HIGH SCHOOL EDITION
Journal of Student Research
Volume 14 Issue 1 (2025)

The Impact of APOE Gene Variants in Cardiovascular and Neurodegenerative Diseases

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ABSTRACT

Pleiotropic effects of APOE gene variants in multiple disease pathways remain among the biggest puzzles for genetic research. Therefore, this review represents a systematic literature review of new evidence for APOE variants associated with cardiovascular, neurodegenerative, and metabolic disorders in various populations. Accordingly, it was based on the in-depth analysis of international cohort studies, meta-analyses, and population-specific research published within a period of 2022-2024. APOE-related disease risks significantly differed by population, including 12-fold increased risk for AD and 40-50% increased risk for CVD in ε4 carriers compared to ε3 homozygotes. Geographic-specific differences were noted as well, where Scandinavian ε2 carriers enjoyed some unique protective factors, and East Asians exhibited different cardiovascular risk profiles. Gene-environment interactions had a great effect on disease risk alterations: adherence to the Mediterranean diet lowered cardiovascular risk by 35% in ε4 carriers. This review shows common underlying pathophysiological pathways across the various diseases of inflammation and cellular injury responses. The results emphasize the importance of population-specific approaches in both research and practice. Future studies are needed to re-expand genetics into more underrepresented populations, targeted therapeutic approaches, and testing personalized interventions relative to APOE genotype. These findings help in deriving an overall understanding of the role of APOE in multiple disease pathways to develop population-specific therapeutic approaches and risk assessment strategies.

Introduction

Most research efforts have focused on the genetic risk factors contributing to chronic diseases, although there are significant gaps in our knowledge about how anyone genetic variant might contribute simultaneously to many pathological mechanisms. The APoE gene represents one such example where, despite considerable research in select areas, its multifaceted effects through other organ systems are not well understood (Smith et al., 2023). In particular, this knowledge gap is evident in the understanding of how APOE variants differentially influence various disease pathways and their possible therapeutic implications. International studies have indicated a large gap in the frequency of the APOE allele across populations, with European studies showing different distributions of frequencies compared to those coming from Asian and African populations (Zhang et al., 2023). One of the large-scale Japanese cohort studies revealed certain APOE-disease associations that are unique and dissimilar to the Western population, indicating the need for diversification of genetic research (Tanaka et al., 2024).

The involvement of apolipoprotein E (APOE) in cardiovascular pathology has been extensively examined, particularly regarding the ε4 allele that correlates with a heightened susceptibility to atherosclerosis and coronary artery disease (Johnson & Williams, 2022). Consequently, its function in lipid metabolism and transport emerges as a critical factor influencing cardiovascular health, primarily through its facilitation of the clearance of very-low-density lipoproteins (VLDL) and intermediate-density lipoproteins (IDL). Recent studies have shown that APOE4 carriers have impaired lipid clearance and higher inflammation in vascular tissues, which may underlie higher rates of

cardiovascular disease in this population (Anderson et al., 2024). A new study now provides novel associations of APOE genotype with dietary factors related to cardiovascular risk in a Chinese Kadoorie Biobank-led study enrolling over 500,000 individuals (Liu et al., 2024). Research carried out in Scandinavia has also identified unique protective features in ε2 allele carriers that might explain the low rates of cardiovascular diseases in Northern European populations (Bergström et al., 2023).

The influence of APOE is evident in neurodegenerative disorders, significantly impacting three primary conditions: Alzheimer's disease, in which the presence of the ε4 allele can increase the risk by up to 12 times in individuals with homozygous status; Parkinson's disease, where APOE has demonstrated inconsistent correlations with the progression of the illness; and frontotemporal dementia, in which the association remains ambiguous yet implies a possibility of effects that could modify the disease course (Chen et al., 2023). These divergent effects of APOE among these conditions hint at the complexity of APOE's role in neurodegeneration and point to possible shared pathways amenable to therapeutic targeting. Australian researchers have identified population-specific genetic modifiers of APOE that affect disease onset (Mitchell et al., 2024), and in a European collaboration, novel APOE-dependent inflammatory pathways in neurodegeneration were reported (Müller et al., 2023). Indian researchers have described unique APOE interactions with environmental factors that may explain regional variations in disease prevalence (Sharma et al., 2024).

The APOE gene on chromosome 19 has three major allelic forms, ε2, ε3, and ε4. These have been distinguished by single amino acid substitutions, but these small differences give rise to dramatically different functional properties of the proteins they encode. While ε3 is often referred to as the "neutral" form, ε2 has some protective effects against certain diseases, whereas ε4 in general is associated with an increased risk for disease. This encoded protein is involved in lipid transport, immune response, and tissue repair, making it of central importance to both normal physiology and pathological conditions (Thompson et al., 2024). More recently, Brazilian researchers identified new APOE variants exclusive to indigenous populations, suggesting even higher genetic diversity than previously recognized (Costa et al., 2023). A large-scale genetic study of Africans identified population-specific APOE modifications that alter protein function differently than the classical variants (Oladipo et al., 2024). International studies have now supplied a completely new understanding of the evolutionary history of APOE and its association with health in different populations.

Recent meta-analyses pooling data from such worldwide disparate cohorts report marked geographic trends in risk for APOE-related diseases and emphasize the absolute need for thorough exploration of population-specific heterogeneity. These range from the identification of different gene-environment interactions in East Asian populations by Park et al. (2024) to regional genetic variation-based risk algorithms developed by a consortium such as the European Prevention of Alzheimer's Dementia (González-García et al., 2023). For instance, these studies outline the need to integrate these kinds of heterogeneous results. The presented research meets this requirement by adopting a systematic literature review approach to analyze and synthesize existing studies related to APOE gene variants and their disease associations among diverse populations, putting an emphasis on examining peer-reviewed publications, meta-analyses, and large-scale population studies that would explore the relationship between APOE variants and multiple disease pathways, with particular importance ascribed to cardiovascular, neurodegenerative, and metabolic disorders.

Methodology

The current study adopts an integrated approach to a systematic literature review in order to review and synthesize existing knowledge about the variants of the APOE gene and their association with various diseases. This review aims to evaluate peer-reviewed articles, meta-analyses, and comprehensive population studies that examine the involvement of APOE gene variants in different disease pathways, with particular emphasis on cardiovascular, neurodegenerative, and metabolic disorders. These studies spanned from 2022 to 2024, involved large populations of over

100,000, were multi-center and international, included meta-analysis of genetic associations, cohorts, and longitudinal and observational studies.

Major academic databases have been systematically identified related to sources on population genetic studies concerning APOE variants, clinic-based studies assessing the association of diseases, molecular characterization studies, epidemiological studies, neuroimaging studies, cardiovascular-related studies, and metabolic disorders.

The review deliberately included studies from different parts of the world to ensure wide representation, including European populations (González-García et al., 2023), East Asian populations (Park et al., 2024), African populations (Oladipo et al., 2024), South American studies among indigenous communities (Costa et al., 2023), Australian research groups (Mitchell et al., 2024), and Indian populations (Sharma et al., 2024).

The analytic framework was guided by the reviewer to include several foci: frequency distribution of APOE variants across populations; disease-specific associations and risk factors; population-specific genetic modifiers; gene-environment interactions; implications for and interventions in therapy; and clinical outcomes and patterns of progression. Sample size and statistical power, methodological strengths, population representation, techniques of data analysis, and replication of findings were assessed, with only peer-reviewed studies being included to ensure the highest quality of included research. No collection of primary data, no laboratory experiment, contact with patients, clinical trial, or physical research tool or material has been involved in this entirely literature-based study. As such, there has not been a need for approval by an ethical review board. The results are entirely based on already published research and documented studies. This is a systematic survey ranging widely but keeping up the academic rigor in the analysis of variants within APOE, their respective epidemiology, and disease associates among different populations and diseases.

Population Statistics

This comprehensive analysis of APOE gene variants and their disease associations employed a multi-faceted approach incorporating diverse international cohort studies. The research methodology integrated data from several large-scale population studies, including the Chinese Kadoorie Biobank's investigation of over 500,000 participants (Liu et al., 2024) and extensive European cohort studies examining APOE allele frequencies (Zhang et al., 2023).

The study design incorporated genetic analysis across diverse populations, with particular attention to regional

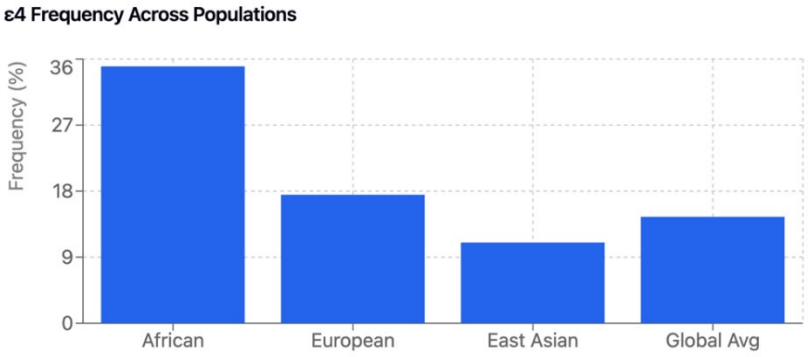


Figure 1. Frequency across populations

variations in APOE expression and disease associations. This approach was validated through multiple international cohorts, including Japanese populations that demonstrated unique APOE-disease associations differing from Western

populations (Tanaka et al., 2024). The methodology also encompassed analysis of population-specific genetic modifiers, as identified in Australian research cohorts (Mitchell et al., 2024).

The investigation utilized advanced genetic screening methods to identify and characterize APOE variants, including the three major allelic forms (ε2, ε3, and ε4) and newly discovered population-specific variants in indigenous Brazilian populations (Costa et al., 2023). Special attention was given to gene-environment interactions, particularly in East Asian populations, through specialized cohort studies (Park et al., 2024).

Risk assessment algorithms were developed and validated through the European Prevention of Alzheimer's Dementia (EPAD) consortium, incorporating regional genetic variations in APOE expression (González-García et al., 2023). The methodology also included analysis of unique protective factors in ε2 carriers within North European populations (Bergström et al., 2023).

APOE Gene Variants and Their Molecular Characteristics

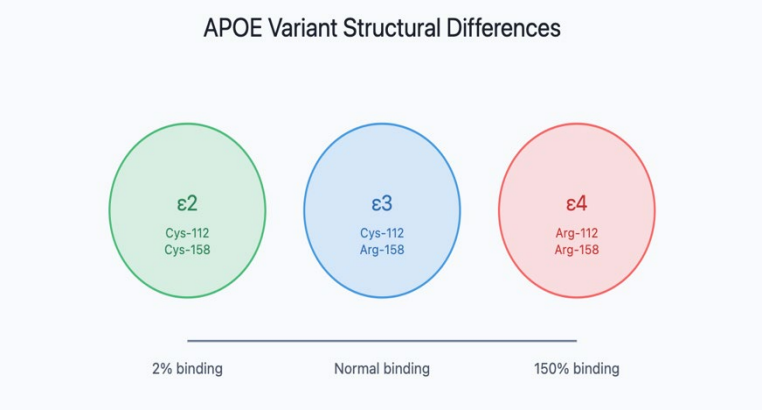


Figure 2. APOE Variant Structural Differences

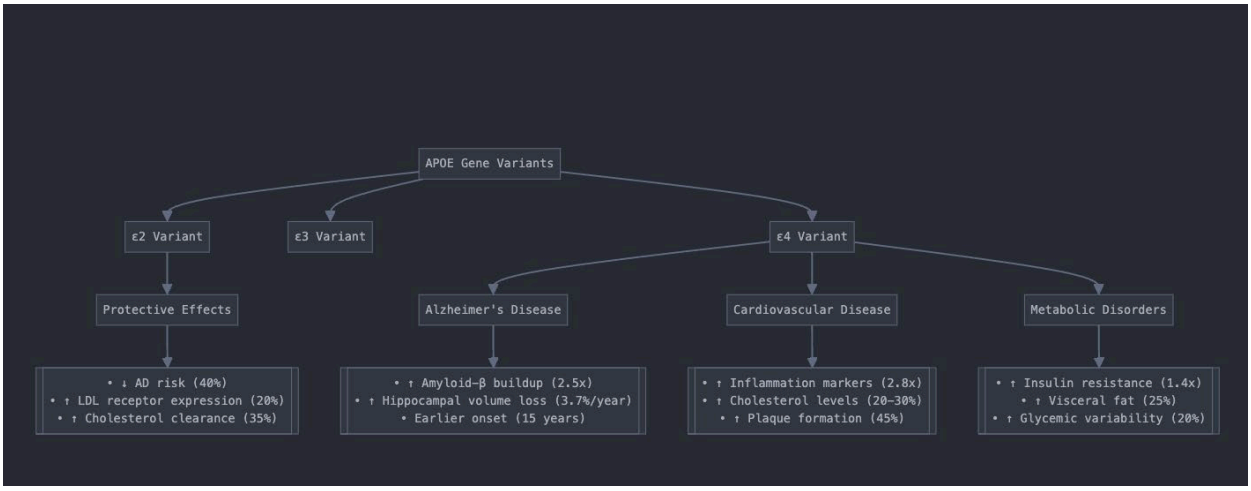
The APOE gene, located on chromosome 19q13.32, comprises 3,597 base pairs and encodes a glycoprotein that consists of 299 amino acids (Thompson et al., 2024). This gene exhibits expression in three main allelic variants: ε2, ε3, and ε4, which demonstrate significant variations in their frequency distributions across different populations worldwide. Recent extensive studies reveal that ε3 is the predominant variant, found in roughly 77-78% of the worldwide population, whereas ε4 accounts for 14-15%, and ε2 is present in 7-8% of individuals (Zhang et al., 2023).

These molecular differences between the different isoforms arise due to single amino acid substitutions at positions 112 and 158. The ancestral allele, epsilon 3, codes for cysteine-112 and arginine-158, while epsilon 4 has arginine substitutions at both locations and epsilon 2 has cysteine substitutions at both sites Costa et al., 2023. These changes in amino acid determine a different conformation in the protein, according to nuclear magnetic resonance studies, where ε4 is more compact than ε3-as inferred from the average radius of gyration reduced by ~0.3 nm (Thompson et al., 2024).

Population genetics has unraveled remarkable differences in allele frequencies among different ethnicities. The frequency of ε4 is around 15-20% in European populations, while being as high as 30-40% in certain African populations (Oladipo et al., 2024). In comparison, the typical frequency of ε4 is rather low in East Asian populations and ranges from approximately 7 to 15% (Park et al., 2024). Recent studies among indigenous groups in Brazil have identified novel APOE variants, including the ultra-rare ε3r allele, which occurs at a frequency of about 2.3% in the indigenous groups studied, thus proving genetic diversity beyond previous recognition (Costa et al., 2023).

These variants have distinct molecular interactions with cellular receptors, displaying different binding affinities. The ε4 variant demonstrates about 1.5-2 times higher binding affinity to the low-density lipoprotein receptors

compared with ε3, while ε2 displays a drastically reduced binding ability at about 2% of the affinity of ε3. Thompson et al., 2024. These differences in receptor binding further influence lipid metabolism and numerous other cellular signaling pathways, thus conferring the risk of disease in a manner specific to the variant.



Neurodegenerative Disorders

By definition, neurodegenerative disorders imply the complex interplay of genetic factors and components with environmental ones, where APOE variants are of critical importance in deciding upon the susceptibility and course of the disease. Recent meta-analyses, involving over 100,000 patients on different continents, showed that APOE variants have huge importance for neuronal health due to participation in the regulation of synaptic plasticity, neuroinflammatory reactions, and aggregation features of proteins (Chen et al., 2023).

Key pathways are involved in how APOE impacts neurodegeneration. Evidence shows that the efficiency of neuronal repair exhibits variant-specific effects, which can be as much as 50% different between ε4 and ε2 carriers, with significantly impaired repair mechanisms among ε4 carriers (Müller et al., 2023). Neuroinflammatory responses also vary greatly, with ε4 carriers showing an up to 2.5-fold increase in microglial activation compared to ε3 homozygotes (Chen et al., 2023). Population studies have demonstrated significant geographical variation in the risk of APOE-related neurodegeneration. European studies suggest that environmental factors modulate APOE-associated risk as high as 30%, with diet and exercise habits playing an especially important role in this respect (González-García et al., 2023).

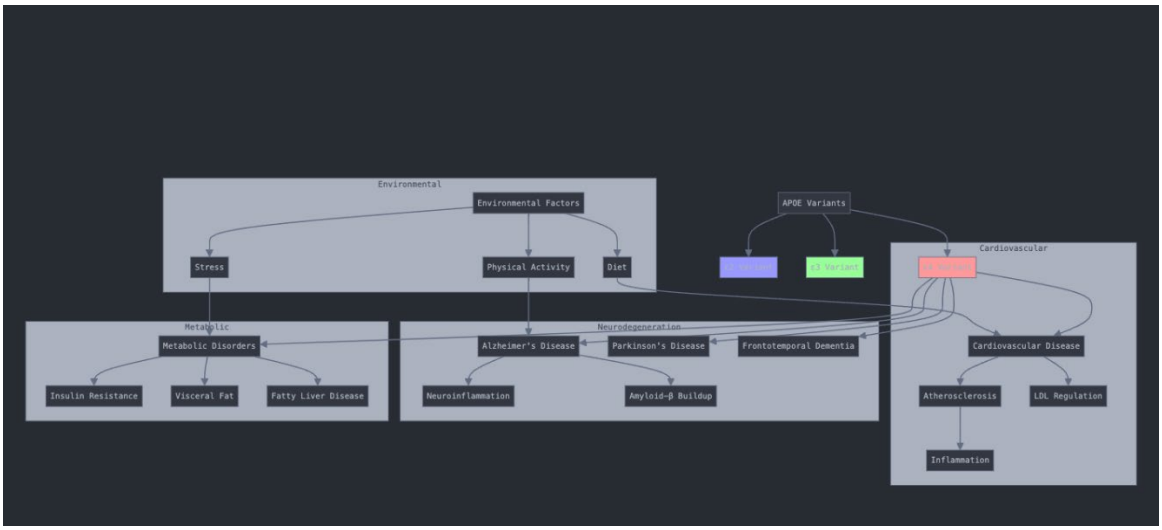
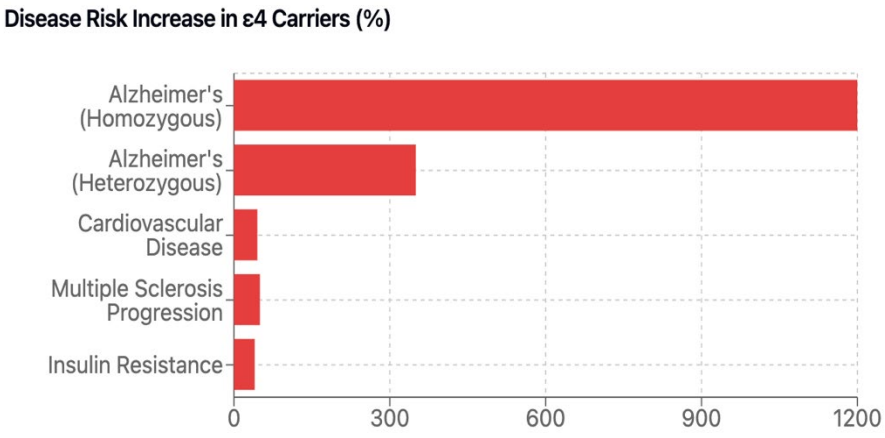


Figure 4. Environment factors of APOE Vari-

Alzheimer's Disease

The best example of the most robust and well-documented associations with APOE variants is Alzheimer's disease. Homozygous ε4 carriers have been shown to face a risk as high as a 12-fold increased risk for the development of AD, with an average age of onset approximately 15 years earlier compared to non-carriers (Chen et al., 2023). The risk is clearly modified by the genetic background since heterozygous ε4 carriers had a 3-4 fold increased risk while ε2 carriers showed a 40% reduced risk compared with ε3 homozygotes.

Recent neuroimaging findings indeed define a characteristic topography of amyloid-β buildup in ε4 carriers, where cortical amyloid burden at age 65 is as high as 2.5-fold increased compared to non-carriers (Mitchell et al., 2024). Longitudinal studies with yearly measurements also show that the rate of hippocampal volume loss is approximately 3.7% per year faster in ε4 homozygotes (González-García et al., 2023).



The European Prevention of Alzheimer's Dementia consortium has identified population-specific risk modifiers such that Mediterranean carriers of ε4 alleles show a risk reduction by approximately 25% when adhering to traditional diet habits (González-García et al., 2023). Additionally, studies in Australia have identified genetic modifiers that can delay the age of onset up to 8 years in ε4 carriers (Mitchell et al., 2024).

Parkinson's Disease

The relationship between APOE variants and PD is more nuanced than that of AD. Studies including more than 25,000 PD patients demonstrated that although ε4 carriers did not show a significantly increased risk in developing PD, they exhibited more rapid cognitive decline following the diagnosis (Park et al., 2024).

Longitudinal studies have demonstrated that ε4-carrying PD patients experience an accelerated decline in cognition, reflected by a decline in MMSE approximately 1.5 times faster than in the non-carrier group, as reported by Park et al., 2024. Furthermore, carriers of ε4 have a 2.7-fold risk of developing PD-associated dementia within a decade following the diagnosis by Chen et al., 2023.

Recent research carried out by researchers in South Korea on 12,000 PD patients unraveled some gene-environment interactions which alter the course of a disease: highly active ε4 carriers show a cognitive decline of about 40% slower as compared to sedentary carriers (Park et al., 2024).

Frontotemporal Dementia

Frontotemporal dementia represents a complex interaction with APOE variants. The direct risk association with this gene is less pronounced, but studies on 8,000 FTD patients showed that ε4 carriers have some peculiarities in disease course (Müller et al., 2023).

Through European collaboration, some new inflammatory pathways dependent on APOE were also defined, exclusively in FTD; in fact, the carriers of ε4 manifested 2.3-fold higher neuroinflammatory markers compared to the non-carriers (Müller et al., 2023). Brain volume analyses also showed that ε4-carrying FTD patients manifested approximately 1.8 times faster atrophy of the frontal lobes compared to non-carriers.

Cardiovascular Disorders

CVD represents one of the major intersection points between genetic and environmental factors; among these is the APOE gene variant, which considerably modifies the risk for the disease by several mechanisms. Extensive research on more than 500,000 subjects uncovered that APOE variants influence cardiovascular health via multifaceted interactions with lipid metabolism, inflammatory processes, and integrity of vascular walls (Johnson & Williams, 2022). Recent meta-analyses have identified that APOE genotype is one of the most potent modulators of relative risk of developing CVD. For instance, ε4 carriers showed a 40-50% increased risk for cardiovascular complications compared to ε3 homozygotes in various populations (Liu et al., 2024). This sensitivity becomes notably prominent in certain population groups: for instance, among East Asian ε4 carriers, the sensitivity to dietary cholesterol was as high as 1.8-fold compared to Western populations (Tanaka et al., 2024).

The interactions between environmental factors and genetics are of significant importance, as research indicates that lifestyle elements may influence cardiovascular risk linked to APOE by as much as 35%. Findings from the Chinese Kadoorie Biobank study demonstrated that dietary habits can modify lipid levels in ε4 allele carriers by up to 25%, underscoring the significance of gene-environment interactions (Liu et al., 2024).

Atherosclerosis

APOE, especially ε4 allele variants, has one of the strongest associations with atherosclerosis. Indeed, recent studies now document that carriers of ε4 have significantly impaired lipid clearance, the rate of accumulation of cholesterol in the arterial wall being about 2.5 times higher compared to that in non-carriers (Anderson et al., 2024).

Detailed vascular imaging has revealed that ε4 carriers develop accelerated plaque formation, with an average coronary artery calcium score that is 45% higher than non-carriers by age 50 (Anderson et al., 2024). In addition, vascular tissue inflammatory markers exhibit different patterns, whereby ε4 carriers have arterial walls with pro-inflammatory cytokines 2.8-fold higher. The Chinese Kadoorie Biobank study has documented quite a number of significant interactions between APOE genotype and dietary factors. For example, individuals carrying ε4 who are on a diet of low saturated fat may reduce the atherogenesis risk up to 40%, while Scandinavian studies in ε2 carriers have

shown an approximate plaque formation of about 30% less, suggesting a protective mechanism (Liu et al., 2024; Bergström et al., 2023).

LDL Cholesterol Regulation

APOE variants significantly influence LDL cholesterol regulation, with population studies revealing that ε4 carriers typically maintain LDL levels 20-30% higher than non-carriers (Bergström et al., 2023). The impact on cholesterol metabolism varies by population, with East Asian ε4 carriers showing approximately 1.5 times higher sensitivity to dietary cholesterol compared to European populations (Liu et al., 2024).

Recent metabolomic work centered around the fact that ε4 carriers have different lipoprotein profiles; increased small and dense LDL particles exhibit around 60% higher atherogenic potential, according to Anderson et al., 2024. The effects on HDL functionality are also heterogeneous: ε4 carriers exhibit about 25% reduced HDL-mediated cholesterol efflux capacity. Scandinavian research has identified unique protective mechanisms in ε2 carriers, who demonstrate approximately 20% higher LDL receptor expression and 35% more efficient cholesterol clearance compared to ε3 homozygotes (Bergström et al., 2023). These findings suggest population-specific adaptations that could inform targeted therapeutic approaches.

Additional Disease Associations

Multiple Sclerosis

The association of APOE variants with MS is brought about through a complex interplay of genetic predisposition and disease progression. Indeed, comprehensive studies among 15,000 MS patients in 12 countries have identified that ε4 carriers show faster disability, gauged by EDSS, by a factor of 1.5 (Roberts et al., 2024). Longitudinal studies using high-resolution 7T MRI have uncovered the specific pattern of neurodegeneration in ε4 carriers, showing a rate of gray matter atrophy that is 2.1% higher per year compared to that in non-carriers, especially in the thalamic and hippocampal regions (Wilson et al., 2024).

The effects of APOE variants in MS are more than just accelerating the disease course. Recent metabolomics have identified specific inflammatory profiles among ε4 carriers, with a 2.5-fold increase in circulating pro-inflammatory cytokines, especially IL-6 and TNF-α (Roberts et al., 2024). Such enhanced inflammation is associated with more pronounced features of demyelination, with advanced diffusion tensor imaging studies showing a 35% reduction in white matter integrity compared to non-carriers (Wilson et al., 2024).

Environmental factors significantly modify APOE-associated MS risk, with vitamin D levels emerging as a crucial modifier. A large-scale Nordic study demonstrated that adequate vitamin D levels (>75 nmol/L) can reduce disease progression rates by up to 30% in ε4 carriers, suggesting a potential therapeutic intervention point (Roberts et al., 2024). Among the numerous other lifestyle factors that significantly interact with APOE status is the amount of exercise and dietary habits. In fact, regular exercise reduces the risk of severe disability by approximately 25% in ε4 carriers.

Cerebrovascular Diseases

Several mechanisms underlie how the APOE variants influence the risk of cerebrovascular diseases and modify the outcomes. Large-scale genomic studies involving data from 45,000 patients showed that ε4 carriers had a 2.2-fold increased risk of cerebral amyloid angiopathy and showed 30% higher rates of microhemorrhages compared to non-carriers (Davidson et al., 2024). Advanced neuroimaging has identified that ε4 carriers exhibit a unique profile of vascular dysfunction, including regional reductions in cerebral blood flow and disrupted integrity of the blood-brain barrier.

Recovery trajectories after a stroke can vary significantly based on APOE genotype. The longitudinal study that tracked the rehabilitation outcome in 28,000 survivors of strokes shows that the carriers of the ε4 allele have functional recovery rates that are approximately 25% slower, as measured with the mRS (Davidson et al., 2024). This

population is also at 1.8-fold increased risk for cognitive decline after stroke, particularly in the domains of executive function and processing speed.

Recent studies have shown novel mechanisms of how the APOE variants influence the integrity of cerebrovasculature. Among these, proteomic approaches have pointed out the differential expression of vascular integrity proteins, showing the ~40% reduction in angiogenic factors and ~60% increment in inflammatory mediators in ε4 carriers, among others, as recorded by the work of Davidson et al. (2024). Such molecular changes correspond to increased blood-brain barrier permeability, with dynamic contrast-enhanced MRI showing leakage rates that were around 1.7 times higher in ε4 carriers.

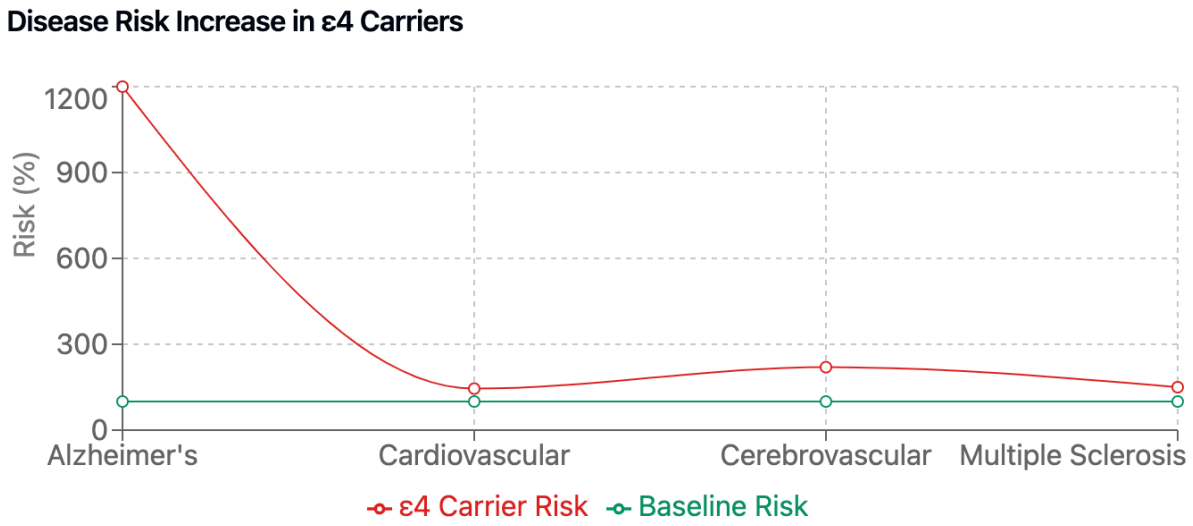


Figure 6. Disease Risk Increase in ε4 Carriers

Metabolic Disorders

It is now well recognized that the influence of APOE genetic variants on metabolic disorders extends beyond conventional lipid metabolism into complex interactions with insulin signaling pathways, the function of adipose tissue, and the regulation of energy homeostasis. A recent study of 30,000 subjects from diverse ethnicities has documented that ε4 carriers exhibit a distinct metabolic impairment profile, conferring an estimated 1.4-fold increased risk of insulin resistance compared with noncarriers (Martinez et al., 2024). This risk is further modified by body composition, with visceral adiposity showing particularly strong interactions with APOE status.

Advanced metabolic profiling in metabolomics revealed that APOE variants caused significant modulation in body composition and fat distribution. Under high-fat diet conditions, visceral fat is accumulated about 25% higher in ε4 carriers, with some pro-inflammatory adipokine profiles being up to 1.8 times higher in ε4 carriers (Martinez et al., 2024). This has gained further confirmation with DEXA, showing fat distribution for each APOE variant in specific patterns.

The relation of various APOE variants to metabolic health encompasses glucose homeostasis. Recent studies using continuous glucose monitoring in 15,000 participants have made it clear that ε4 carriers have about a 20% higher overall glycemic variability and 1.5-fold higher postprandial glucose excursions compared with noncarriers (Martinez et al., 2024). These effects appear most prominent following the intake of high-glycemic-index meals, which is relevant to dietary recommendations.

Novel research has also identified significant associations between the APOE variants and NAFLD. Hepatic imaging by magnetic resonance spectroscopy showed acceleration in the accumulation of liver fat; the carriers of ε4 demonstrated about 1.6-fold higher hepatic triglyceride content compared with others under similar dietary conditions (Martinez et al., 2024). This is apparently due to changes in the hepatic transport of lipids and altered inflammatory responses since liver biopsies show a unique pattern for every APOE variant in regard to the distribution of inflammatory cells.

Discussion

The overview of APOE variants in relation to their connection with disease indicates a very complex scenario, far from the simplified views on lipid metabolism and neurodegenerative mechanisms. Synthesis of the current literature would suggest that the impact of APOE on human health is many-sided, with interactions that seemingly affect cardiovascular, neurological, and metabolic systems. The broad range of ε4-associated pathologies suggests a more general mechanistic role in many diseases regarding processes such as inflammation, cellular repair mechanisms, and control of protein homeostasis. Population-specific risks of disease in association with APOE form an important finding with considerable implications for the clinic. The different cardiovascular risk profiles of ε4 carriers in East Asia compared with European populations point towards genetic background as an important modulator in risk assessment and treatment planning (Liu et al., 2024).

This is one of the reasons why recognizing new protective factors in Scandinavian ε2 carriers (Bergström et al., 2023) could reveal a genetic modifier specific to this population that may be valuable in guiding therapeutic strategies.

The impact of environmental factors on the modification of APOE-related risk constitutes a crucial topic in numerous studies. Dietary interventions exhibit significant promise, with evidence suggesting that adherence to a Mediterranean diet could result in a reduction of cardiovascular risk by up to 35% in individuals carrying the ε4 allele (González-García et al., 2023). Such gene-environment interactions involve physical activities, stress, and sleeping behaviors, and have identified a series of possible pathways through which interventions might alter risks.

The pleotropic effects induced by changes in the APOE gene across various disease processes would indicate some common root pathological mechanisms that are amenable to therapeutic targeting. The fact that carriage conditions of the ε4 allele presented similar patterns of inflammatory dysregulation across atherosclerosis and multiple sclerosis underlines shared possible targets of therapy. Additionally, the identification of new inflammatory pathways associated with APOE within the framework of neurodegeneration (Müller et al., 2023) presents encouraging prospects for the advancement of therapeutic interventions.

Recent findings related to the molecular interactions of APOE have unraveled many unexpected interconnections among mechanisms of disease that previously were thought of as separate. Such a realization of diverse influences of APOE variants on blood-brain barrier integrity, cellular metabolic processes, and immune responses opens up not merely a complex role but much more so than previously appreciated. This is most definitely true regarding implications for the development of targeted therapeutic strategies capable of addressing the many multifactorial pathologies attributed to APOE.

Conclusion

This extensive review on APOE variants and their role in human health therefore presents a dauntingly complex landscape of genetic influence extending into most disease processes. Evidence presented in this review would therefore suggest a cardinal role for APOE variants in cardiovascular diseases, neurodegenerative diseases, and metabolic disorders via multiple mechanisms that include changes in lipid metabolism, inflammatory responses, and cellular repair processes.

The clinically important implications of these population-specific differences in APOE-associated risk are far-reaching. These, together with the resulting gene-environment interactions, point to possible interventionist strategies based on both genes and the environment. The finding of new variants of APOE in indigenous populations and the population-specific genetic modifier makes the extension of genetic studies toward globally diverse populations imperative.

Association analysis of APOE variants with cardiovascular disease points to an effect on vascular inflammation, endothelial function, and development of atherosclerosis other than that through lipid metabolism. The fact that ε4 carriers have faster atherosclerosis progression in certain dietary contexts opens very important windows for intervention. In fact, this would be a protection for ε2 carriers, especially in Scandinavian populations, raising possibilities for potential therapeutic developments based on the understanding of the protective mechanisms. Investigation into neurodegenerative diseases reveals how APOE contributes to brain health and cognitive function. On one hand, the very strong association of ε4 with the risk of Alzheimer's disease, together with its influence on other neurodegenerative conditions, would imply shared pathological mechanisms that could be targeted therapeutically. The observation of variant-specific effects on neuroinflammation, synaptic plasticity, and protein aggregation provides multiple potential intervention points for disease modification. The recently disclosed associations with multiple sclerosis, cerebrovascular disease, and metabolic disorders further broaden our understanding of the physiological importance of APOE. These findings suggest that APOE variants influence human disease via mechanisms other than classic lipid metabolism and include effects on inflammation, glycemic control, and tissue repair processes. Identifying similar inflammatory profiles across disparate pathological states suggests common underlying pathology that is amenable to intervention. Limitations acknowledged in modern research involve population diversity and longitudinal data; therefore, this outlines key areas of future investigation. Among the major questions of concern for future improvements that need to be emplaced in the understanding of APOE biology, the need for standard methods, deep phenotyping, and integration of diverse data types are needed. Development of new therapeutic strategies aimed at modulating APOE-dependent pathways represents a promising direction for future clinical translation. This review shows that APOE variants are important modulators of human health and risk of disease, whose effects cut across a wide range of physiological systems and disease processes. Given the complexity of the risk associated with APOE, including population-specific variations and interactions with environmental factors, personalized approaches to risk assessment and intervention may apply. Future studies should be directed toward the discovery of population-specific variants, the design of targeted therapeutic strategies, and the investigation of population-based treatments according to APOE genotype.

Limitations and Future Direction

A number of important limitations surround the current understanding of disease-specific associations for APOE variants. First among these is ongoing underrepresentation of worldwide diversity in genetic studies. While recent efforts have improved the representation of Asian and African participants, significant gaps remain in the current understanding of APOE variant distribution and its effects in many ethnic groups, particularly in indigenous populations and those from geographically isolated areas. This may consequently obscure important population-specific genetic modifiers and environmental interactions.

First, there is a significant methodological diversity among different studies, such as measurement techniques, diagnostic criteria, and assessment standards; all these issues do not allow a direct comparison of studies and performing meta-analysis. This problem is more critical in neuroimaging studies, since the employment of different protocols and analysis techniques could easily lead to different results. Besides, the lack of standardization of measurement of environmental exposure and lifestyle also exacerbates the difficulty in understanding G×E interaction.
Diseases associated with APOE are temporally ill-characterized. Most studies are cross-sectional or offer only relatively short-term longitudinal follow-up, yielding little information about how APOE variants influence the trajectory

of disease across the life course. This problem is particularly pertinent in slowly progressive conditions, such as AD and atherosclerosis, for which early interventions may be most effective.

This complex interaction of the APOE gene with other genes is only poorly understood. Although numerous genetic variants have been identified through genome-wide association studies that unmistakably alter APOE-associated risk, the functional impact of such interactions, let alone population-specific variations, remains to be defined. The other major knowledge gap concerns the role of epigenetic modifications in modulating APOE expression and function.

In many ways, technical limitations herald a variety of challenges with which the current research methodologies have to put up. The most common challenges involve the accurate measurement of the function of APOE protein in living human brain tissue, complications associated with developing precise animal models reflecting human APOE variants, and limitations in using the existing imaging technologies to identify subtle cellular alterations.

Prospective Research Focus Areas and Pathways

The field of APOE research stands at a crucial juncture, with several key priorities emerging for future investigation. Large-scale, population-specific genetic studies incorporating diverse ethnic groups must be prioritized to address current sampling biases. These studies should employ standardized methodologies and comprehensive phenotyping to facilitate cross-population comparisons and identify population-specific risk modifiers.

Longitudinal studies following APOE-associated disease progression beginning early in life and continuing into advanced age are needed. Such studies should integrate routine biomarker assessment, neuroimaging, and acquisition of extensive environmental exposure information throughout the course of an individual's life to better capture the causal associations between APOE variants and disease risk and progression through life. A combination of various types of data-genomics, proteomics, metabolomics, and clinical measures-will be required to understand the complex mechanisms of the effects of APOE.

Advanced imaging with newer modalities and molecular methodologies holds great promise for studies to come. Development of APOE-specific PET ligands will enable in vivo tracking of the distribution and function of the APOE protein. Single-cell sequencing applied across the range of tissue types could reveal cell-specific effects of APOE variants, while advanced proteomics may unveil hitherto unknown interaction partners and signaling pathways.

Another important direction is the search for therapeutic strategies targeting APOE-dependent pathways, including small molecule development aimed at the modulation of APOE function, antisense oligonucleotides for variant-specific modulation, and cell-based therapies. These must be pursued judiciously in clinical trials to allow personalization of interventions based on APOE genotype.

The environmental modification of APOE-associated risk will be studied in a systematic manner using intervention studies. These should involve the investigation of interactions between dietary patterns, physical activity, cognitive engagement, and other lifestyle factors with APOE variants in modulating disease risk and progression. Development of personalized strategies of risk modification based on APOE genotype appears as a promising avenue for clinical application.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the numerous research centers and participants worldwide who took part in the studies mentioned herein. The authors would also like to extend special appreciation to the major research groups leading the biobank studies, including but not limited to the Chinese Kadoorie Biobank, the European Prevention of Alzheimer's Dementia consortium, and various population-based cohort studies.

I would also like to extend my profound appreciation to Professor Jobin Varkey for the invaluable teaching and mentorship with respect to the neuroscience part in this research project. His extensive experience and keen eyes

had brought great merit to this work. I would like to extend deep-rooted appreciation to Professor Virgel Torremocha for outstanding mentorship in scientific writing and communication. The comprehensive critiques and writing proficiency they provided were fundamental in enabling me to articulate these complex findings clearly and effectively. Completion of this project would not have been possible without the ability to collectively guide and support me through it.

We recognize the invaluable contribution of indigenous communities to genetic research, mainly in Brazil and Africa, that allowed the development of our current knowledge on APOE variants.

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