Genome-wide analyses identify *SCN5A* as a susceptibility locus for premature atrial contraction frequency

1) GWAS meta-analysis for premature atrial contractions
   n=4831 participants from 5 cohorts

2) Replication of atrial fibrillation variants

Significant loci:

- *SCN5A/SCN10A*
- *SYNPO2L*
- *TTN*

Significant locus:

- *SCN5A*

Highlights

- Variants in *SCN5A* are associated with premature atrial contractions (PAC) frequency
- Other atrial fibrillation (AF) risk variants are also associated with PAC frequency
- Both shared and distinct genetic mechanisms exist for PAC frequency and AF
Genome-wide analyses identify SCN5A as a susceptibility locus for premature atrial contraction frequency

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SUMMARY
Premature atrial contractions (PACs) are frequently observed on electrocardiograms and are associated with increased risks of atrial fibrillation (AF), stroke, and mortality. In this study, we aimed to identify genetic susceptibility loci for PAC frequency. We performed a genome-wide association study meta-analysis with PAC frequency obtained from ambulatory cardiac monitoring in 4,831 individuals of European ancestry. We identified a genome-wide significant locus at the SCN5A gene. The lead variant, rs7373862, located in an intron of SCN5A, was associated with an increase of 0.12 [95% CI 0.08–0.16] standard deviations of the normalized PAC frequency per risk allele. Among genetic variants previously associated with AF, there was a significant enrichment in concordance of effect for PAC frequency (n = 73/106, p = 5.1 × 10⁻⁵). However, several AF risk loci, including PITX2, were not associated with PAC frequency. These findings suggest the existence of both shared and distinct genetic mechanisms for PAC frequency and AF.

INTRODUCTION
Premature atrial contractions (PACs) are a form of ectopic atrial activity in which the action potential is generated by the atrial myocardium. They are frequently observed on electrocardiograms (ECG) and detectable in up to 99% of individuals over 50 years of age undergoing 24-h Holter monitoring, which is considered the gold standard for PAC quantification in clinical practice (Conen et al., 2012). Although generally considered to be benign, PACs are an independent predictor of incident atrial fibrillation (AF) (Dewland et al., 2013) and have been associated with increased risks of stroke and death (Larsen et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2015).

The etiology of PACs remains uncertain, but several risk factors have been identified, including older age, cardiovascular disease, greater height, and the lack of physical activity (Conen et al., 2012). Contrary to AF, for which many susceptibility loci have been identified (Roselli et al., 2018), little is known about the genetic architecture of PAC frequency. The identification of risk loci would improve the understanding of the biological mechanisms leading to PACs, as well as the relationship between PACs and AF. This information could potentially lead to the development of novel preventive therapies.

In this study, we aimed to identify common genetic variants associated with PAC frequency measured by ambulatory ECG monitoring by performing a genome-wide association study (GWAS) meta-analysis. We also compared the genetic architectures of PAC frequency and AF.

RESULTS
GWAS meta-analysis
Five cohorts with a total of 4,831 individuals of European ancestry were included in the analysis (Table 1). Mean age varied from 35.5 to 72.6 years. The proportion of men was between 37% and 54%. The estimated number of PACs per hour before normalization ranged from 0 to 1482, with a median between 0 and 4.1 per hour.
Table 1. Clinical characteristics of individuals included from each cohort

|                      | GAPP     | SAPALDIA | CHS      | MESA     | BHS      |
|----------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| N                    | 1897     | 1194     | 833      | 502      | 405      |
| ECG monitoring       | Holter   | Holter   | Holter   | Zio      | Holter   |
| Duration (h)         | 24.0 (0.1) | 22.3 (2.1) | 21.7 (1.0) | 305.6 (67.4) | 20.0 (2.0) |
| Age (years)          | 35.5 (5.2) | 59.9 (6.0) | 71.3 (4.6) | 72.6 (7.9) | 47.7 (15.1) |
| Sex (n male, %)      | 879 (46.3) | 643 (53.9) | 342 (41.1) | 245 (48.8) | 149 (36.8) |
| Height (m)           | 1.72 (0.09) | 1.68 (0.09) | 1.65 (0.09) | 1.68 (0.10) | 1.63 (0.09) |
| BMI (kg/m²)          | 24.6 (3.8) | 26.5 (4.2) | 26.6 (4.1) | 27.8 (5.2) | 26.0 (5.0) |
| Hypertension, n, %   | 254 (13.4) | 629 (52.7) | 421 (50.5) | 278 (55.4) | 134 (33.1) |
| Diabetes, n, %       | 0 (0)     | 67 (5.6)  | 109 (13.1) | 74 (14.7)  | 24 (5.9)   |
| Myocardial infarction, n, % | 0 (0)     | 8 (0.7)   | 0 (0)     | 7 (1.4)    | 8 (2.0)    |
| Heart Failure, n, %  | 0 (0)     | 18 (1.5)  | 0 (0)     | 1 (0.2)    | NA         |
| PAC frequency (n/h) – mean (SD) | 0.57 (3.6) | 8.6 (40.4) | 29.4 (108.4) | 31.9 (100.5) | 10.9 (63.0) |
| PAC frequency (n/h) – median (IQR) | 0.13 (0.25) | 1.2 (2.6)  | 3.0 (10.0)  | 4.1 (14.9) | 0 (0.86)   |

Continuous variables are expressed as mean (standard deviation) unless stated otherwise. GAPP: Genetic and phenotypic determinants of blood pressure and other cardiovascular risk factors; SAPALDIA: Swiss Cohort Study on Air Pollution and Lung Diseases in Adults; CHS: Cardiovascular Health Study; MESA: Multi-Ethnic Study of Atherosclerosis; BHS: Baependi Heart Study; BMI: body mass index, PAC: premature atrial contraction, SD: standard deviation, IQR: interquartile range. See also Table S1.

Credible set and annotation

The 95% credible set included five variants, all in linkage disequilibrium (R² > 0.95) (Table S3). To verify if these variants are associated with a change in the expression of nearby genes, we queried publicly available expression quantitative trait loci (eQTL) datasets in several tissues, including heart chambers. The lead variant is a weak eQTL for SCN5A in thyroid (p = 5.1 x 10^-11) and lung (p = 2.0 x 10^-15) tissues, according to the Genotype-Tissue Expression (GTEx) project (Table S3). The risk allele rs7373862-A for PAC frequency is associated with higher expression of SCN5A in these tissues. As for regulatory elements, two variants, rs3924120 and rs3935184, showed DNase peaks in cardiac tissues. Notably, rs3935184 is located in a DNase peak for the right atrium and is predicted to lie in a gene enhancer region for the right ventricle, according to a model including five chromatin marks (Kundaje et al., 2015) (Table S3).

Replication of variants associated with AF

We verified the effect of previously identified genome-wide significant variants for AF obtained following conditional analysis in a meta-analysis of 537,409 individuals of European ancestry (Roselli et al., 2018). Out of 107 variants, 106 were available in the PAC frequency meta-analysis. One variant (rs187585530) was excluded because the allele frequency was lower than 0.01. Five variants were significantly associated with PAC frequency at a false-discovery rate threshold of 5% (Tables 2 and S4 and Figure S2), including three variants at the SCN5A/SCN10A locus (rs7374540, rs7373065, and rs6790396). Variant rs7374540 is in linkage disequilibrium with the PAC frequency lead variant rs7373862 (R² = 0.808) in European individuals.
from 1000 Genomes), and the risk allele for AF (rs7374540-A) correlates with the allele associated with a higher PAC frequency (rs7373862-A). Variant rs6480708, located in an intron of SYNPO2L-AS1, near SYNPO2L, and rs2288327, located in an intron of TTN, were also associated with PAC frequency (p respectively 0.00020 and 0.0019). On the other hand, the lead AF variant at the PITX2 locus, rs6847935, was not associated with PAC frequency (p = 0.94). Out of the 106 variants, 73 (68.9%) had a concordant direction of effect between AF and PAC frequency, which is significantly higher than expected by chance (p = 5.1 \times 10^{-5}) (Figure S3).

DISCUSSION

We performed the first genetic association study for PAC frequency measured from ambulatory monitoring and identified a robust and reproducible association with common variants located in an intron of SCN5A. Among genetic variants previously associated with AF, there was a significant enrichment in concordance of effect for PAC frequency.

SCN5A encodes the alpha subunit of the main cardiac sodium channel Nav1.5, a large transmembrane protein with four homologous domains. It maintains the normal inward sodium current in the heart and has an important role in the fast depolarization phase that enables initiation of the excitation-contraction coupling cascade, for proper conduction of the electrical impulses in the heart (Li et al., 2018). Genetic variants in SCN5A have been associated with several arrhythmias, including AF, Brugada syndrome, long QT syndrome, sick sinus syndrome, ventricular fibrillation, and atrioventricular block, along with contractile dysfunction and dilated cardiomyopathy (Akai et al., 2000; Benito et al., 2008; Kapplinger et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2002; Wilde and Amin, 2018). Both gain- and loss-of-function variants located in different coding regions of the protein have been linked to atrial arrhythmias (Li et al., 2018; Wilde and Amin, 2018). SCN5A is therefore an obvious candidate causal gene for PAC frequency, although the specific causal variant and mechanism cannot be established with certainty based on our data. Some of the identified SNPs could have a regulatory function, as suggested by modest effects on gene expression in non-cardiac tissues and the presence of regulatory elements in cardiac tissues (GTEx Consortium, 2020; Dong and Boyle, 2019). The SNPs could also tag a rare mutation impacting the protein, although this interpretation is less likely given the consistency of the association among several European ancestry populations from Europe, North America, and South America.
To our knowledge, a single GWAS was previously published for a closely related phenotype. Napier et al. performed a multi-ancestry GWAS meta-analysis in 42,976 individuals for supraventricular ectopy, defined as one or more supraventricular ectopic beats (a synonym of PACs) on a standard 10-s, twelve-lead electrocardiogram (Napier et al., 2018). Although they did not identify any genome-wide significant association, the lead variant, rs3922844 (p = 1.5 \times 10^{-7}), was located in the SCN5A gene, about 10 kilobases from our lead SNP. The identification of a genome-wide significant signal at this locus in our study with a smaller sample size underscores the importance of optimizing phenotype measurement to maximize power, in this case by using continuous PAC frequency from ambulatory monitoring.

We also observed associations between PAC frequency and previously reported AF risk variants. In addition to SCN5A, variants in two other loci, near SYNPO2L and TTN, showed a significant association with PAC frequency after correction for multiple testing. Interestingly, the proteins coded by these genes are...
expressed in the heart and are involved in sarcomere organization (Clausen et al., 2021). Loss-of-function variants in both genes have been associated with AF in humans (Ahlberg et al., 2018; Clausen et al., 2021), and transgenic animal models exhibit cardiac fibrosis and electrical abnormalities (Ahlberg et al., 2018; van Eldik et al., 2017). These mechanisms could be common to PAC frequency and AF. Also, variants near TTN have recently been associated with left atrial passive emptying fraction, further supporting the role of this gene in atrial function (Ahlberg et al., 2021).

On the other hand, other AF susceptibility loci showed no significant association with PAC frequency. Moreover, >30% of the AF-associated variants had a discordant direction of effect. Notably, the lead SNP at the strongest AF risk locus, PITX2, showed no association with PAC frequency. These findings suggest that the genetic mechanisms involved in the two phenotypes are not identical.

In conclusion, we identified a novel association at the SCN5A locus with PAC frequency and the existence of genetic determinants shared between AF and PAC frequency. More studies are needed to further define the biological mechanisms by which cardiac sodium channels and sarcomere organization influence ectopic atrial activity and to elucidate the complete genetic architecture of PAC frequency.

Limitations of the study
First, the distribution of PAC frequency was highly skewed and varied considerably among the cohorts. The use of ambulatory monitoring data and normalization within each cohort produced a robust phenotype adapted to each population. Second, only individuals of European ancestry were included in the analyses due to a low sample size for other ancestries; further studies are needed with other ancestries. The power to detect variants with a small effect was limited by the modest sample size for a genome-wide association study, due to the limited availability of ambulatory electrocardiographic monitoring in large population-based cohort studies. This is nevertheless the first study evaluating genetic determinants of PAC frequency as a continuous variable obtained from ambulatory monitoring.

STAR METHODS
Detailed methods are provided in the online version of this paper and include the following:

- KEY RESOURCES TABLE
- RESOURCE AVAILABILITY
  - Lead contact
  - Materials availability
  - Data and code availability
- EXPERIMENTAL MODELS AND SUBJECT DETAILS
  - Cohort description
- METHOD DETAILS
  - Quantification of PACs
  - Genotyping and imputation
  - Study-level association analyses
  - GWAS meta-analysis

Table 2. Replication of selected variants previously associated with atrial fibrillation

| Variant | Chr | Pos  | RA  | NRA | RR AF | P AF  | Z PAC | P PAC | Candidate gene(s) |
|---------|-----|------|-----|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------------------|
| rs7374540 | 3   | 38634142 | A   | C   | 1.06  | 1.7 × 10⁻¹² | 4.866 | 1.1 × 10⁻⁶ | SCN5A             |
| rs6480708 | 10  | 75420114 | C   | A   | 1.12  | 5.8 × 10⁻²⁷ | 3.720 | 0.00020 | SYNPO2L           |
| rs7373065 | 3   | 38710315 | T   | C   | 1.26  | 3.9 × 10⁻¹⁵ | 3.614 | 0.00030 | SCN5A, SCN10A     |
| rs6790396 | 3   | 38771925 | C   | A   | 1.06  | 5.7 × 10⁻¹⁵ | 3.581 | 0.00034 | SCN10A            |
| rs2288327 | 2   | 179411665 | G   | A   | 1.11  | 3.5 × 10⁻²³ | 3.110 | 0.0019  | TTN               |
| rs6847935 | 4   | 111696651 | T   | A   | 1.48  | 1.9 × 10⁻⁴⁲ | 0.070 | 0.94   | PITX2             |

Chr: chromosome; Pos: position (GRCh 37); RA: risk allele; NRA: non risk allele; RR AF: relative risk for atrial fibrillation from Roselli et al. (2018); P AF: P for atrial fibrillation from Roselli et al. (2018); Z PAC: Z score for premature atrial contraction frequency from the current meta-analysis; P PAC: P for premature atrial contraction frequency from the current meta-analysis. See also Figures S2 and S3 and Table S4.
SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

Supplemental information can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2022.105210.

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STAR METHODS

KEY RESOURCES TABLE

| REAGENT or RESOURCE | SOURCE | IDENTIFIER |
|---------------------|--------|------------|
| Deposited data      |        |            |
| Summary statistics of the GWAS meta-analysis for PAC frequency | This paper | https://www.ebi.ac.uk/gwas/: accession number GCST90134637 |

Software and algorithms

| METAL           | Willer et al. (2010) | https://genome.sph.umich.edu/wiki/METAL |
| SAIGE            | Zhou et al. (2018) | https://github.com/weizhouUMICH/SAIGE |
| CAVIAR           | Hormozdiari et al. (2014) | https://github.com/fhormoz/caviar |
| HaploReg         | Ward and Kellis (2012) | https://pubs.broadinstitute.org/mammals/haploreg/haploreg.php |
| RegulomeDB       | Dong and Boyle (2019) | https://regulomedb.org/regulome-search/ |

RESOURCE AVAILABILITY

Lead contact

Further information and requests for resources and reagents should be directed to and will be fulfilled by the lead contact, Sébastien Thériault (sebastien.theriault@criucpq.ulaval.ca).

Materials availability

This study did not generate new unique reagents.

Data and code availability

- Summary statistics of the meta-analysis have been deposited on GWAS Catalog and are publicly available as of the date of publication. Accession numbers are listed in the key resources table.
- This paper does not report original code. All codes used in this study followed the manuals of the software listed in the key resources table.
- Any additional information required to reanalyze the data reported in this paper is available from the lead contact upon request.

EXPERIMENTAL MODELS AND SUBJECT DETAILS

A total of five population-based cohorts were included in the study: Genetic and phenotypic determinants of blood pressure and other cardiovascular risk factors (GAPP), Swiss Cohort Study on Air Pollution and Lung Diseases in Adults (SAPALDIA), Cardiovascular Health Study (CHS), Multi-Ethnic Study of Atherosclerosis (MESA), and Baependi Heart Study (BHS). Only individuals of European ancestry were included due to a low sample size for other ancestries. Individuals with a history of AF, pacemaker implantation or those using antiarrhythmic drugs other than beta-blockers and calcium channel blockers were excluded. Institutional review board approval and informed consent for all participating individuals were obtained at the study level. A summary of the clinical characteristics of the individuals included from each cohort is available in Table 1.

Cohort description

GAPP

Genetic and phenotypic determinants of blood pressure and other cardiovascular risk factors (GAPP) is a population-based prospective cohort study involving a representative sample of healthy adults aged 25–41 years residing in the Principality of Liechtenstein (Conen et al., 2013). Exclusion criteria were the presence of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obstructive sleep apnoea and a body mass index >35 kg/m².

SAPALDIA

Swiss Cohort Study on Air Pollution And Lung And Heart Disease In Adults (SAPALDIA) is a population-based multi-center study in eight geographic areas representing the range of environmental,
meteorological and socio-demographic conditions in Switzerland (Ackermann-Liebrich et al., 1997; Martin et al., 1997). It was initiated in 1991 (SAPALDIA 1) with a follow-up assessment in 2002 (SAPALDIA 2) and 2010 (SAPALDIA3). This study has specifically been designed to investigate longitudinally lung function, respiratory and cardiovascular health; to study and identify the associations of these health indicators with individual long term exposure to air pollution, other toxic inhalants, lifestyle and molecular factors.

CHS
Cardiovascular Health Study (CHS) is a population-based cohort study of risk factors for coronary heart disease and stroke in adults ≥65 years conducted across four field centers (Fried et al., 1991). The original predominantly European ancestry cohort of 5,201 persons was recruited in 1989–1990 from random samples of the Medicare eligibility lists; subsequently, an additional predominantly African American cohort of 687 persons was enrolled for a total sample of 5,888.

MESA
Multi-Ethnic Study of Atherosclerosis (MESA) is a community-based study of subclinical cardiovascular disease in a sample of 6,814 men and women without cardiovascular disease, aged 45–84 years at baseline (2000–2002) (Bild et al., 2002). Participants were enrolled at six US field centers, and self-identified as Black, Chinese American, Hispanic, or White. At Exam 6 (2016–2018), a subset of participants wore one or two 14-day Zio Patch cardiac monitors (Heckbert et al., 2020). The White participants with Zio Patch data were included in this analysis.

BHS
The Baependi Heart Study was set up in 2005 to develop a longitudinal family-based cohort study that reflects on some of the genetic and lifestyle-related peculiarities of the Brazilian populations, in order to evaluate genetic and environmental influences on CVD risk factor traits (Egan et al., 2016).

METHOD DETAILS
Quantification of PACs
PAC frequency was obtained from 24h monitoring using Holter monitors or 2-week monitoring using Zio patches (one study). Participants with a duration of recording of less than 18 h were excluded. The number of PACs per hour was normalized using rank-based inverse normal transformation with the Rankit method, i.e., the inverse cumulative normal function of \((r - 1/2)/n\), where \(r\) is the rank and \(n\) the number of observations.

Genotyping and imputation
Genotyping was performed individually by each cohort using a genome-wide array (Table S1). Individuals with a poor genotype call rate, unusually high heterozygosity or sex mismatch and ancestry outliers (verified using principal component analysis) were excluded. Variants with a poor call rate, marked deviations from Hardy Weinberg equilibrium or a low minor allele frequency were excluded. Imputation was performed using reference panels from 1000 Genomes, Haplotype Reference Consortium (HRC), Trans-Omics for Precision Medicine (TOPMed) or the Genetic Investigation of ANthropometric Traits (GIANT) consortium (Table S1).

Study-level association analyses
Association between each variant and normalized PAC frequency was evaluated using linear regression. An additive model was used with the genotype probability (expected allele dosage) for imputed data. Covariates included age, sex and the first ten genetic principal components, along with study-specific covariates (e.g., center, genotyping platform) (Table S1).

GWAS meta-analysis
The summary statistics from each cohort were examined for signs of inflation and discrepancy in allele frequencies. Variants with an imputation quality score <0.3 or minor allele frequency <0.01 were excluded. A meta-analysis was performed using METAL (Willer et al., 2010) with sample size weighting. The genome-wide significance level of \(p < 5.0 \times 10^{-8}\) was used. Heterogeneity was evaluated using Cochran’s Q-test.
Replication in UK Biobank

We verified the association of the lead SNP at the genome-wide associated locus with a diagnosis of atrial premature depolarisation in UK Biobank (International Classification of Diseases version-10 code number I49.1). Samples were genotyped with the Affymetrix UK BiLEVE Axiom array or the Affymetrix UK Biobank Axiom Array. Phasing and imputation were performed centrally using a reference panel combining the Haplotype Reference Consortium, UK10k and 1000 Genomes Phase 3 samples (Bycroft et al., 2018). Samples with call rate <95%, outlier heterozygosity rate, gender mismatch, non-white British ancestry, samples with excess third-degree relatives (>10), or not used for relatedness calculation were excluded. The association between the genetic variant and atrial premature depolarisation (as a binary phenotype) was evaluated by mixed modeling using SAIGE version 0.45 (Zhou et al., 2018). A selection of independent, high quality genotyped variants (n = 93,511) was used to derive the genetic relationship matrix in step 1. The models were adjusted for age, sex, and the first ten ancestry-based principal components. The analyses were conducted under UK Biobank data application number 25205.

Fine-mapping

A 95% credible set of variants was established at the genome-wide associated locus with a model assuming a single causal variant in CAVIAR (Hormozdari et al., 2014). Expression quantitative trait loci (eQTL) were retrieved from The Genotype-Tissue Expression (GTEx) project v8 (GTEx Consortium, 2020) and from the Hsu et al. study (Hsu et al., 2018) for the left atrial appendage. In order to prioritize variants with a potential functional impact, HaploReg v.4.1 (Ward and Kellis, 2012) and RegulomeDB (Boyle et al., 2012; Dong and Boyle, 2019) were used to look at regulatory elements, including DNA accessibility, chromatin marks and states.

Replication of atrial fibrillation variants

We selected independent variants previously reported to be associated with atrial fibrillation in a large meta-analysis (Roselli et al., 2018). A list of 107 genome-wide significant variants obtained following conditional analysis in individuals of European ancestry was used to perform replication in our PAC frequency meta-analysis. A threshold of 5% false-discovery rate was used for statistical significance. The proportion of variants with a concordant direction of effect was evaluated using one-sided Pearson’s chi-square test.

QUANTIFICATION AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Statistical analyses were performed with R version 3.6.0 unless otherwise specified. Two-sided p below 0.05 were considered significant unless otherwise specified.