Genetic overlap between endometriosis and endometrial cancer: evidence from cross-disease genetic correlation and GWAS meta-analyses


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Endometriosis and Endometrial Cancer

Introduction

Endometriosis (defined as tissue resembling endometrium in extrauterine sites) and endometrial cancer (cancer of the uterine corpus) are serious gynecological diseases with major impacts on the quality of life of affected women. Endometriosis is a relatively common disease affecting 6–10% of women of reproductive age and 35–50% of infertile women [1, 2]. Affected women commonly

Abstract

Epidemiological, biological, and molecular data suggest links between endometriosis and endometrial cancer, with recent epidemiological studies providing evidence for an association between a previous diagnosis of endometriosis and risk of endometrial cancer. We used genetic data as an alternative approach to investigate shared biological etiology of these two diseases. Genetic correlation analysis of summary level statistics from genomewide association studies (GWAS) using LD Score regression revealed moderate but significant genetic correlation ($r_g = 0.23$, $P = 9.3 \times 10^{-3}$), and SNP effect concordance analysis provided evidence for significant SNP pleiotropy ($P = 6.0 \times 10^{-5}$) and concordance in effect direction ($P = 2.0 \times 10^{-5}$) between the two diseases. Cross-disease GWAS meta-analysis highlighted 13 distinct loci associated at $P \leq 10^{-5}$ with both endometriosis and endometrial cancer, with one locus (SNP rs2475335) located within PTPRD associated at a genomewide significant level ($P = 4.9 \times 10^{-8}$, OR = 1.11, 95% CI = 1.07–1.15). PTPRD acts in the STAT3 pathway, which has been implicated in both endometriosis and endometrial cancer. This study demonstrates the value of cross-disease genetic analysis to support epidemiological observations and to identify biological pathways of relevance to multiple diseases.
experience severe menstrual pain, pelvic pain, subfertility or infertility, and bowel-related symptoms. Endometrial cancer is the most common invasive gynecological cancer in Australia, ranking sixth for incident cancers in women [3]. This disease is associated with significant morbidity due to surgery and radiotherapy [4], and treatment is further complicated by the fact that most patients present at relatively older age and with major comorbidities, notably obesity and diabetes. Finding the genes and pathways underlying these complex diseases is an essential step toward developing better diagnostic and therapeutic tools for both diseases. Both diseases are known to have a genetic component, with twin studies showing heritability of endometriosis at ~50% (51%, 95% confidence interval = 33–66% [5]; H = 47%, 95% CI = 36–57% [6]) and of endometrial cancer 27% (95% CI = 11–43% [7]).

Genomewide association studies have, to date, identified 19 independent SNPs as being significantly associated with endometriosis [8] and nine independent SNPs with endometrial cancer [9, 10]. These genomewide-associated SNPs, and the genetic regions in which they occur, are nonoverlapping between the diseases.

Epidemiological, biological, and molecular data all indirectly suggest that there could be links between the two disorders. Endometriosis and endometrial cancer are both hormonally regulated diseases, with increased risk in women exposed to higher levels of estrogen, and decreased or ameliorated risk or symptoms through treatments such as the contraceptive pill and hormonal therapies that include progesterone [11]. Both are associated with increased risk of uterine fibroids [12, 13] and with ovarian cancer: endometriosis through an increased risk of this disease, and endometrial cancer through multiple shared risk factors, and histopathologic and molecular features [14, 15]. Cancer-related genetic changes such as loss of heterozygosity, and altered methylation and expression patterns have been reported for endometriosis [16]. Numerous endometrial cancer-associated genes, including PTEN and other genes in the Ingenuity “endometrial cancer pathway,” have been shown to be dysregulated in endometriosis [17, 18].

Epidemiological studies have shown conflicting evidence for a link between a diagnosis of endometriosis and risk of endometrial cancer [13, 19–24]. The interpretation of results from epidemiological studies is complicated by several factors, including small sample sizes, the under-diagnosis and misdiagnosis of endometriosis, inability to adjust for confounders including oral contraceptives and parity, and the exclusion criteria of some epidemiological studies which assumed coincidental diagnosis of endometrial cancer within 1 year before the endometrial cancer diagnosis; however, the subset of women with surgically confirmed endometriosis diagnosed >1 year prior to cancer showed a significant 2.6-fold increased risk of endometrial cancer [13]. However, a recent study in US nurses which was also able to adjust for diagnosis intervals found no association between either self-reported or laparoscopically confirmed endometriosis and risk of endometrial cancer [22]. Meanwhile, two population-based studies had shown associations between the diseases, although neither was able to adjust for confounders such as parity. A large study including 45,790 Danish women with a clinical diagnosis of endometriosis found increased risks of endometrial cancer >1 year (standardized incidence ratio (SIR) = 1.43, 95% CI = 1.13–1.79) and ≥10 years (SIR = 1.51, 95% CI = 1.15–1.95) following the endometriosis diagnosis [23]. Another study including 15,488 Taiwanese women diagnosed with endometriosis found a similar link, but only in women diagnosed with endometriosis at over 40 years of age (adjusted hazard ratio = 7.08, 95% CI = 2.33–21.55) [24]. Age-related effects, if present, could have further confounded the results of previous epidemiological studies investigating shared risk of endometriosis and endometrial cancer.

Given the methodological complications inherent in epidemiological studies, unbiased genetic approaches are an ideal way to test for shared biological etiology between endometriosis and disease. For example, a degree of shared genetic etiology has recently been demonstrated between endometriosis and ovarian cancer, including with ovarian cancer subtypes not previously thought to be associated with endometriosis [25]. We used separate genomewide association study (GWAS) datasets for endometriosis and endometrial cancer to estimate the degree to which these two diseases share a common genetic etiology. We then combined these datasets in a cross-disease GWAS meta-analysis to identify genetic loci potentially contributing to the genetic risk of both endometriosis and endometrial cancer.

Materials and Methods

Genetic overlap between endometriosis and endometrial cancer: datasets and analyses

This study utilized data from four previously published genetic datasets for endometriosis and endometrial cancer (outlined below and in the following section; Table 1) [26–28]. Three of the datasets were GWAS datasets, genotyped using Illumina 610Quad and 670Quad BeadChips (Illumina Inc, San Diego, CA) and containing data for 462,430 SNPs in common between them. Of these, the
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Cross-disease meta-analysis between endometriosis and endometrial cancer

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cancer. Heterogeneity was assessed using Cochran’s Q-test. The results for the top SNPs \((P \leq 10^{-5})\) from the endometriosis–endometrial cancer meta-analysis were then compared with results for the same SNPs from the fourth dataset included in this study, a separate, independent sample of 4402 endometrial cancer cases and 28,758 controls genotyped at 211,155 SNPs using a custom Illumina Infinium iSelect array by the Collaborative Oncological Gene-environment Study (“iCOGS”) [33, 34]. SNPs not included on the iCOGS array were imputed (including all SNPs within 1 Mb of the target SNP) using IMPUTE(v2) software [35] and the 1000 Genomes Project (2012 release) as the reference panel [9]. Imputation quality scores ranged from 0.34 to 1.00. Association testing on the iCOGS SNPs was performed using SNPTEST (v2) [36] employing frequentist tests with a logistic regression model adjusting for eight separate strata and the first 10 principal components [9, 28]. These results were then included in the replication meta-analysis, which included all four datasets and was conducted as described for the cross-disease meta-analysis above.

**Results**

**Genetic overlap between endometriosis and endometrial cancer**

Genetic correlation analyses of GWAS datasets for endometriosis and endometrial cancer revealed the presence of weak to moderate, but significant, genetic overlap between the two diseases. The LD Score regression analysis indicated moderate but significant genetic correlation \((r_g)\) between the two diseases \((r_g = 0.23, P = 9.3 \times 10^{-5})\). The SECA primary test for the overlap of associated effects, including all 144 SNP subsets, revealed more subsets than expected by chance showing at least nominally significant pleiotropy between endometriosis and endometrial cancer \((P = 6.0 \times 10^{-3})\): The pair of SNP subsets producing the minimum exact binomial test \(P\)-value for pleiotropy (endometriosis SNP subset with \(P \leq 0.002\) and endometrial cancer SNP subset with \(P \leq 0.86\)) had \(P = 3.3 \times 10^{-4}\). The primary test for concordant effects between endometriosis and endometrial cancer also revealed that the number of SNP subsets with nominally significant concordant effects \((P \leq 0.05)\) was significantly more than expected by chance \((P = 2.0 \times 10^{-3})\): The pair of SNP subsets producing the minimum Fisher’s exact test \(P\)-value for effect correlation (endometriosis SNP subset with \(P \leq 0.37\) and endometrial cancer SNP subset with \(P \leq 1)\) had \(P = 2.1 \times 10^{-4}\). The primary results indicate that SNP effects are correlated, with the presence of allelic effects that increase the risk of both traits. Including only specific (default) SNP subsets in the analyses [31], SNP effects were positively, although not significantly, correlated for SNPs at \(P \leq 0.05\) in both datasets \((P = 8.4 \times 10^{-2})\) and for SNPs with \(P \leq 1.0 \times 10^{-5}\) in the larger endometriosis dataset and with \(P \leq 0.05\) in the endometrial cancer dataset \((P = 6.8 \times 10^{-2})\). Together, these results indicate that overall more SNPs than expected by chance were associated with the same direction of effect for both diseases, particularly amongst nominally or marginally associated SNPs.

**Cross-disease genomewide association analyses**

For the cross-disease meta-analysis including the endometriosis and endometrial cancer (ANECS-SEARCH and NSEC) GWAS datasets, two SNPs had \(P\)-values reaching genomewide significance \((rs6782972, P = 3.3 \times 10^{-5}\) and \(rs2218868, P = 4.1 \times 10^{-5}\); Table S1). A further 92 SNPs were suggestively \((P \leq 10^{-3})\) associated in the combined analysis of both diseases (Table S1). Following inclusion of the iCOGS association results in the meta-analysis, the \(P\)-values for both \(rs6782972\) and \(rs2218868\) dropped below the threshold for suggestive significance \((rs6782972, P = 1.2 \times 10^{-3}, OR = 0.95, 95\% CI = 0.90–0.99; rs2218868, P = 1.4 \times 10^{-3}, OR = 1.06, 95\% CI = 1.02–1.09)\); hence, neither locus was validated by the endometrial cancer replication dataset. Including all four datasets, 13 loci showed evidence for replication \((P\)-values \(\leq 10^{-5}\); Table 2; Fig. S1), with a genomewide significant signal detected for SNP \(rs2475335\) \((P = 4.9 \times 10^{-8}, OR = 1.11, 95\% CI = 1.07–1.14))\). After adjusting for the multiple testing of 13 SNPs, two SNPs showed evidence of significant heterogeneity between studies (Table 2), \(rs9865110\) \((P_{het} = 2.2 \times 10^{-3})\) and \(rs7515106(P_{het} = 3.6 \times 10^{-3})\).

**Discussion**

A link between endometriosis and endometrial cancer has long been postulated due to the numerous risk factors shared by the two diseases, but has only recently been convincingly demonstrated epidemiologically [23, 24]. Our genetic study indicates that endometriosis and endometrial cancer have a moderate, but significant, shared genetic etiology. Genetic correlation analyses indicated the presence of pleiotropic SNPs as well as correlation in the direction of genetic effects, particularly amongst SNPs marginally and nominally associated with each disease individually. This is consistent with our hypothesis that a proportion of endometrial cancer cases (but certainly not all) will share genetic predisposition factors in common with endometriosis cases. Cross-disease meta-analysis identified one genomewide significant locus associated with the risk of developing...
Table 2. Replicated associations (P ≤ 10^{-6}) from the cross-disease meta-analysis for endometriosis and endometrial cancer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chr</th>
<th>BP</th>
<th>Lead SNP</th>
<th>Flanking gene/genes</th>
<th>Effect allele</th>
<th>Noneffect allele</th>
<th>GWAS meta-analysis</th>
<th>Replication meta-analysis</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>T</td>
<td>C</td>
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<td>1.11 (1.07–1.15)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>1.11 (1.06–1.16)</td>
<td>1.10 (1.06–1.14)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>T</td>
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<td>0.92 (0.88–0.96)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>T</td>
<td>G</td>
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<td>1.28 (1.17–1.38)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>A</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>1.14 (1.08–1.19)</td>
<td>1.09 (1.05–1.13)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>1.14 (1.08–1.19)</td>
<td>1.08 (1.05–1.12)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>A</td>
<td>T</td>
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<td>A</td>
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<td>1.11 (1.06–1.16)</td>
<td>1.09 (1.05–1.13)</td>
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<td>C</td>
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<td>T</td>
<td>1.12 (1.07–1.17)</td>
<td>1.08 (1.04–1.12)</td>
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<td>A</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>0.89 (0.84–0.95)</td>
<td>0.93 (0.89–0.97)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only one gene is listed for SNPs located within genes (introns or exons).

1) With rs1452666, which we have previously reported as having borderline GWAS significance (P = 1.0 × 10^{-6}). Located on chromosome 17q21.32, rs2278868 is in extremely low LD with the top endometriosis [25, 45] and to endometrial cancer [46]. This region is associated with ovarian cancer subtypes of which are clearly linked epidemiologically and genetically to endometriosis [25, 45] and to endometrial cancer [46]. Although rs2278868 lies within intron 2 of an alternative transcript of the SKAP1 gene, it is in perfect linkage disequilibrium with rs2278868 located on chromosome 17q21.32, which is associated with endometriosis [25, 45] and to endometrial cancer [46]. A number of prior GWAS meta-analyses for endometriosis and endometrial cancer have reported candidate genes in this region, including PTPRD. In the current study, we identified two SNPs (rs6278746 and rs6278747) in this region that were significantly associated with endometriosis (P = 0.034, 0.034, respectively). These SNPs are in high LD (r^2 = 1) with rs1452666, which has been suggested as a potential target for treatment for both diseases [40, 41]. The gene targeted by this SNP (or one of the other SNPs in high LD with this variant) is an attractive candidate gene for regulatory functions in these diseases, as it is not only associated with endometriosis but also with endometrial cancer [22, 41].

The Catalogue of Somatic Mutations in Cancer (COSMIC) database (http://cancer.sanger.ac.uk/cosmic; accessed 10/12/2016) indicates ~5% of endometrioid carcinomas harbor PTPRD mutations. However, the presence of mutated PTPRD protein enhancers cell growth and migration in melanoma cell lines [38, 39]. Elevated STAT3 expression has been implicated in both endometriosis and endometrial cancer models are now required to investigate the biology underlying the increased risks of both diseases associated with this variant [44]. Both diseases are significantly associated with disease in the endometriosis-endometrial cancer meta-analysis was rs2278868 (P = 4.9 × 10^{-8}). Located on chromosome 9p23, rs2475335 is associated with endometriosis [25, 45] and to endometrial cancer [46]. This SNP variation in the endometriosis-endometrial cancer association with endometrial cancer in the combined GWAS dataset is as yet unknown, and further experiments are required to fully understand the biological implications of this variant [45].

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additional neighboring genes (e.g., SNX11, HOXB2, and HOXB3) in various tissues.

Other SNPs of interest include rs12303900 on chromosome 12q21, located between the KITLG and DUSP6 genes. DUSP6 is a critical regulator of ERK signaling, a pathway dysregulated in both endometriosis and endometrial cancer and a potential target for treatment for both diseases [47–49]. SNP rs10008492, located on chromosome 4p14, is an eQTL for nearby toll-like receptors TLR1 and TLR6 (http://www.gtexportal.org). Both TLR1 and TLR6 are upregulated in endometriotic mesenchymal stem cells [50] and are expressed in endometrial cancer cell lines [51]. However, as for the PTPRD locus, all of these association results need to be further validated in additional replication datasets for both diseases, and relevant functional studies undertaken, before more is hypothesized about their genetic and biological effects on the risk of both endometriosis and endometrial cancer.

In this cross-disease genetic correlation and genomewide association study, we have provided evidence for overlap in genetic risk factors for endometriosis and endometrial cancer. Our genetic correlation analysis supports recent large epidemiological studies indicating an increased risk of endometrial cancer in women previously diagnosed with endometriosis, while the cross-disease meta-analysis has revealed plausible loci that could increase the risk of both diseases and which should be pursued further in functional studies. This work on endometriosis and endometrial cancer also adds further evidence to the utility of cross-disease genetic correlation and GWAS analyses as tractable and attractive methodologies to identify susceptibility loci that predispose to multiple diseases, which could lead to new diagnostic or treatment options for affected individuals.

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

References

endometriosis highlighting key genes involved in hormone metabolism. Nat. Commun. 8:15539.


Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article:

Figure S1. Forest plots of association between the top 13 SNPs in the endometriosis-endometrial cancer meta-analysis and each of the datasets included in the analysis.

Table S1. Results for the top SNPs from the endometriosis and endometrial cancer (ANECS-SEARCH and NSECG) GWAS meta-analysis, with iCOGS as the endometrial cancer replication dataset.