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Authors

Escala-Garcia, Maria
Guo, Qi
Dörk, Thilo
[et al.](#)

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ARTICLE

Genetics and Genomics

Genome-wide association study of germline variants and breast cancer-specific mortality

Maria Escala-Garcia et al.

BACKGROUND: We examined the associations between germline variants and breast cancer mortality using a large meta-analysis of women of European ancestry.

METHODS: Meta-analyses included summary estimates based on Cox models of twelve datasets using ~10.4 million variants for 96,661 women with breast cancer and 7697 events (breast cancer-specific deaths). Oestrogen receptor (ER)-specific analyses were based on 64,171 ER-positive (4116) and 16,172 ER-negative (2125) patients. We evaluated the probability of a signal to be a true positive using the Bayesian false discovery probability (BFDP).

RESULTS: We did not find any variant associated with breast cancer-specific mortality at $P < 5 \times 10^{-8}$. For ER-positive disease, the most significantly associated variant was chr7:rs4717568 (BFDP = 7%, $P = 1.28 \times 10^{-7}$, hazard ratio [HR] = 0.88, 95% confidence interval [CI] = 0.84–0.92); the closest gene is *AUTS2*. For ER-negative disease, the most significant variant was chr7:rs67918676 (BFDP = 11%, $P = 1.38 \times 10^{-7}$, HR = 1.27, 95% CI = 1.16–1.39); located within a long intergenic non-coding RNA gene (AC004009.3), close to the *HOXA* gene cluster.

CONCLUSIONS: We uncovered germline variants on chromosome 7 at BFDP < 15% close to genes for which there is biological evidence related to breast cancer outcome. However, the paucity of variants associated with mortality at genome-wide significance underpins the challenge in providing genetic-based individualised prognostic information for breast cancer patients.

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BACKGROUND

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the Western world and accounts for 15% of cancer-related deaths in women, with about 522,000 deaths worldwide in 2012.¹ Survival after a diagnosis of breast cancer varies considerably between patients even with closely matching tumour characteristics. Models that predict the likelihood of survival after breast cancer treatment use tumour and treatment data, but currently do not take host factors into account. The identification of prognostic and predictive biomarkers inherent in the germline of the patients rather than the tumour could pinpoint mechanisms of tumour progression and help with treatment stratification to increase therapeutic benefit. Such markers include inherited genetic variation, as there is evidence for heritability of breast cancer-specific mortality in affected first-degree relatives.^{2–5} Germline variation may affect prognosis by affecting tumour biology, since such variants are known to be associated with risk of specific breast tumour subtypes, particularly those defined by hormone receptor status, and have different outcomes.^{6–8} Germline genotype could also affect the efficacy of adjuvant drug therapies^{9,10} or might condition the host tumour environment via vascularisation,^{11,12} metastatic pattern,^{13,14} stroma–tumour interaction^{15,16} and immune surveillance.^{17,18}

The association between common germline genetic variation and breast cancer-specific mortality has been examined in many

candidate gene studies,^{5,9,14,19–36} as well as in moderate-sized genome-wide association studies (GWAS).^{37–41} However, it has been difficult link GWAS results to plausible candidate genes and few have been convincingly replicated.^{29,42} Large studies with long follow-up and reliable data on known prognostic factors are required if novel alleles associated with prognosis in breast cancer are to be identified at a level of genome-wide significance. In the present work, we pooled genotype data from multiple breast cancer GWAS discovery and replication efforts^{43,44} with new genotype data obtained from a large breast cancer series genotyped using the OncoArray chip.^{45,46} We examined associations with risk of breast cancer-specific mortality in a total of 96,661 breast cancer patients with survival time data. We then investigated the potential functional role of the selected variants by predicting possible target genes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Breast cancer patient samples

We included data from twelve datasets ($n = 96,661$) in which multiple breast cancer patient cohorts were genotyped by a variety of arrays providing genome-wide coverage of common variants. An overview of the datasets with specification of the arrays used is given in Supplementary Table 1. Data from eight of these datasets have been used in previous analyses ($n = 37,954$).⁴⁴

Correspondence: Qi Guo (qg209@medschl.cam.ac.uk)

Extended author information available on the last page of the article.

Shared first authorship: Maria Escala-Garcia, Qi Guo

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However, the Collaborative Oncological Gene-Environment Study (COGS) dataset from the Breast Cancer Association Consortium (BCAC) was updated to include additional follow-up and death events and additional genotype data, increasing the number of events and samples to a total of $n = 29,959$ patients. Two new datasets, the BCAC OncoArray and the SUCCESS A trial, comprising 58,027 samples, were added for the current analyses.

The OncoArray is a custom Illumina genotyping array designed by the Genetic Associations and Mechanisms in Oncology (GAME-ON) consortium. It includes 533,000 variants of which 260,660 form a GWAS backbone, with the remainder being custom content, details of which have been described previously.⁴⁵ The SUCCESS-A Study⁴⁷ is a randomised phase III study of $n = 3,299$ breast cancer cases. Cases from the trial were genotyped using the Illumina Human OmniExpress array. We downloaded imputed genotypes from dbGaP (data reference 6266).

COGS samples that were also genotyped on the OncoArray were removed from the COGS dataset ($n = 14,426$). Female patients with invasive breast cancer diagnosed at age > 18 years, and with follow-up data available were included in the analyses. BCAC data from freeze 8 was used, in which 873 COGS samples with unknown breast cancer-specific mortality status were excluded from the analyses. All stages of cancer, including metastatic, were used in the analysis. Some individual studies applied additional selection criteria such as young age or early breast cancer stage (Supplementary Table 2).

Genotype and sample quality control, ancestry analysis and imputation

The genotype and sample quality control for the datasets have been described previously.^{44,45,47,48} Ancestry outliers for each dataset were identified by multidimensional scaling or LAMP⁴⁹ on the basis of a set of unlinked variants and HapMap2 populations. Samples of European ancestry were retained for analyses.

Ten of the datasets were imputed using the reference panel from the 1000 Genomes Project in a two-stage procedure. The 1000 Genomes project Phase 3 (October 2014) release was used as the reference panel for all the datasets apart from SUCCESS-A, which used the Phase 1 release (March 2012). Imputation for CGEMS and BPC3 was performed using the programme MACH.⁵⁰ Phased genotypes were first derived using SHAPEIT⁵¹ and IMPUTE2⁵² and then used to perform imputation on the phased data. The main analyses were based on variants that were imputed with imputation $r^2 > 0.3$ and had minor allele frequency (MAF) > 0.01 in at least one of the datasets leading to ~ 10.4 million variants. To match the individual datasets in the meta-analysis we used the chromosome position. Variants were kept in the analysis as long as they were present in one of the studies. In those cases where there was ambiguity over the naming of the insertions and deletions, the MAF was used for further matching.

Statistical and bioinformatic methods

Time-to-event was calculated from the date of diagnosis. For prevalent cases with study entry after diagnosis left truncation was applied, i.e., follow-up started at the date of study entry.⁵³ Follow-up was right censored on the date of death, on the date last known alive if death did not occur, or at 15 years after diagnosis, whichever came first. We chose the 15 years cut-off because follow-up varied between studies and after that period follow-up data became scarce. Follow-up of the cohorts is illustrated in Kaplan Meier curves (Supplementary Figure 1).

The hazard ratios (HR) for the association of genotypes with breast cancer-specific mortality were estimated using Cox proportional hazards regression⁵⁴ implemented in an in-house programme written in C++. Analysis of the CGEMS and BPC3 data was conducted using ProbABEL.⁵⁵ The estimates of the individual studies were combined using an inverse-variance weighted meta-analysis. Since meta-analysis results based on the Wald test have

been shown to be inflated for rare variants⁵⁶ we recomputed the standard errors based on the likelihood ratio test statistic (see details in Supplementary methods), using the formula:

$$SE = \log(HR) / \sqrt{LRT}$$

For each dataset we included as covariates a variable number of principal components (Supplementary Table 1) from the ancestry analysis as covariates in order to control for cryptic population substructure. The Cox models were stratified by country for the OncoArray dataset and by study for the COGS dataset. Statistical tests were performed for each variant by combining the results for all the datasets using a fixed-effects meta-analysis. Inflation of the test statistics (λ) was estimated by dividing the 45th percentile of the test statistic by 0.357 (the 45th percentile for a χ^2 distribution on 1 degree of freedom). Analyses were carried out for all invasive breast cancer and for oestrogen receptor (ER)-positive and ER-negative disease separately.

To assess the probability of a variant being a false positive we used a Bayesian false discovery probability (BFDP)⁵⁷ test based on the P value, a prior set to 0.0001 and an upper likely HR of 1.3.

To predict potential target genes, we used Bedtools v2.26 to intersect notable variants with genomic annotation data relevant to gene regulation activity in samples derived from breast tissue. We examined features including enhancers, promoters and transcription factor binding sites identified by the Roadmap⁵⁸ and ENCODE⁵⁹ Projects. Expression quantitative loci (eQTL) data from GTEx⁶⁰ were queried for evidence of potential *cis*-regulatory activity.

RESULTS

Genotype data from 96,661 breast cancer cases (64,171 ER-positive and 16,172 ER-negative) with 7697 breast cancer deaths within 15 years were included in the primary analyses. For 16,318 cases we did not have ER-status information. The average follow-up time was 6.38 years. Details of the numbers of samples and events in each dataset are given in Supplementary Table 3. Manhattan and quantile-quantile (Q-Q) plots for the associations between variants and breast cancer-specific mortality of all invasive, ER-negative and ER-positive breast cancers are shown in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, respectively. There was some evidence of inflation of the test statistic with an inflation factor of 1.06 for all invasive and ER-positive, and 1.05 for ER-negative including all variants. These Q-Q plots showed no evidence of an association at $P < 5 \times 10^{-8}$; at less stringent thresholds for significance, there were an increasing number of observed associations for all three analyses (Fig. 2).

We identified three variants at BFDP $< 15\%$ associated with breast cancer-specific mortality of patients with ER-negative disease (Table 1). These variants are part of an independent set of 32 highly correlated variants⁶¹ on chromosome 7q21.1 that were associated at $P < 5 \times 10^{-6}$ (Supplementary Table 4). The LD matrix between these variants computed based on the 1000 European genomes,^{62,63} and their chromosomal positions, are shown in Supplementary Figure 1. The strongest association was for rs67918676: HR = 1.27; 95% CI = 1.16–1.39; $P = 1.38 \times 10^{-7}$; risk allele A frequency = 0.12 and BFDP = 11%. The imputation efficiency for this variant was high, with $r^2 = 0.99$ for all datasets.

The lead variant rs67918676 is located in an intron of a long intergenic non-coding RNA gene, *LOC105375207* (AC004009.3), in close proximity to the *HOXA* gene cluster and the lncRNA *HOTTIP*. We tested the genes within a 500 MBp window around the 32 highly correlated variants for the association of their mRNA expression in breast tumours with recurrence-free survival using KMplotter (kmplot.com/analysis). Four of the ten closest genes with probes available showed moderate association with breast cancer survival at $P < 0.005$ (*HOXA9*, *HOTTIP*, *EVX1* and *TAX1BP1*), with these associations mainly observed for ER-negative breast cancer (Supplementary Table 5A). Yet, intersecting the germline variants with several sources of genomic annotation information

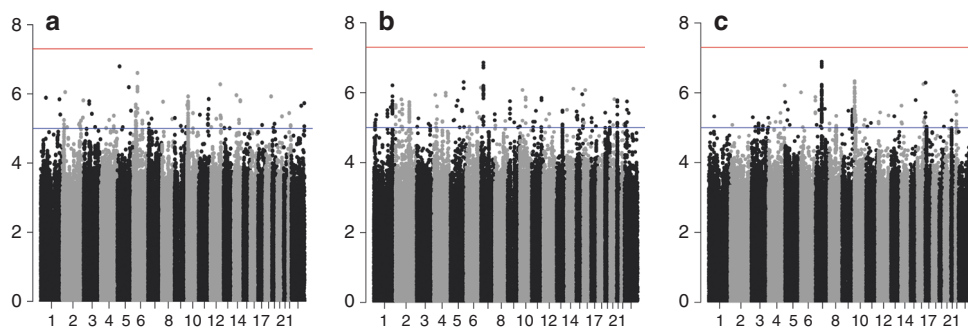


Fig. 1 Association plot for the meta-analysis of the twelve datasets for breast cancer-specific mortality analyses (censored at 15 years) for **a** all breast tumours (censored at 15 years), **b** ER-negative tumours and **c** ER-positive tumours. The y-axis shows the $-\log_{10} P$ values of each variant analysed, and the x-axis shows their chromosome position. The red horizontal line represents $P = 5 \times 10^{-8}$

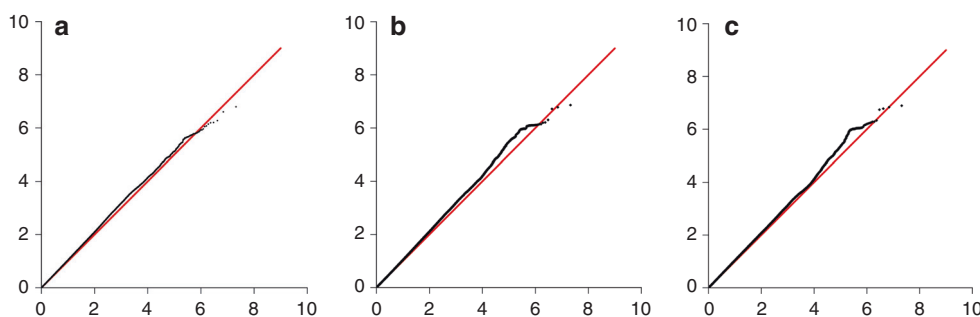


Fig. 2 Q-Q plots for the meta-analysis of the twelve datasets for breast cancer-specific mortality analyses (censored at 15 years) for **a** all breast cancer tumours (censored at 15 years), **b** ER-negative tumours and **c** ER-positive tumours. The y-axis represents the observed $-\log_{10} P$ value, and the x-axis represents the expected $-\log_{10} P$ value. The red line represents the expected distribution under the null hypothesis of no association. Analyses were not corrected for LD-structure

Table 1. Results of the variants with BFDP < 15% in the meta-analysis of the 12 studies of breast cancer-specific mortality

Subgroup	Variant	Chr	Position	Alt	Ref	Eaf_Ref	HR	LCL	UCL	P value	BFDP
ER-negative	rs67918676:27445956:A:AT	7	27445956	AT	A	0.12	1.27	1.16	1.39	1.38×10^{-7}	0.11
ER-negative	rs192185001:27448012:A:AT	7	27448012	AT	A	0.12	1.27	1.16	1.39	1.66×10^{-7}	0.13
ER-negative	rs145963877:27473909:CAG:C	7	27473909	C	CAG	0.11	1.28	1.17	1.41	1.91×10^{-7}	0.15
ER-positive	rs4717568:70400700:T:C	7	70400700	C	T	0.62	0.88	0.8	0.92	1.28×10^{-7}	0.07
ER-positive	rs1917618:70396442:T:A	7	70396442	A	T	0.62	0.88	0.84	0.93	1.46×10^{-7}	0.08
ER-positive	rs1546774:70398441:T:G	7	70398441	G	T	0.62	0.88	0.84	0.93	1.66×10^{-7}	0.09
ER-positive	rs1546773:70398437:T:C	7	70398437	C	T	0.62	0.88	0.84	0.93	1.81×10^{-7}	0.10
All	rs370332736:50395136:AACTT:A	6	50395136	A	AACTT	0.09	1.16	1.10	1.24	2.48×10^{-7}	0.13

(e.g., chromosome conformation, enhancer–promoter correlations or gene expression) we could not find strong *in silico* evidence of gene regulation by the region containing the associated variants.

We also identified four variants at a BFDP < 15% associated with breast cancer-specific mortality of patients with ER-positive disease (Table 1). These variants were part of an independent set of 45 highly correlated variants on chromosome 7q11.22 that were associated at $P < 5 \times 10^{-6}$ (Supplementary Table 6). The LD matrix between these variants computed based on the 1000 European genomes,^{62,63} and their chromosomal positions, are shown in Supplementary Figure 3. The strongest association was for rs4717568: HR = 0.88; 95% CI:0.84–0.92; $P = 1.28 \times 10^{-7}$; risk allele A frequency = 0.62 and BFDP = 7%. The imputation efficiency for this variant was high, with an average $r^2 = 0.96$ for all datasets. Two coding genes, *AUTS2* and *GALNT17*, were located within a 500 MBp window around the 45 highly correlated variants, but the expression of neither of the two was associated with breast cancer survival in KMplotter analyses of TCGA data (Supplementary Table 5B).

The association of rs67918676 with ER-negative breast cancer was observed in eight of nine studies with no significant heterogeneity present at $P < 0.01$ (Fig. 3 and Supplementary Figure 4a). For ER-positive disease, the association of rs4717568 was detected in all seven studies with no heterogeneity present at $P < 0.01$ (Fig. 4 and Supplementary Figure 4b).

Apart from the 7q variants, only one isolated rare variant reached BFDP values below 15% for all tumours (Table 1). The variant, rs370332736: HR = 1.17; 95% CI: 1.10–1.24; $P = 2.48 \times 10^{-7}$; risk allele A frequency = 0.09 and BFDP = 13%, is located on chromosome 6 and has an average imputation efficiency of $r^2 = 0.96$ for all datasets. In addition, there were several variants found at $P < 10^{-6}$ for all three analyses (Supplementary Table 4, Supplementary Table 6 and Supplementary Table 7).

DISCUSSION

In this large survival analysis, we report a genome-wide study for identifying genetic markers associated with breast cancer-specific

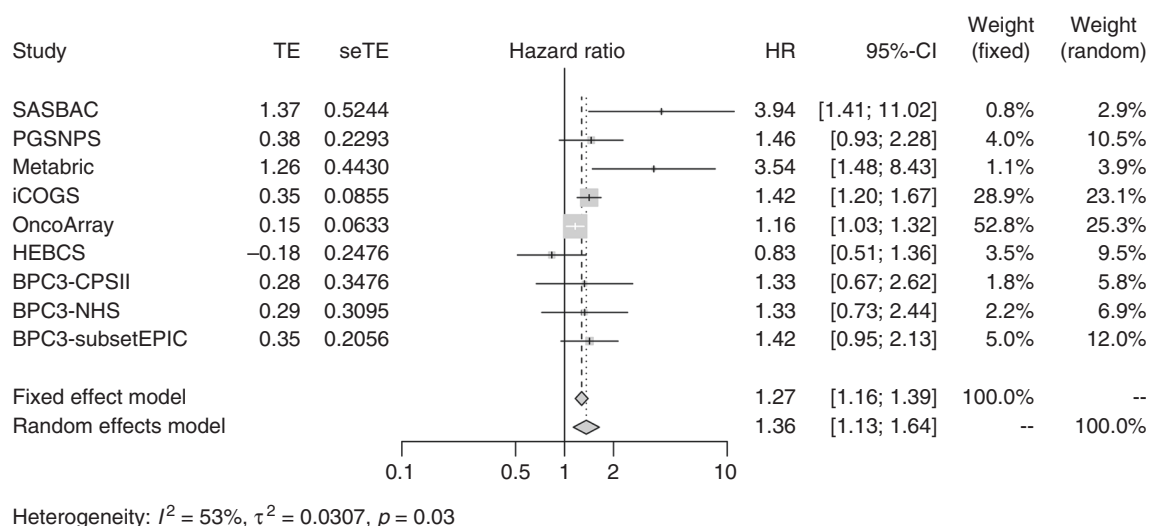


Fig. 3 Forest plot showing the association between the ER-negative variant rs67918676 and breast cancer-specific mortality in ER-negative tumours for the datasets used in the meta-analysis. The size of the square reflects the size of the study (see also Supplementary Table 3)

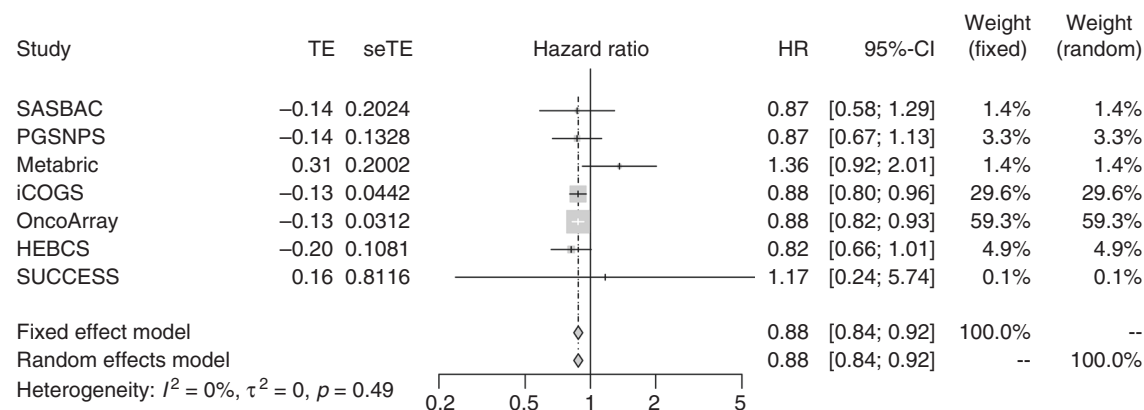


Fig. 4 Forest plot showing the association between the ER-positive variant rs4717568 and breast cancer-specific mortality in ER-positive tumours for the datasets used in the meta-analysis. The size of the square reflects the size of the study (see also Supplementary Table 3)

mortality, involving 96,661 patients from a combined meta-analysis. We found one noteworthy region with 32 highly correlated variants on chromosome 7q21.1 for ER-negative. The lead variant rs67918676 ($P = 1.38 \times 10^{-7}$ and BDFP of 11% under reasonable assumptions for the prior probability of association) is located in a long intergenic non-coding RNA gene (AC004009.3). While this represents an uncharacterised transcript mainly expressed in testis and prostate, it is located about 200 kb away from a cluster of *HOXA* homeobox genes that has been implicated in breast cancer aetiology and prognosis.^{64,65} This region also contains *HOTTIP*, a lncRNA with prognostic value on clinical outcome in breast cancer.⁶⁶ The flanking region on the opposite side contains *TAX1BP1*, a gene that may be involved in chemosensitivity.⁶⁷ Interestingly, database mining using KMplotter revealed evidence for an association of the expression of these nearby genes with survival from ER-negative breast cancer. On the other hand, the enhancer activity at this noteworthy locus was predicted to be low based on the intersection with biofeatures characteristic of regulatory activity as no known eQTLs appear to exist in this region, suggesting that gene regulatory effects of the identified variants are limited in breast tissue or may be activated under certain untested conditions. For ER-positive tumours, we found another noteworthy region with 45 highly correlated variants at $P < 5 \times 10^{-6}$ on chromosome 7q11.22. The lead variant rs4717568 ($P = 1.28 \times 10^{-7}$ and BDFP of 7%) is located

between the *AUTS2* and the *GALNT17* genes. *GALNT17* encodes an N-acetylgalactosaminyltransferase that may play a role in membrane trafficking.⁶⁸ *AUTS2* has been implicated in neurodevelopment,⁶⁹ but *AUTS2* overexpression in cancer has also been linked with resistance to chemotherapy and epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition.⁷⁰ It has been postulated that overexpression of *AUTS2* is specific for metastases,⁷⁰ which may be consistent with the inconspicuous gene expression results in the TCGA database.

It is important to note the differences between the present and the previous GWAS study we had undertaken,⁴⁴ the latter done in a much smaller dataset (3632 events versus 7697 events in the current study) that did not include the OncoArray study. The OncoArray study is the largest dataset used in the present meta-analysis and also the study with the highest imputation quality. The two previously reported variants (rs148760487 for all breast cancer tumours and rs2059614 for ER-negative tumours) were not associated with breast cancer-specific mortality in the current analyses ($P = 1.59 \times 10^{-3}$ and $P = 5.41 \times 10^{-4}$, respectively). The most likely explanation for this is that the original results were false-positive findings, despite the original association being nominally “genome-wide significant”. The BDFPs for the original reported associations were 54% and 16%, respectively. For the lead variants identified in the present analysis, we tested for differences in the imputation quality between the current and previous analysis. All variants had high imputation

quality (~0.99) in the previous study, suggesting that the longer and more complete follow-up together with a higher number of events allowed more robust identification of breast cancer mortality associations. However, there are some weaknesses of the current meta-analysis such as heterogeneity between patient treatment over time and between countries and between datasets with different study designs that should be considered. These limitations, intrinsic to large survival meta-analyses, increase the noise and reduce the power to detect true associations.

In conclusion, we found two novel candidate regions at chromosome 7 for breast cancer survival, credible at a BFD $P < 15\%$ and associated with either ER-negative or ER-positive breast cancer-specific mortality. Concerning additional variants, we might still be underpowered to obtain a more comprehensive picture of genomic markers for breast cancer outcome. Overall, the role of germline variants in breast cancer mortality is still unclear^{36,37,71} and additional analyses with larger sample sizes and more complete follow-up including treatments are needed. In addition, alternative methods that integrate multiple data sources such as gene expression, protein-protein interactions or pathway analyses may be used to aggregate the effect of multiple variants with small effects.⁷² Such approaches could increase the power of the analyses while better explaining the underlying biological mechanisms associated with breast cancer mortality.

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AFFILIATIONS

Maria Escala-Garcia¹, Qi Guo², Thilo Dörk³, Sander Canisius^{1,4}, Renske Keeman¹, Joe Dennis⁵, Jonathan Beesley⁶, Julie Lecarpentier⁵, Manjeet K. Bolla⁵, Qin Wang⁵, Jean Abraham^{7,8,9}, Irene L. Andrulis^{10,11}, Hoda Anton-Culver¹², Volker Arndt¹³, Paul L. Auer^{14,15}, Matthias W. Beckmann¹⁶, Sabine Behrens¹⁷, Javier Benitez^{18,19}, Marina Bermisheva²⁰, Leslie Bernstein²¹, Carl Blomqvist^{22,23}, Bram Boeckx^{24,25}, Stig E. Bojesen^{26,27,28}, Bernardo Bonanni²⁹, Anne-Lise Børresen-Dale^{30,31,32,33,34,35,36,37,38,39}, Hiltrud Brauch^{40,41,42}, Hermann Brenner^{13,42,43}, Adam Brentnall⁴⁴, Louise Brinton⁴⁵, Per Broberg⁴⁶, Ian W. Brock⁴⁷, Sara Y. Brucker⁴⁸, Barbara Burwinkel^{49,50}, Carlos Caldas^{8,9,51}, Trinidad Caldés⁵², Daniele Campa^{17,53}, Federico Canzian⁵⁰, Angel Carracedo^{54,55,56}, Brian D. Carter⁵⁷, Jose E. Castelao⁵⁸, Jenny Chang-Claude^{17,59}, Stephen J. Chanock⁴⁵, Georgia Chenevix-Trench⁶, Ting-Yuan David Cheng⁶⁰, Suet-Feung Chin⁶¹, Christine L. Clarke⁶², NBCS Collaborators, Emilie Cordina-Duverger⁶³, Fergus J. Couch⁶⁴, David G. Cox^{65,66}, Angela Cox⁴⁷, Simon S. Cross⁶⁷, Kamila Czene⁶⁸, Mary B. Daly⁶⁹, Peter Devilee^{70,71}, Janet A. Dunn⁷², Alison M. Dunning⁷, Lorraine Durcan^{73,74}, Miriam Dwek⁷⁵, Helena M. Earl^{9,76}, Arif B. Ekici⁷⁷, A. Heather Eliassen^{78,79}, Carolina Ellberg⁴⁶, Christoph Engel^{80,81}, Mikael Eriksson⁶⁸, D. Gareth Evans^{82,83}, Jonine Figueroa^{45,84,85}, Dieter Flesch-Janys^{86,87}, Henrik Flyger⁸⁸, Marika Gabrielson⁶⁸, Manuela Gago-Dominguez^{54,89}, Eva Galle^{24,25}, Susan M. Gapstur⁵⁷, Montserrat Garcia-Closas^{45,90}, José A. Garcia-Sáenz⁵², Mia M. Gaudet⁵⁷, Angela George^{91,92}, Vassilios Georgoulas⁹³, Graham G. Giles^{94,95,96}, Gord Glendon¹⁰, David E. Goldgar⁹⁷, Anna González-Neira¹⁸, Grethe I. Grenaker Alnæs³⁰, Mervi Grip⁹⁸, Pascal Guénel⁶³, Lothar Haeberle⁹⁹, Eric Hahnen^{100,101}, Christopher A. Haiman¹⁰², Niclas Håkansson¹⁰³, Per Hall^{68,104}, Ute Hamann¹⁰⁵, Susan Hankinson¹⁰⁶, Elaine F. Harkness^{107,108,109}, Patricia A. Harrington⁷, Steven N. Hart¹¹⁰, Jaana M. Hartikainen^{111,112,113}, Alexander Hein¹⁶, Peter Hillemanns³, Louise Hiller⁷², Bernd Holleczeck¹¹⁴, Antoinette Hollestelle¹¹⁵, Maartje J. Hooning¹¹⁵, Robert N. Hoover⁴⁵, John L. Hopper⁹⁵, Anthony Howell¹¹⁶, Guanmengqian Huang¹⁰⁵, Keith Humphreys⁶⁸, David J. Hunter^{79,117,118}, Wolfgang Janni¹¹⁹, Esther M. John^{120,121,122}, Michael E. Jones⁹⁰, Arja Jukkola-Vuorinen¹²³, Audrey Jung¹⁷, Rudolf Kaaks¹⁷, Maria Kabisch¹⁰⁵, Katarzyna Kaczmarek¹²⁴, Michael J. Kerin¹²⁵, Sofia Khan¹²⁶, Elza Khusnutdinova^{20,127}, Johanna I. Kiiski¹²⁶, Cari M. Kitahara¹²⁸, Julia A. Knight^{129,130}, Yon-Dschun Ko¹³¹, Linetta B. Koppert¹³², Veli-Matti Kosma^{111,112,113}, Peter Kraft^{79,117}, Vessela N. Kristensen^{30,31,32,33,34,35,36,37,38,39}, Ute Krüger⁴⁶, Tabea Kühl⁵⁹, Diether Lambrechts^{24,25}, Loic Le Marchand¹³³, Eunjung Lee¹⁰², Flavio Lejbkovicz¹³⁴, Lian Li¹³⁵, Annika Lindblom¹³⁶, Sara Lindström^{137,138}, Martha Linet¹²⁸, Jolanta Lissowska¹³⁹, Wing-Yee Lo^{40,41}, Sibylle Loibl¹⁴⁰, Jan Lubiński¹²⁴, Michael P. Lux⁹⁹, Robert J. MacInnis^{94,95}, Melanie Maietheraler⁵⁰, Tom Maishman^{73,74}, Enes Makalic⁹⁵, Arto Mannermaa^{111,112,113}, Mehdi Manoochehri¹⁰⁵, Siranoush Manoukian¹⁴¹, Sara Margolin¹⁴², Maria Elena Martinez^{89,143}, Dimitrios Mavroudis⁹³, Catriona McLean¹⁴⁴, Alfons Meindl¹⁴⁵, Pooja Middha^{17,146}, Nicola Miller¹²⁵, Roger L. Milne^{94,95}, Fernando Moreno⁵², Anna Marie Mulligan^{147,148}, Claire Mulot¹⁴⁹, Rami Nassir¹⁵⁰, Susan L. Neuhausen²¹, William T. Newman^{82,83}, Sune F. Nielsen^{26,27}, Børge G. Nordestgaard^{26,27,28}, Aaron Norman¹¹⁰, Håkan Olsson⁴⁶, Nick Orr¹⁵¹, V. Shane Pankratz¹⁵², Tjyoung-Won Park-Simon³, Jose I. A. Perez¹⁵³, Clara Pérez-Barrios¹⁵⁴, Paolo Peterlongo¹⁵⁵, Christos Petridis¹⁵⁶, Mila Pinchev¹³⁴, Karoliona Prajzandanc¹²⁴, Ross Prentice¹⁴, Nadege Presneau⁷⁵, Darya Prokofieva¹²⁷, Katri Pylkäs^{157,158}, Brigitte Rack¹⁴⁵, Paolo Radice¹⁵⁹, Dhanya Ramachandran³, Gadi Rennert¹³⁴, Hedy S. Rennert¹³⁴, Valerie Rhenius⁷, Atocha Romero¹⁵⁴, Rebecca Roylance¹⁶⁰, Emmanouil Saloustros¹⁶¹, Elinor J. Sawyer¹⁵⁶, Daniel F. Schmidt⁹⁵, Rita K. Schmutzler^{100,101}, Andreas Schneeweiss^{49,162}, Minouk J. Schoemaker⁹¹, Fredrick Schumacher¹⁶³, Lukas Schwentner¹¹⁹, Rodney J. Scott^{164,165,166,167}, Christopher Scott¹¹⁰, Caroline Seynaeve¹¹⁵, Mitul Shah⁷, Jacques Simard¹⁶⁸, Ann Smeets¹⁶⁹, Christof Sohn¹⁶², Melissa C. Southey^{170,171}, Anthony J. Swerdlow^{91,172}, Aline Talhouk^{173,174,175}, Rulla M. Tamimi^{78,79,117}, William J. Tapper¹⁷⁶, Manuel R. Teixeira^{177,178}, Maria Tengström^{111,179,180}, Mary Beth Terry¹⁸¹, Kathrin Thöne⁵⁹, Rob A. E. M. Tollenaar¹⁸², Ian Tomlinson^{183,184}, Diana Torres^{105,185}, Thérèse Truong⁶³, Constance Turman⁷⁹, Clare Turnbull⁹¹, Hans-Ulrich Ulmer¹⁸⁶, Michael Untch¹⁸⁷, Celine Vachon¹¹⁰, Christi J. van Asperen¹⁸⁸, Ans M. W. van den Ouweland¹⁸⁹, Elke M. van Veen^{82,83}, Camilla Wendt¹⁹⁰, Alice S. Whittemore^{121,122}, Walter Willett^{79,191,192}, Robert Winqvist^{157,158}, Alicja Wolk¹⁹³, Xiaohong R. Yang⁴⁵, Yan Zhang^{13,42}, Douglas F. Easton^{5,7}, Peter A. Fasching^{16,194}, Heli Nevanlinna¹²⁶, Diana M. Eccles⁷⁴, Paul D. P. Pharoah^{5,7} and Marjanka K. Schmidt^{1,195}

¹The Netherlands Cancer Institute, Antoni van Leeuwenhoek Hospital, Division of Molecular Pathology, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; ²University of Cambridge, Cardiovascular Epidemiology Unit, Department of Public Health and Primary Care, Cambridge, UK; ³Hannover Medical School, Gynaecology Research Unit, Hannover, Germany; ⁴The Netherlands Cancer Institute, Antoni van Leeuwenhoek Hospital, Division of Molecular Carcinogenesis, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; ⁵University of Cambridge, Centre for Cancer Genetic Epidemiology, Department of Public Health and Primary Care, Cambridge, UK; ⁶QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute, Department of Genetics and Computational Biology, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia; ⁷University of Cambridge, Centre for Cancer Genetic Epidemiology, Department of Oncology, Cambridge, UK; ⁸Cambridge Experimental Cancer Medicine Centre, Cambridge, UK; ⁹University of Cambridge NHS Foundation Hospitals, Cambridge Breast Unit and NIHR Cambridge Biomedical Research Centre, Cambridge, UK; ¹⁰Lunenfeld-Tanenbaum Research Institute of Mount Sinai Hospital, Fred A. Litwin Center for Cancer Genetics, Toronto, ON, Canada; ¹¹University of Toronto, Department of Molecular Genetics, Toronto, ON, Canada; ¹²University of California Irvine, Department of Epidemiology, Genetic Epidemiology Research Institute, Irvine, CA, USA; ¹³German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ), Division of Clinical Epidemiology and Aging Research, Heidelberg, Germany; ¹⁴Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Cancer Prevention Program, Seattle, WA, USA; ¹⁵University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Zilber School of Public Health, Milwaukee, WI, USA; ¹⁶University Hospital Erlangen, Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg, Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics, Comprehensive Cancer Center ER-EMN, Erlangen, Germany; ¹⁷German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ), Division of Cancer Epidemiology, Heidelberg, Germany; ¹⁸Spanish National Cancer Research Centre (CNIO), Human Cancer Genetics Programme, Madrid, Spain; ¹⁹Biomedical Network on Rare Diseases (CIBERER), Madrid, Spain; ²⁰Ufa Scientific Center of Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Biochemistry and Genetics, Ufa, Russia; ²¹Beckman Research Institute of City of Hope, Department of Population Sciences, Duarte, CA, USA; ²²University of Helsinki, Department of Oncology, Helsinki University Hospital, Helsinki, Finland; ²³Örebro University Hospital, Department of Oncology, Örebro, Sweden; ²⁴VIB, VIB Center for Cancer Biology, Leuven, Belgium; ²⁵University of Leuven, Laboratory for Translational Genetics, Department of Human Genetics, Leuven, Belgium; ²⁶Copenhagen University Hospital, Copenhagen General Population Study, Herlevand Gentofte Hospital, Herlev, Denmark; ²⁷Copenhagen University Hospital, Department of Clinical Biochemistry, Herlev and Gentofte Hospital, Herlev, Denmark; ²⁸University of Copenhagen, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, Copenhagen, Denmark; ²⁹Division of Cancer Prevention and Genetics, IEO, European Institute of Oncology IRCCS Milan, Milan 20141, Italy; ³⁰Oslo

University Hospital-Radiumhospitalet, Department of Cancer Genetics, Institute for Cancer Research, Oslo, Norway; ³¹University of Oslo, Institute of Clinical Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Oslo, Norway; ³²Department of Research, Vestre Viken Hospital, Drammen, Norway; Section for Breast- and Endocrine Surgery, Department of Cancer, Division of Surgery, Cancer and Transplantation Medicine, Oslo University Hospital-Ullevål, Oslo, Norway; ³³Department of Radiology and Nuclear Medicine, Oslo University Hospital, Oslo, Norway; ³⁴Department of Pathology at Akershus University hospital, Lørenskog, Norway; ³⁵Department of Tumor Biology, Institute for Cancer Research, Oslo University Hospital, Oslo, Norway; ³⁶Department of Oncology, Division of Surgery and Cancer and Transplantation Medicine, Oslo University Hospital-Radiumhospitalet, Oslo, Norway; ³⁷National Advisory Unit on Late Effects after Cancer Treatment, Department of Oncology, Oslo University Hospital, Oslo, Norway; ³⁸Department of Oncology, Akershus University Hospital, Lørenskog, Norway; ³⁹Breast Cancer Research Consortium, Oslo University Hospital, Oslo, Norway; ⁴⁰Dr. Margarete Fischer-Bosch-Institute of Clinical Pharmacology, Stuttgart, Germany; ⁴¹University of Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany; ⁴²German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ), German Cancer Consortium (DKTK), Heidelberg, Germany; ⁴³German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ) and National Center for Tumor Diseases (NCT), Division of Preventive Oncology, Heidelberg, Germany; ⁴⁴Queen Mary University of London, Centre for Cancer Prevention, Wolfson Institute of Preventive Medicine, London, UK; ⁴⁵National Cancer Institute, Division of Cancer Epidemiology and Genetics, Bethesda, MD, USA; ⁴⁶Lund University, Department of Cancer Epidemiology, Clinical Sciences, Lund, Sweden; ⁴⁷University of Sheffield, Sheffield Institute for Nucleic Acids (SiNfoNiA), Department of Oncology and Metabolism, Sheffield, UK; ⁴⁸University of Tübingen, Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics, Tübingen, Germany; ⁴⁹University of Heidelberg, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Heidelberg, Germany; ⁵⁰German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ), Molecular Epidemiology Group, C080 Heidelberg, Germany; ⁵¹The Institute of Cancer Research, Section of Cancer Genetics, London, UK; ⁵²Instituto de Investigación Sanitaria San Carlos (IdISSC), Centro Investigación Biomédica en Red de Cáncer (CIBERONC), Medical Oncology Department, Hospital Clínico San Carlos, Madrid, Spain; ⁵³University of Pisa, Department of Biology, Pisa, Italy; ⁵⁴Instituto de Investigación Sanitaria de Santiago de Compostela (IDIS), Genomic Medicine Group, Galician Foundation of Genomic Medicine, SERGAS, Santiago de Compostela, Spain; ⁵⁵Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Centro de Investigación en Red de Enfermedades Raras (CIBERER), Santiago De Compostela, Spain; ⁵⁶King Abdulaziz University, Center of Excellence in Genomic Medicine, Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; ⁵⁷American Cancer Society, Epidemiology Research Program, Atlanta, GA, USA; ⁵⁸Instituto de Investigación Sanitaria Galicia Sur (IISGS), Xerencia de Xestión Integrada de Vigo-SERGAS, Oncology and Genetics Unit, Vigo, Spain; ⁵⁹University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf, Cancer Epidemiology Group, University Cancer Center Hamburg (UCCH), Hamburg, Germany; ⁶⁰Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Division of Cancer Prevention and Control, Buffalo, NY, USA; ⁶¹University of Cambridge, Cancer Research UK Cambridge Institute, Cambridge, UK; ⁶²University of Sydney, Westmead Institute for Medical Research, Sydney, NSW, Australia; ⁶³INSERM, University Paris-Sud, University Paris-Saclay, Cancer & Environment Group, Center for Research in Epidemiology and Population Health (CESP), Villejuif, France; ⁶⁴Mayo Clinic, Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology, Rochester, MN, USA; ⁶⁵Imperial College London, Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, School of Public Health, London, UK; ⁶⁶Cancer Research Center of Lyon, INSERM U1052 Lyon, France; ⁶⁷University of Sheffield, Academic Unit of Pathology, Department of Neuroscience, Sheffield, UK; ⁶⁸Karolinska Institutet, Department of Medical Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Stockholm, Sweden; ⁶⁹Fox Chase Cancer Center, Department of Clinical Genetics, Philadelphia, PA, USA; ⁷⁰Leiden University Medical Center, Department of Pathology, Leiden, The Netherlands; ⁷¹Leiden University Medical Center, Department of Human Genetics, Leiden, The Netherlands; ⁷²University of Warwick, Warwick Clinical Trials Unit, Coventry, UK; ⁷³University of Southampton, Southampton Clinical Trials Unit, Faculty of Medicine, Southampton, UK; ⁷⁴University of Southampton, Cancer Sciences Academic Unit, Faculty of Medicine, Southampton, UK; ⁷⁵University of Westminster, Department of Biomedical Sciences, Faculty of Science and Technology, London, UK; ⁷⁶University of Cambridge, Department of Oncology, Cambridge, UK; ⁷⁷Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg, Comprehensive Cancer Center Erlangen-EMN, Institute of Human Genetics, University Hospital Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany; ⁷⁸Harvard Medical School, Channing Division of Network Medicine, Department of Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, MA, USA; ⁷⁹Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Department of Epidemiology, Boston, MA, USA; ⁸⁰University of Leipzig, Institute for Medical Informatics, Statistics and Epidemiology, Leipzig, Germany; ⁸¹University of Leipzig, LIFE - Leipzig Research Centre for Civilization Diseases, Leipzig, Germany; ⁸²University of Manchester, Manchester Academic Health Science Centre, Division of Evolution and Genomic Medicine, School of Biological Sciences, Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health, Manchester, UK; ⁸³St Marys Hospital, Central Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Manchester Academic Health Science Centre, Manchester Centre for Genomic Medicine, Manchester, UK; ⁸⁴The University of Edinburgh Medical School, Usher Institute of Population Health Sciences and Informatics, Edinburgh, UK; ⁸⁵Cancer Research UK Edinburgh Centre, Edinburgh, UK; ⁸⁶University Medical Centre Hamburg-Eppendorf, Institute for Medical Biometrics and Epidemiology, Hamburg, Germany; ⁸⁷University Medical Centre Hamburg-Eppendorf, Department of Cancer Epidemiology, Clinical Cancer Registry, Hamburg, Germany; ⁸⁸Copenhagen University Hospital, Department of Breast Surgery, Herlev and Gentofte Hospital, Herlev, Denmark; ⁸⁹University of California San Diego, Moores Cancer Center, La Jolla, CA, USA; ⁹⁰Institute of Cancer Research, Division of Genetics and Epidemiology, London, UK; ⁹¹The Institute of Cancer Research, Division of Genetics and Epidemiology, London, UK; ⁹²The Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust, Cancer Genetics Unit, London, UK; ⁹³University Hospital of Heraklion, Department of Medical Oncology, Heraklion, Greece; ⁹⁴Cancer Council Victoria, Cancer Epidemiology & Intelligence Division, Melbourne, VIC, Australia; ⁹⁵The University of Melbourne, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, Centre for Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Melbourne, VIC, Australia; ⁹⁶Monash University, Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, Melbourne, VIC, Australia; ⁹⁷Huntsman Cancer Institute, University of Utah School of Medicine, Department of Dermatology, Salt Lake City, UT, USA; ⁹⁸University of Oulu, Department of Surgery, Oulu University Hospital, Oulu, Finland; ⁹⁹Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg, Comprehensive Cancer Centre Erlangen-EMN, Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, University Hospital Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany; ¹⁰⁰University Hospital of Cologne, Centre for Hereditary Breast and Ovarian Cancer, Cologne, Germany; ¹⁰¹University of Cologne, Centre for Molecular Medicine Cologne (CMCC), Cologne, Germany; ¹⁰²University of Southern California, Department of Preventive Medicine, Keck School of Medicine, Los Angeles, CA, USA; ¹⁰³Karolinska Institutet, Institute of Environmental Medicine, Stockholm, Sweden; ¹⁰⁴South General Hospital, Department of Oncology, Stockholm, Sweden; ¹⁰⁵German Cancer Research Centre (DKFZ), Molecular Genetics of Breast Cancer, Heidelberg, Germany; ¹⁰⁶University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Department of Biostatistics & Epidemiology, Amherst, MA, USA; ¹⁰⁷University of Manchester, Manchester Academic Health Science Centre, Division of Informatics, Imaging and Data Sciences, Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health, Manchester, UK; ¹⁰⁸Wythenshawe Hospital, Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, Nightingale Breast Screening Centre, Manchester, UK; ¹⁰⁹Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, Manchester Academic Health Science Centre, NIHR Manchester Biomedical Research Unit, Manchester, UK; ¹¹⁰Mayo Clinic, Department of Health Sciences Research, Rochester, MN, USA; ¹¹¹University of Eastern Finland, Translational Cancer Research Area, Kuopio, Finland; ¹¹²University of Eastern Finland, Institute of Clinical Medicine, Pathology and Forensic Medicine, Kuopio, Finland; ¹¹³Kuopio University Hospital, Imaging Centre, Department of Clinical Pathology, Kuopio, Finland; ¹¹⁴Saarland Cancer Registry, Saarbrücken, Germany; ¹¹⁵Erasmus MC Cancer Institute, Department of Medical Oncology, Family Cancer Clinic, Rotterdam, The Netherlands; ¹¹⁶University of Manchester, Institute of Cancer studies, Manchester, UK; ¹¹⁷Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Program in Genetic Epidemiology and Statistical Genetics, Boston, MA, USA; ¹¹⁸University of Oxford, Nuffield Department of Population

Health, Oxford, UK; ¹¹⁹Cancer Research UK Edinburgh Centre, Edinburgh, UK; ¹²⁰Cancer Prevention Institute of California, Department of Epidemiology, Fremont, CA, USA; ¹²¹Stanford University School of Medicine, Department of Health Research and Policy - Epidemiology, Stanford, CA, USA; ¹²²Stanford University School of Medicine, Department of Biomedical Data Science, Stanford, CA, USA; ¹²³Tampere University Hospital, Department of Oncology, Tampere, Finland; ¹²⁴Pomeranian Medical University, Department of Genetics and Pathology, Szczecin, Poland; ¹²⁵National University of Ireland, Surgery, School of Medicine, Galway, Ireland; ¹²⁶University of Helsinki, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Helsinki University Hospital, Helsinki, Finland; ¹²⁷Bashkir State University, Department of Genetics and Fundamental Medicine, Ufa, Russia; ¹²⁸National Cancer Institute, Radiation Epidemiology Branch, Division of Cancer Epidemiology and Genetics, Bethesda, MD, USA; ¹²⁹Lunenfeld-Tanenbaum Research Institute, Sinai Health System, Prosserman Centre for Population Health Research, Toronto, ON, Canada; ¹³⁰University of Toronto, Division of Epidemiology, Dalla Lana School of Public Health, Toronto, ON, Canada; ¹³¹Johanniter Krankenhaus, Department of Internal Medicine, Evangelische Kliniken Bonn gGmbH, Bonn, Germany; ¹³²Erasmus MC Cancer Institute, Department of Surgical Oncology, Family Cancer Clinic, Rotterdam, The Netherlands; ¹³³University of Hawaii Cancer Center, Epidemiology Program, Honolulu, HI, USA; ¹³⁴Carmel Medical Center and Technion Faculty of Medicine, Clalit National Cancer Control Center, Haifa, Israel; ¹³⁵Tianjin Medical University Cancer Institute and Hospital, Department of Epidemiology, Tianjin, China; ¹³⁶Karolinska Institutet, Department of Molecular Medicine and Surgery, Stockholm, Sweden; ¹³⁷University of Washington School of Public Health, Department of Epidemiology, Seattle, WA, USA; ¹³⁸Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Public Health Sciences Division, Seattle, WA, USA; ¹³⁹M. Sklodowska-Curie Cancer Centre, Oncology Institute, Department of Cancer Epidemiology and Prevention, Warsaw, Poland; ¹⁴⁰GmbH, German Breast Group, Neu Isenburg, Germany; ¹⁴¹Fondazione IRCCS (Istituto Di Ricovero e Cura a Carattere Scientifico) Istituto Nazionale dei Tumori (INT), Unit of Medical Genetics, Department of Medical Oncology and Haematology, Milan, Italy; ¹⁴²Karolinska Institutet, Department of Clinical Science and Education, Södersjukhuset, Stockholm, Sweden; ¹⁴³University of California San Diego, Department of Family Medicine and Public Health, La Jolla, CA, USA; ¹⁴⁴The Alfred Hospital, Anatomical Pathology, Melbourne, VIC, Australia; ¹⁴⁵Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, Munich, Germany; ¹⁴⁶University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Medicine, Heidelberg, Germany; ¹⁴⁷University of Toronto, Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathobiology, Toronto, ON, Canada; ¹⁴⁸University Health Network, Laboratory Medicine Program, Toronto, ON, Canada; ¹⁴⁹INSERM UMR-S1147, Université Paris Sorbonne Cité, Paris, France; ¹⁵⁰University of California Davis, Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Medicine, Davis, CA, USA; ¹⁵¹Queen's University Belfast, Centre for Cancer Research and Cell Biology, Belfast, Ireland, UK; ¹⁵²University of New Mexico, University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center, Albuquerque, NM, USA; ¹⁵³Hospital Monte Naranco, Servicio de Cirugía General y Especialidades, Oviedo, Spain; ¹⁵⁴Hospital Universitario Puerta de Hierro, Medical Oncology Department, Madrid, Spain; ¹⁵⁵The FIRC (Italian Foundation for Cancer Research) Institute of Molecular Oncology, IFOM, Milan, Italy; ¹⁵⁶King's College London, Research Oncology, Guy's Hospital, London, UK; ¹⁵⁷University of Oulu, Laboratory of Cancer Genetics and Tumour Biology, Cancer and Translational Medicine Research Unit, Biocentre Oulu, Oulu, Finland; ¹⁵⁸Northern Finland Laboratory Centre Oulu, Laboratory of Cancer Genetics and Tumour Biology, Oulu, Finland; ¹⁵⁹Fondazione IRCCS (Istituto Di Ricovero e Cura a Carattere Scientifico) Istituto Nazionale dei Tumori (INT), Unit of Molecular Bases of Genetic Risk and Genetic Testing, Department of Research, Milan, Italy; ¹⁶⁰UCLH Foundation Trust, Department of Oncology, London, UK; ¹⁶¹University Hospital of Larissa, Department of Oncology, Larissa, Greece; ¹⁶²University of Heidelberg, National Centre for Tumour Diseases, Heidelberg, Germany; ¹⁶³Case Western Reserve University, Department of Population and Quantitative Health Sciences, Cleveland, OH, USA; ¹⁶⁴John Hunter Hospital, Division of Molecular Medicine, Pathology North, Newcastle, NSW, Australia; ¹⁶⁵University of Newcastle, Discipline of Medical Genetics, School of Biomedical Sciences and Pharmacy, Faculty of Health, Callaghan, NSW, Australia; ¹⁶⁶John Hunter Hospital, Hunter Medical Research Institute, Newcastle, NSW, Australia; ¹⁶⁷University of Newcastle, Centre for Information Based Medicine, Callaghan, Newcastle, NSW, Australia; ¹⁶⁸Centre Hospitalier Universitaire de Québec - Université Laval Research Centre, Genomics Centre, Québec City, QC, Canada; ¹⁶⁹University Hospitals Leuven, Department of Surgical Oncology, Leuven, Belgium; ¹⁷⁰Monash University, Precision Medicine, School of Clinical Sciences at Monash Health, Clayton, Victoria, Australia; ¹⁷¹The University of Melbourne, Department of Clinical Pathology, Melbourne, VIC, Australia; ¹⁷²The Institute of Cancer Research, Division of Breast Cancer Research, London, UK; ¹⁷³BC Cancer Agency and University of British Columbia, British Columbia's Ovarian Cancer Research (OVCARE) Program, Vancouver General Hospital, Vancouver, BC, Canada; ¹⁷⁴University of British Columbia, Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, Vancouver, BC, Canada; ¹⁷⁵University of British Columbia, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Vancouver, BC, Canada; ¹⁷⁶University of Southampton, Faculty of Medicine, Southampton, UK; ¹⁷⁷Portuguese Oncology Institute, Department of Genetics, Porto, Portugal; ¹⁷⁸University of Porto, Biomedical Sciences Institute (ICBAS), Porto, Portugal; ¹⁷⁹Kuopio University Hospital, Cancer Centre, Kuopio, Finland; ¹⁸⁰University of Eastern Finland, Institute of Clinical Medicine, Oncology, Kuopio, Finland; ¹⁸¹Columbia University, Department of Epidemiology, Mailman School of Public Health, New York, NY, USA; ¹⁸²Leiden University Medical Centre, Department of Surgery, Leiden, The Netherlands; ¹⁸³University of Birmingham, Institute of Cancer and Genomic Sciences, Birmingham, UK; ¹⁸⁴University of Oxford, Wellcome Trust Centre for Human Genetics and Oxford NIHR Biomedical Research Centre, Oxford, UK; ¹⁸⁵Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Institute of Human Genetics, Bogota, Colombia; ¹⁸⁶Frauenklinik der Stadtklinik Baden-Baden, Baden-Baden, Germany; ¹⁸⁷Helios Clinics Berlin-Buch, Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, Berlin, Germany; ¹⁸⁸Leiden University Medical Centre, Department of Clinical Genetics, Leiden, The Netherlands; ¹⁸⁹Erasmus University Medical Centre, Department of Clinical Genetics, Rotterdam, The Netherlands; ¹⁹⁰Karolinska Institutet, Department of Clinical Science and Education, Södersjukhuset, Stockholm, Sweden; ¹⁹¹Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Department of Nutrition, Boston, MA, USA; ¹⁹²Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Channing Division of Network Medicine, Boston, MA, USA; ¹⁹³Karolinska Institutet, Department of Environmental Medicine, Division of Nutritional Epidemiology, Stockholm, Sweden; ¹⁹⁴University of California at Los Angeles, David Geffen School of Medicine, Department of Medicine Division of Hematology and Oncology, Los Angeles, CA, USA and ¹⁹⁵The Netherlands Cancer Institute - Antoni van Leeuwenhoek hospital, Division of Psychosocial Research and Epidemiology, Amsterdam, The Netherlands