Vilella, M; Nunes de Oliveira Costa, G; Lima Barreto, M; Alexandrina Figueredo, C; Maria Alcantara-Neves, N; Cunha Rodrigues, L; Maria Alvim de Matos, S; Leovigildo Fiaccone, R; Oliveira, P; Rocha, A; +1 more... de Câssia Ribeiro-Silva, R; (2017) Effect of dietary consumption as a modifier on the association between FTO gene variants and excess body weight in children from an admixed population in Brazil: the Social Changes, Asthma and Allergy in Latin America (SCAALA) cohort study. The British journal of nutrition. pp. 1-8. ISSN 0007-1145 DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007114517001386

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Effect of dietary consumption as a modifier on the association between FTO gene variants and excess body weight in children from an admixed population in Brazil: the Social Changes, Asthma and Allergy in Latin America (SCAALA) cohort study

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(Submitted 2 August 2016 – Final revision received 21 April 2017 – Accepted 15 May 2017 – First published online 29 June 2017)

Abstract

Previous studies have shown associations of variants of the FTO gene with body weight, but none of these have involved Latin American populations with a high level of miscegenation, as is seen in the north-eastern Brazilian population. This study evaluated the association between SNP in the FTO gene and excess weight in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. In addition, the effect of diet as a modifier on this association was also investigated. This cross-sectional study included 1191 participants aged 4–11 years, who were genotyped for 400 variants of the FTO gene. Direct anthropometric measures were made and dietary data were obtained by 24-h food recall. Multivariate logistic regression analyses were used to assess the associations of interest. Overall, 11.2% of the individuals included in the study were overweight/obese. Interactions were identified between the percentage energy intake from proteins and obesity risk linked to the rs62048379 SNP ($P_{\text{interaction}} = 0.01$) and also between fat intake (PUFA:SFA ratio) and obesity risk linked to the rs62048379 SNP ($P_{\text{interaction}} = 0.01$). The T allele for the variant rs62048379 was positively associated with overweight/obesity in individuals whose percentage energy intake from protein was above the median (OR 2.00; 95% CI 1.05, 3.82). The rs62048379 SNP was also associated with overweight/obesity in individuals whose PUFA:SFA ratio was below the median (OR 1.63; 95% CI 1.05, 2.55). The association between FTO gene variants and excess body weight can be modulated by dietary characteristics, particularly by fatty acid distribution and dietary protein intake in children.

Key words: Dietary intake: FTO variants: Adiposity: Children

Genetic factors and several postnatal factors such as environmental, social, economic, cultural, psychosocial and behavioural elements are associated with an increased risk for overweight and obesity, and constitute a set of factors that are interrelated and mutually compounding, making overweight/obesity a complex and multifaceted trait (1). Nevertheless, the factors that best explain the growing number of overweight individuals are related to changes in lifestyle, such as the increased consumption of high-energy processed food, particularly those foods with a high content of SFA and simple carbohydrates, and by increased sedentarianism (2). Currently, there is a growing interest in understanding the genetics of complex traits such as overweight/obesity, which are characterised by a multiplicity of interactions between genetic determinants and conditions associated with lifestyle and the environment.
With the exception of the Y chromosome, studies have shown that all other human chromosomes contain loci associated with the risk for excess weight\(^5\,^4\). In various studies using different protocols and different methodologies, more than 430 genes associated with overweight and obesity have been identified\(^5\). Of all of the genes associated with overweight and obesity, the fat mass and obesity-associated (FTO) gene merits particular mention because it explains the largest amount of genetic variance in obesity traits over the lifespan\(^4\). The FTO gene has been associated with energy homeostasis, participating directly in the control of body fat reserves\(^5\). There is evidence supporting the role of some common genetic variants of the FTO gene in increased food intake and the choice of more energy-dense foods\(^5\,^7\,^9\). Currently, studies have shown the effects of components consumed in the diet on gene expression\(^5\). Some dietary components, particularly SFA, are hypothesised to interact with some of the variants of the FTO gene and modify the effect of the association between these genetic variants and obesity in such a way as to compound the obesogenic effect of the FTO gene\(^7\,\,^10\). However, the mechanisms by which these associations are established remain to be fully clarified.

Previous studies have shown associations of variants of the FTO gene with body weight\(^11\,\,^18\) but none of these has involved Latin American populations with a high level of miscegenation, as is seen in the north-eastern Brazilian population. Therefore, the objective of the present study was to evaluate the association between SNP in the FTO gene and excess weight in a population of children living in the city of Salvador, Brazil. In addition, the effect of diet as a modifier of this association was assessed in these Brazilian children. The hypothesis was that SNP in the FTO gene are associated with overweight/obesity and that any associations could be modified by dietary intake to modulate the effect of these polymorphisms on excess weight.

**Methods**

**Ethical aspects**

The parents or legal guardians of each participating child signed an informed consent form in which the study procedures were described in detail. The study protocol was approved by the internal ethics committee of the Collective Health Institute of the Federal University of Bahia and by the National Research Ethics Council (CONEP) under references 003-05/CEP-ISC and 15.895/2011, respectively.

**Study design and population**

This is a cross-sectional, population-based study nested within the cohort study Social Changes, Asthma and Allergy in Latin America (SCAALA), which was conducted to evaluate risk factors for asthma in Salvador. The methodology used in that study has been described previously\(^19\). The city of Salvador has a population of over 2.6 million inhabitants, of whom 80% consider themselves black or of mixed race\(^20\). The sample consisted of 1445 children who were randomly selected from 20,000 households encompassing a variety of different socio-economic levels and environmental conditions. Of these children, genetic data were available for 1309 children. Following quality control, two children were excluded from the study because data on their obesity/overweight status were missing, and sixty-one were excluded because data on kinship were lacking, leaving 1246 eligible children. After a review of the questionnaires (24-h diet recall), we excluded fifty-five cases because of inconsistent data, and the final sample was made up of 1191 children.

**Data collection**

**Anthropometric data.** The participants were weighed on a portable electronic microscale (Filizola\(^26\), model E-150/3P, São Paulo, Brazil), and their heights were measured using a portable stadiometer (Leicester Height Measure\(^26\), Seca). BMI was used for the diagnosis of anthropometric status, adopting the percentiles for age and sex proposed by the WHO\(^21\). Anthropometric status was classified as follows: underweight, <3rd percentile; normal weight, ≥3rd percentile and <85th percentile; overweight, ≥85th percentile and <97th percentile; and obese, ≥97th percentile. The categories of overweight and obese were grouped together; therefore, children classified as having excess weight were those ≥ the 85th percentile.

**Genotyping**

DNA extraction was performed according to the manufacturer’s instructions using the Gentra Puregene Blood Kit. The Qubit fluorometer (Invitrogen) was used for DNA quantification\(^22\). All children were genotyped for 458 variants of the FTO gene using the illumina genotyping platform HumanOmni2.5-8 BeadChip. The Illumina Human Omni 2.5-MV3 chip delivers comprehensive coverage of both common and rare SNP content from the 1000 Genomes Project (IKGP; minor-allele frequency (MAF)>2.5%), designed to be maximally informative for diverse world populations. We selected all SNP in the FTO gene (Assembly GRCh37; p13, localised between 53737875 and 54148379 positions) covered by this platform. Genotyping data have been deposited in the European Genome-phenome Archive (EGA, http://www.ebi.ac.uk/ega/), which is hosted by the European Bioinformatics Institute (EBI), under the accession number EGAS000001001245. Imputation was performed only for the variant rs9939609 using the IMPUTE2 package\(^23\) on the public panel from 1000 Genomes Project Phase I data version 3 (ALL.integrated_phase1_ SHAPEIT_16-06-14.nomonom.integrated_phase1_v3.20101123.snps.indels_svsgenotypes.nomonom.haplotypes.gz), which contained 1092 individuals of various ethnicities.

Quality control was performed before conducting the tests for association. All procedures were automated and performed using the PLINK program, version 1.9\(^24\). To evaluate family structure, kinship coefficients were calculated for every possible pair. A total of sixty-one individuals were removed from the sample because of the relationship determined by kinship coefficients for each possible pair of individuals. This method is implemented in the REAP software (Relatedness Estimation in Admixed Populations)\(^25\). Quality control was conducted in stages to exclude SNP with a genotyping call rate <0.98;
deviation from Hardy–Weinberg equilibrium was determined using controls only, with a $P$-value $<0.05$ and MAF $<1\%$\textsuperscript{(26)}.

**Population structure**

Principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted to identify different population groups based on the ethnic history/origin of each individual, and correct the population structure\textsuperscript{(27)}.

Details on the use of PCA to evaluate population stratification can be found in the paper published by Costa et al. in 2015\textsuperscript{(28)}.

**Dietary intake**

The 24-h diet-recall method (R24h) was used to determine dietary intake. Parents reported their children's dietary intake. However, the information given by the children at the time of the interview complemented the information given by their parents. Food consumed in school or at day-care centres was also recorded. The food consumption recorded was converted into energy and macronutrients using DietPro software, version 4.0, 2006\textsuperscript{(29)}.

Assessment Table for Food Consumption from Home-Cooking Measurements\textsuperscript{(31)}, the ENDEF (Estudo Nacional de Despesas Familiares) food composition table\textsuperscript{(32)} and packaged-food labels. Macronutrient intake was expressed as the percentage of total energy intake.

**Statistical analysis**

The characteristics of the population were identified by conducting a descriptive analysis. $\chi^2$ Tests were used for categorical variables. The Mann–Whitney $U$ test was used, where appropriate, in order to compare dietary intake variables for 'overweight' and 'not overweight' groups because of their highly skewed distribution. Logistic regression analysis was used to evaluate the association between genetic variants and excess weight. Each SNP of the $FTO$ gene was analysed separately. Because of the low numbers of AA homozygotes, the genotype was analysed using the dominant-allele model of $\chi^2$.

Details on the use of PCA to evaluate population stratification can be found in the paper published by Costa et al. in 2015\textsuperscript{(28)}.

Results

The eligible study population consisted of 1445 children aged 4–11 years. Of these, 1191 children were included in the analysis, and 11.2% of these children were overweight/obese. There was a slightly higher percentage of boys than girls (54:46%) and of children aged 6–7 years (41.8%). With respect to skin colour, the vast majority of children were reported as being brown or black (91.5%). The median energy intake was 7045.85 (1928.78–38940.99) kJ. The median intake of carbohydrates, proteins and fat as a percentage of energy content was 61.68 (range: 27.48–87.38), 12.58 (range: 4.28–10.95) and 26.08 (range: 5.28–51.28)\%, respectively. The median PUFA:SFA intake was 0.93 (range: 0.02–3.89). There were significant differences in the percentage of energy from carbohydrates ($P=0.046$) and fat ($P=0.037$) between the non-overweight/non-obese and overweight/obese groups (Table 1).

A genetic analysis, using a logistic regression model adjusted for sex, age, population structure and energy intake, was conducted to evaluate the association between the $FTO$ gene variants and excess weight. As shown in Table 2, ten SNP in introns 1, 7 and 8 of the $FTO$ gene were associated ($P<0.05$) with excess weight in the population evaluated (online Supplementary Fig. S1). The top SNP associated with excess weight were rs115530394 and rs75066479 for the dominant genetic model. The results of all 400 SNP are presented (online Supplementary Table S1). In addition, a regional association plot was produced using LocusZoom\textsuperscript{(37)} for better understanding of the genomic context (online Supplementary Fig. S2).

A polymorphism associated with a particular trait is not necessarily a causal mutation; rather, it may be in linkage disequilibrium with a functional variant. For this reason, an initial investigation was conducted to determine whether SNP associated with excess weight in the Brazilian population capture a single signal or whether they are independently associated with this condition. Of all $FTO$ polymorphisms significantly associated with excess weight, only two pairs were in strong linkage disequilibrium. One pair is located in intron 7 (rs115530394/rs114019148) and the other in intron 8 (rs75066479/rs115662052). In addition, we observed low linkage disequilibrium between the variants rs62048379 and rs99390609 ($r^2=0.004$ and $D^\prime=0.17$; $r^2=0.004$ and $D^\prime=0.17$). We included rs99390609 in the analysis and indicated that it was imputed (Fig. 1).
Interaction between FTO variants and dietary intake on overweight/obesity

An analysis was conducted of the effect of dietary intake on the association between FTO gene variants and excess weight with the objective of evaluating the modifying effect of diet on this association. Interactions between the FTO genotype and dietary intake, and the effect on overweight/obesity were tested by including the respective interaction terms in the models. For these analyses, the percentage contribution of energy obtained from carbohydrates, proteins, total fat and MUFA was dichotomised according to whether this percentage was above or below the median, as was the ratio between PUFA:SFA.

Table 3 shows the results of the multivariate logistic regression analysis conducted to evaluate the association between FTO gene variants and overweight/obesity according to dietary intake. An interaction was found between protein intake and the FTO gene variant rs62048379 ($P_{interaction} = 0.01$) in relation to overweight/obesity. The risk allele for the FTO gene (A allele) was positively associated with overweight/obesity in individuals whose percentage energy intake from protein was above the median (OR 2.05, 95% CI 1.05, 3.82). An interaction was also found between fat intake (the ratio between PUFA:SFA) and the FTO gene variant rs62048379 ($P_{interaction} = 0.01$) in relation to overweight and obesity. The risk allele for the FTO gene (A allele) for the variant rs62048379 was positively associated with overweight/obesity in individuals whose PUFA:SFA ratio was below the median (OR 1.50; 95% CI 1.05, 2.17). These data are complemented by the data in the online Supplementary Table S2. Analyses of the remaining FTO gene variants associated with overweight/obesity as a function of dietary intake are shown in the online Supplementary Table S3.

### Discussion

The present study investigated the possible associations between variants of the FTO gene and overweight/obesity in children in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. The Brazilian population is considered to be highly admixed. According to Table 1, 91.5% of the SCAALA population declares itself to be black or brown. Actually, Lima-Costa et al. show that 50% of the genetic composition in the Salvador-SCAALA cohort is of African origin. Following the appropriate adjustments, SNP that were significantly associated with overweight/obesity were rs115530394, rs75066479, rs115662052, rs114039148, rs62048379, rs62034079, rs79149291, rs112817, rs16952683 and rs2003583. Variants of the FTO gene influencing obesity have been studied in children in Europe, China, and Japan, as well as in African American and Brazilian children (including the rs9939609 SNP). Variants of the FTO gene were not found to have any significant association with overweight/obesity in different populations.
depend on ethnicity or differences in gene–environment interactions\(^{(40)}\).

Previous studies identified associations between obesity and polymorphisms in introns 1\(^{(41,33)}\) and 8\(^{(42)}\) of the \(FTO\) gene. Those previous findings, together with the present results, suggest the occurrence of variants with a regulatory potential in different regions of the \(FTO\) gene. In the present analysis, variants in introns 1, 7 and 8 of the \(FTO\) gene were identified as being associated with overweight/obesity. Here, most SNP associated with the trait in question are located in intron 8. This

![Diagram showing linkage disequilibrium (LD) plots.](https://www.cambridge.org/core).
indicates that, in addition to intron 1, intron 8 may constitute a second site of FTO variants related to overweight/obesity. In a study of African American individuals, an association was found between seven SNP from the FTO gene (rs708262, rs11076017, rs16952725, rs9932411, rs7191513, rs2689269, rs16952987 and rs8057044) and overweight/obesity. Some of these SNP are also situated in intron 8(42). These results reinforce the suggestion that there are similarities between genetic factors that predispose individuals of African American descent to obesity and predisposing genetic factors in the Brazilian population, particularly in the admixed population of Bahia(43).

The possible associations between FTO gene variants and overweight/obesity were evaluated in accordance with the composition of the diet. The results of studies investigating the interaction between dietary factors and FTO gene variants on overweight/obesity have generated conflicting results regarding potential interactions(44,45,10). In the present study, an interaction was identified between the percentage of energy intake from proteins and obesity risk linked to the rs62048379 SNP ($P_{\text{interaction}} = 0.01$). An interaction was also found between fat intake (PUFA:SFA ratio) and obesity risk linked to the rs62048379 SNP ($P_{\text{interaction}} = 0.01$). The OR that reflect the magnitude of the association between FTO gene variants and overweight/obesity are clearly heterogeneous in this study. Therefore, in individuals whose percentage energy intake from proteins was above the median, the presence of the risk allele (A) for the rs62048379 variant increased the prevalence of excess weight by 2.0 times compared with when the allele was absent. These findings are consistent with the results of a meta-analysis conducted by Qi et al.(50). Those authors showed that a lower dietary protein intake attenuated the association between the FTO genotype and adiposity in children and adolescents.

Studies suggest that FTO may influence body composition through cellular sensing of amino acids(48,49). Given the increasing evidence supporting the role of FTO in protein metabolism and body composition, future investigations on this topic may help clarify the mechanisms underlying the observed interaction between the FTO variant and protein intake and its effect on overweight/obesity.

The presence of the allele (A) for the rs62048379 variant increased the prevalence of excess weight by 1.63 times in those individuals whose PUFA:SFA ratio was below the median compared with when this allele is absent. A novel finding in this study was that low dietary PUFA:SFA intake ratio accentuated obesity risk in the A allele carriers but not in the TT homozygote carriers in this population, suggesting that genetic predisposition to obesity may be modulated by dietary SFA intake. The findings of the present study reinforce the results of other studies in which the authors emphasise that diets based on unsaturated fats(45,50) may attenuate the obesogenic effect of FTO on the expression of the obesity phenotype. Studies have indicated a possible ‘anti-obesity’ effect attributable to PUFA. This may be due to their greater oxidative rates when compared with SFA(51). Several investigators have shown that fatty acid oxidation increases directly with a concomitant increase in PUFA:SFA intake(40,52). The mechanisms allowing dietary SFA to interact with FTO are unknown and require further investigation.

### Table 3. Association between polymorphisms (rs62048379) and phenotypes according to dietary intake. Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, 2004–2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protein (% energy)</th>
<th>Phenotypes</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>95 % CI</th>
<th>$P_{\text{interaction}}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>≥ Median</td>
<td>Excess weight</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.05, 3.82</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; Median</td>
<td>Excess weight</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.71, 2.45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dietary PUFA:SFA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ Median</td>
<td>Excess weight</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.43, 1.72</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; Median</td>
<td>Excess weight</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>1.05, 2.55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other studies, however, reported contradictory results (46,47). Studies suggest that proteins was above the median, the presence of the risk allele due to the relatively small cohort size. Thus, we chose the dominant heritability model instead of the additive or recessive model in order to improve the power for statistical analysis. Even so, studies with larger sample sizes are needed to support the findings of the present study. In addition, we were unable to examine other adiposity proxies but were limited to the consideration of BMI, which cannot distinguish body composition and does not provide any indication of body fat distribution. The R24h used in the present study to investigate dietary intake may also represent another limitation. Although it is a rapid, relatively inexpensive and easily applied method, the success of its use depends on the respondent’s memory and requires a well-trained investigator to obtain accurate estimations of the portions consumed. However, this method supplies reliable estimates of the mean dietary intake of a population, even when applied only once, as long as the designated methodology is followed and analytical resources are appropriate(57). Most of the children included in our analysis are predominantly of African descent, and it is unknown whether our results can be generalised to other ethnic groups. In contrast, the strengths of this study include the genotyping of various SNP along the FTO gene (400 SNP). An additional strength
is the use of a permutation test rather than other methods to test for associations and control for family-wise error rate (FWER), such as Bonferroni and false discovery ratio (FDR). The Bonferroni correction assumes complete independence between markers, but markers in proximity to each other or in low linkage disequilibrium are not completely independent, which makes this approach overly stringent here. The FDR avoids the problem of dependence of tests, but it offers weak control for FWER. It permits a number of false discoveries; therefore, uncertainty remains about the accuracy of each significant result. Permutation analyses provide much stronger control for FWER than the FDR. As in all approaches, permutation has its weaknesses. Power decreases when there is a very large number of tests. It is most accurate for simple analyses, unless the sample size is large.

In summary, the majority of SNP associated with obesity in this study are located in intron 8, rather than in intron 1, suggesting that there may be many genetic variants that have not yet been reported in the literature that affect obesity in humans. Furthermore, the association between FTO gene variants and excess body weight can be modified by dietary characteristics, particularly by fatty acid distribution and lower dietary saturated fat intake in children, offering new insights into the interrelationships between FTO genetic variants, dietary intake and obesity.

Acknowledgements

This study was funded by the following sources: Funding of Studies and Projects (FINEP, Ministry of Science and Technology, Brazil), the Brazilian National Research Council (CNPq) and The Wellcome Trust, UK, Ref 072405/Z/03/Z.

M. V., G. N. O. C., P. O. and R. d. C. R-S. participated in statistical analysis, interpretation of results and writing of the manuscript. M. L. B., L. C. R., S. M. A. d. M. participated in the study design, data collection, interpretation of results and revision of the manuscript. C. A. F., N. M. A.-N., A. R. and R. L. F. participated in the interpretation of results and revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Supplementary material

For supplementary material/s referred to in this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007114517001386

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