposing strategies, optimizing clinical trial design for population selection, and assessing safety signals. Despite this progress, methodological challenges, such as pleiotropic effects of genetic variants, extrapolation of small genetic associations to large interventional effects, and the predominance of European-derived data, highlight the need for careful interpretation. Continued methodological advances, coupled with the emergence of high-throughput omics data and detailed cardiovascular phenotyping, promise unprecedented opportunities to refine drug discovery and development.

Key Words: atherosclerosis ■ cardiovascular diseases ■ cytokines ■ genetics ■ immune system ■ inflammation

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) remains the leading cause of death worldwide and is associated with substantial economic and quality-of-life burdens.¹⁻³ Despite advances in the management of vascular risk factors, the rates of CVD remain alarmingly high and are projected to further increase in the coming decades, highlighting the need for novel therapeutic and preventive strategies.¹ However, investment in cardiovascular drug development has stagnated, leading to a deceleration in the development of new therapeutics for CVD indications.⁴ For example, between 2011 and 2023, only 28 molecular entities were approved for cardiovascular indications, which is in stark contrast to 573 new entities

approved between 2000 and 2022 for cancer.^{5,6} This is partly attributed to prior cardiovascular drug failures, safety concerns, commercial viability, the high cost of cardiovascular outcome trials, and the uncertainties surrounding regulatory approval of new therapies or indications.⁴ Accelerating the discovery and development of novel CVD therapeutics is essential for decreasing CVD burden in the community.

Analyses of human genetic data provide valuable insights into target discovery and drug development.^{7,8} Advances such as the sequencing of the human genome and the development of high-throughput genotyping and analytic technologies have facilitated the discovery of

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Nonstandard abbreviations and acronyms

| | |
|----------------|---|
| ANGPTL3 | angiopoietin-like 3 |
| CAD | coronary artery disease |
| CIRT | Cardiovascular Inflammation Reduction Trial |
| CKD | chronic kidney disease |
| CRP | C-reactive protein |
| CVD | cardiovascular disease |
| CXCL10 | C-X-C motif chemokine ligand 10 |
| Fg | fibrinogen |
| hsCRP | high-sensitivity C-reactive protein |
| IL-6 | interleukin-6 |
| IL6R MR | Interleukin-6 Receptor Mendelian Randomization Analysis |
| IL6R | interleukin-6 receptor |
| LDL-C | low-density lipoprotein cholesterol |
| Lp(a) | lipoprotein(a) |
| Lp-PLA2 | lipoprotein-associated phospholipase A2 |
| mIL-6R | membrane bound interleukin-6 receptor |
| MR | Mendelian randomization |
| NLRP3 | NOD-, LRR- and pyrin domain-containing protein |
| OR | odds ratio |
| PCSK9 | proprotein convertase subtilisin/kexin type 9 |
| SAA | serum amyloid A |
| sIL-6R | soluble interleukin-6 receptor |

hundreds of genomic loci associated with CVD.⁹ Analyzing genetic variation, especially in genes encoding drug targets, enables *in silico* predictions of the effects of interfering with these molecules, offering insights analogous to pharmacological interventions. These analyses have been empowered by the increasing availability of large-scale resources including population-based biobanks, genetic, and phenotypic data repositories, and initiatives aimed at deeply sequencing the human genome across diverse populations. Retrospective analyses of drug development programs have shown that drugs targeting molecules with genetic support are 2.6× as likely to gain regulatory approval.¹⁰ In fact, genetic evidence has directly informed the development of CVD therapeutics, contributing to successful development programs targeting PCSK9 (proprotein convertase subtilisin/kexin type 9),⁸ Lp(a) (lipoprotein [a]),^{11–13} apo C₃,¹⁴ ANGPTL3 (angiopoietin-like 3),¹⁴ factor XI,¹⁵ and IL (interleukin)-6 signaling.^{16–18}

Here, we summarize how genetic studies may support cardiovascular drug development using IL-6 signaling as a case study. We discuss opportunities to leverage

human genetics for target selection, indication prioritization, repurposing strategies, optimization of clinical trial design, and safety assessment.

IL-6 SIGNALING IN CVD

Atherosclerosis is the main underlying cause of CVD and is largely driven by inflammation. Decades of preclinical, epidemiological, and clinical investigations have identified key molecular pathways driving atheroinflammation,^{19–27} with IL-6 signaling emerging as a critical target for atheroprotective immunotherapies.²⁸ IL-6 is a central regulator of the acute-phase response, driving the production of CRP (C-reactive protein), Fg (fibrinogen), and SAA (serum amyloid A).²⁹ Within atherosclerotic lesions, IL-6 is primarily produced by macrophages and foam cells in response to IL-1 and exacerbates local inflammation, likely contributing to plaque destabilization and rupture.^{30–33} Epidemiological studies have shown consistent associations between circulating levels of hs-CRP (high-sensitivity CRP), a key downstream biomarker of IL-6 pathway activity, and cardiovascular risk.^{34,35} Prospective cohort studies have similarly provided evidence that higher levels of IL-6 are associated with a higher risk of major adverse cardiovascular events.³⁶ Preclinical studies in mouse models of atherosclerosis have shown that genetic or pharmacological inhibition of IL-6 signaling is associated with a lower burden of atherosclerosis.³⁷

Notably, findings from cardiovascular outcome trials targeting upstream regulators of IL-6 signaling with colchicine and canakinumab in patients with atherosclerosis have shown significant reductions in major adverse cardiovascular events.^{24–26} Subgroup analyses of the Phase 3 CANTOS trial for canakinumab, an anti-IL-1 β monoclonal antibody, showed that the reduction in major adverse cardiovascular events was greatest in participants who achieved robust inhibition of the IL-6 pathway,^{27,38} reinforcing IL-6 signaling as a central mediator of residual inflammatory risk. The subgroup of participants who achieved IL-6 levels in the lowest tertile on canakinumab had a hazard ratio of 0.65 (95% CI, 0.53–0.81) for major adverse cardiovascular events and a hazard ratio of 0.41 (95% CI, 0.27–0.64) for cardiovascular mortality after adjusting for covariates including baseline level of IL-6. On the contrary, treatment with low-dose methotrexate did not lower vascular risk or hs-CRP levels in the CIRT (Cardiovascular Inflammation Reduction Trial),³⁹ thus emphasizing the importance of specifically targeting atherosclerosis-specific inflammatory pathways. Although 2 trials showed efficacy for colchicine in lowering major adverse cardiovascular events risk among patients with coronary artery disease (CAD; LoDoCo2 and COLCOT), the largest and most recent trial of patients with acute myocardial infarction (CLEAR SYNERGY [OASIS-9])⁴⁰ failed to show any benefit. Colchicine is a long-used drug that inhibits microtubule formation and is believed

to exert its main anti-inflammatory action by inhibiting NLRP3 (NOD-, LRR- and pyrin domain-containing protein) inflammasome, leading to downstream downregulation of IL-1 β and IL-6 signaling activity.^{41–43} The reason for the lack of benefit in CLEAR SYNERGY remains unclear and may be attributable to inadequate control of inflammation, given the on-treatment least-squares mean hs-CRP levels of 3.0 mg/L (95% CI, 2.6–3.5), in contrast to median hs-CRP levels of 0.94 mg/L and 1.12 mg/L in the positive trials LoDoCo2 and COLCOT, respectively.⁴⁴ Effective anti-inflammatory therapies need to carefully balance between efficacy and safety, particularly in mitigating risks associated with immunomodulation. Neither CANTOS²⁴ nor the colchicine trials reduced mortality,^{25,26} and both canakinumab²⁴ and colchicine²⁶ were associated with adverse effects including fatal infections. IL6R (IL-6 receptor) inhibitors, such as tocilizumab or sarilumab, in patients with autoimmune disorders have been associated with neutropenia, as well as common bacterial infections, such as skin infections, urinary tract infections, and pneumonia.^{24,45,46}

These data have supported the advancement of clinical trials examining the effect of direct inhibitors of the IL-6 signaling pathway for the treatment and prevention of CVD. In the RESCUE phase 2 trial in patients with chronic kidney disease (CKD), ziltivekimab, a monoclonal antibody targeting IL-6, showed dose-dependent reductions in hs-CRP levels of 77%, 88%, and 92% with monthly subcutaneous doses of 7.5, 15, and 30 mg, respectively; 67%, 82%, and 96% of patients achieved hs-CRP levels below 2 mg/L.⁴⁷ Similarly, in the POSIBIL_{ESKD} phase 2b trial in patients on hemodialysis, clazakizumab, another anti-IL-6 monoclonal antibody, displayed reductions in hs-CRP of 86%, 90%, and 92% at monthly intravenous doses of 2.5, 5, and 10 mg, respectively; 79%, 82%, and 79% of patients achieved hs-CRP below 2 mg/L.⁴⁸ Both trials showed reductions in additional pharmacodynamic biomarkers downstream of IL-6, including Fg, SAA, and Lp(a), as well as safety profiles allowing for progression to phase 3 cardiovascular outcome studies. Notably, there was no signal regarding adverse changes in lipids or severe sustained thrombocytopenia or neutropenia in either phase 2 study. Currently, several clinical trials assessing anti-IL-6 monoclonal antibodies are underway including one phase 2 trial for pacibekitug (TRANQUILITY [URL: <https://www.clinicaltrials.gov>; Unique identifier: NCT06362759]), as well as 4 phase 3 trials for ziltivekimab (ZEUS [URL: <https://www.clinicaltrials.gov>; Unique identifier: NCT05021835], ATHENA [URL: <https://www.clinicaltrials.gov>; Unique identifier: NCT06200207], HERMES [URL: <https://www.clinicaltrials.gov>; Unique identifier: NCT05636176], ARTERMIS [URL: <https://www.clinicaltrials.gov>; Unique identifier: NCT06118281]) and a phase 3 study for clazakizumab (POSIBIL_{ESKD} [URL: <https://www.clinicaltrials.gov>; Unique identifier: NCT05485961]).

IDENTIFYING THE CAUSAL DENOMINATOR OF ATHEROINFLAMMATION WITH HUMAN GENETICS

Human genetics has played a pivotal role in pinpointing IL-6 signaling as a causal mediator of atheroinflammation in CVD, triggering drug development in this direction. In the 1990s and 2000s, data from several observational prospective cohort studies showed robust associations between circulating inflammatory biomarker levels such as CRP, Fg, and Lp-PLA₂ (lipoprotein-associated phospholipase A₂), and risk of incident CVD.^{49–52} These molecules were potential causal mediators of atheroinflammation and could represent potential candidate targets of anti-inflammatory therapies.⁵³ However, early human genetic studies that applied a method called Mendelian randomization (MR) contradicted this idea (Figure 1). Briefly, MR leverages randomly assorted germline genetic variants associated with specific exposures as proxies to examine potential causal relationships with outcomes.⁵⁴ In addition to providing valuable insights into the cause of cardiometabolic diseases, MR studies have also identified promising drug targets.⁵⁵ Variants in genes encoding target proteins can serve as proxies for studying drug perturbation.⁵⁶

Two independent studies detected genetic variants in the gene encoding CRP that led to increases in circulating CRP levels. If CRP had a causal role in the pathogenesis of CVD, one would expect these variants to also increase the risk of CAD, in concordance with observational studies linking CRP levels to CAD risk. However, in both studies, there was no evidence of an effect on risk of CAD.^{57,58} Similarly, MR studies failed to provide evidence for a causal involvement of Fg and Lp-PLA₂ in CVD, despite evidence for strong dose-dependent associations in observational studies. Specifically, neither a genetic variant in the beta-fibrinogen gene promoter that increases Fg levels⁵⁹ nor variants within *PLA2G7* linked to higher activity of Lp-PLA₂ were associated with CAD risk.^{51,60}

In search of the causal inflammatory mediator of atherosclerosis, 2 landmark studies published in 2012 focused on variants in the gene encoding the *IL6R*. These studies reported significant associations of a common variant, rs2228145 (Asp358Ala), estimated to be present in \approx 40% of individuals of European descent, with risk of CAD.^{61,62} The rs2228145 SNP leads to a change from adenine to cytosine in exon 9 of *IL6R* that encodes for the IL-6R protein. This change leads to an amino acid change from aspartic acid to alanine at position 358 of the IL-6R protein. The study conducted by the IL6R Genetics Consortium and Emerging Risk Factors Collaboration showed that Asp358Ala was associated with a lower risk of CAD (3.4%) per allele.⁶¹ The variant was also associated with decreasing concentrations of CRP (7.5%) and Fg (1%) with every copy of 358Ala and

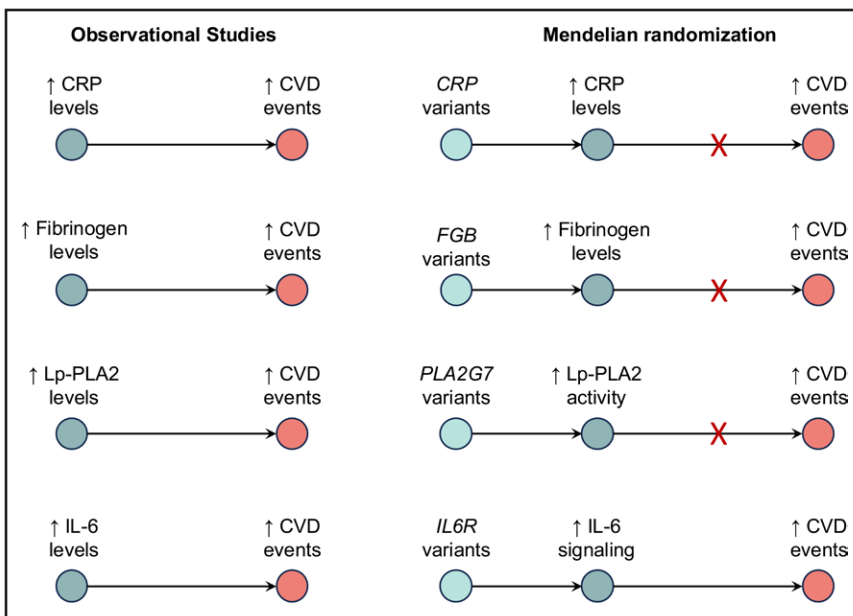


Figure 1. Detecting the causal denominator of atheroinflammation. Comparisons of the results of (1) prospective population-based studies supporting dose-dependent associations of circulating levels of CRP (C-reactive protein), Fg (fibrinogen), Lp-PLA2 (lipoprotein-associated phospholipase A₂), and IL (interleukin)-6 with incident cardiovascular disease (CVD) events (**left**) and (2) those of Mendelian randomization studies studying genetic instruments consisting of variants within the genes coding for key proteins of the respective pathways in association with lifetime risk of CVD events (**right**).

increasing concentrations of IL-6 (14.6%) and sIL-6R (soluble IL-6R; 34.3%).⁶¹ Similarly, the IL6R MR Consortium (Interleukin-6 Receptor Mendelian Randomization Analysis) identified an association between rs7529229, a variant in strong linkage disequilibrium with rs2228145, and a lower risk for CAD-related events (OR, 0.95 per allele [95% CI, 0.93–0.97]).⁶² This variant was also associated with decreased CRP levels (8.4% decrease per allele [95% CI, 7.3–9.4]), as well as increased circulating IL-6 levels (9.4% increase per allele [95% CI, 8.3–10.6]) and sIL-6R (14.9% increase per allele [95% CI, 13.1–16.7]).⁶² Future studies also showed significant associations of this variant with peripheral artery (odds ratio [OR], 0.95 [95% CI, 0.94–0.97])⁶³ and abdominal aortic aneurysm (OR, 0.91 [95% CI, 0.90–0.92]).⁶⁴

In an effort to understand the mechanism by which rs2228145 regulates IL-6 signaling, Ferreira et al⁶⁵ discovered 358Ala to be associated with increased sIL-6R concentrations (35% increase per copy) and reduced surface expression of IL-6R on both CD4+T cells and monocytes ($\leq 28\%$ reduction per allele, $P=5.6 \times 10^{-22}$) likely contributing to reduced clearance of IL-6 by mIL-6R (membrane-bound IL-6R) within the liver. This is hypothesized to explain the apparent paradox of higher circulating levels of IL-6 and lower downstream signaling (ie, lower hs-CRP) as well as lower CAD risk with this genetic variant.⁶⁵ The Asp358Ala substitution leads to an increase in the shedding of mIL-6R, producing higher levels of sIL-6R in the blood. This is the result of enhanced proteolytic ectodomain shedding of mIL-6R by the disintegrin and metalloproteinases ADAM10 and ADAM17, leading to a large increase in sIL-6R levels.⁶⁶ Indeed, rs2228145 is the main determinant of circulating sIL-6R levels.⁶⁵ The higher cleavage of IL-6R to sIL-6R leads to decreases in mIL-6R in hepatocytes, immune cells, and

possibly epithelial cells, thus leading to a decrease in the activity of classic IL-6 signaling. While not experimentally validated, according to Rose-John et al⁶⁷ the increase in sIL-6R levels could also influence IL-6 trans-signaling. In the circulation, IL-6 binds to sIL-6R, the levels of which can vary less (change up to 10-fold as a response to inflammation) when compared with variations in levels of IL-6, which can increase as much as 1000-fold. The complex of IL-6 and sIL-6R in the circulation binds with very high affinity to gp130, the levels of which remain rather unaltered during inflammation. The complex can be seen as a buffer for IL-6 activity, as it does not allow bound IL-6 to exert its proinflammatory actions. As such, the levels of sIL-6R may be a key determinant of the buffer capacity of the system and its ability to cushion overstimulation to IL-6 (Figure 2).⁶⁶

GENETICS INFORMING CLINICAL DEVELOPMENT

Selection of Indications

Genetics can inform several aspects of clinical development, particularly as it relates to selection of potential therapeutic indications. The emergence of genome-wide association studies and cohort consortia decoding the genetic architecture of human traits in very large sample sizes offered new opportunities for MR explorations. Using large genomic data sets for circulating CRP levels, it became possible to discover more genetic variants in the *IL6R* locus associated with downregulated IL-6 signaling (Figure 3).

Statistical development in MR methodologies offered the framework for pooling these variants, thus increasing statistical power. With these expanded instruments, it

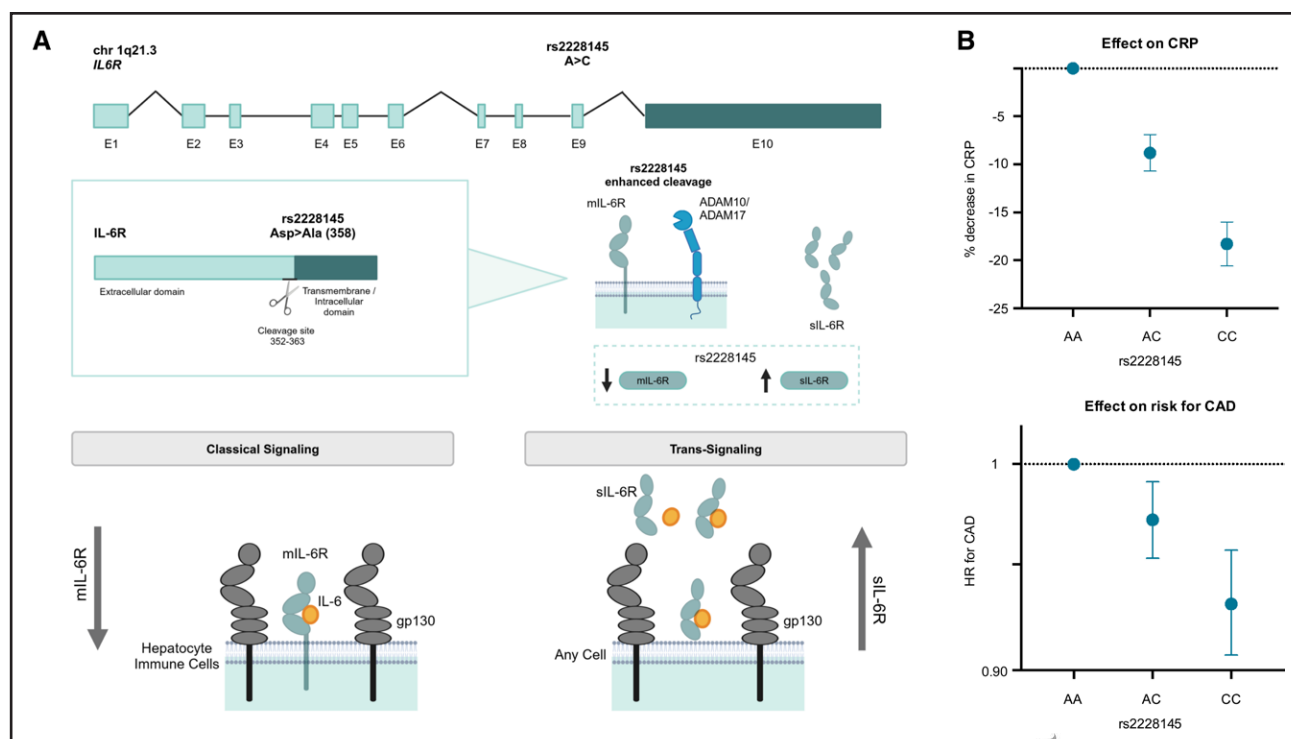


Figure 2. The use of the *IL6R* (interleukin-6 receptor) variant rs2228145 as a genetic proxy of IL (interleukin)-6 signaling downregulation.

A, rs2228145 leads to change from adenine (A) to cytosine (C) in exon 9 of *IL6R* that encodes for the mIL-6R (membrane-bound IL-6R) protein, resulting in an amino acid change from aspartic acid (Asp) to alanine (Ala) at position 358. This variant results in enhanced cleavage of mIL-6R to sIL-6R (soluble IL-6R) by ADAMs, leading to decreased mIL-6R in hepatocytes and immune cells and increased circulating sIL-6R, thus leading to downregulation of the IL-6 signaling cascade. **B**, Associations of rs2228145 genotypes with percentage decrease in CRP (C-reactive protein) and risk for coronary artery disease (CAD). **A** was created in Biorender.com. HR indicates hazard ratio.

became possible to explore the impact on multiple different outcomes, thus directly expanding the list of potential indications that could be explored in cardiovascular trials (Figure 4).

For example, a set of 7 conditionally independent variants in the *IL6R* locus (within ± 300 kB of *IL6R*) that are significantly ($P < 5 \times 10^{-8}$) associated with decreases in CRP levels, are also associated with higher circulating IL-6 and sIL-6R levels, and lower Fg levels—these effects are consistent with the mechanism of tocilizumab, an IL-6R inhibitor approved for autoimmune disease indications.¹⁸ MR analyses revealed that these *IL6R* proxies of IL-6 signaling downregulation were associated with lower risk of ischemic stroke (OR per 1 SD decrease in CRP levels, 0.89 [95% CI, 0.82–0.97]), CAD (OR, 0.84 [95% CI, 0.77–0.90]), myocardial infarction (OR, 0.88 [95% CI, 0.81–0.96]), aortic aneurysm (OR, 0.51 [95% CI, 0.37–0.68]), and carotid plaque (OR, 0.87 [95% CI, 0.77–0.99]).¹⁸ Employing a different approach, another study selected genetic variants based on their effects on sIL6R levels and came to similar conclusions.⁷⁹ Particularly, in the field of ischemic stroke, which is etiologically highly heterogeneous, genetic data have helped prioritize large artery atherosclerotic and cryptogenic stroke as potential

targets for IL-6 targeting therapies.^{18,72} A thorough analysis of phenotypes related to cerebral small vessel disease suggests no effect of genetically downregulated IL-6 signaling on clinical, imaging, or histopathology traits related to the underlying pathology of arteriolosclerosis.⁸⁰ The 7-variant genetic instrument was used to successfully predict the pharmacological effects of tocilizumab in patients with polymyalgia rheumatica,^{81,82} as well as in the setting of COVID-19 sepsis.^{83–85} A more recent larger genome-wide association study for CRP⁸⁶ increased the list of independent proxies of IL-6 signaling within the *IL6R* locus to 26,^{68,87} thus further increasing power for detecting promising effects. Although the majority of these studies have included primarily populations of European ancestry, genetic proxies of IL-6R downregulation have been identified in a Japanese population (rs1386821, rs12133641, and rs1588075) and have also been associated with lower risk for CAD (OR, 0.38 per 1 SD decrease in CRP [95% CI, 0.32–0.46]).⁸⁸ Figure 4 summarizes the effects of IL-6 signaling downregulation through the use of *IL6R* genetic proxies on cardiovascular outcomes scaled to the natural variation in CRP observed across carriers of the rs2228145 variants (18% decrease in CRP) or a composite score of the 26 variants (30% decrease

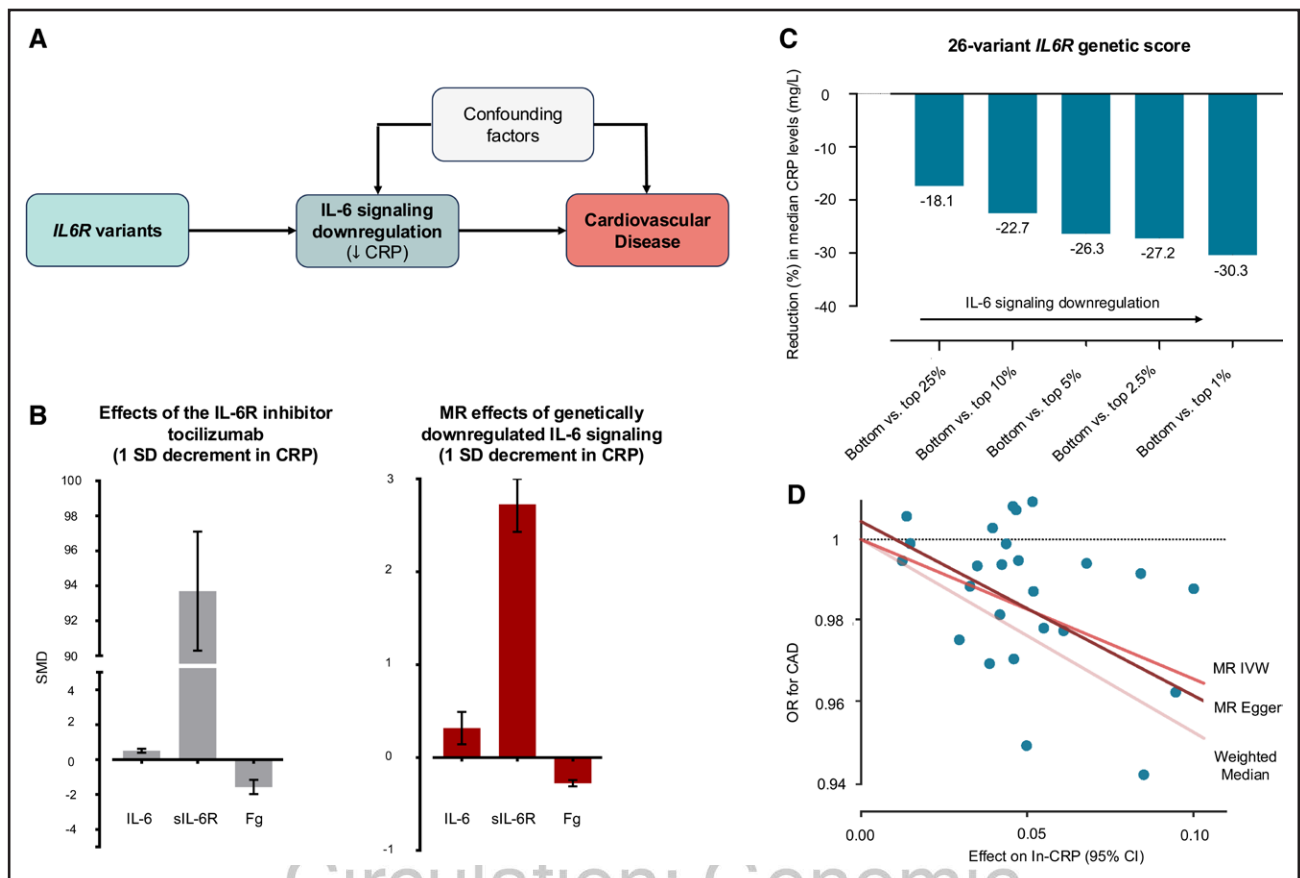


Figure 3. Use of multivariate genetic instruments proxying IL (interleukin)-6 signaling inhibition to predict effects on cardiovascular outcomes.

A, Framework for Mendelian randomization (MR) analyses using CRP (C-reactive protein) levels as a readout of IL-6 signaling activity to detect variants proxying IL-6 signaling downregulation. **B**, Comparable effects observed between pharmacological inhibition of IL-6R (IL-6 receptor) with tocilizumab vs a multivariate genetic instrument of IL-6 signaling downregulation on circulating IL-6, sIL-6R (soluble IL-6R), and Fg (fibrinogen) levels (adapted from Georgakis et al.¹⁸ This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC BY license, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.). **C**, Percentual and absolute reduction in CRP levels across the distribution of an *IL6R* genetic score of the 26-variant instrument in the population-based UK Biobank study. **D**, Genetic downregulation of CRP is associated with lower odds of coronary artery disease (CAD) across different MR methods (reanalyzed from Georgakis et al.¹⁸). IVW indicates inverse-variance weighted; Ln, natural log-transformed; OR, odds ratio.

in CRP), as determined in the population-based UK Biobank study. Thus, genetic studies can largely inform the landscape of clinical indications to be targeted by pharmacological interventions against IL-6 signaling.

REPURPOSING POTENTIAL AND SAFETY

The increasing availability of large-scale biobanks that house genetic and phenotypic data has facilitated systematic cross-phenotype associations, otherwise referred to as phenome-wide association studies.⁸⁹ These phenotypes (collectively termed a phenome) have been characterized using data from electronic health records and provide a representative clinical landscape of an individual's health conditions (Figure 5A).⁸⁹ Phenome-wide association studies have revealed significant associations between genetically downregulated IL-6 signaling and lower risk for

rheumatoid arthritis (OR, per 0.1 SD lower CRP, 0.93 [95% CI, 0.90–0.96]) and type 2 diabetes (OR per 1 SD lower CRP, 0.44 [95% CI, 0.73–0.88]).^{17,83} *IL6R* variants have also been associated with lower risk for SARS-CoV-2 infection (OR, 0.92 [95% CI, 0.89–0.95]; OR versus negatively tested individuals, 0.92 [95% CI, 0.89–0.97]) and lower risk of COVID-19 hospitalization (OR versus nonhospitalized COVID-19, 0.88 [95% CI, 0.78–0.99]; OR versus population, 0.91 [95% CI, 0.87–0.96]).⁸³ Although the findings cannot be directly translated to a setting of very severe COVID-19 infection, tocilizumab was also found to improve outcomes, including survival, in critically ill patients with COVID-19 receiving organ support in intensive care units.⁹³ Beyond cardiovascular end points, the rs2228145 *IL6R* variant has been associated with several other phenotypes including skin, musculoskeletal, pulmonary, renal, and eye conditions; some of which were

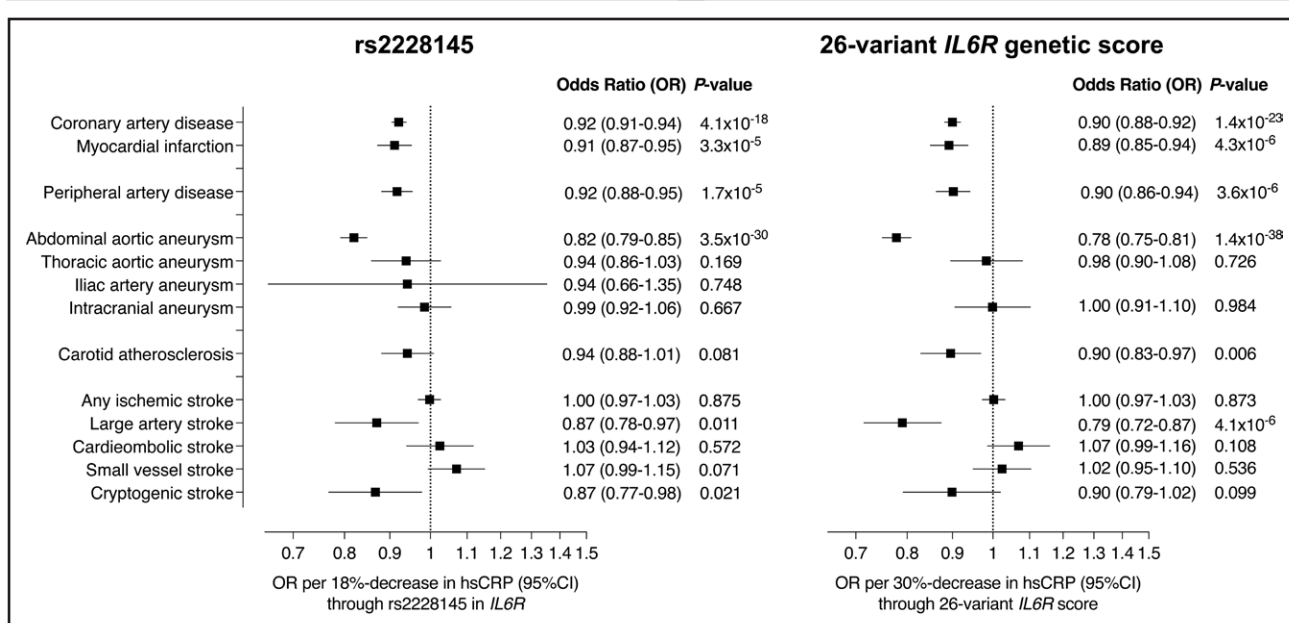


Figure 4. Cardiovascular indications associated with genetically proxied IL (interleukin)-6 signaling downregulation.

IL6R genetic proxies of cardiovascular risk per 18% decrease in hs-CRP (high-sensitivity C-reactive protein) as determined by rs2228145 (left) and per 30% decrease in hs-CRP as determined by a 26-variant *IL6R* genetic instrument (right), which is the natural variation observed across these genetic instruments in the population-based UK Biobank study. The odds ratios (ORs) have been calculated with inverse-variance weighted Mendelian randomization analyses using summary statistics from genome-wide association studies case-control studies for these outcomes.^{69–78}

replicated in larger cohorts.¹⁶ Although these data can generate repurposing ideas for alternative indications, they also highlight potential safety concerns of downregulation of IL-6 signaling. Genetic downregulation of IL-6 signaling has been associated with neutropenia and increased risk for infections including those of the skin and urinary tract.¹⁷ This aligns with clinical trial data in patients with autoimmune disorders demonstrating that IL-6 inhibition may predispose patients to infectious complications (when compared with placebo).²⁴ These findings highlight the need for careful patient selection, infection monitoring, and risk-benefit assessment in the clinical deployment of IL-6-targeting therapies for CVD.

TRIAL DESIGN

Beyond identification of indications and assessment of potential side effects, genetic studies may also support the design of phase 2 and 3 trials, thus accelerating clinical development pipelines. Findings from recent analyses of the UK Biobank have provided potential insight into patient populations that may best benefit from IL-6 signaling inhibitors (Figure 5B). For example, the associations between genetically proxied IL-6 signaling and the risk of CVD was a linear function of absolute and not percentual (logarithmically transformed) changes in hs-CRP levels (hazard ratio 0.90 per 1 mg/dL decrement in absolute hs-CRP [95% CI 0.85–0.94]),⁶⁸ thus suggesting that larger absolute changes in hs-CRP might

lead to larger decreases in CVD risk. This implies that patients with the highest baseline hs-CRP levels, with the opportunity for greater absolute hs-CRP reductions, might benefit the most from IL-6 signaling inhibition for CVD prevention and could be prioritized for selection in clinical trials.⁶⁸ In addition, given the increased risk for CAD in patients with CKD, Yu et al⁹⁰ also investigated genetic variants mimicking IL-6 signaling inhibition and their effect on cardiovascular events in individuals with and without CKD. Interestingly, there was a significant interaction between the *IL6R* rs2228145 variant and CKD, with rs2228145 being more strongly associated with incidence for CAD among individuals with CKD.⁹⁰ In line with this genetic finding, the phase 3 ZEUS trial testing ziltivekimab is enrolling patients with moderate-to-severe CKD and hs-CRP levels ≥ 2 mg/L. A similar interaction has been observed with clonal hematopoiesis of indeterminate potential, an age-related, proinflammatory, and proatherogenic state characterized by clonal expansion of hematopoietic stem cells due to somatic leukemogenic mutations. The *IL6R* rs2228145 variant was found to be more strongly associated with CVD risk in patients with large clonal hematopoiesis of indeterminate potential clones (hazard ratio, 0.46 [95% CI, 0.29–0.73]; $P < 0.001$).⁹¹ Whether cardiovascular outcomes trials testing IL-6 signaling inhibition should be enriched with patients with clonal hematopoiesis of indeterminate potential remains to be determined, but a post hoc analysis of the CANTOS trial also showed a larger cardioprotective effect of canakinumab among patients

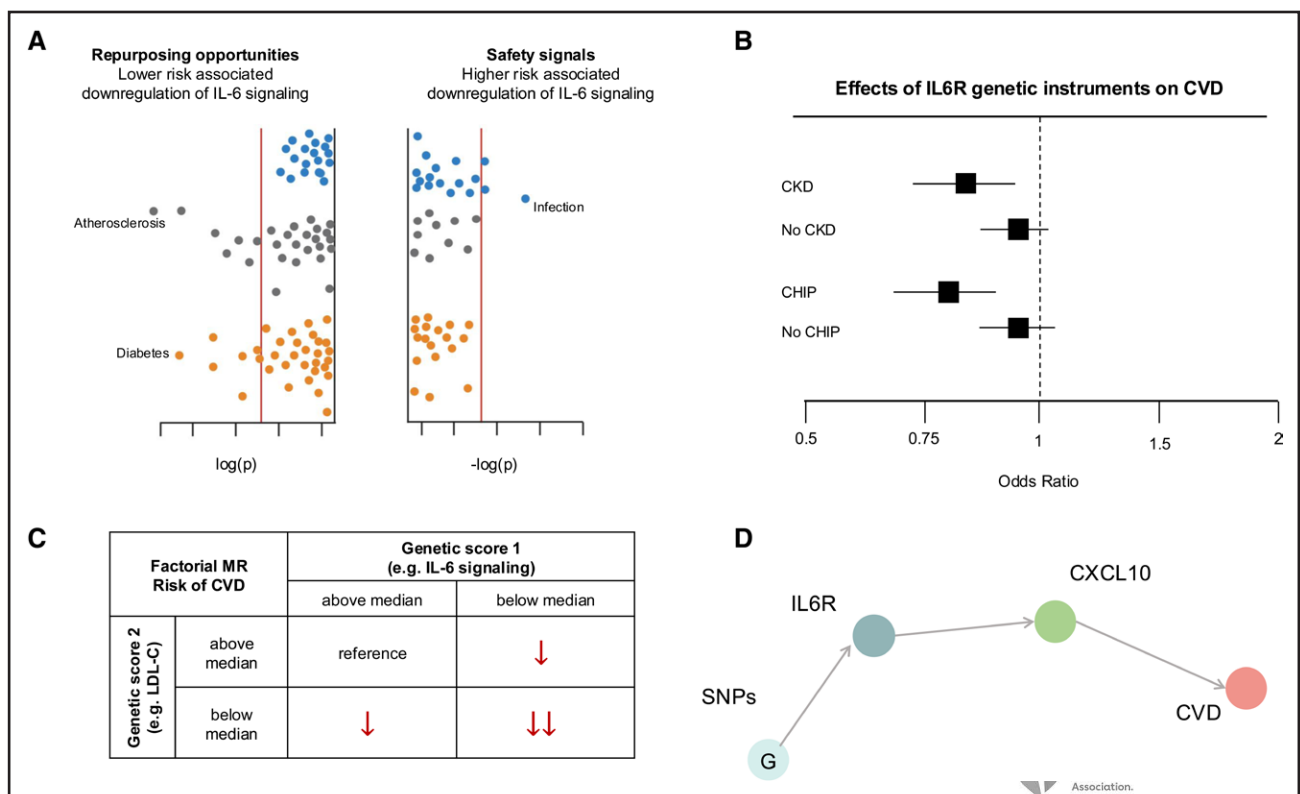


Figure 5. Conceptual schematic highlighting opportunities for human genetics to inform drug development pipelines.

A, Identification of safety implications and potential repurposing opportunities with genome-wide association studies.¹⁷ **B**, Population selection for maximizing efficacy in clinical trials.^{90,91} **C**, Assessment of joint effects through factorial Mendelian randomization (MR) designs.⁸⁷ **D**, Identification of alternative drug targets by multiomic data integration.⁹² CHIP indicates clonal hematopoiesis of indeterminate potential; CKD, chronic kidney disease; CVD, cardiovascular disease; CXCL10, C-X-C motif chemokine ligand 10; IL-6, interleukin-6; IL6R, interleukin-6 receptor; LDL-C, low-density lipoprotein cholesterol; and SNP, single nucleotide polymorphism.

with evidence of clonal hematopoiesis of indeterminate potential.⁹⁴

An interesting subtype of MR analyses, factorial MR, assesses potential interactions between genetic proxies for different under investigation targets, thus potentially providing evidence for the additive effects of targeting different mechanisms.⁹⁵ This can be of special interest in chronic diseases, like atherosclerotic CVD, where different treatment options are already available. For example, Ference et al⁹⁶ previously showed that genetically lowered low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C) mediated by variants within *NPC1L1* (coding for the target of ezetimibe) and *HMGCR* (coding for the target of statins) displayed 5.8 mg/dL lower LDL-C and 10.8% additively lower log-linear CAD risk (OR, 0.892 [95% CI, 0.854–0.932]), thus providing support that inhibiting both targets simultaneously could provide additional benefit beyond individual inhibition of each target. In the inflammation space, previous analysis supports that genetically downregulated IL-6 signaling through *IL6R* and genetically lowered LDL-C through genome-wide variation are also associated with additive lower lifetime risk of CVD (for individuals with IL-6 and LDL-C genetic scores below the median OR, 0.92 [95% CI, 0.90–0.95]), suggesting that IL-6 signaling inhibition has the potential to

provide reductions in CVD risk beyond LDL-C lowering⁸⁷ (Figure 5C).

ADDITIONAL TARGET IDENTIFICATION

By focusing on the *IL6R* locus, most genetic studies have provided evidence for the CVD-lowering potential of inhibiting IL-6 signaling activity by targeting IL-6R. This is mainly related to the availability of genetic variants of higher frequency in this locus, especially in European populations, which offers more opportunities for leveraging to explore downstream effects. It does not, however, prove higher efficacy of any potential pharmacological intervention, when compared with other targets in the same pathway. Some preliminary efforts have focused on the gene encoding IL-6 itself, as well as further upstream on the NLRP3 inflammasome. Using *IL-6* variants associated with *IL-6* expression and lower CRP levels, 1 MR study showed that a genetically proxied 1 mg/L decrease in CRP levels by *IL-6* was associated with lower risk for CAD (OR, 0.86 [95% CI, 0.77–0.96]), an effect comparable to the same genetically proxied CRP reduction caused by variants in *IL6R* (OR, 0.90 [95% CI, 0.86–0.95]).⁹⁷ It should be noted although that the selected variants did not meet genome-wide thresholds

of significance, thus raising concerns about instrument strength.⁹⁷ The NLRP3 inflammasome is an upstream regulator of IL-6 signaling with the selective oral inhibitor dapansutrile, having shown an acceptable safety and tolerability profile in a phase 1b trial of patients with stable systolic heart failure.⁹⁸ Carriers of a common intronic variant in the gene coding for NLRP3 (rs10754555) that influences *NLRP3* gene expression and NLRP3 activity in peripheral blood mononuclear cells had higher CRP and SAA levels, as well as higher risk for CAD and cardiovascular mortality.⁹⁹ Focusing on potential targets downstream to IL-6 signaling, a recent study integrating genomic and proteomic data applied MR to explore proteomic mediators of genetic proxies of IL-6 signaling on risk for different cardiovascular outcomes.⁹² Genetically downregulated IL-6 signaling was associated with lower circulating levels of CXCL10 (C-X-C motif chemokine ligand 10) and, in turn, genetically proxied circulating levels of CXCL10 were associated with risk for CAD, peripheral artery disease, and large artery atherosclerotic stroke.⁹² In a mediation framework, 67% of the effects of genetically downregulated IL-6 signaling were mediated by declines in CXCL10 levels, thereby highlighting CXCL10 as a protective protein that may serve as a promising drug target for atherosclerosis downstream to the IL-6/IL-6R complex.⁹² However, additional studies will be necessary to further elucidate its potential clinical utility (Figure 5D).

METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

In cardiovascular medicine, the efficacy of medications is ultimately tested in large-scale Phase 3 cardiovascular outcomes trials. Although biomarkers like CRP are commonly used as primary end points in Phase 2 studies of anti-inflammatory treatments, only LDL-C, HbA1c, and blood pressure measurements are recognized by the Food and Drug Administration as approved surrogates of efficacy for cardiovascular risk reduction. As a result, most drugs move to costly phase 3 studies, typically recruiting >5000 patients followed for over 3 years, often without robust evidence of efficacy. In this context, human genetic studies offer a cost-effective approach to assess the potential efficacy and safety of new therapeutics, aiding in the prioritization of candidates for investment in large cardiovascular outcome trials. However, genetic studies have inherent limitations that must be carefully considered.⁵⁴

First, MR studies depend on specific assumptions that are often violated. The genetic instruments used must influence outcomes solely through the exposure of interest (ie, perturbation in a specific drug target) and not via alternative pleiotropic pathways.¹⁰⁰ While drug-target MR studies typically use variants within the locus of the target gene (*cis*- versus *trans*-acting variants), high correlations

due to linkage disequilibrium between neighboring variants and commonalities in function of neighboring genes can lead to violations of this assumption—specifically, the selected variants might act by either directly influencing the expression or function of neighboring genes or by being in strong linkage disequilibrium with other variants influencing the expression or function of neighboring genes.^{101,102} Associations should, therefore, be validated using positive control outcomes or biomarkers influenced by the pharmacological intervention that the instruments are supposed to proxy.

Second, MR studies assess the lifelong impact of small genetic perturbations, which may differ substantially from the pronounced effects of short-term pharmacological interventions. For example, genetic variants influencing LDL-C show consistently larger effects on risk of CAD per unit reduction in LDL-C than LDL-C-lowering treatments.¹⁰³ Although LDL-C appears to have a cumulative and largely log-linear association with risk of CVD,¹⁰⁴ there is no clear evidence that IL-6 signaling follows the same pattern. This raises uncertainty about how genetic findings translate to short-term pharmacological interventions. Furthermore, we cannot exclude the possibility of nonlinear relationships between IL-6 signaling and cardiovascular risk, which could further complicate extrapolation from genetic data. Compensatory mechanisms induced by pharmacological IL-6 inhibition may also differ from those occurring in genetic variation, leading to discrepancies between MR-predicted effects and clinical trial outcomes. Prior case studies highlight the importance of translating genetic predictions within the appropriate clinical context. For instance, while genetic variants reducing lower factor XI activity are strongly associated with lower cardioembolic stroke risk,^{72,105,106} asundexian, an oral factor XIa inhibitor, was inferior to the standard anticoagulant apixaban in preventing stroke in patients with atrial fibrillation.¹⁰⁷

Third, the majority of available genetic data are derived from individuals of European ancestry, limiting the generalizability of findings to other populations. This lack of diversity can affect the transferability of genetic associations and reduce the applicability of MR-derived insights to global cardiovascular drug development. Efforts to address this limitation include leveraging biobanks with broader ancestral representation, such as the Million Veteran Program,¹⁰⁸ All of Us,¹⁰⁹ and Biobank Japan,¹¹⁰ as well as integrating multiethnic genome-wide association studies to enable downstream MR analyses across ancestries. In addition, emerging statistical methodologies for trans-ethnic MR analyses may enable a more diverse representation in future studies.¹¹¹ Expanding representation in genetic research remains essential to ensure equitable translation of genetic discoveries into therapeutic applications.

Fourth, due to the low variance explained by genetic variants, MR studies require very large sample sizes to

achieve sufficient statistical power. The level of genetic variation within loci varies across the genome, influenced by evolutionary pressures, functional constraints, and genomic context.¹¹² Consequently, studying certain genes is more feasible than others.

Fifth, the exact biological mechanisms underlying the effects of selected genetic variants are often poorly characterized. Without robust *in vitro* or *in vivo* experiments, conclusions rely heavily on associational data, which may lack mechanistic clarity.

Sixth, conventional MR analyses assume a linear relationship between gene perturbation and the outcome of interest, which might not be biologically plausible. Introducing variants with significantly different magnitudes of effects, such as rare loss-of-function or gain-of-function variants in the analyses may contribute to elucidating nonlinear effects. Emerging methods to assess nonlinear relationships could offer deeper insights. Finally, communication of genetic findings to the broader community involved in drug discovery and development remains a challenge.¹¹³ Clear translation of genetic evidence into actionable insights will be critical for integrating these data into the drug discovery pipeline.

Finally, although genetic studies provide valuable insights into potential drug targets, they do not account for key real-world factors such as cost-effectiveness, accessibility, and regulatory challenges. IL-6 inhibitors, like other biologics, face high production costs and complex pricing dynamics, which could limit their widespread adoption. These factors highlight the importance of integrating economic and policy considerations alongside genetic and clinical trial evidence to facilitate successful translation into clinical practice.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

The emergence of IL-6 signaling as a key therapeutic target in atherosclerotic CVD exemplifies the potentially transformative role of human genetic studies in informing different stages of cardiovascular drug development. Beyond prioritization of promising targets, human genetic studies can inform indication selection, exploration of repurposing opportunities, and population selection for clinical trials. Human genetics also enhances the selection of relevant safety end points and enables comparative analyses of emerging drugs on top of established therapies. In addition, although genetic data has largely informed the development of protein-targeted therapeutics, there is growing potential for these data to inform RNA-based therapeutics and other emerging modalities. The integration of additional high-throughput omics technologies—such as whole-genome sequencing, whole-exome sequencing, transcriptomics, metabolomics, and proteomics—with increasingly detailed cardiovascular

phenotypes offers unprecedented opportunities to refine drug discovery and development. By leveraging these advances, human genetics can not only accelerate the identification of disease-modifying therapies but also support a more nuanced understanding of patient heterogeneity, fostering the development of precision medicine strategies in CVD.

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Acknowledgments

Writing support was provided by Talisa Silzer, PhD, of Sixsense Strategy Group Inc, a Herspiegel company, and was funded by Tourmaline Bio Inc.

Sources of Funding

Dr Georgakis is supported by the German Research Foundation (ID 512461526), the Fritz-Thyssen Foundation (Ref. 10.22.2.024MN), and the Hertie Foundation (ID P1230035).

Disclosures

Drs deGoma and Walsh are employees and shareholders of Tourmaline Bio Inc. Dr Georgakis reports consulting fees by Tourmaline Bio Inc, Pheiron GmbH, and Gerson Lehrman Group Inc. The other authors report no conflicts.

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