

1 Transcripts with high distal heritability mediate genetic effects on
2 complex traits

3

4 **Abstract**

5 The transcriptome is increasingly viewed as a bridge between genetic risk factors for complex disease and
6 their associated pathophysiology. Powerful insights into disease mechanism can be made by linking genetic
7 variants affecting gene expression (expression quantitative trait loci - eQTLs) to phenotypes.

8 **Introduction**

9 In the quest to understand the genetic architecture of complex traits, gene expression is an important bridge
10 between genotype and phenotype. By identifying mediating transcripts, we get one step closer to a molecular
11 understanding of how genetic variants influence traits. Moreover, there is evidence from genome-wide
12 association studies (GWAS) that regulation of gene expression accounts for the bulk of the genetic effect
13 on complex traits, as most trait-associated variants lie in gene regulatory regions [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7]. It is
14 widely assumed that these variants influence local transcription, and methods such as transcriptome-wide
15 association studies (TWAS) [8, 9, 10, 11], summary data-based Mendelian randomization (SMR) [10], and
16 others have capitalized on this idea to identify genes associated with multiple disease traits [12, 13, 14, 15]

17 Despite the great promise of these methods, however, they have not been as widely successful as it seemed
18 they could have been, and the vast majority of complex trait heritability remains unexplained. Although
19 trait-associated variants tend to lie in non-coding, regulatory regions, they often do not have detectable effects
20 on gene expression [16] and tend not to co-localize with expression quantitative trait loci (eQTLs) [17, 18].

21 One possible explanation for these observations is that gene expression is not being measured in the appropriate
22 cell types and thus true eQTLs influencing traits cannot be detected [16]. An alternative explanation that
23 has been discussed in recent years is that effects of these variants are mediated not through local regulation
24 of gene expression, but through distal regulation [18, 19, 20, 15].

25 However, assessing the role of wide-spread distal gene regulation on complex traits requires large, dedicated data

26 sets that include high-dimensional, clinically relevant phenotyping, dense genotyping in a highly recombined
27 population, and transcriptome-wide measurements of gene expression in multiple tissues. Measuring gene
28 expression in multiple tissues is critical to adequately assess the extent to which local gene regulation varies
29 across multiple tissues and whether such variability might account for previous failed attempts to identify
30 trait-relevant local eQTL. Such data sets are extremely difficult to obtain in human populations, particularly
31 in the large numbers of subjects required for statistical testing. Thus, to investigate further the role of local
32 and distal gene regulation on complex traits, we have generated an appropriate data set in a large population
33 of diversity outbred (DO) mice [21] in a population model of diet-induced obesity and metabolic disease [12].

34 The DO mice were derived from eight inbred founder mouse strains, five classical lab strains, and three
35 strains more recently derived from wild mice [21]. They represent three subspecies of mouse *Mus musculus*
36 *domesticus*, *Mus musculus musculus*, and *Mus musculus castaneus*, and capture 90% of the known variation
37 in laboratory mice [cite]. They are maintained with a breeding scheme that ensures equal contributions from
38 each founder across the genome thus rendering almost the whole genome visible to genetic inquiry [21]. We
39 measured clinically relevant metabolic traits, including body weight, plasma levels of insulin and glucose,
40 and plasma lipids in 500 DO mice. We further measured transcriptome-wide gene expression in four tissues
41 related to metabolic disease: adipose tissue, pancreatic islets, liver, and skeletal muscle.

42 To assess the role of gene regulation in mediating variation in metabolic traits in this population, we propose
43 high-dimensional mediation (HDM). In univariate approaches, such as TWAS, SMR, and other Mendelian
44 randomization approaches, each transcript is tested independently for mediation of a local variant on a
45 trait. This process requires huge numbers of statistical tests, which is computationally expensive, requires
46 strict corrections for multiple testing, and assumes independence of genetic variants and transcripts. Such
47 methods are therefore limited to detecting only the largest statistical effects and are biased toward local gene
48 regulation. In contrast, with high-dimensional mediation we assessed broad relationships among the genome,
49 transcriptome, and phenotype as a whole and identified a highly heritable composite trait that was perfectly
50 mediated by a composite transcript. We show that composite transcripts were tissue-specific and highly
51 interpretable in terms of biological processes as well as cell type composition. Heritability analysis of the
52 transcripts showed that the strongest transcriptional mediators of metabolic disease had low local heritability
53 and high distal heritability. Finally, we show that the composite transcripts identified in the DO population
54 predicted obesity in an independent population of Collaborative Cross recombinant inbred (CC-RIX) mice
55 and in human subjects. In contrast, local eQTL were unable to predict obesity in the CC-RIX mice. Together
56 our results suggest that both the tissue used for gene expression analysis as well as distal gene regulation are
57 critically important in identifying transcriptional mediators of the genome on complex traits.

58 **Results**

59 **Genetic variation contributes to wide phenotypic variation**

60 Although the environment was consistent across all animals, the genetic diversity present in this population
61 resulted in widely varying distributions across physiological measurements (Fig. 1). For example, body
62 weights of adult individuals varied from less than the average adult B6 body weight to several times the body
63 weight of a B6 adult in both sexes (Fig. 1A). Fasting blood glucose (FBG) also varied considerably (Fig. 1B)
64 although few of the animals had FBG levels that would indicate pre-diabetes (animals,), or diabetes (7
65 animals, 1.4) according to previously developed cutoffs (pre-diabetes: $\text{FBG} \geq 250 \text{ mg/dL}$, diabetes: $\text{FBG} \geq$
66 300, mg/dL) [22]. Males had higher FBG than females on average (Fig. 1C) as has been observed before
67 suggesting either that males were more susceptible to metabolic disease on the high-fat diet, or that males
68 and females may require different thresholds for pre-diabetes and diabetes.

69 Body weight was strongly positively correlated with food consumption (Fig. 1D $R^2 = 0.51, p = 1.5 \times 10^{-75}$)
70 and fasting blood glucose (FBG) (Fig. 1E, $R^2 = 0.21, p = 1.4 \times 10^{-26}$) suggesting a link between behavioral
71 factors and metabolic disease. However, the heritability of this trait and others (Fig. 1F) indicates that
72 background genetics contribute substantially to correlates of metabolic disease in this population.

73 The landscape of trait correlations (Fig. 1G) shows that most of the metabolic trait pairs were relatively
74 weakly correlated indicating complex relationships among the measured traits. This low level of redundancy
75 suggests a broad sampling of multiple heritable aspects of metabolic disease including overall body weight,
76 glucose homeostasis, pancreatic composition and liver function.

77 **Distal Heritability Correlates with Phenotype Relevance**

78 We performed eQTL analysis using R/qltl2 [23] (Methods) and identified both local and distal eQTL for
79 transcripts in each of the four tissues (Supp. Fig 9). Significant local eQTLs far outnumbered distal eQTLs
80 (Supp. Fig. 9F) and tended to be shared across tissues (Supp. Fig. 9G) whereas the few significant distal
81 eQTL we identified tended to be tissue-specific (Supp. Fig. 9H)

82 We calculated the heritability of each transcript in terms of local and distal genetic factors (Methods). Overall,
83 local and distal genetic factors contributed approximately equally to transcript abundance. In all tissues,
84 both local and distal factors explained between 8 and 18% of the variance in the median transcript (Fig 2A).

85 Local heritability of transcripts was negatively correlated with their trait relevance, defined as the maximum
86 correlation of a transcript across all traits (Fig. 2B). This suggests that the more local genotype influenced
87 transcript abundance, the less effect variation in transcript abundance had on the measured traits. Conversely,

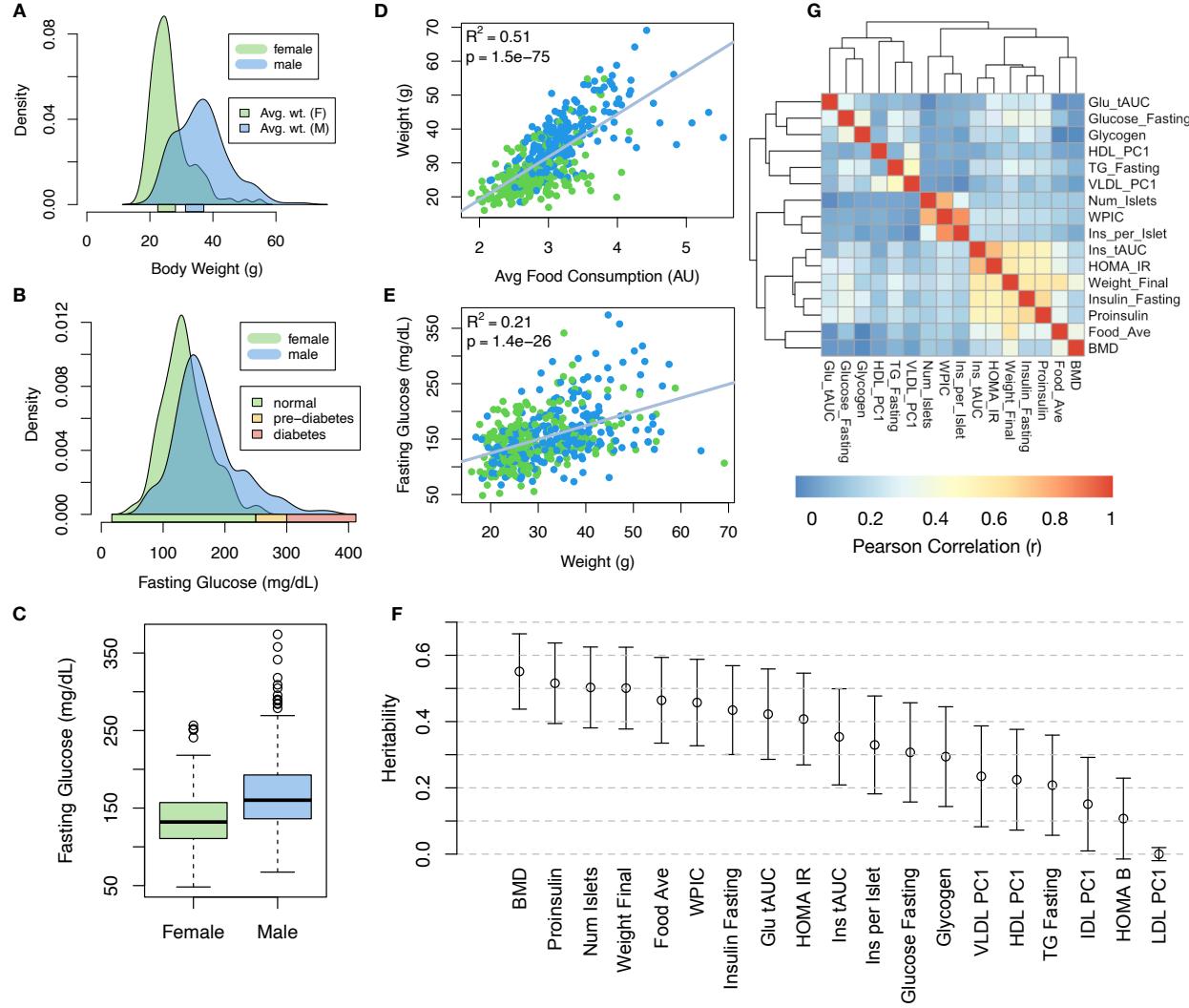


Figure 1: Clinical overview. **A.** Distributions of final body weight in the diversity outbred mice. Sex is indicated by color. The average B6 male and female adult weights at 24 weeks of age are indicated by blue and green bars on the x-axis. **B.** The distribution of final fasting glucose across the population split by sex. Normal, pre-diabetic, and diabetic fasting glucose levels for mice are shown by colored bars along the x-axis. **C.** Males had higher fasting blood glucose on average than females. **D.** The relationship between food consumption and body weight for both sexes. **E.** Relationship between body weight and fasting glucose for both sexes. **F.** Heritability estimates for each physiological trait. Bars show standard error of the estimate. **G.** Correlation structure between pairs of physiological traits.

distal heritability of transcripts was positively correlated with trait relevance (Fig. 2C). That is, transcripts that were more highly correlated with the measured traits tended to be distally, rather than locally, heritable. That trait-correlated transcripts have low local heritability is consistent with previous observations that low-heritability transcripts explain more expression-mediated disease heritability than high-heritability transcripts [19]. However, the positive relationship between trait correlation and distal heritability suggests that there are alternative mechanisms through which genetic regulation of transcripts may influence traits.

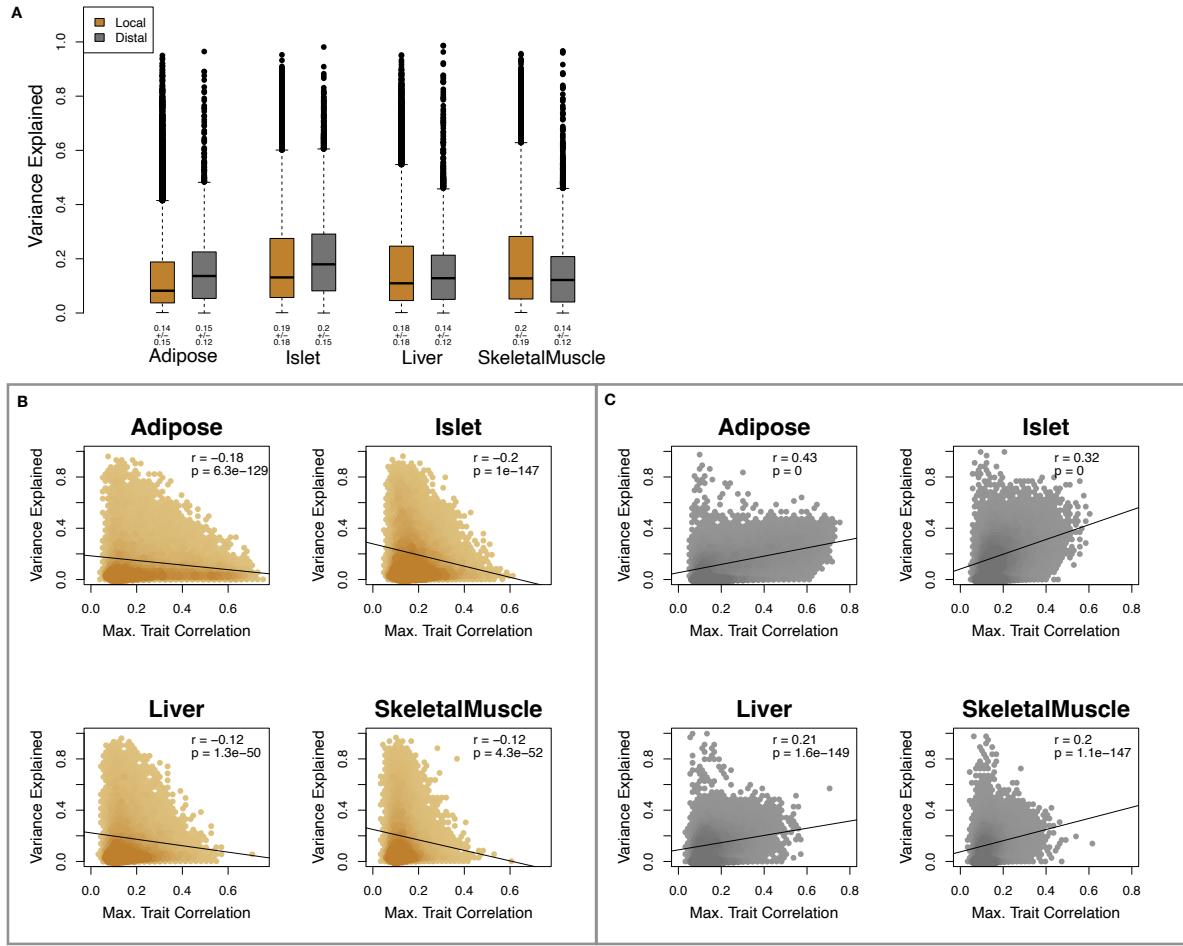


Figure 2: Transcript heritability and trait relevance. **A.** Distributions of distal and local heritability of transcripts across the four tissues. Overall local and distal factors contribute equally to transcript heritability. The relationship between **(B.)** local and **(C.)** distal heritability and trait relevance across all four tissues. Here trait relevance is defined as the maximum correlation between the transcript and all traits. Local heritability was negatively correlated with trait relevance, and distal heritability is positively correlated with trait relevance. Pearson (r) and p values for each correlation are shown in the upper-right of each panel.

94 **High-Dimensional Mediation identifies composite transcript that perfectly mediates composite
95 trait**

96 To identify mechanisms through which genetic regulation of transcripts influences heritable traits, we propose
97 high-dimensional mediation (HDM) (Fig. 3). In this process we kernelize each of the genome, transcriptome,
98 and phenotype, and perform regularized and sparse generalized canonical correlation analysis (RGCCA) [cite]
99 in which we explicitly model the mediation by the transcriptome of the effect of the genome on the phenotype
100 (Methods, Fig. 3). RGCCA is an extended form of canonical correlation analysis (CCA) [cite] in which
101 multiple data sets can be analyzed simultaneously with explicit relationships.

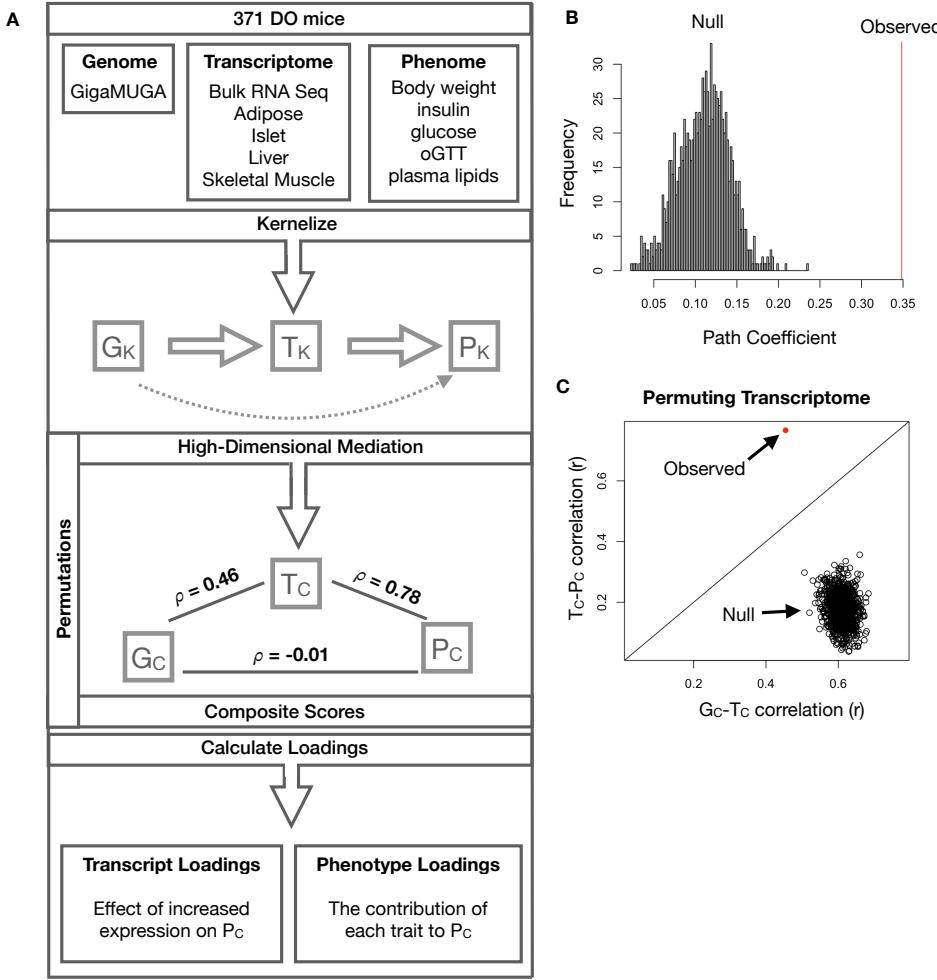


Figure 3: High-dimensional mediation. **A.** Workflow indicating major steps of high-dimensional mediation. The genotype, transcriptome, and phenotype matrices were kernelized to yield single matrices representing the relationships between all individuals for each data modality (G_K = genome kernel, T_K = transcriptome kernel; P_K = phenome kernel). High-dimensional mediation was applied to these matrices to maximize the direct path $G \rightarrow T \rightarrow P$, the mediating pathway (arrows), while simultaneously minimizing the direct $G \rightarrow P$ pathway (dotted line). The composite vectors that resulted from high-dimensional mediation were G_c , T_c , and P_c . The partial correlations ρ between these vectors indicated perfect mediation. Transcript and trait loadings were calculated as described in the methods. **B.** The null distribution of the path coefficient derived from 10,000 permutations compared to the observed path coefficient (red line). **C.** The null distribution of the G_c-T_c correlation vs. the T_c-P_c correlation compared with the observed value (red dot).

102 The result of this process is three vectors representing the composite genome (G_c), composite transcriptome
 103 (T_c) and the composite phenotype (P_c) where T_c perfectly mediates the effect of G_c on P_c . Each vector is
 104 of length n where n is the number of individual mice. Fig. 3A shows the partial correlations between all
 105 pairs of composite vectors. The partial correlation r between G_c and T_c was 0.46, and the partial correlation
 106 between T_c and P_c was 0.78. However, when the transcriptome was taken into account, the partial correlation
 107 between G_c and P_c was effectively 0 (-0.01). The estimated heritability of the composite phenotype was

108 heritability of 0.71 ± 0.0837393 , which was higher than any of the individual traits (Fig. 1F). Thus, we have
109 identified a maximally heritable metabolic trait that is perfectly mediated by a heritable component of the
110 transcriptome.

111 Standard CCA is prone to over-fitting because in any two large matrices it can be trivial to identify
112 highly correlated composite vectors. To assess whether RGCCA was similarly prone to over-fitting in a
113 high-dimensional space, we performed permutation testing. We permuted the individual labels on the
114 transcriptome kernel matrix 1000 times and recalculated the path coefficient, which is the partial correlation
115 of G_C and T_C multiplied by the partial correlation of T_C and P_C . This represents the path from G_C to
116 P_C that is mediated through T_C . The null distribution of the path coefficient is shown in Fig. 3B, and the
117 observed path coefficient from the original data is indicated by the red line. The observed path coefficient
118 was well outside the null distribution generated by permutations. Fig. 3C illustrates this observation in more
119 detail. Although we identified high correlations between G_C and T_C , and modest correlations between T_C and
120 P_C in the null data (Fig 3C), these two values could not be maximized simultaneously. The red dot shows that
121 in the real data both the G_C-T_C correlation and the T_C-P_C correlation could be maximized simultaneously
122 suggesting that that path from genotype to phenotype through transcriptome is highly non-trivial and
123 identifiable in this case. These results suggest that these composite vectors represent genetically determined
124 variation in phenotype that is mediated through genetically determined variation in transcription.

125 **Body weight and insulin resistance were highly represented in the expression-mediated com-**
126 **posite trait**

127 The loadings of each measured trait onto P_C indicate how much each contributed to P_C . Final body weight
128 contributed the most to P_C (Fig. 4), followed by homeostatic insulin resistance (HOMA_IR) and fasting
129 plasma insulin levels (Insulin_Fasting). We can thus interpret P_C as an index of metabolic disease (Fig. 4B).
130 Individuals with high values of P_C have a higher metabolic index and greater metabolic disease, including
131 higher body weight and higher insulin resistance. We refer to P_C as the metabolic index going forward. Traits
132 contributing the least to the metabolic index were measures of cholesterol and pancreas composition. Thus,
133 when we interpret the transcriptomic signature identified by HDM, we are explaining primarily transcriptional
134 mediation of body weight and insulin resistance, as opposed to cholesterol measurements.

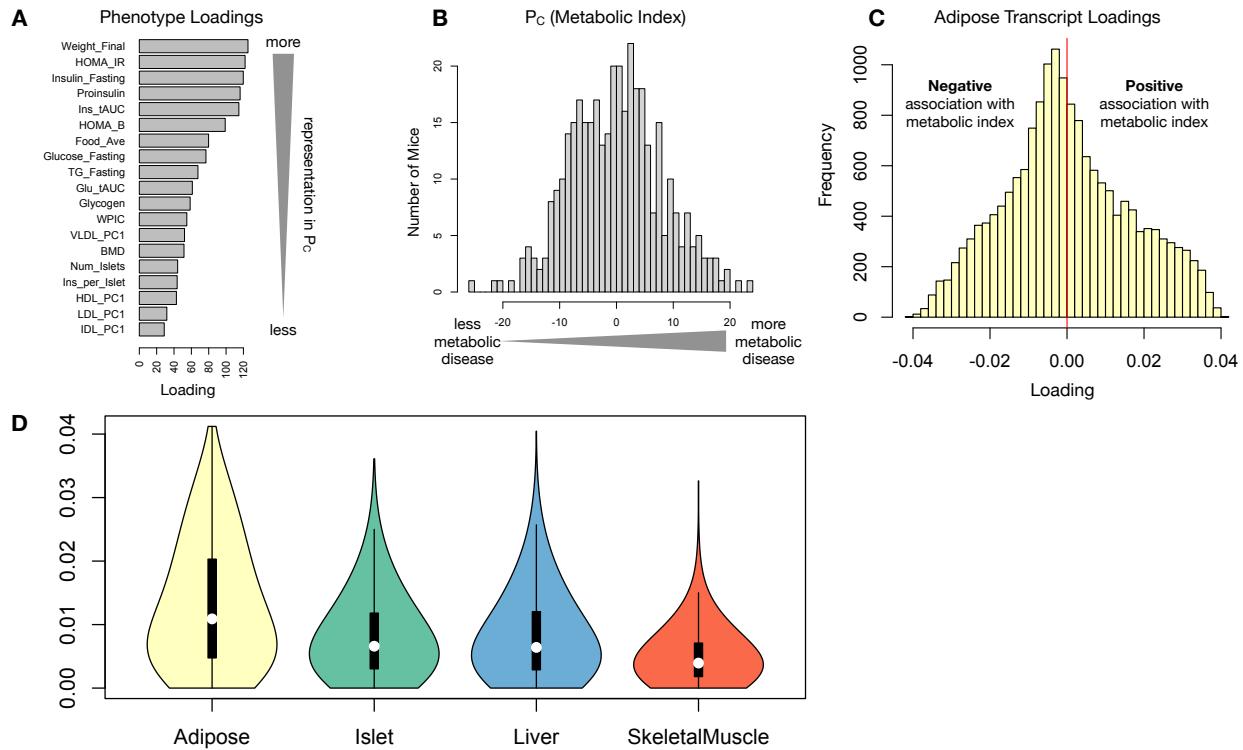


Figure 4: Interpretation of loadings. **A.** Loadings across traits. Body weight and insulin resistance contributed the most to the composite trait. **B.** Phenotype scores across individuals. Individuals with large positive phenotype scores had higher body weight and insulin resistance than average. Individuals with large negative phenotype scores had lower body weight and insulin resistance than average. **C.** Distribution of transcript loadings in adipose tissue. For transcripts with large positive loadings, higher expression was associated with higher phenotype scores. For transcripts with large negative loadings, higher expression was associated with lower phenotype scores. **D.** Distribution of absolute value of transcript loadings across tissues. Transcripts in adipose tissue had the largest loadings indicating that transcripts in adipose tissue were the best mediators of the genetic effects on body weight and insulin resistance.

- 135 **High-loading transcripts have low local heritability, high distal heritability, and are linked**
 136 **mechanistically to obesity**
- 137 We interpreted large loadings onto transcripts as indicating strong mediation of the effect of genetics on
 138 metabolic index. Large positive loadings indicate that inheriting higher expression was associated with a
 139 higher metabolic index (i.e. higher risk of obesity and metabolic disease on the high-fat diet) (Fig. 4C).
 140 Conversely, large negative loadings indicate that inheriting lower expression of these transcripts was associated
 141 with a lower metabolic index (i.e. lower risk of obesity and metabolic disease on the high-fat diet) (Fig. 4C).
 142 We used GSEA to look for biological processes and pathways that were enriched at the top and bottom of
 143 this list (Methods).
- 144 In adipose tissue, both GO processes and KEGG pathway enrichments pointed to an axis of inflammation

145 and metabolism (Supp. Fig. 10 and 11). Processes and pathways associated with inflammation, particularly
146 macrophage infiltration were positively associated with metabolic index, indicating that increased expression
147 in inflammatory pathways was associated with a higher metabolic index. It is well established that adipose
148 tissue in obese individuals is highly inflamed [cite] and infiltrated by macrophages [cite], and the results here
149 suggest that this may be a heritable component of metabolic disease.

150 The strongest negative enrichments in adipose tissue were related to mitochondrial activity in general, and
151 thermogenesis in particular (Supp. Fig. 10 and 11). It has been shown mouse strains with greater thermogenic
152 potential are also less susceptible to obesity on a high-fat diet.

153 Transcripts associated with the citric acid (TCA) cycle as well as the catabolism of branched-chain amino acids
154 (BCAA), valine, leucine, and isoleucine also had strong negative enrichment in the adipose tissue (Supp. Fig.
155 XXX). Expression of genes in both pathways (for which there is some overlap) has been previously associated
156 with insulin sensitivity [12, 24, 25], suggesting that impairment in these pathways may be associated with
157 insulin resistance. Selective PPAR γ modulation by insulin-sensitizing thiazolidinedione drugs has further
158 been shown to influence both inflammation and BCAA metabolism in obese rats suggesting a relationship
159 between these pathways and insulin resistance [26]. BCAA levels are also related to insulin resistance in
160 human subjects and are elevated in insulin-resistant obese individuals relative to weight-matched non-insulin
161 resistant individuals [27]. In the DO mice studied here, inheriting increased expression of genes involved in
162 BCAA catabolism was associated with reduced body weight and insulin resistance.

163 Transcripts in the adipose tissue had the largest loadings, both positive and negative, of all tissues, suggesting
164 that much of the effect of genetics on body weight and insulin resistance is mediated through gene expression
165 in adipose tissue (Fig. 5A). The loadings in liver and pancreas were comparable, and those in skeletal muscle
166 were the weakest (Fig. 5A), suggesting that less of the genetic effects were mediated through transcription in
167 skeletal muscle. Across all tissues, transcripts with the largest loadings tended to have relatively high distal
168 heritability compared with local heritability (Fig. 5A). Transcripts with the highest local heritability tended
169 to have very weak loadings and were 3.6 times less likely to be associated with diabetes and obesity in the
170 literature than transcripts with high loadings (Fig. fig:loading_heritabilityB, Methods). TWAS-nominated
171 transcripts also had relatively weak loadings and high local heritability (Fig. 4C). They were half as likely as
172 transcripts with the highest loadings to be associated with diabetes and obesity in the literature (Fig. 4C).

173 **Tissue-specific transcriptional programs were associated with metabolic traits**

174 Clustering of transcripts with top loadings in each tissue showed tissue-specific functional modules associated
175 with obesity and insulin resistance in the DO population (Fig. 6A). In this figure, the importance of immune

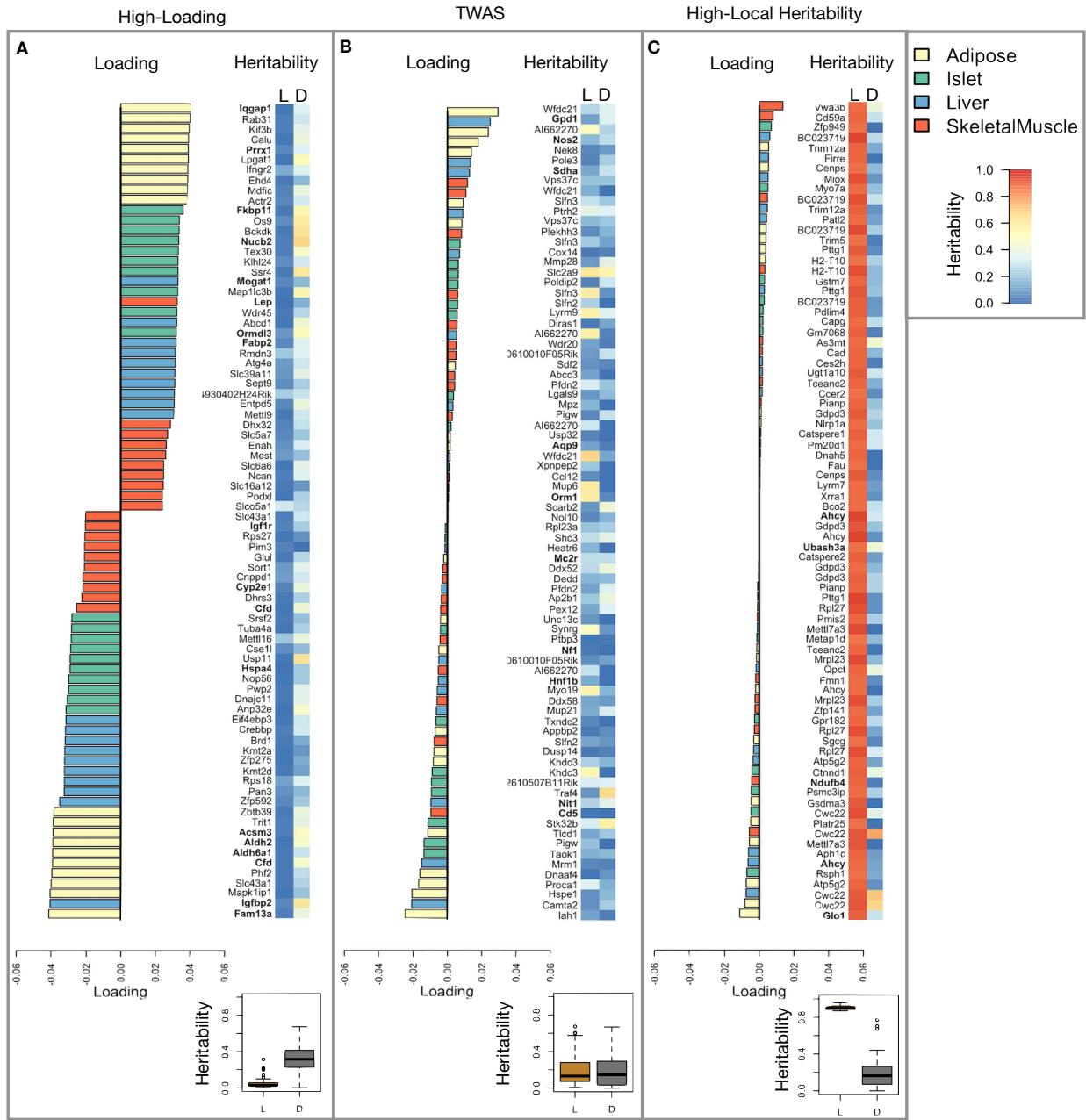


Figure 5: Transcripts with high loadings have high distal heritability and literature support. Each panel has a bar plot showing the loadings of transcripts selected by different criteria. Bar color indicates the tissue of origin. The heat map shows the local (L - left) and distal (D - right) heritability of each transcript. **A.** Loadings for the 10 transcripts with the largest positive loadings and the 10 transcripts with the largest negative loadings for each tissue. **B.** Loadings of TWAS candidates with the 10 largest positive correlations with traits and the largest negative correlations with traits across all four tissues. **C.** The transcripts with the largest local heritability (top 20) across all four tissues.

activation specifically in the adipose tissue is apparent. There are also other tissue-specific processes. Positive loadings on lipid metabolism in liver suggest that inheriting high liver expression of genes in this cluster is positively associated with metabolic disease. This cluster included the gene *Pparg*, whose primary role is in

179 the adipose tissue where it is considered a master regulator of adipogenesis [28]. Agonists of Pparg, such
180 as Thiazolidinediones, which are FDA-approved to treat type II diabetes, reduce inflammation and adipose
181 hypertrophy [28]. Consistent with this role, the loading for *Pparg* in adipose tissue is slightly negative,
182 suggesting that upregulation is associated with leaner mice (Fig. 6B). In contrast, *Pparg* has a large positive
183 loading in liver, where it plays a role in the development of hepatic steatosis, or fatty liver. Mice that lack
184 *Pparg* specifically in the liver, are protected from developing steatosis and show reduced expression of lipogenic
185 genes [29, 30]. Overexpression of *Pparg* in the livers of mice with a *Ppara* knockout, causes upregulation of
186 genes involved in adipogenesis [31]. In the livers of both mice and humans [32, 33] High *Pparg* expression is
187 associated with hepatocytes that accumulate large lipid droplets and have gene expression profiles similar to
188 adipocytes.

189 The local and distal heritability of *Pparg* is low in adipose tissue suggesting its expression in this tissue is
190 highly constrained in the population (Fig. 6B). However, the distal heritability of *Pparg* in liver is relatively
191 high suggesting it is complexly regulated and has sufficient variation in this population to drive variation
192 in phenotype. Both local and distal heritability of *Pparg* in the islet are fairly high, but the loading is
193 low, suggesting that variability of expression in the islet does not drive phenotypic variation. These results
194 highlight the importance of tissue context when investigating the role of heritable transcript variability in
195 driving phenotype.

196 Gene lists for all clusters are available in Supplemental Files XXX.

197 **Gene expression, but not local eQTLs, predict body weight in an independent population**

198 The loading of each transcript indicates how inherited expression levels influence metabolic phenotypes.
199 If local regulation is the predominant factor influencing gene expression, we should be able to predict an
200 individual's phenotype based on their genotypes across all local eQTLs. We tested this hypothesis in an
201 independent population of F1 mice generated through multiple pairings of Collaborative Cross (CC) [cite]
202 strains (Fig. 7A) (Methods).

203 We first tested whether the transcript loadings derived from HDM in the DO were relevant to the relationship
204 between the transcriptome and the phenotype in the CC-RIX. To do this, we multiplied the transcript loadings
205 derived from HDM in the DO mice by transcript measurements in the CC-RIX standardized across individuals.
206 This created a transcript vector weighted by importance to metabolic disease as determined in the DO.
207 The mean of this vector was the predicted metabolic index for the animal based on its transcription in
208 either adipose tissue, liver, or skeletal muscle. Across all three tissues, weighted transcription values were
209 significantly correlated with metabolic index in the CC-RIX population measured as body weight (Fig. 7B left

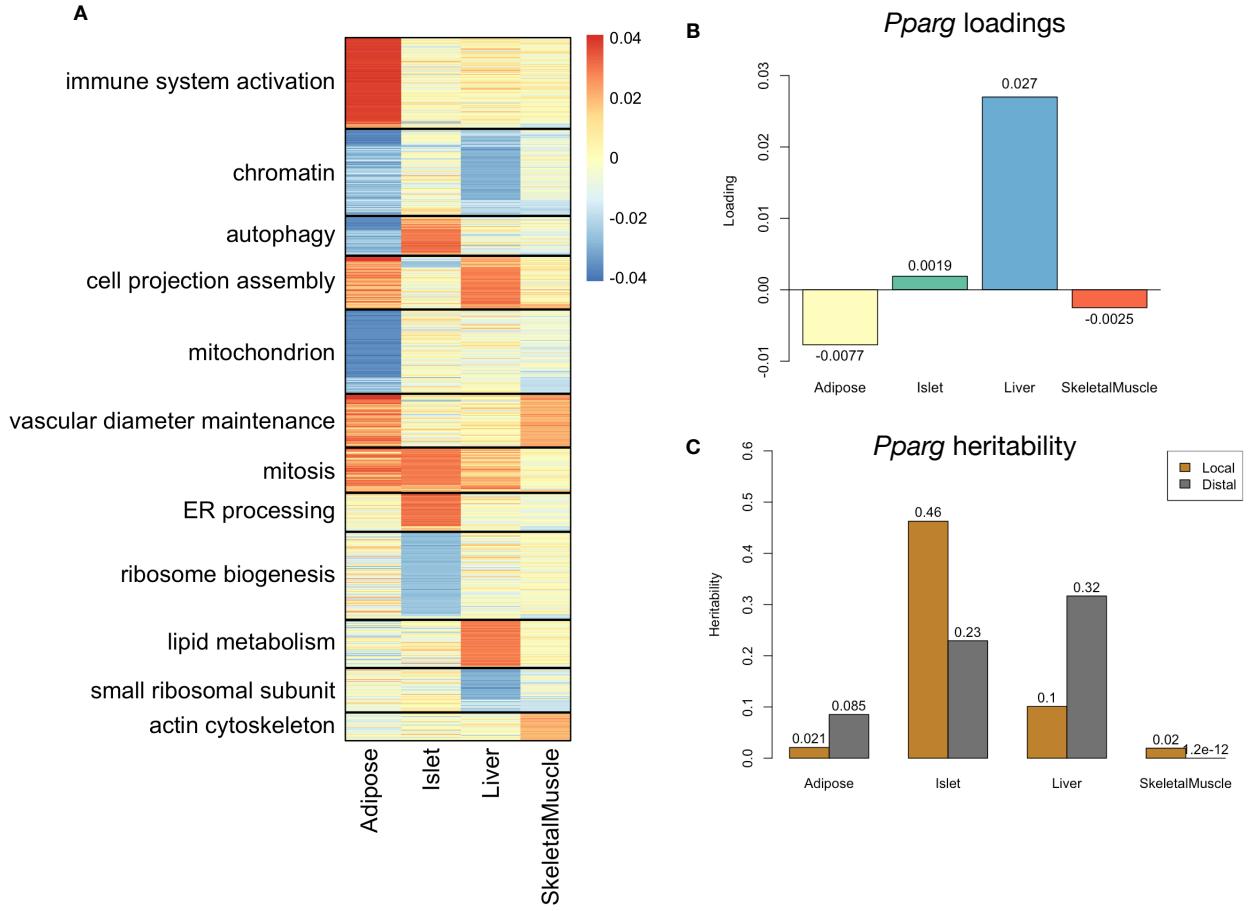


Figure 6: Tissue-specific transcriptional programs were associated with obesity and insulin resistance. **A** Heat map showing the loadings of all transcripts with loadings greater than 2.5 standard deviations from the mean in any tissue. The heat map was clustered using k medoid clustering. Functional enrichments of each cluster are indicated along the left margin. **B** Loadings for *Pparg* in different tissues. **C** Local and distal of *Pparg* expression in different tissues.

210 column). Adipose tissue transcription yielded the most accurate prediction (stats). This result confirms the
 211 validity and translatability of the transcript loadings determined in the DO population and their relationship
 212 to metabolic disease. It also supports the observation that transcription in adipose tissue is the strongest
 213 mediator of genetic effects on metabolic index.

214 We then tested whether this mediation signal was encoded by local genotype. To do this, we imputed gene
 215 expression in the CC-RIX using local genotype. We were able to estimate variation in gene transcription
 216 robustly. The correlation between measured gene expression and imputed gene expression across all tissues
 217 was close to $R = 0.5$, and the variance explained by local genotype was comparable in the DO and CC-RIX
 218 (Supp. Fig. 12). However, when weighted with the loadings derived from HDM in the DO population, these
 219 imputed transcripts across all tissues failed to predict metabolic index in the CC-RIX (Fig. 7B right column).

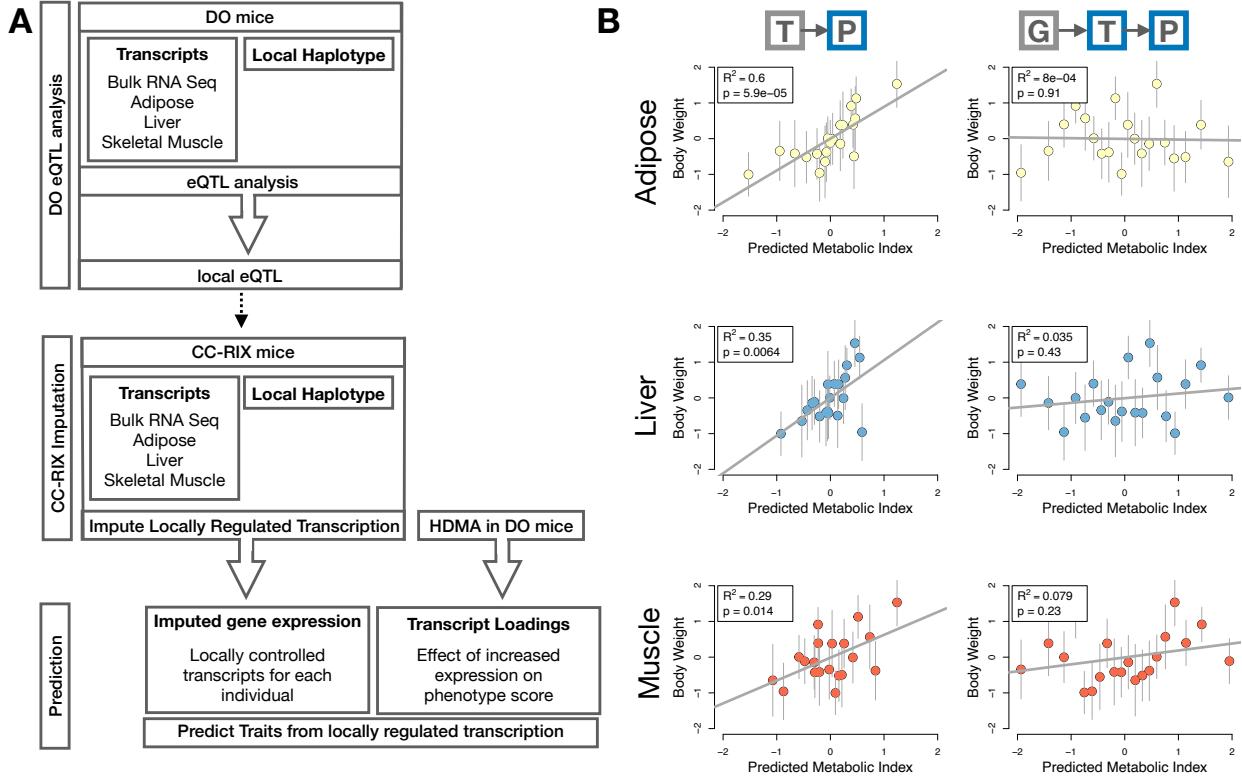


Figure 7: Transcription, but not local genotype, predicts phenotype in the CC-RIX. **A.** Workflow showing procedure for translating HDM results to an independent population of mice. **B.** Relationships between the predicted metabolic index and measured body weight. The left column shows the predictions using measured transcripts. The right column shows the prediction using transcript levels imputed from local genotype. Gray boxes indicate measured quantities, and blue boxes indicate calculated quantities. The dots in each panel represent individual CC-RIX strains. The gray lines show the standard deviation on body weight for the strain.

220 Taken together, these results support the hypothesis that distal, rather than local genetic factors are primarily
 221 driving complex-trait related variation in gene expression.

222 **Distally heritable transcriptomic signatures reflect variation in composition of adipose tissue
 223 and islets**

224 Interpretation of global distal genetic influences on gene expression and phenotype is potentially more
 225 challenging than interpretation and translation of local genetic influences. Effects can not be located to
 226 individual gene variants or transcripts, but because we have a measure of importance across all transcripts in
 227 multiple tissues, we can look at global patterns. We noted earlier that functional enrichments of transcripts
 228 with large positive loadings in the adipose tissue, suggested that the obese mice in the population had a
 229 genetic predisposition toward elevated macrophage infiltration into the adipose tissue. This suggests heritable
 230 variability in cell-type composition of the adipose tissue. We investigated this further bioinformatically

231 by comparing the loadings of cell-type-specific transcripts (Methods). For adipose tissue we used a list of
 232 cell-type specific genes identified in human adipose tissue

233 In adipose tissue, the mean loading of macrophage-specific genes was substantially greater than 0 (Fig. 8A),
 234 indicating that obese mice were genetically predisposed to have high levels of macrophage infiltration in
 235 adipose tissue in response to the high-fat, high-sugar diet.

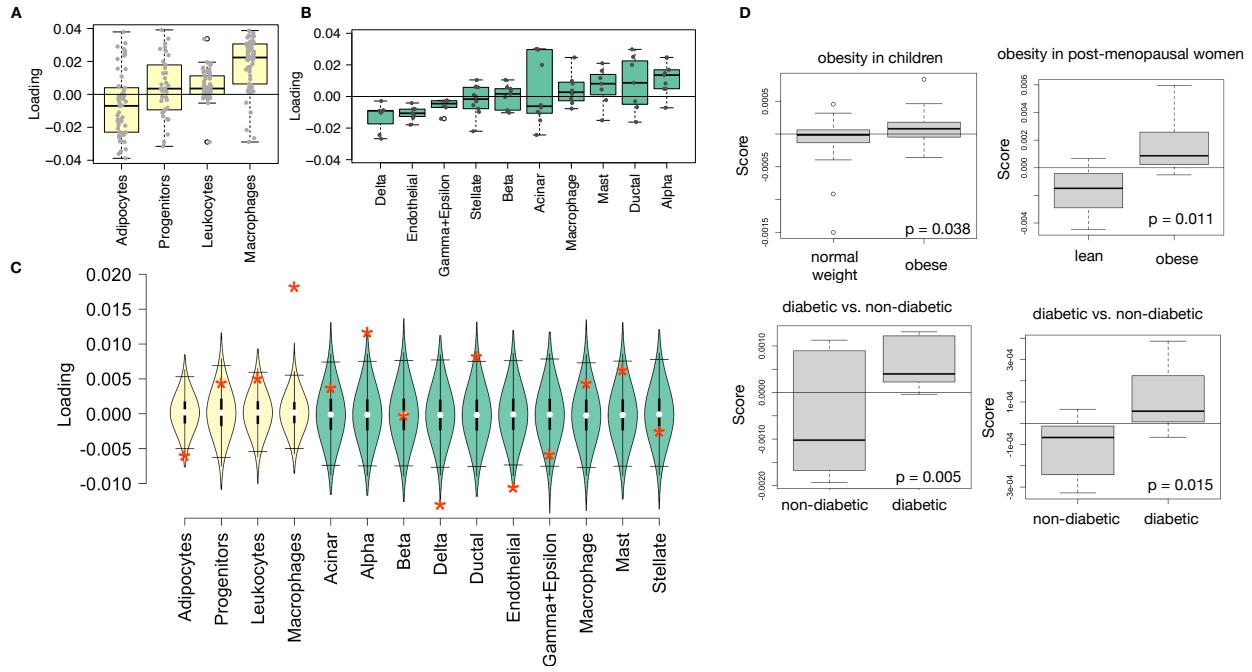


Figure 8: HDM results translate to humans. **A.** Distribution of loadings for cell-type-specific transcripts in adipose tissue. **B.** Distribution of loadings for cell-type-specific transcripts in pancreatic islets (green). **C.** Null distributions for the mean loading of randomly selected transcripts in each cell type compared with the observed mean loading of each group of transcripts (red asterisk). **D.** Predictions of metabolic phenotypes in four adipose transcription data sets downloaded from GEO. In each study the obese/diabetic patients were predicted to have greater metabolic disease than the lean/non-diabetic patients based on the HDM results from DO mice.

236 In islet, the mean loadings for alpha-cell specific transcripts were significantly positive, while the mean
 237 loadings for delta- and endothelial-cell specific genes were significantly negative (Fig. 8B). These results
 238 suggest that obese mice had inherited higher proportions of alpha cells, and lower proportions of endothelial
 239 and delta cells in their pancreatic islets.

240 The loadings for pancreatic beta cell-type specific loadings was not significantly different from zero. This
 241 does not reflect on the function of the beta cells in the obese mice, but rather suggests that mice prone to
 242 obesity were not obese because they inherited fewer beta cells than non-obese mice.

243 Biological interpretation of alpha, endothelial, delta cells??

244 Distally heritable transcriptomic signatures translate to human disease

245 Ultimately, the distally heritable transcriptomic signatures that we identified in DO mice will be useful if
246 they inform pathogenicity and treatment of human disease. To investigate the potential for translation of the
247 gene signatures identified in DO mice, we compared them to transcriptional profiles in obese and non-obese
248 human subjects (Methods). We limited our analysis to adipose tissue because the adipose tissue signature
249 had the strongest relationship to obesity and insulin resistance in the DO.

250 We calculated a predicted obesity score for each individual in the human studies based on their adipose
251 tissue gene expression (Methods) and compared the predicted scores for obese and non-obese groups as well
252 as diabetic and non-diabetic groups. In all cases, the predicted obesity scores were higher on average for
253 individuals in the obese and diabetic groups compared with the lean and non-diabetic groups, indicating that
254 the distally heritable signature of obesity identified in DO mice is relevant to obesity and diabetes in human
255 subjects.

256 Targeting gene signatures

257 Although high-loading transcripts are likely good candidates for understanding specific biology related to
258 obesity, we emphasize that the transcriptome overall is highly interconnected and redundant, and that
259 focusing on individual transcripts for treatment may be less effective than using a broader transcriptomic
260 signature. The ConnectivityMap (CMAP) database [cite] developed by the Broad Institute allows us to query
261 thousands of compounds that reverse or enhance transcriptomic signatures as a whole in multiple different
262 cell types. By identifying drugs that reverse pathogenic transcriptomic signatures as a whole rather than
263 targeting individual genes, we can potentially increase efficacy of tested compounds.

264 We thus queried the CMAP database through the CLUE online query tool developed by The Broad Institute
265 [cite] (Methods).

266 Alternatively, we can target the gene signature as a whole using CMAP. Identifying drugs to target gene
267 signatures is possible through CMAP. We put our loadings from islet into CMAP. The top hit was PPAR
268 receptor agonist. Rosiglitazone, a widely used diabetes drug, is a PPAR receptor agonist. Another class of
269 drugs on the list was sulfonylureas, which are another major class of drugs for type 2 diabetes.

- 270 • **Supplemental Table** results from CMAP

271 **Discussion**

272 Yao *et al.* [19] observed that genes with low local heritability explained more expression-mediated disease
273 heritability than genes with high local heritability. This observation is consistent with principles of robustness
274 in complex systems. If a transcript were both important to a trait and subject to strong local regulation,
275 a population would be susceptible to extremes in phenotype that might frequently cross the threshold to
276 disease. Indeed, strong disruption of highly trait-relevant genes is the cause of Mendelian disease.

277 Rather, observations suggest that genes near GWAS hits and have obvious functional relevance to a trait
278 tend to have highly complex regulatory landscapes under strong selection pressures [18]. In contrast, genes
279 with strong local regulation tend to be depleted of functional annotations and are under looser selection
280 constraints [18]. These observations and others led Liu *et al.* [34] to suggest that most heritability of complex
281 traits is driven by weak trans-eQTLs. They proposed a framework of understanding heritability of complex
282 traits in which massive polygenicity is distributed across common variants in both functional “core genes”,
283 as well as more peripheral genes that may not seem obviously related to the trait.

284 We developed high-dimension mediation to test the omnigenic model with a more holistic approach. This
285 model posits that once the expression of the core genes (i.e. trait-mediating genes) is accounted for, there
286 should be no residual correlation between the genome and the phenotype. This hypothesis lends itself well to
287 systems approaches that can account for arbitrarily complex gene regulation, as well as the interconnectedness
288 and redundancy of the transcriptome without explicitly modeling them. The HDM approach we propose here
289 tests the hypothesis of the omnigenic model

- 290 • distal heritability correlates with phenotype relevance
- 291 • others who use local eQTL to associate genotype with traits often say “we nominated this gene” even
292 though other nearby genes have higher eQTL LOD scores (27019110, 31465442) Our method supports
293 the idea that the transcripts with the strongest local regulation are less likely to be functionally related
294 to the trait

295 **Data Availability**

296 Here we tell people where to find the data

297 **Acknowledgements**

298 Here we thank people

299 **Supplemental Figures**

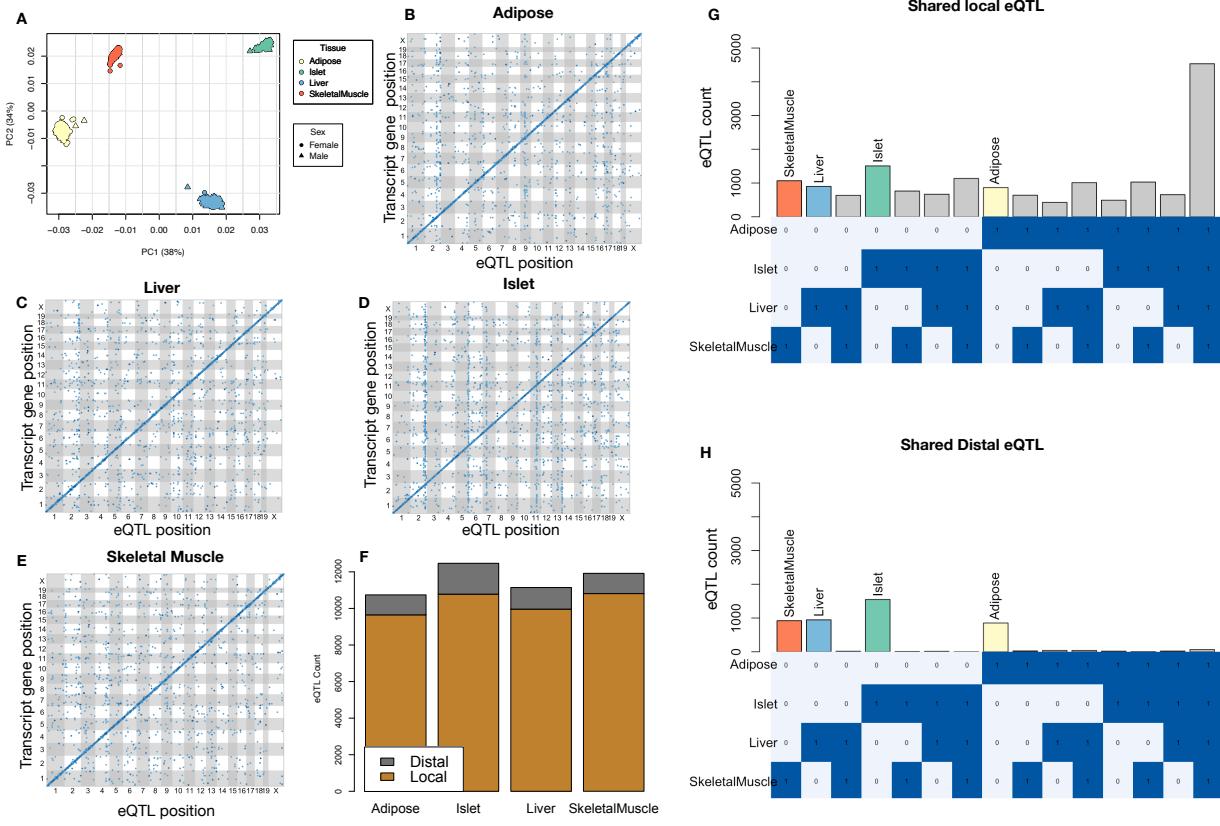


Figure 9: Overview of eQTL analysis in DO mice. **A.** RNA seq samples from the four different tissues clustered by tissue. **B.-E.** eQTL maps are shown for each tissue. The *x*-axis shows the position of the mapped eQTL, and the *y*-axis shows the physical position of the gene encoding each mapped transcript. Each dot represents an eQTL with a minimum LOD score of 8. The dots on the diagonal are locally regulated eQTL for which the mapped eQTL is at the within 4Mb of the encoding gene. Dots off the diagonal are distally regulated eQTL for which the mapped eQTL is distant from the gene encoding the transcript. **F.** Comparison of the total number of local and distal eQTL with a minimum LOD score of 8 in each tissue. All tissues have comparable numbers of eQTL. Local eQTL are much more numerous than distal eQTL. **G.** Counts of transcripts with local eQTL shared across multiple tissues. The majority of local eQTL were shared across all four tissues. **H.** Counts of transcripts with distal eQTL shared across multiple tissues. The majority of distal eQTL were tissue-specific and not shared across multiple tissues. For both G and H, eQTL for a given transcript were considered shared in two tissues if they were within 4Mb of each other. Colored bars indicate the counts for individual tissues for easy of visualization.

KEGG pathway enrichments by GSEA

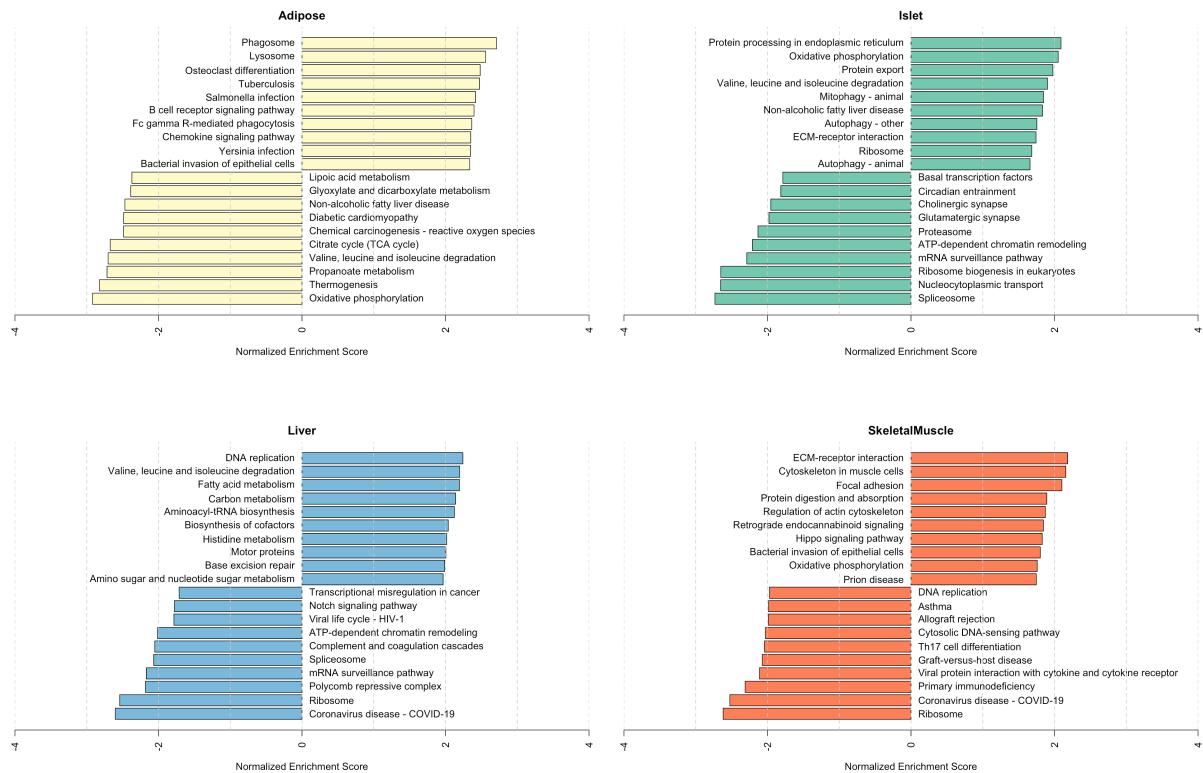


Figure 10: Bar plots showing normalized enrichment scores (NES) for KEGG pathways as determined by fast gene score enrichment analysis (fgsea). Only the top 10 positive and top 10 negative scores are shown. Colors indicate tissue. The name beside each bar shows the name of each enriched KEGG pathway.

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Top GO term enrichments by GSEA

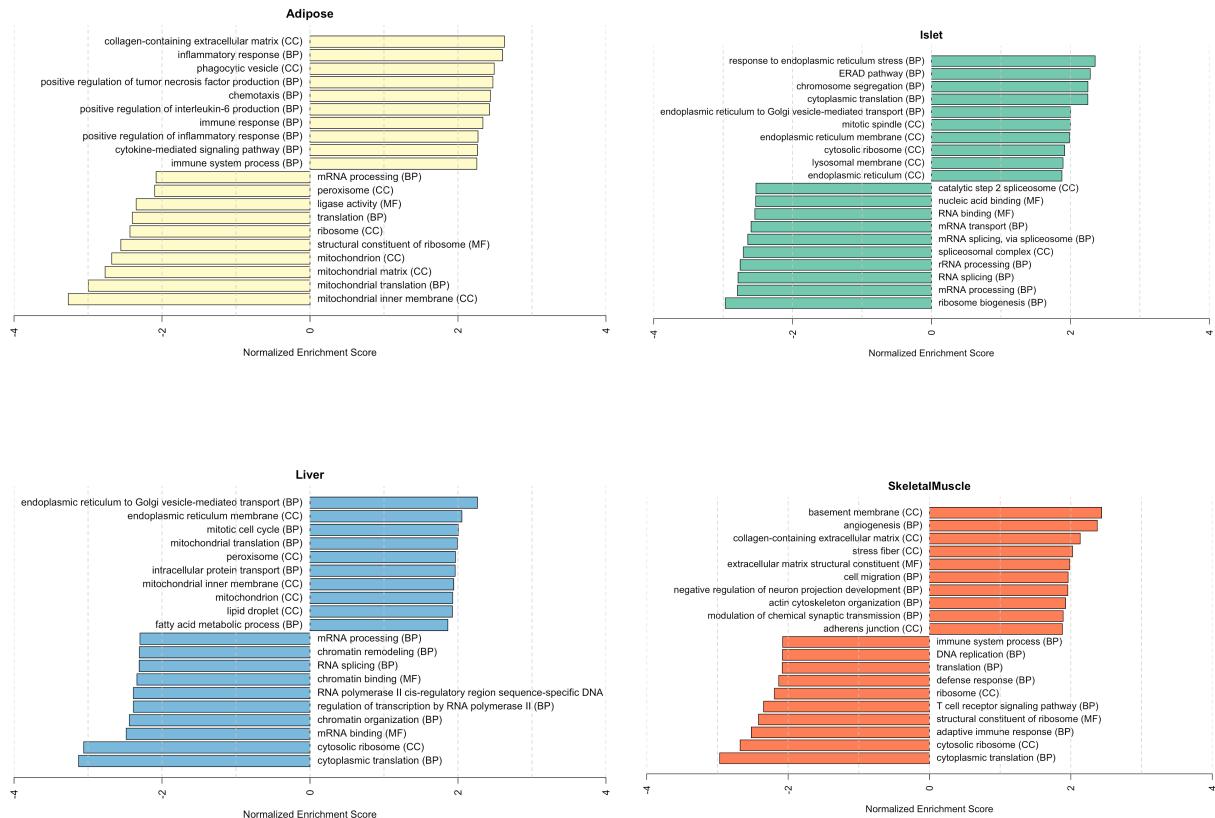


Figure 11: Bar plots showing normalized enrichment scores (NES) for GO terms as determined by fast gene score enrichment analysis (fgsea). Only the top 10 positive and top 10 negative scores are shown. Colors indicate tissue. The name beside each bar shows the name of each enriched GO term. The letters in parentheses indicate whether the term is from the biological process ontology (BP), the molecular function ontology (MF), or the cellular compartment ontology (CC).

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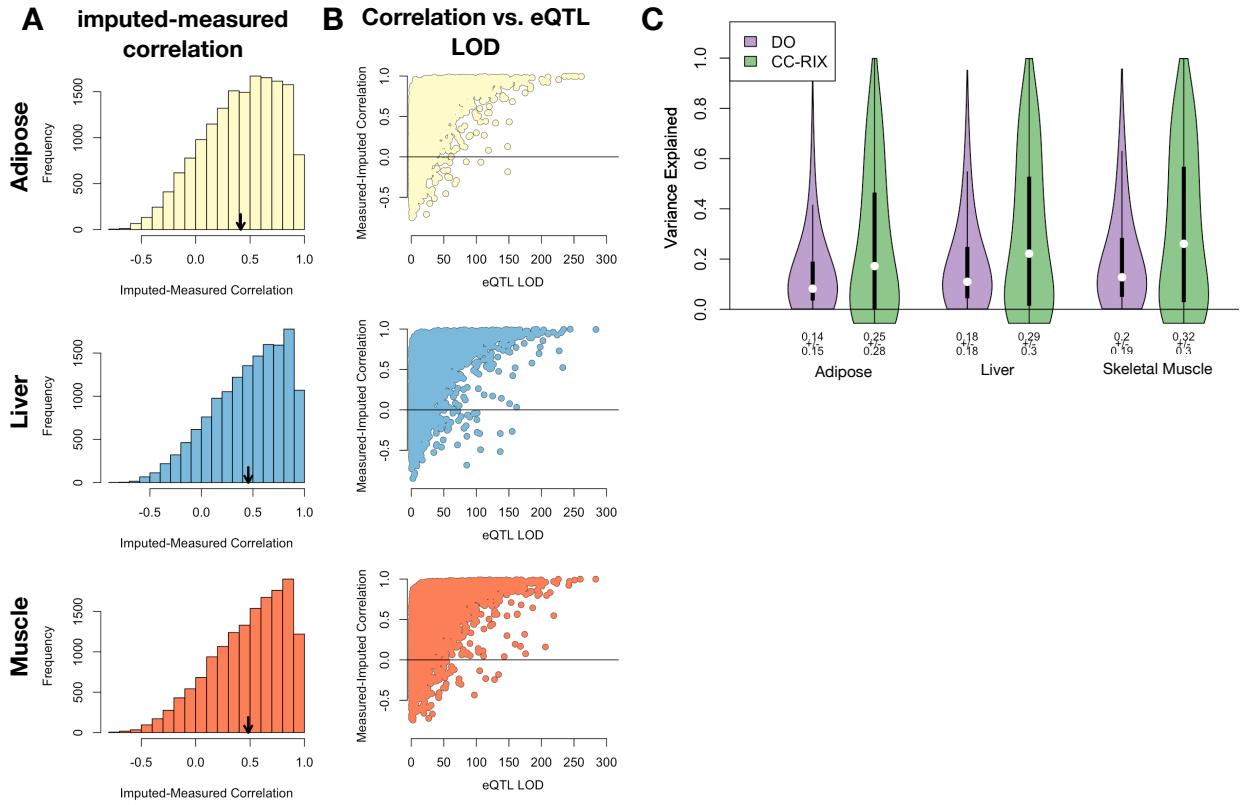


Figure 12: Validation of transcript imputation in the CC-RIX. **A.** Distributions of correlations between imputed and measured transcripts in the CC-RIX. The mean of each distribution is shown by the red line. All distributions were skewed toward positive correlations and had positive means near a Pearson correlation (r) of 0.5. **B.** The relationship between the correlation between measured and imputed expression in the CC-RIX (x-axis) and eQTL LOD score. As expected, imputations are more accurate for transcripts with strong local eQTL. **C.** Variance explained by local genotype in the DO and CC-RIX.

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