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2014-02


http://hdl.handle.net/10138/158610
https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgen.1004123

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Abstract

Autoimmune thyroid diseases (AITD) are common, affecting 2-5% of the general population. Individuals with positive thyroid peroxidase antibodies (TPOAbs) have an increased risk of autoimmune hypothyroidism (Hashimoto’s thyroiditis), as well as autoimmune hyperthyroidism (Graves’ disease). As the possible causative genes of TPOAbs and AITD remain largely unknown, we performed GWAS meta-analyses in 18,297 individuals for TPOAb-positivity (1769 TPOAb-positives and 16,528 TPOAb-negatives) and in 12,353 individuals for TPOAb serum levels, with replication in 8,990 individuals. Significant associations (P<5×10-8) were detected at TPO-rs11675434, SETX-rs664085, KALRN-rs2011099 for TPOAb levels, and at TPO-rs11675434, MAGI3-rs1230666, and KALRN-rs2011099 for TPOAb levels. Individual and combined effects (genetic risk scores) of these variants on subclinical hypo- and hyperthyroidism, goiter and thyroid cancer were studied. Individuals with a high genetic risk score had, besides an increased risk of TPOAb-positivity (OR: 2.18, 95% CI 1.68–2.81, P=8.1×10−5), a higher risk of increased thyroid-stimulating hormone levels (OR: 1.51, 95% CI 1.26–1.82, P=2.9×10−5), as well as a decreased risk of goiter (OR: 0.77, 95% CI 0.66–0.89, P=6.5×10−4). The MAGI3 and BACH2 variants were associated with an increased risk of hyperthyroidism, which was replicated in an independent cohort of patients with Graves’ disease (OR: 1.37, 95% CI 1.22–1.54, P=1.2×10−7 and OR: 1.25, 95% CI 1.12–1.39, P=6.2×10−5). The MAGI3 variant was also associated with an increased risk of hyperthyroidism (OR: 1.57, 95% CI 1.18–2.10, P=1.9×10−5). This first GWAS meta-analysis for TPOAbs identified five newly associated loci, three of which were also associated with clinical thyroid disease. With these markers we identified a large subgroup in the general population with a substantially increased risk of TPOAbs. The results provide insight into why individuals with thyroid autoimmunity do or do not eventually develop thyroid disease, and these markers may therefore predict which TPOAb-positives are particularly at risk of developing clinical thyroid dysfunction.


Editor: Chris Cotsapas, Yale School of Medicine, United States of America
Received August 22, 2013; Accepted December 3, 2013; Published February 27, 2014

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Funding: The Asklepios Study was supported by a Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek-Vlaanderen FWO research grant G.0427.03 and G.0838.10N (Asklepios Study). The 1994 S Busselton Health Survey was funded by Healthway, Western Australia. The Busseton Health Studies are supported by the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia and the Great Wine Estates Auctions. The CHS research reported in this article was supported by NHLBI contracts HHSN268201200036C, N01HC85239, N01HC55222, N01HC85079, N01HC85080, N01HC85081, N01HC85082, N01HC85083, N01HC85086; and NHLBI grants HL080295, HL07652, HL105756 with additional contribution from the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS). Additional support was provided through AG023629 from the National Institute on Aging (NIA), DNA handling and genotyping at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center was supported in part by the National Center for Research Resources, grant UL1RR033176, and is now at the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences, CTSA grant UL1TR000124; in addition to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Disease grant DK063491 to the Southern California Diabetes Endocrinology Research Center. Additional funding was provided by the Cedars-Sinai Board of Governors’ Chair in Medical Genetics (JIR). The CARLA Study was founded by a grant from the Forschungszentrum Greifswald (FZG) and the European Union (EACS). The AASE Study is supported by the European Commission, the Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek-Vlaanderen, and the Research Foundation—Flanders (FWO). The Asklepios Study was supported by grants from the Academy of Finland, the Finnish Diabetes Research Society, Finnish Society for Cardiovascular Research, Folkhälsoan Research Foundation, Novo Nordisk Foundation, Finska Läkaresällskapet, Signe and Ane Gyllenborg Foundation, University of Helsinki, European Science Foundation (EUROSTRESS), Ministry of Education, Ahokas Foundation, Emil Aaltonen Foundation, Juho Vainio Foundation, and Wellcome Trust (grant number WT089062). This work was supported by KORA, which is a research platform initiated and financed by the Helmholtz Center Munich, German Research Center for
Introduction

Autoimmune thyroid disease (AITD), including Hashimoto’s thyroiditis and Graves’ disease, is one of the most common autoimmune diseases, affecting 2–5% of the general population [1,2,3]. Thyroid dysfunction has been associated with osteoporosis, depression, atrial fibrillation, heart failure, metabolic syndrome, and mortality [4,5,6,7,8,9]. High serum antibodies against the enzyme thyroid peroxidase (TPO), which is located in the thyroid gland and plays a key role in thyroid hormone synthesis, are present in 90% of patients with Hashimoto’s thyroiditis [10,11]. These autoantibodies against TPO function as a clinical marker for the detection of early AITD, it remains controversial if these antibodies play a causative role in the pathogenesis of Hashimoto’s thyroiditis [12,13].

Interestingly, TPOAb-positive persons also have an increased risk of developing autoimmune hyperthyroidism (Graves’ disease) [14,15], which is caused by stimulating antibodies against the thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH) receptor [16]. Numerous studies have shown that Graves’ hyperthyroidism and Hashimoto’s thyroiditis show co-inheritance [17,18,19]. Finally, thyroid autoimmunity is the most common autoimmune disorder in women of childbearing age, and TPOAb-positive women have an increased risk of developing pregnancy complications such as miscarriage and pre-term delivery [17,18,19].

The prevalence of TPOAb-positivity in the general population ranges from 5–24%, but it is currently unknown why these people develop TPOAbs, nor is it known why not all individuals with thyroid autoimmunity develop clinical thyroid disease [20,21]. It is estimated that around 70% of the susceptibility to develop thyroid autoantibodies is due to genetic factors [22]. In this context it is remarkable to note that little is known about the genetic factors that determine TPOAb-positivity and the risk of AITD.

We therefore performed a genome wide association study (GWAS) meta-analysis for TPOAbs in the general population in 18,297 individuals from 11 populations. Newly identified genetic variants were studied in relation to subclinical and overt hypo- and hyperthyroidism, goiter, thyroid autoimmunity during pregnancy and thyroid cancer risk.

Results

Characteristics of the studied populations are shown in Table 1 and the Supplementary Material S1. Heritability estimates in the family-based cohorts SardiNIA, TwinsUK and Val Borbera were, respectively, 0.65, 0.66, and 0.54 for TPOAb-positivity, and 0.43, 0.66, and 0.30 for TPOAb levels.

Loci associated with TPOAb-positivity and TPOAb levels

See Table 1 and Supplementary Figure S1 for TPOAb measurements and Supplementary Table S1 for genotyping procedures. In most autoimmune diseases, both the presence and the level of autoantibodies are relevant for the disease onset [18]. Furthermore, different pathophysiological processes may be involved in the initiation and severity of the autoimmune response. We therefore performed a GWAS on TPOAb-positivity including 1769 TPOAb-positives and 16,328 TPOAb-negatives, as well as a GWAS on continuous TPOAb levels (including 12,353 individuals) in stage 1. See Supplementary Figures S2 and S3 for QQ plots and Manhattan plots.

In stage 2, we followed-up 20 stage 1 SNPs (P<5×10^{-6}) for TPOAb-positivity and 10 TPOAb level SNPs, with 3 SNPs overlapping in 5 populations, including up to 8,990 individuals for TPOAb-positivity (922 TPOAb-positives and 8068 TPOAb-negatives) and 8,159 individuals for TPOAb level analyses (see Supplementary Material S1). Results of the combined stage 1 and 2
**Author Summary**

Individuals with thyroid peroxidase antibodies (TPOAbs) have an increased risk of autoimmune thyroid diseases (AITD), which are common in the general population and associated with increased cardiovascular, metabolic and psychiatric morbidity and mortality. As the causative genes of TPOAbs and AITD remain largely unknown, we performed a genome-wide scan for TPOAbs in 18,297 individuals, with replication in 8,990 individuals. Significant associations were detected with variants at TPO, ATXN2, BACH2, MAGI3, and KALRN. Individuals carrying multiple risk variants also had a higher risk of increased thyroid-stimulating hormone levels (including subclinical and overt hypothyroidism), and a decreased risk of goiter. The MAGI3 and BACH2 variants were associated with an increased risk of hyperthyroidism, and the MAGI3 variant was also associated with an increased risk of hypothyroidism. This first genome-wide scan for TPOAbs identified five newly associated loci, three of which were also associated with clinical thyroid disease. With these markers we identified a large subgroup in the general population with a substantially increased risk of TPOAbs. These results provide insight into why individuals with thyroid autoimmunity do or do not eventually develop thyroid disease, and these markers may therefore predict which individuals are particularly at risk of developing clinical thyroid dysfunction.

meta-analyses, including heterogeneity analyses, are shown in Supplementary Tables S2 and S3. Regional association plots are shown in Supplementary Figures S4 and S5. In the combined stage 1 and 2 meta-analyses GWAS significant associations ($P<5\times10^{-8}$) were observed near TPO (Chr 2p23; rs11675434), at ATXN2 (Chr 12q24.1; rs653178), and BACH2 (Chr 6q15; rs10944479) for TPOAb-positivity, and near TPO (rs11675434), at MAGI3 (Chr 6q15; rs1230666), and KALRN (Chr 3q21; rs2010099) for TPOAb levels (Table 2 and Figure 1). The TPOAb level meta-analysis P-values for the 3 GWAS significant TPOAb-positivity loci were: TPO-rs11675434: $P=7.4\times10^{-13}$; ATXN2-rs653178: $P=1.3\times10^{-5}$; and BACH2-rs10944479: $P=2.0\times10^{-4}$.

As the 3 GWAS significant loci for TPOAb levels also showed associations with TPOAb-positivity (TPO-rs11675434: OR, 1.21 [95% CI, 1.15–1.28]; ATXN2-rs653178: OR, 1.23 [95% CI, 1.14–1.33]; BACH2-rs1230666: OR, 1.24 [95% CI, 1.12–1.37], $P=7.4\times10^{-5}$), we subsequently studied the (combined) effects of these 5 SNPs on clinical thyroid disease. Genetic risk scores were calculated as described in the Supplementary Material. The variation explained by these 5 SNPs was 3.1% for TPOAb-positivity and 3.2% for TPOAb levels. Subjects with a high genetic risk score had a 2.2 times increased risk of TPOAb-positivity compared to subjects with a low genetic risk score ($P=8.1\times10^{-5}$) (Table 3).

Table S4 shows the stage 1 TPOAb-positivity and TPOAb level meta-analyses results for GWAS significant SNPs reported in previous GWAS on thyroid related phenotypes.

**Associations with hypo- and hyperthyroidism**

The associations between the 5 GWAS significant SNPs and the risk of abnormal thyroid function tests are shown in Table 4. MAGI3-rs1230666 was associated with an increased risk of overt hypothyroidism and increased TSH levels below the Bonferroni threshold (i.e., $P=0.05/5=0.01$). Borderline significant signals were observed at BACH2-rs10944479 with a higher risk of increased TSH levels as well as overt hyperthyroidism ($P=0.011$ and $P=0.012$), and at the KALRN-rs2010099 SNP with a lower risk of decreased TSH levels ($P=0.010$).

Furthermore, a higher genetic risk score was associated with a higher risk of increased TSH levels (Supplementary Table S5). No effects of the genetic risk score on the risk of overt hypothyroidism, hyperthyroidism or decreased TSH levels were observed.

**Associations with goiter**

Individuals with a high genetic risk score had a 2.4 times increased risk of TPOAb-positivity compared to women with a low score (10.3% vs 4.8%, $P=0.03$). These women did not have a higher risk of increased TSH levels. However, a borderline significant signal with a lower risk of increased TSH levels was observed at ATXN2-rs653178 (OR, 0.54 [95% CI, 0.34–0.87], $P=0.012$).

**Associations with thyroid disease in independent populations**

**a) Graves’ disease.** As MAGI3-rs1230666 and BACH2-rs10944479 showed promising associations (i.e., $P\leq0.05$) with hyperthyroidism in our meta-analyses, we tested these SNPs in an independent population of 2478 patients with Graves’ disease and 2682 controls (see Supplementary Material for further details). Both were associated with an increased risk of Graves’ disease (MAGI3-rs1230666: OR, 1.37 [95% CI, 1.22–1.54]; BACH2-rs10944479: OR, 1.25 [1.12–1.39]; $P=6.2\times10^{-7}$).

**b) Thyroid cancer.** Supplementary Table S6 shows the associations of the 5 GWAS significant SNPs with thyroid cancer. No statistically significant associations were detected, but a borderline significant signal with an increased risk of thyroid cancer was observed at ATXN2-rs653178 (OR, 1.32 [95% CI, 1.02–1.70], $P=0.03$).

**Pathway analyses**

Ingenuity Pathway Analyses (IPA; Ingenuity Systems, Ca, USA) and GRAIL analyses [32] were performed to identify potential pathways involved in AITD, the results of which are shown in Supplementary Tables S7 and S8, and Figure S6. The identified top pathways involved cell death, survival, movement, and OX40 signalling.

**Discussion**

This is the first GWAS meta-analysis investigating the genetics of TPOAbs in the normal population in up to 18,297 individuals from 11 populations with replication in up to 8,990 individuals from 5 populations. We identified 5 GWAS significant loci associated with TPOAb-positivity and/or levels.

The most significant hit for both TPOAb-positivity and TPOAb levels was located near the TPO gene itself. TPO is a membrane-bound protein located on the apical membranes of the thyroid follicular cell, catalyzing key reactions in thyroid hormone synthesis [33]. Mutations in TPO have been found in patients with congenital hypothyroidism [34,35]. Although TPOAbs are...
Table 1. Population characteristics and serum TPOAb, TSH, and FT4 level measurements specifications.

<p>| Study       | Ethnic group (origin) | N with TPOAb and GWAS data | N using thyroid medication | N case-control approach (cases/controls) | N continuous approach | Men (%) | Age (yrs) Mean (SD) | TPOAb-positivity (%) | TPOAb-positivity cut off | TPOAb specifications | TSH specifications | TSH Median (IQR) | Assay (normal range) | FT4 specifications | FT4 Mean (SD) | Assay (normal range) |
|-------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Stage 1     |                       |                            |                            |                                          |                       |         |                     |                      |                      |                      |                     |                   |                  |                            |                     |                  |                     |
| BHS         | Caucasian (Australia) | 1363                       | 47                         | 1316 (197/1119)                         | 1316                  | 43%     | 53.0 (17.2)         | 15.0%                | 35                   | Immulite 2000       | 1.3 (0.9;1.9) mU/L | Immulite 2000      | 16.9 (2.5) pmol/L | Immulite 2000      |                     |                     |                   |
| CHS         | Caucasian (USA)       | 2024                       | 0                          | 2024 (281/1743)                        | 1817                  | 41%     | 74.8 (5.1)         | 13.9%                | 34                   | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 2.3 (1.5;3.5) mU/L | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 1.2 (0.2) ng/dL | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 14.1 (1.6) ng/dL |                     |                   |
| HBCS        | Caucasian (Finland)   | 526                        | 29                         | 497 (75/422)                           | 497                   | 50%     | 61.0 (2.8)         | 15.1%                | 12                   | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 2.0 (1.2;2.4) mU/L | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 18.9 (2.6) pmol/L | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 13.5 (2.4) pmol/L |                     |                   |
| KORA        | Caucasian (Germany)   | 1765                       | 49                         | 1475 (74/1401)                        | 1475                  | 45%     | 60.5 (8.9)         | 5.0%                 | 200                  | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 1.5 (0.6;2.5) mU/L | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 18.9 (2.6) pmol/L | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 13.5 (2.4) pmol/L |                     |                   |
| NBS         | Caucasian (Netherlands) | 1829                      | 26                         | 1829 (287/1542)                       | 1829                  | 50%     | 61.5 (10.3)        | 15.7%                | 12                   | Fluoro-immunometric assay (2.6–1000) | 1.3 (0.9;2.0) mU/L | Immuno-luminometric assay (0.4–4.0 mU/L) | 18.4 (2.4) pmol/L | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 11–25 pmol/L |                     |                   |
| RS          | Caucasian (Netherlands) | 1627                      | 50                         | 1577 (137/1440)                       | 210                   | 40%     | 70.2 (5.6)         | 8.7%                 | 35                   | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 1.2 (0.6;2.5) mU/L | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 18.4 (2.4) pmol/L | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 11–25 pmol/L |                     |                   |
| SardiNIA     | Caucasian (Italy)     | 4686                       | 154                        | 972 (108/864)                          | 1257                  | 49%     | 56.9 (12.5)        | 11.1%                | 35                   | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 1.3 (0.8;2.0) mU/L | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 1.3 (0.2) ng/dL | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 12.8 (3.8) pmol/L |                     |                   |
| SHIP        | Caucasian (Germany)   | 4096                       | 293                        | 3803 (265/3538)                       | 1818                  | 52%     | 49.3 (16.3)        | 7.0%                 | 60                   | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 0.7 (0.4;1.0) mU/L | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 12.8 (3.8) pmol/L | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 7.7–23.2 pmol/L |                     |                   |
| SHIP Trend  | Caucasian (Germany)   | 986                        | 99                         | 887 (36/851)                          | 887                   | 46%     | 49.5 (13.7)        | 4.1%                 | 200                  | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 1.2 (0.8;1.6) mU/L | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | -                     | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | -                     |                     |                   |
| TwinsUK     | Caucasian (UK)        | 2455                       | 86                         | 2369 (461/1893)                       | 774                   | 0%      | 46.9 (12.5)        | 19.5%                | 6                    | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 1.3 (0.9;1.8) mU/L | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 13.6 (1.9) pmol/L | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | 9–19 pmol/L |                     |                   |
| ValBorbera  | Caucasian (Italy)     | 1661                       | 90                         | 1571 (161/1410)                       | 452                   | 46%     | 54.3 (18.4)        | 10.2%                | 60 and 50             | Two chemiluminescent immunoassays (5.5–3000; 6-7500) | 14.0 (9.9;20.9) mU/L | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | -                     | Chemiluminescent immunoassay | -                     |                     |                   |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Ethnic group (origin)</th>
<th>N with TPOAb and GWAS data</th>
<th>N using thyroid medication</th>
<th>N case-control approach (cases/controls)</th>
<th>N continuous approach</th>
<th>Age (yrs) Mean (SD)</th>
<th>TPOAb positivity (%)</th>
<th>TPOAb positivity cut-off</th>
<th>FT4 specifications</th>
<th>TSH specifications</th>
<th>FT4 Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Assay (normal range)</th>
<th>doi:10.1371/journal.pgen.1004123.t001</th>
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<td>Table 1. Cont.</td>
</tr>
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<td>Asklepios</td>
<td>Caucasian (Belgium)</td>
<td>2418</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>2309 (245/2064)</td>
<td>2185</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>45.9 (5.9)</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Chemiluminescent immunoassay (5–600)</td>
<td>Chemiluminescent immunoassay (0.3–4.2 mU/L)</td>
<td>1.5 (1.1;2.1) mU/L</td>
<td>(0.9–1.7 ng/dL)</td>
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<td>CARLA</td>
<td>Caucasian (Germany)</td>
<td>1753</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>1483 (186/1297)</td>
<td>1190</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>64.2 (10.2)</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Chemiluminescent immunoassay (5–600)</td>
<td>Chemiluminescent immunoassay (0.4–3.8 mU/L)</td>
<td>0.9 (0.6;1.2) mU/L</td>
<td>(16.3–24.5 pmol/L)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFSOCH</td>
<td>Caucasian (UK)</td>
<td>1289</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1289 (97/1192)</td>
<td>1233</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>34.2 (5.9)</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Chemiluminescent immunoassay (5–600)</td>
<td>Chemiluminescent immunoassay (0.4–4.5 mU/L)</td>
<td>1.9 (1.3;2.6) mU/L</td>
<td>(16.0–2.1 pmol/L)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health2006 Study</td>
<td>Caucasian (Danish)</td>
<td>3287</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3287 (204/3083)</td>
<td>3285</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>49.3 (13.0)</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Chemiluminescent immunoassay (1–3000)</td>
<td>Chemiluminescent immunoassay (0.4–3.7 mU/L)</td>
<td>1.7 (1.0;2.0) mU/L</td>
<td>(12.4–2.1 pmol/L)</td>
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<td>SardiNIA2</td>
<td>Caucasian (Italy)</td>
<td>1387</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>765 (104/661)</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>46.6 (17.4)</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Chemiluminescent immunoassay (5–1000)</td>
<td>Chemiluminescent immunoassay (0.4–4.0 mU/L)</td>
<td>1.6 (1.0;2.2) mU/ml</td>
<td>(1.3 (0.2) ng/dl)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
valid clinical biomarkers ofAITD, they are generally considered to be secondary to the thyroid damage inflicted by T-cells.

The FOXE1 gene has been previously associated with hypothyroidism [36,37] and is known to regulate transcription of TPO [38]. In this context it is interesting to note that we did not find any associations of the variant near TPO with hypothyroidism. Most genes that have been associated withAITD (predominantly Graves’ disease) by candidate gene and GWAS studies so far are located in the HLA class I and II regions, or in genes involved in T-cell (i.e., CTLA-4, PTPN22) or other autoimmune responses [28,39]. Until now, the TPO gene itself had not been associated withAITD, except in one recent candidate gene analysis in a small cohort (n=188) without replication [40]. A variant near TPO (rs11675434), which is in LD with rs11675434 (r² = 0.97 in HapMap2), has previously been associated with TSH levels by Porcu et al [42].

Furthermore, the identified SNP in ATXN2 has previously been associated with renal function, serum urate levels and blood pressure [62,63,64]. However, this SNP is in high LD with rs3184504 (r² = 0.873), a variant causing a Trp262Arg substitution in ATXN2. This is supported by a recent study which showed that variants in HD genes have associated thyroid dysfunction with cerebellar ataxia [60,61]. Different epidemiological studies have associated thyroid dysfunction with cerebellar ataxia [60,61]. Furthermore, the identified SNP in ATXN2 has previously been associated with renal function, serum urate levels and blood pressure [62,63,64]. However, this SNP is in high LD with rs3184504 (r² = 0.873), a variant causing a Trp262Arg substitution in HD genes have associated thyroid dysfunction with cerebellar ataxia [60,61]. Different epidemiological studies have associated thyroid dysfunction with cerebellar ataxia [60,61].

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Table 2. Newly identified loci associated with TPOAb-positivity and/or serum TPOAb levels reaching genome wide significance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alleles</th>
<th>Stage 1 + 2 meta-analysis: up to 2691 cases and 24,596 controls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TPOAb-positivity</td>
<td>SNP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rs11675434</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rs653178</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rs10944479</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alleles</th>
<th>Stage 1 + 2 meta-analysis: up to 20,512 subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TPOAb levels</td>
<td>SNP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rs11675434</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rs1230666</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rs2010099</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chr., chromosome

*Risk allele frequency: Weighted mean frequency of the risk allele across all included cohorts.

*Adjusted for age and gender

*Expressed in sd of natural logarithm transformed serum TPOAb level, adjusted for age and gender

doi:10.1371/journal.pgen.1004123.t002

The $BACH2$ locus has been implicated in the susceptibility to several autoimmune diseases, including celiac disease, type 1 diabetes, vitiligo, Crolin’s disease, and multiple sclerosis [46,51,52,53,54]. A recent candidate gene analysis associated the $BACH2$ locus with an increased risk ofAITD, including Hashimoto’s thyroiditis and Graves’ disease [53]. However, the associations were not significant when Hashimoto’s thyroiditis and Graves’ disease were studied separately. $BACH2$ is specifically expressed in early stages of B-cell differentiation and represses different immunoglobulin genes [56]. Interestingly, $BACH2$ can bind to the co-repressor SMRT (silencing mediator of retinoid and thyroid receptor), which may suggest a more direct effect on thyroid hormone secretion and action as well.
development ofAITD [44,45]. Another top pathway involved was the OX40 signalling pathway, and it is of interest to note that OX40 is a T-cell activator promoting the survival of CD4+ T-cells at sites of inflammation [69].

Our results have potential clinical relevance for several reasons. Genetic risk scores based on these novel common (risk allele frequencies: 9–40%) TPOAb-associated SNPs enabled us to identify a large subgroup in the general population with a two-fold risk.
increased risk of TPOAb-positivity (10.4% vs 5.4%). These individuals also have a higher risk of increased TSH levels and a lower risk of goiter, suggesting an advanced stage of destruction of the thyroid due to autoimmune processes. Furthermore, pregnant women with high genetic risk scores had a 2.4 times increased risk of TPOAb-positivity during pregnancy. In this context it is interesting to note that TPOAb-positive pregnant women have an increased risk of miscarriages and preterm births independent of thyroid function [70].

Associations with thyroid disease were also found on an individual SNP level. The MAGI3 SNP was associated with a substantially increased risk of hypothyroidism, and the BACH2 SNP showed a borderline significant association ($P = 0.011$) with a higher risk of increased TSH levels, which includes subjects with subclinical and overt hypothyroidism. Furthermore, both loci were significantly associated with an increased risk of Graves’ hyperthyroidism in an independent population. To predict which patients with first or second degree relatives with documented Hashimoto’s or Graves’ disease will develop clinical thyroid disease, a clinical algorithm has been developed [i.e., the THEA score] [18]. Future studies should analyze if these genetic markers increase the sensitivity of the THEA score.

The prevalence of TPOAb-positivity in the general population is high (5–24%), but it is currently unknown why part of the individuals with thyroid autoimmunity develop clinical thyroid disease whereas others do not [27,28]. In this context it is interesting to note that the TPOAb-associated SNPs located in TPO and ATXN2 were not associated with clinical thyroid disease. This suggests that the TPOAbs in these individuals may be of less clinical relevance, providing insight into why TPOAb-positive individuals do or do not eventually develop clinical thyroid disease.

Our study has some limitations. The validity of the results is restricted to individuals from populations of European ancestry. Future GWASs in populations from non-European descent will be required to determine to which extent our results can be generalized to other ethnic groups. Secondly, we did not perform conditional analyses to further identify secondary association signals within the identified loci, nor did we perform functional studies for the identified variants. Further research is therefore needed to unravel the exact biological mechanism behind the observed associations. The fact that various TPOAbs assays were used across the participating cohorts could lead to bias. We
therefore used TPOAb-positivity cut-off values as provided by the respective assay manufacturer, instead of using one fixed cut-off value. This is also of clinical importance as in clinical practice most institutions rely on the TPOAb-positivity cut-off as provided by the assay manufacturer. Furthermore, we did not detect heterogeneity in our results, supporting the fact that results obtained with different assays can be combined across cohorts using the z-score based meta-analysis. Finally, asAITD coincides with other autoimmune diseases, our results could be driven by indirect associations with other autoimmune diseases. However, AITD is the most common autoimmune disease in the general population. We furthermore show that carriage of multiple risk alleles is associated with an increased risk of thyroid dysfunction, which underlies the clinical importance of our findings.

In conclusion, this first GWAS for TPOAbs identified five newly associated loci, three of which were also associated with clinical thyroid disease. Furthermore, we show that carriage of multiple risk variants is not only associated with a substantial increased risk of TPOAb-positivity, but also with a higher risk of increased TSH levels (including subclinical and overt hypothyroidism) and a lower risk of goiter. These genetic markers not only help to identify large groups in the general population with an increased risk of TPOAb-positivity, but may also predict which TPOAb-positive persons are particularly at risk of developing clinical thyroid disease.

### Materials and Methods

#### Study cohorts

For the TPOAb GWAS stage 1 and 2 analyses, and the hypothyroidism, hyperthyroidism and goiter analyses, individuals were recruited from 16 independent community-based and family studies. For the Graves’ disease analyses, cases were recruited from the United Kingdom Graves’ disease cohort and controls from the British 1958 Birth Cohort. Thyroid cancer cases and controls were recruited from the Nijmegen and Ohio thyroid cancer cohorts. A detailed description of the original cohorts contributing samples is provided in Table 1 and in the Supplementary Material. All participants provided written informed consent and protocols were approved by the institutional review boards or research ethics committees at the respective institutions, and conducted according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

#### Phenotype definitions

Serum TPOAbs levels were determined with a range of assays. TPOAb-positives were defined as subjects with TPOAb levels above the assay-specific TPOAb-positivity cut-off, as defined by the manufacturer (Table 1). Serum TSH and free thyroxine (FT4) levels were determined using a range of assays (Table 1). Assay-specific TSH and FT4 reference ranges were used, as provided by the manufacturer (Table 1). Overt hypothyroidism was defined as a high TSH (i.e., a TSH level above the TSH reference range) and a low FT4. Increased TSH was defined as a high TSH, including persons with overt hypothyroidism or subclinical hypothyroidism (i.e., high TSH with a normal FT4). Overt hyperthyroidism was defined as a low TSH and a high FT4. Decreased TSH was defined as a low TSH, including persons with subclinical or overt hyperthyroidism.

The diagnosis of goiter is described in the Supplementary Material, and the diagnosis of Graves’ disease and thyroid cancer in the respective cohorts have been described previously [41].

#### Genotyping

Samples were genotyped with a range of GWAS genotyping arrays (Supplementary Table S1). Sample and SNP quality control procedures were undertaken within each study. For each GWAS, over 2.5 million SNPs were imputed using CEU samples from Phase 2 of the International HapMap project (www.hapmap.org). Genotyping procedures in the stage 2, Graves’ disease and thyroid cancer populations are described in the Supplementary Material.

#### Association analyses

The heritabilities of TPOAb-positivity and serum TPOAb levels were estimated, as described in the Supplementary Material.

In stage 1, we performed a GWAS on TPOAb-positivity as well as a GWAS on continuous TPOAb levels. Persons taking thyroid medication were excluded. Each SNP was tested for association with TPOAb-positivity using logistic regression analyses, adjusting for age and sex. For cohorts with family structure, we approximated the probability of being affected with a linear mixed model adjusting for age and sex. The produced model was used to predict the expected proportion of “risk” (effective) alleles in cases and controls, hence giving the means to estimate odds ratios. Only unrelated individuals were considered for the SardiNIA cohort. For the GWAS of continuous TPOAb levels, samples with a TPOAb level below the minimum TPOAb assay detection limit (Table 1) were excluded. TPOAb levels were natural log-transformed, and sex-specific, age adjusted standardized residuals were calculated. Each SNP was tested for association with these TPOAb level residuals using linear regression analyses (additive model).

### Table 5. Newly identified TPOAb associated loci, genetic risk scores and the risk of goiter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nearby gene</th>
<th>SNP</th>
<th>Risk allele</th>
<th>Other allele</th>
<th>OR (95% CI)</th>
<th>P value</th>
<th>GRS Quartile</th>
<th>% Goiter (N cases/total)</th>
<th>OR (95% CI)</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TPO</td>
<td>rs11675434</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>0.95 (0.88–1.02)</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>1 (reference)</td>
<td>35.2% (588/1669)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATXN2</td>
<td>rs653178</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>0.95 (0.88–1.03)</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33.7% (570/1691)</td>
<td>0.92 (0.79–1.06)</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BACH2</td>
<td>rs10944479</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>0.94 (0.85–1.05)</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>31.6% (530/1675)</td>
<td>0.84 (0.72–0.98)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAGI3</td>
<td>rs1230666</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>0.90 (0.81–1.00)</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30.4% (517/1702)</td>
<td>0.77 (0.66–0.89)</td>
<td>6.5×10^{-4}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KALRN</td>
<td>rs2010099</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>0.93 (0.81–1.05)</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GRS, genetic risk score (based on rs11675434, rs653178, rs10944479, rs1230666, rs2010099).

*Adjusted for age, gender, and body surface area.

rs653178 is in high LD with SH2B3-rs3184504.

rs1230666 is in high LD with PTPN22-rs24756601.

doi:10.1371/journal.pgen.1004123.t005
correcting for relatedness in studies with family structure. See Supplementary Table S1 for the software used for these analyses.

Before meta-analysis, SNPs with a minor allele frequency (MAF) <1% or a low imputation quality were excluded (Supplementary Material). After which the results of each GWAS were combined in a population size weighted z-score based meta-analysis using METAL [71]. Genomic control was applied to individual studies if \( \lambda \geq 1.0 \).

In stage 2, we followed-up stage 1 GWAS significant SNPs, as well as promising SNPs not reaching GWAS significance, in an attempt to reach GWAS significant associations by increasing sample size (Supplementary Material). Results from stage 1 and 2 were combined in a population size weighted z-score based meta-analysis using METAL [71]. A z-score based meta-analysis was used to reduce bias that might be induced by different assays. As this method does not provide betas, and we wanted to provide a rough estimate of the actual effect sizes for convenience, we calculated betas using the fixed effects (inverse variance based) meta-analysis method. Heterogeneity was tested, applying bonferroni based \( P \)-value thresholds of \( P = 0.004 \) for the TPOAb-positivity analyses and \( P = 0.005 \) for the TPOAb level analyses.

All studies assessed and, if present, corrected for population stratification using principal-component analysis (PCA) and/or multidimensional-scaling (MDS), with the exception of SardeNIA and ValBorbera where the high isolation substantiates a lack of stratification (Table S1) [72,73]. Lambda values were all \( \sim 1 \), indicating that population stratification was overall properly accounted for (Table S1). To fully remove residual effects, we applied genomic correction to studies were lambda was >1. The final meta-analyses reported a lambda of 1.01 for both the TPOAb-positivity and the TPOAb level GWAS, thus no genomic correction was applied.

The variances explained by the GWAS significant SNPs were calculated. We subsequently studied the individual as well as the combined effects of the GWAS significant SNPs on the risk of clinical thyroid disease, as specified in the Supplementary Material. In short, to study combined effects, a genetic risk score was calculated. We subsequently studied the individual as well as the combined stage 1 and 2 result of this SNP is indicated in yellow.

The most significant stage 1 SNP is indicated in purple. The SNPs surrounding the most significant SNP are color-coded to reflect their LD with this SNP. Symbols reflect functional genomic annotation, as indicated in the legend. The blue y-axes on the right of each plot indicate the estimated recombination rates (based on HapMap Phase II); the bottom of each panel shows the respective annotated genes at the locus and their transcriptional direction. Mb, megabases.

Figure S4 Regional association plots of stage 1 lead loci for TPOAb-positivity (panels a-m). The y-axis on the left indicates the – log10 \( P \) value for the association with TPOAb-positivity. SNPs are plotted on the x-axis according to their chromosomal position. The most significant stage 1 SNP is indicated in purple. The combined stage 1 and 2 result of this SNP is indicated in yellow. The SNPs surrounding the most significant SNP are color-coded to reflect their LD with this SNP. Symbols reflect functional genomic annotation, as indicated in the legend. The blue y-axes on the right of each plot indicate the estimated recombination rates (based on HapMap Phase II); the bottom of each panel shows the respective annotated genes at the locus and their transcriptional direction. Mb, megabases.

Figure S5 Regional association plots of stage 1 lead loci for TPOAb levels (panels a-j). The y-axis on the left indicates the – log10 \( P \) value for the association with TPOAb levels. SNPs are plotted on the x-axis according to their chromosomal position. The most significant stage 1 SNP is indicated in purple. The combined stage 1 and 2 result of this SNP is indicated in yellow. The SNPs surrounding the most significant SNP are color-coded to reflect their LD with this SNP. Symbols reflect functional genomic annotation, as indicated in the legend. The blue y-axes on the right of each plot indicate the estimated recombination rates (based on HapMap Phase II); the bottom of each panel shows the respective annotated genes at the locus and their transcriptional direction. Mb, megabases.

Figure S6 GRAIL results for the stage 1 TPOAb-positivity and TPOAb level lead SNPs. GRAIL circle plot of locus connectivity where each locus is plotted in a circle, where significant connections (\( P < 0.05 \)) based on PubMed abstracts are drawn spanning the circle. Analyses were based on the 20 stage 1 TPOAb-positivity and TPOAb level lead SNPs.

Table S1 Study sample genotyping, quality control and association analyses for stage 1 populations.

Table S2 Associations of stage 1 lead SNPs with TPOAb-positivity in stage 1 and 2.

Table S3 Associations of stage 1 lead SNPs with serum TPOAb levels in stage 1 and 2.

Table S4 Stage 1 TPOAb-positivity and TPOAb level meta-analyses results for GWAS significant SNPs reported in previous GWAS on thyroid related phenotypes.

Table S5 Genetic risk score and the risk of increased TSH levels.

Table S6 Newly identified TPOAb associated loci and the risk of thyroid cancer.
We thank all study participants, volunteers and study personnel that made this work possible. The Asklepios study is indebted to Femke van Hoek, Bianca Leyden, and Caroline van Dale, and the residents and general practitioners of Erpe-Mere and Nieuwerkerken for their help in completing the study. The Basselton Health Study thanks the Basselton Population Medical Research Foundation for approving the study. We thank Siemens Ltd, Australia and New Zealand Healthcare Sector for donating assay reagents. The Rotterdam Study thanks Pascal Arp, Mila Jhamai, Marijn Verkerk, Lizbeth Herrera and Marjolein Peters for their help in creating the GWAS database, and Karol Estrada and Maksim V. Struchalin for their support in creation and analysis of imputed data. The authors are grateful to the study participants, the staff from the Rotterdam Study and the participating general practitioners and pharmacists. We would like to thank Karol Estrada, Dr. Fernando Rivadeneira, Dr. Tobias A. Knoch, Anis Abuseiris, Luc V. de Zeeuw, and Rob de Graaf (Erasmus MC Rotterdam, The Netherlands), for their help in creating GRIMP, and BigGRID, MedBigGRID, and Services@MediGRID/D-Grid for access to their grid computing resources. We would like to thank Symen Ligthart for his help with the IPA and GRIMP pathway analyses. The SardNIA study thanks the many individuals who generously participated in this study, Monsignore Piseddu, Bishop of Ogliastra, the residents and general practitioners of this work possible.

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Author Contributions

Conceived and designed the experiments: MM SBJ RAJ RR AA HJG ER JIR HH LC DTi BV TdM TJ JGE BMP AhO DS HW AdiC TMF AL KR LAK AGU JPW KS EWA CMe MdH MtH TVJ TDS SGW HV AC DTo SS SN RPP. Performed the experiments: MM EP GP AT LC SBJ RAJ RR GLR TSP SHV JL MJ S LLN MH RMF BS MG LC YG JS YA AL TVJ SS SN RPP. Analyzed the data: MM EP GP AT SBJ RAJ RR GLR TSP SHV JL MJ S LLN MH RMF BS MG LC YG JS YA AL TVJ SS SN RPP. Contributed reagents/materials/analysis tools: MM RR GLR TSP JL MJ S LLN MH RMF BS MG LC YG JS YA AL TVJ SS SN RPP. Wrote the paper: MM AT LC TSV SGW AC SS SN RPP.

References


