

# Association of *APOE* Haplotypes With Common Age-Related Ocular Diseases in 412,171 Individuals

Perttu J. Liuska,<sup>1,\*</sup> Joel T. Rämö,<sup>2,3,\*</sup> Susanna Lemmelä,<sup>2,4</sup> Kai Kaarniranta,<sup>5</sup> Hannu Uusitalo,<sup>6</sup> Elisa Lahtela,<sup>2</sup> Mark J. Daly,<sup>2,3</sup> Mika Harju,<sup>7</sup> Aarno Palotie,<sup>2,3</sup> and Joni A. Turunen<sup>1,7</sup>; for the FinnGen Study<sup>†</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Eye Genetics Group, Folkhälsan Research Center, Biomedicum Helsinki, Haartmaninkatu 8, Helsinki, Finland

<sup>2</sup>Institute for Molecular Medicine Finland (FIMM), HiLIFE, PL 20, University of Helsinki, Finland

<sup>3</sup>The Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, Stanley Building, Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States

<sup>4</sup>Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, PL 30, Helsinki, Finland

<sup>5</sup>Department of Ophthalmology, Kuopio University Hospital and University of Eastern Finland, KYS, Finland

<sup>6</sup>TAYS Eye Center, Tampere University and Tampere University Hospital, PL 2000, Tampere, Finland

<sup>7</sup>Department of Ophthalmology, University of Helsinki and Helsinki University Hospital, Haartmaninkatu 4C, Helsinki, Finland

Correspondence: Perttu Liuska, Department of Ophthalmology, Helsinki University Hospital, Haartmaninkatu 4C, PL220, FI-00029 HUS, Helsinki, Finland; [perttu.liuska@helsinki.fi](mailto:perttu.liuska@helsinki.fi).

<sup>†</sup>Related online manuscript file.

PJL and JTR contributed equally to the work.

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**PURPOSE.** Apolipoprotein E4 (*APOE*4), a known risk factor for Alzheimer's disease, has controversially been associated with reduced risk of primary open-angle glaucoma (POAG) and age-related macular degeneration (AMD). Here, we sought to systematically quantify the associations of *APOE* haplotypes with age-related ocular diseases and to assess their scope and age-dependency.

**METHODS.** We included genetic and registry data from 412,171 Finnish individuals in the FinnGen study. Disease endpoints were defined using nationwide registries. *APOE* genotypes were directly genotyped using Illumina and Affymetrix arrays or imputed using a custom Finnish reference panel. We evaluated the disease associations of *APOE* genotypes containing  $\epsilon 2$  (without  $\epsilon 4$ ) and  $\epsilon 4$  (without  $\epsilon 2$ ) compared with the  $\epsilon 3\epsilon 3$  genotype using logistic regressions stratified by age.

**RESULTS.** *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  enriched haplotypes were inversely associated with overall glaucoma (odds ratio [OR] = 0.95, 95% confidence interval [CI] = 0.92–0.99,  $P = 0.0047$ ), and its subtypes POAG (OR = 0.95,  $P = 0.027$ ), normal-tension glaucoma (OR = 0.87,  $P = 0.0058$ ), and suspected glaucoma (OR = 0.95,  $P = 0.014$ ). Individuals with the  $\epsilon 4$  allele also had lower odds for AMD (OR = 0.80, 95% CI = 0.76–0.84,  $P < 0.001$ ), seen both in dry and neovascular subgroups. A slight negative association was also detected in senile cataract, but this was not reproducible in age-group analyses.

**CONCLUSIONS.** Our results support prior evidence of the inverse association of *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  with glaucoma, but the association was weaker than for AMD. We could not show an association with exfoliation glaucoma, supporting the hypothesis that *APOE* may be involved in regulating retinal ganglion cell degeneration rather than intraocular pressure.

**Keywords:** apolipoprotein E (*APOE*), glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration (AMD)

Apolipoprotein E (*APOE*), the major lipoprotein in the brain and a lipid transport protein, is strongly associated with late-onset Alzheimer's disease (AD) – the leading cause of dementia in the elderly – and cardiovascular disease.<sup>1</sup> It has also emerged as a potential regulator of age-related macular degeneration (AMD), and, more recently, glaucoma, which together account for up to 49.8% of blindness in developed, high-income countries.<sup>1–3</sup>

The *APOE* gene normally encodes a 299-aminoacid lipoprotein which regulates plasma lipid levels and acts as a ligand for low-density lipoprotein (LDL) receptors. *APOE* has three alleles ( $\epsilon 2$ ,  $\epsilon 3$ , and  $\epsilon 4$ ), defined by two single-nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs), rs429358 and rs7412. Thus, six different genotypes are formed by the combina-

tion of these three alleles ( $\epsilon 2/\epsilon 2$ ,  $\epsilon 3/\epsilon 3$ ,  $\epsilon 4/\epsilon 4$ ,  $\epsilon 2/\epsilon 3$ ,  $\epsilon 3/\epsilon 4$ , and  $\epsilon 2/\epsilon 4$ ), encoding different isoforms of the *APOE* protein, affecting lipid processing, transport, and clearance from the circulation.<sup>4</sup> The  $\epsilon 3$  allele is the most common and constitutes a baseline risk for AD, whereas  $\epsilon 4$  is a major risk allele and  $\epsilon 2$  is protective for AD in an allele-dose dependent manner.<sup>5,6</sup>

Primary open-angle glaucoma (POAG; MIM 137760), the leading cause of irreversible blindness in the world, is a group of neurodegenerative diseases characterized by the loss of retinal ganglion cells (RGCs) and their axons in the optic nerve. Intraocular pressure (IOP) remains the only modifiable risk factor for POAG and there are no neuroprotective therapies to promote RGC survival.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the

*APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  allele has recently been associated with a reduced risk of POAG (odds ratio [OR] = 0.83, 95% confidence interval [CI] = 0.74–0.94,  $P = 0.0022$ ) in an inverse association compared with AD.<sup>1</sup> This protective effect was found in both high-tension and normal-tension glaucoma (NTG) groups. Furthermore, in a Brazilian cohort, carrying the *APOE*  $\epsilon 2$  allele (OR = 1.516,  $P = 0.04$ ) or the  $\epsilon 2\epsilon 3$  genotype (OR = 1.655,  $P = 0.02$ ) was associated with a greater risk for POAG when compared to  $\epsilon 3\epsilon 3$  reference genotype.<sup>8</sup> A small negative association between *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  and glaucoma was also observed in a recent study within the UK Biobank, but this was not reproducible in two other replication cohorts in the study set, and the authors suggested that the association might only reflect glaucoma underdiagnosis in the *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  carriers.<sup>9</sup>

AMD (MIM 603075), identified by progressive degeneration of photoreceptors and the underlying retinal pigment epithelium (RPE) cells in the macula region of the retina, is the second leading cause of acquired visual impairment in the elderly population, and it is estimated to affect almost 30% of European individuals over 75 years of age.<sup>2,10</sup> It can be clinically classified into two major subtypes: the dry form, accounting for approximately 80% of the cases, and the wet form.<sup>11</sup> The early hallmark of AMD are inflammatory cellular debris called drusen in or under the RPE. The dry form of AMD is also characterized by pigment irregularities or geographic atrophy in the RPE (without angiogenesis), whereas the wet form is marked by choroidal neovascularization.<sup>3</sup> An inverse association between the *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  allele and AMD was identified in early candidate gene studies,<sup>12</sup> and the *APOE* locus has since been identified in meta-analyses and genome-wide association studies of AMD with high statistical confidence.<sup>3,13,14</sup>

Despite increasing interest, the statistical evidence for a causal association of *APOE* with glaucoma remains weaker than for AMD.<sup>9</sup> Several studies have reported conflicting results regarding the risk profiles of different *APOE* haplotypes with glaucoma,<sup>15–19</sup> whereas others have detected no association.<sup>20–25</sup> Many previous reports are based on small to moderately sized case-control datasets and have not examined other diseases as negative controls to reveal possible bias in the study design. *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  is a major determinant of cardiovascular disease and dementia, and a leading genetic cause of mortality and disability worldwide.<sup>26,27</sup> The association of *APOE* genotypes with life span and functional capacity in old age can bias associations of diseases primarily affecting the elderly population. Non-neurodegenerative diseases affecting a large proportion of the elderly population, such as senile age-related cataract,<sup>28</sup> can be analyzed as probable negative outcome controls to assess the likelihood of bias.

Here, we report the association and age dependency of *APOE* haplotypes with common age-related ocular diseases, glaucoma, AMD, and senile cataract in 412,171 Finnish individuals.

## METHODS

FinnGen (<https://www.finnngen.fi/en>) is a public-private partnership research project combining genotype data of currently 429,209 individuals (Data Freeze 10) from Finnish biobanks, prospective epidemiological cohorts (initiated as far back as 1992), and disease-based cohorts with digital health record data from national health registries. The samples were linked by a unique national personal identifi-

cation number assigned to all Finnish citizens and residents. Recruitment of samples to FinnGen was initiated in August 2017, and the data analysis was performed between December 2022 and April 2023.

The FINRISK study is a large Finnish population survey on risk factors for chronic, noncommunicable diseases. The survey was carried out for 40 years since 1972 every 5 years using independent, random, and representative population samples from different parts of Finland, as described earlier.<sup>29</sup> The Health 2000 Survey was carried out in the years 2000 to 2001, capturing a nationally representative sample of more than 8000 persons aged 30 years and over living in mainland Finland. The National FINRISK Study and Health 2000 Survey were joined to form a new population study, the National FinHealth Study. The data were transferred to THL Biobank in July 2015 and subsequently incorporated into FinnGen.

The FinnGen samples were genotyped using Illumina and Affymetrix arrays (Illumina Inc., San Diego, CA, USA, and Thermo Fisher Scientific, Santa Clara, CA, USA), as detailed previously.<sup>30</sup> Genotypes were imputed based on a population-specific SISu v4 imputation reference panel comprised of 8557 whole genomes. Non-Finnish outliers, twin, and duplicate samples were removed, as detailed previously,<sup>30</sup> and the remaining 412,171 participants were included in genotype analyses. The two SNPs forming the *APOE* alleles, rs429358 and rs7412, were identified either by direct genotyping or imputation.

The FinnGen study protocol adhered to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethics Review Board of the Hospital District of Helsinki and Uusimaa (HUS/990/2017; Online-Only Supplement). Individuals gave written informed consent based on the Finnish Biobank Act or separate research cohort protocols. All DNA samples and data in this study were pseudonymized.

The disease endpoints were defined using nationwide registries for deaths, hospital discharges, outpatient specialist appointments, harmonizing over the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) revisions 8, 9, and 10, procedure codes (NOMESCO), Finnish-specific Social Insurance Institute (KELA) drug reimbursement codes and Anatomic Therapeutic Chemical (ATC) codes. Glaucoma-related operations included trabeculectomy and iridectomy, glaucoma shunt operation, non-penetrating glaucoma surgery, and other filtering operations. The definitions of clinical endpoints used in this study are presented in Supplementary Table S1 and control groups are provided in detail at <https://www.finnngen.fi/en/researchers/clinical-endpoints>.

## Statistical Analysis

*APOE* genotypes were identified from haplotypes of the two non-synonymous SNPs, rs429358 and rs7412, forming the corresponding alleles of  $\epsilon 2$ ,  $\epsilon 3$ , and  $\epsilon 4$ . Logistic regression in R (version 4.2.2; <http://www.r-project.org>) was used to analyze the association of genotypes with ocular disease, with covariates including genotypic sex, age at end of follow-up or death,<sup>2</sup> first 10 genotypic principal components (PCs), and genotyping array. All participants were included in the analyses, and the *APOE*  $\epsilon 3\epsilon 3$  was used as the reference unless otherwise stated. A Wald test was used to evaluate the statistical significance of the coefficients. We additionally evaluated the disease associations of the rs429358 and rs7412 genotypes with 2405 binary endpoints and 3 quantitative endpoints using the additive model as implemented

in Regenie version 2.24, with genotypic sex, age at end of follow-up or death, first 10 PCs, genotyping array, and genotyping batch as fixed-effect covariates.<sup>51</sup> All tests were two-tailed. Because this study followed up previously reported associations, and the examined phenotypes and genotypes were correlated, multiple testing correction was not considered appropriate. The analyses were performed between December 2022 and April 2023.

## RESULTS

### Study Characteristics

Altogether, 412,171 individuals from FinnGen passing genotype quality control were included (Table 1). Of those, 230,307 (55.9%) were female subjects, and 181,864 (44.1%) were male subjects. The mean age at the end of the follow-up period was 60.3 (SD = 17.9) years. The number of individuals with different disease endpoints are presented in Table 2.

The distribution of individuals with different APOE genotypes are tabulated in Table 1. The phenome-wide association study plots of the two APOE alleles forming the haplotypes, rs429358 and rs7412, are supplied in Supplementary Figure S1.

### Associations of the APOE Genotypes With AD and Ocular Diseases

First, we tested the known association of APOE genotypes with AD in our sample. The OR for genotypes with ε4 but without ε2 (i.e. ε3ε4 and ε4ε4) compared to the ε3ε3 reference genotype was 3.06 (95% CI = 2.93–3.20, P < 0.001) for AD. We subsequently investigated the association between the APOE genotypes with glaucoma endpoints and AMD. The APOE ε4 allele demonstrated an inverse association with all glaucoma endpoints (overall glaucoma, glaucoma

TABLE 1. Characteristics of Study Participants (n = 412,171) and Prevalence of the APOE Haplotypes

Characteristic	
Mean age, y (SD)*	60.3 (17.9)
Sex, n (%)	
Male	181,864 (44.1)
Female	230,307 (55.9)
Genotypes	
ε2ε2	1135 (0.3)
ε2ε3	33,597 (7.8)
ε2ε4	8040 (1.9)
ε3ε3	241,282 (56.2)
ε3ε4	114,836 (26.8)
ε4ε4	13,281 (3.1)

\* Standard deviation.

suspects, POAG, NTG, and glaucoma operations) except XFG (see Table 2). The APOE ε4 allele also had a negative association with AMD with an OR of 0.80 (95% CI = 0.76–0.84, P < 0.001). To serve as a negative control, we also tested for associations among the APOE genotypes, myopia, and senile cataract. The APOE ε4 allele was not associated with myopia but there was an association with senile cataract (OR = 0.95, 95% CI = 0.93–0.97, P < 0.001).

The OR for genotypes with ε4 but without ε2 (i.e. ε3ε4 and ε4ε4) compared with all other genotypes was 0.93 (95% CI = 0.88–0.98, P = 0.011) for overall glaucoma; for POAG 0.86 (95% CI = 0.79–0.93, P < 0.001); for NTG 0.79 (95% CI = 0.68–0.93, P = 0.0030); and 0.92 (95% CI = 0.86–0.99, P = 0.022) for suspected glaucoma. The OR was 0.75 for AMD (95% CI = 0.69–0.81, P < 0.001); and 0.93 for senile cataract (95% CI = 0.89–0.96, P < 0.001). The associations of ε3ε4 and ε4ε4 genotypes with XFG (95% CI = 0.82–1.06, P = 0.30) or glaucoma-related surgery (95% CI = 0.73–1.08, P = 0.23) were not significant.

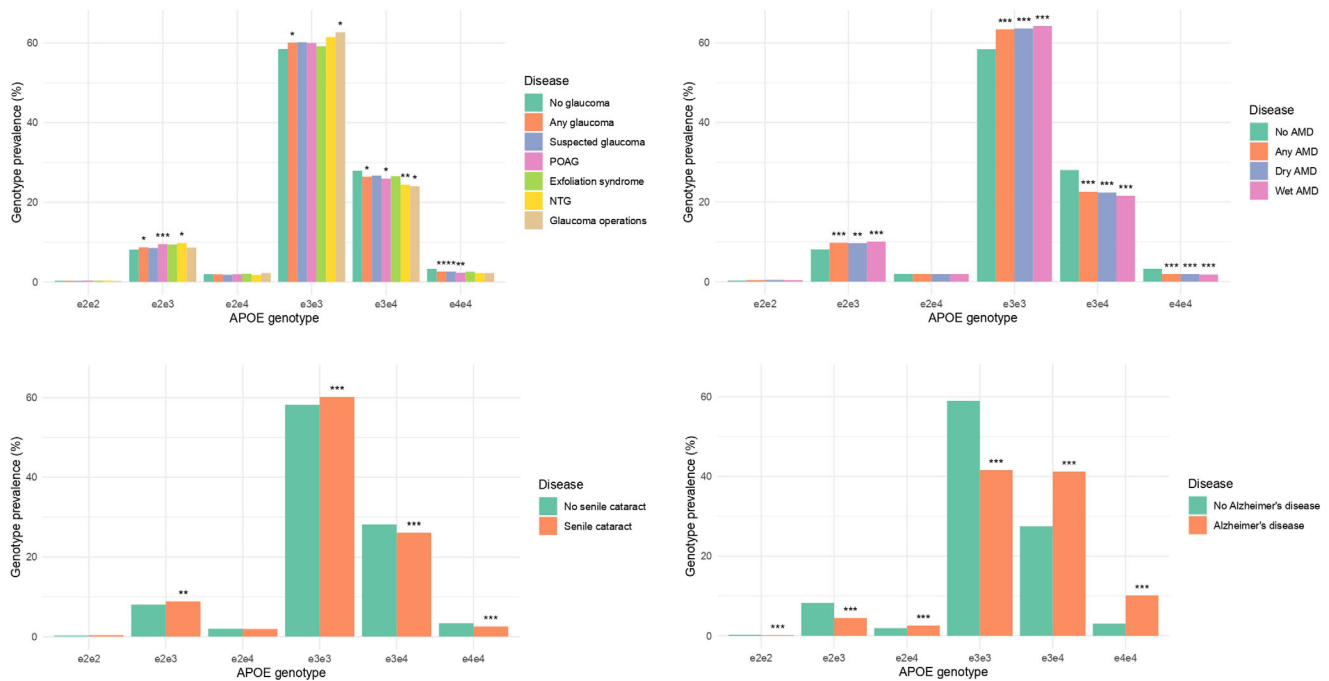
TABLE 2. Disease Prevalence and Association of the APOE ε4 Allele Containing Genotypes (ε3ε4 and ε4ε4 Genotypes) Compared With the Reference Genotype ε3ε3 With Different Types of Glaucoma, Age-Related Macular Degeneration, Myopia, Senile Cataract, and Alzheimer's Disease in the FinnGen Biobank Cohort With 412,171 Individuals

No. (%)*	Controls	Odds Ratio (95% CI)	P Value†
Individuals after QC (n = 412,171)		NA	NA
Glaucoma (n = 20,905; 5.1%)	391,266	0.95 (0.92–0.99)	0.0047
POAG (n = 8530; 2.1%)	391,266	0.95 (0.90–0.99)	0.027
NTG (n = 2272; 0.58%)	391,266	0.87 (0.79–0.96)	0.0058
XFG (n = 3424; 0.87%)	391,266	1.03 (0.95–1.11)	0.52
Glaucoma suspects (n = 11,968; 3.0%)	391,266	0.95 (0.91–0.99)	0.014
Glaucoma operations (n = 1 486; 0.36%)	410,685	0.84 (0.75–0.95)	0.0049
AMD (n = 9721; 2.5%)	381,330	0.80 (0.76–0.84)	<0.001
Wet AMD (n = 5239; 1.9%)	273,912	0.76 (0.71–0.81)	<0.001
Dry AMD (n = 6651; 2.3%)	272,496	0.80 (0.75–0.84)	<0.001
Myopia (n = 4106; 1.0%)	394,019	0.94 (0.88–1.01)	0.089
Senile cataract (n = 65,235; 16.0%)	341,536	0.95 (0.93–0.97)	<0.001
Alzheimer's disease (n = 10,519; 2.6%)	401,652	3.06 (2.93–3.20)	<0.001

QC, quality control; POAG, primary open-angle glaucoma; NTG, normal-tension glaucoma; XFG, exfoliation glaucoma; AMD, age-related macular degeneration; NA, not applicable.

\* Prevalence in cohort;

† Logistic regression, two-tailed, P values with Wald test.



**FIGURE.** Prevalences of the *APOE* genotypes in different types of glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration, senile cataract, and Alzheimer’s disease in FinnGen. The prevalence of each *APOE* genotype with respect to disease status was evaluated using logistic regression, with the respective *APOE* genotype as the outcome and disease status, genotypic sex, age at the end of follow-up or death<sup>2</sup>, first 10 PCs, and genotyping array as independent predictors. A Wald test was used to evaluate the statistical significance (\*\*\*) indicates  $P < 0.001$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ , and \* $P < 0.05$ ). Abbreviations: POAG = primary open-angle glaucoma, NTG = normal-tension glaucoma, AMD = age-related macular degeneration.

When comparing the less common  $\epsilon 2$  allele containing genotypes  $\epsilon 2\epsilon 2$  and  $\epsilon 2\epsilon 3$  with the  $\epsilon 3\epsilon 3$  reference genotype, we observed a slight positive association with POAG (OR = 1.12, 95% CI = 1.03–1.20,  $P = 0.0046$ ), but we did not observe statistically significant associations with any other glaucoma phenotypes (Supplementary Table S2).

### Prevalences of Ocular Diseases by *APOE* Genotypes

The prevalence of glaucoma-related diseases among carriers of the *APOE*  $\epsilon 4\epsilon 4$  and the reference  $\epsilon 3\epsilon 3$  genotypes were 4.1% and 5.2%, respectively, for overall glaucoma; 1.5% and 2.1% for POAG; 0.66% and 0.84% for XFG; 0.38% and 0.58% for NTG; 2.3% and 3.0% for suspected glaucoma; and 0.25% and 0.39% for glaucoma-related surgery. The prevalence among carriers of the *APOE*  $\epsilon 4\epsilon 4$  and the  $\epsilon 3\epsilon 3$  genotypes were 1.4% and 2.6% for AMD; 0.71% and 1.4% for wet AMD; 0.95% and 1.8% for dry AMD; and 12.4% and 16.3% for senile cataract. The genotype prevalences in disease endpoints are presented in the Figure.

### Age-Dependent Associations of *APOE* Genotypes With Ocular Diseases

We also evaluated associations of *APOE* haplotypes with the disease endpoints in different age groups by age at disease onset: <70 years, <60 years, and <50 years (i.e. all individuals diagnosed before the age limit; Table 3). The association of the  $\epsilon 4$  allele containing genotypes compared with the reference  $\epsilon 3\epsilon 3$  genotype was statistically significant with

POAG in all age groups (see Table 3). Similarly, we observed a significant association between *APOE* haplotypes and overall glaucoma in all age groups, and the association was more pronounced in the younger age groups (OR = 0.96,  $P = 0.047$ ; and OR = 0.90,  $P = 0.0098$  for individuals <70 and <50 years of age by disease onset, respectively; see Table 3). However, we could not repeat significant associations with AMD or senile cataract in any of these age groups. Myopia was not associated with *APOE* haplotypes in any age group. The results were similar in additional sensitivity analyses stratified by age at the end of the follow-up (Supplementary Table S3).

### Associations of *APOE* Genotypes With Ocular Diseases in Population Surveys

We performed an additional sensitivity analysis using the representative, randomly selected National FinHealth Study subpopulation in FinnGen with 35,599 individuals (Supplementary Table S4). The inverse association of the *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  allele with different types of AMD remained significant. Although we did not detect statistically significant associations with glaucoma endpoints in this smaller sample, effect estimates were comparable to those observed in the entire FinnGen cohort (Supplementary Table S5).

### DISCUSSION

Here, we systematically evaluated the associations of *APOE* haplotypes with common age-related ocular diseases, with a particular focus on glaucoma subtypes and AMD. We



**TABLE 3.** Age-Related Odds Ratios (ORs) of *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  Allele ( $\epsilon 3\epsilon 4$  and  $\epsilon 4\epsilon 4$  Genotypes) Compared to the Reference  $\epsilon 3\epsilon 3$  Genotype in Different Ophthalmic Diseases, and Alzheimer's Disease in FinnGen Data Freeze 10 ( $n = 412,171$ ) by Age at Disease Onset

Age, Y	Cases (N)	OR (95% CI)	P Value*
<b>Glaucoma</b>			
<50 y	3334	0.90 (0.84–0.98)	<b>0.0098</b>
<60 y	7007	0.94 (0.89–0.99)	<b>0.020</b>
<70 y	13,177	0.96 (0.92–1.00)	<b>0.047</b>
<b>POAG</b>			
<50 y	671	0.82 (0.69–0.97)	<b>0.023</b>
<60 y	1922	0.86 (0.78–0.95)	<b>0.0037</b>
<70 y	4454	0.92 (0.86–0.99)	<b>0.019</b>
<b>Glaucoma suspects</b>			
<50 y	2215	0.95 (0.86–1.04)	0.28
<60 y	4566	0.96 (0.90–1.03)	0.26
<70 y	8138	0.97 (0.92–1.02)	0.20
<b>Exfoliation glaucoma</b>			
<50 y	129	1.08 (0.74–1.58)	0.69
<60 y	376	1.05 (0.84–1.32)	0.64
<70 y	1386	1.07 (0.95–1.21)	0.24
<b>Normal-tension glaucoma</b>			
<50 y	93	1.04 (0.67–1.62)	0.85
<60 y	372	0.83 (0.66–1.05)	0.12
<70 y	1047	0.90 (0.78–1.03)	0.11
<b>Glaucoma-related surgery</b>			
<50 y	131	0.89 (0.61–1.30)	0.54
<60 y	314	0.82 (0.64–1.06)	0.14
<70 y	712	0.76 (0.64–0.91)	<b>0.0020</b>
<b>AMD</b>			
<50 y	0	NA	NA
<60 y	541	1.02 (0.85–1.23)	0.80
<70 y	2494	0.92 (0.84–1.00)	0.058
<b>Wet AMD</b>			
<50 y	0	NA	NA
<60 y	240	1.11 (0.84–1.47)	0.45
<70 y	1234	0.88 (0.77–1.00)	0.051
<b>Dry AMD</b>			
<50 y	0	NA	NA
<60 y	340	0.98 (0.78–1.24)	0.89
<70 y	1604	0.92 (0.82–1.03)	0.14
<b>Senile cataract</b>			
<50 y	1166	0.90 (0.79–1.02)	0.11
<60 y	5903	0.96 (0.91–1.02)	0.17
<70 y	24,110	0.98 (0.95–1.01)	0.14
<b>Myopia</b>			
<50 y	2735	0.96 (0.89–1.05)	0.39
<60 y	3417	0.96 (0.89–1.03)	0.25
<70 y	3879	0.95 (0.88–1.02)	0.13
<b>Alzheimer's disease</b>			
<50 y	29	0.47 (0.19–1.16)	0.10
<60 y	217	1.92 (1.46–2.53)	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
<70 y	1113	3.59 (3.16–4.08)	<b>&lt;0.001</b>

POAG, primary open-angle glaucoma; AMD, age-related macular degeneration; OR, odds ratio; NA, not applicable.

\*Logistic regression, two-tailed P values with Wald test.

build upon previous findings of a protective association of *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  with glaucoma by including genotype and registry data from 412,171 Finnish individuals. We demonstrate that the *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  enriched haplotypes were inversely associated with overall glaucoma, NTG, POAG, and suspected glaucoma. They were also inversely associated with both dry and neovascular AMD. Interestingly, a slight negative association was also shown in senile cataract.

In earlier studies, the most pronounced protective effect of *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  has been observed in NTG or populations with a high proportion of NTG.<sup>1,16,17</sup> Margeta et al. speculated that this is because *APOE* has a role in regulating RGC degeneration rather than IOP.<sup>1</sup> In our study, the effect was also most pronounced in the NTG group (OR = 0.79 compared with all other genotypes,  $P = 0.0030$ ). We could not show an association with XFG, a relatively common cause of secondary glaucoma in the Nordics,<sup>32</sup> which is in line with this hypothesis. In exfoliation syndrome, extracellular fibrillary material can be discovered in the anterior segment of the eye supposedly hindering the outflow of the aqueous humor and increasing IOP. Thus, the pathogenesis of XFG differs from that of primary glaucoma.

Some other studies and meta-analyses have also reported contradictory results, suggesting either a lack of association of these alleles or a positive association of *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  with glaucoma.<sup>9,33,34</sup> A recent study within the UK Biobank, including 13,988 individuals with glaucoma, observed similar results to our analysis, but could not replicate the results in other cohorts and the authors proposed that the association may represent an artifact of glaucoma underdiagnosis in *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  carriers.<sup>9</sup> Considering the possible ethnic differences, the differences in the pathogenesis of different types of glaucoma, and false positive results when conducting targeted genetic association studies, the role of *APOE* with glaucoma has remained debatable. An additional confounding element arises from the observation that AD has an impact on the retina both molecularly and structurally.<sup>35,36</sup> The *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  allele has been associated with faster retinal nerve fiber layer thinning,<sup>37</sup> introducing a potential source of bias in imaging-based studies. Our results do not exclude a general role for *APOE* in glaucoma and support differential associations for glaucoma subtypes.

An important observation is the presence of a negative association between *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  allele-containing genotypes and senile cataract, a presumed negative control outcome. A similar association was also recently detected in the UK Biobank.<sup>9</sup> This association could reflect a genuine pathophysiological role of *APOE* in lens degeneration, or perhaps more likely, confounding. Because *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  is linked with greater disability and mortality, as well as with recruitment to biobank studies, this may distort the association with senile cataract in a large data set reliant on digital health registries for disease endpoints. Supporting this hypothesis, we observed that the association with cataract was no longer significant in age groups <70 years of age despite a considerable number of cases (see Table 3, Supplementary Table S3). In contrast, we observed significant associations of the  $\epsilon 4$  allele containing genotypes with glaucoma in younger age groups.

We also carried out additional sensitivity analyses using representative and randomly selected population samples within the FinHealth Study subsample in FinnGen. In this subsample of 35,599 individuals, the associations of the *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  allele with AMD subtypes and AD remained significant, but we could not repeat significant associations with different types of glaucoma or senile cataract (see Supplementary Table S5). Nevertheless, the effect size of the *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  with respect to glaucoma endpoints remained consistent with the original analyses, and less robust associations may have been obscured by smaller sample sizes.

The exact mechanism by which *APOE* may affect the risk of glaucoma and AMD remains unclear. Although *APOE* is expressed widely in different cell types, *APOE* is also shown

to be synthesized in retinal Müller cells, secreted into the vitreous, and transported into the optic nerve by RGCs.<sup>38</sup> *APOE* is upregulated in mouse models of neurodegenerative diseases, such as AD, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, and multiple sclerosis; and it seems to be a regulator of microglial neurodegeneration.<sup>39,40</sup> Microglia are the resident immune cells in the central nervous system that play a vital role in brain homeostasis but lose their homeostatic function in neurodegenerative diseases.<sup>39</sup> Margeta et al. showed in two mouse models that the microglial transition from homeostatic to neurodegenerative is characterized by upregulation of *APOE* and *LGALS3* (galectin-3), which were also upregulated in glaucomatous human retinas.<sup>41</sup> This transition to neurodegenerative microglia seems to be controlled by *APOE* and triggering receptor expressed on myeloid cells 2 (TREM2) signaling.<sup>39</sup> In human glaucoma, the activated microglia colocalize in the optic nerve with proinflammatory cytokines, including tumor necrosis factor  $\alpha$ .<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, a recent study found that *APOE* and galectin-3 levels were significantly elevated in the aqueous humor of human eyes with glaucoma.<sup>43</sup> In mouse models, mice carrying the human *APOE4* allele or targeted deletion of *ApoE* were protected from RGC loss and did not upregulate neurodegeneration associated genes including *LGALS3*.<sup>41</sup> Thus, *APOE4* may act as a loss-of-function isoform, preserving RGCs by impairing microglial activation.<sup>41</sup>

*APOE* also plays a significant role in neuroinflammatory response in AMD. AMD is associated with a breakdown of the subretinal immunosuppressive system and chronic accumulation of mononuclear phagocytes, which express high levels of *APOE*, interleukin-6 (IL-6) and CC chemokine ligand 2.<sup>44,45</sup> Moreover, *APOE* can activate the innate immunity receptor cluster and induce inflammatory cytokines including IL-6 and promote the survival of mononuclear phagocytes.<sup>44</sup> Notably, IL-6 levels are associated with AMD incidence.<sup>46</sup> The *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  allele is associated with lower plasma and brain tissue *APOE* concentrations, whereas  $\epsilon 2$  associates with higher concentrations.<sup>47</sup> AMD is characterized by drusen, which contain considerable amounts of *APOE* and its cargo, and thus, a causal inverse association of *APOE4* with AMD is plausible.<sup>47</sup>

### Strengths and Limitations

A strength of the current study is the ability to evaluate multiple diseases, including subtypes of glaucoma and AMD, simultaneously within a large cohort. Glaucoma endpoints in FinnGen are based on both inpatient and outpatient diagnosis and operation codes reported by eye care specialists, which may decrease bias, compared with data from hospital admissions and self-report in cohorts such as the UK Biobank. Enrichment of the *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  allele in the Nordics also increases the power to evaluate disease associations.<sup>48</sup> The two SNPs forming the *APOE* alleles, rs429358 and rs7412, both had very high-quality imputation INFO scores of 99.9% (ranges = 0.86-1.0 and 0.90-1.0, respectively).

Our study had several limitations. FinnGen is not a truly healthy population-based sample, as many biobanks collected consent from individuals during hospital visits, potentially inflating estimates of disease prevalence and presenting a challenge in determining accurate ORs. The study relied on reported codes in national health registries, which could result in undiagnosed or unreported individuals and overlapping diagnoses. It is also estimated that 50% of patients with glaucoma remain undiagnosed,<sup>49,50</sup> and

we speculate that some diseases, such as senile cataract, might also be more likely diagnosed in the presence of other ophthalmic comorbidities. Finally, individuals with a high disease burden or disability may be less likely to participate in biobank studies compared with healthy individuals.

### CONCLUSIONS

Our results corroborate prior evidence of an inverse association of the *APOE*  $\epsilon 4$  allele with glaucoma and its subtypes POAG, NTG, and suspected glaucoma. Furthermore, in age-stratified analyses, we were able to validate these results in younger age groups. We could not demonstrate an association with XFG, which supports the hypothesis that *APOE* may be involved in regulating RGC degeneration rather than IOP. We also observed a nominally significant association of the *APOE*  $\epsilon 2$  allele with POAG. However, the associations with different types of glaucoma appear to be markedly weaker than that observed with AMD, and the causality of these associations remains unresolved. Our study highlights the necessity to systematically assess the associations detected in genetic association studies considering false positive associations and the complex pleiotropy of many genetic loci.

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Perttu Liuska and Joel Rämö had full access to all the data in the study and take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

**Data Availability:** Summary-level genome-wide association study data from FinnGen is subjected to a one-year embargo and thereafter made available online ([https://www.finnngen.fi/en/access\\_results](https://www.finnngen.fi/en/access_results)). Any researcher can apply for health register data from the Finnish Data Authority Findata and individual-level genotype data via the Fingenius portal (<https://site.fingenius.fi/en/>) hosted by the Finnish Biobank Cooperative FinBB (<https://finbb.fi/en/>).

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