A Multi-Omics Review of the Correlation Between Vitamin D and Type 2 Diabetes in Males of African Ancestry

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Objective: This report provides a comprehensive, PhD-level literature review investigating the correlation between vitamin D and Type 2 diabetes in African Ancestry Males. It synthesizes current knowledge on biological mechanisms, genetic factors, multi-omics findings, and health disparities to serve as the foundational literature base for hypothesis development and aims paper writing.

Introduction

The escalating global prevalence of Type 2 Diabetes (T2D) presents a formidable public health challenge, with disproportionately high rates of incidence and morbidity observed in populations of African ancestry. Concurrently, these populations exhibit a remarkably high prevalence of vitamin D deficiency, a condition linked to a spectrum of chronic diseases beyond its classical role in bone health. The confluence of these two conditions within African ancestry communities, particularly among males who often face unique health burdens, suggests a complex interplay of biological, genetic, and environmental factors that warrants rigorous investigation. This literature review aims to deconstruct this relationship through a multi-layered, systems biology lens. By systematically examining the molecular underpinnings of vitamin D metabolism and T2D pathophysiology, exploring the biological and genetic mechanisms that connect them, and integrating findings from genomics, proteomics, and metabolomics, this report seeks to build a comprehensive framework of understanding. This review will critically analyze the existing evidence, identify significant research gaps, and outline future opportunities, thereby providing the essential scientific foundation for a hierarchical multi-omics research project designed to elucidate the causal pathways linking vitamin D status to T2D risk in African ancestry males.

Vitamin D Metabolism and Biological Functions

The metabolism of vitamin D is a multi-step endocrine process essential for a wide array of physiological functions, beginning with its acquisition either through dietary intake or endogenous synthesis in the skin. The two primary forms, vitamin D2 (ergocalciferol) from plant sources and vitamin D3 (cholecalciferol) synthesized in the skin from 7-dehydrocholesterol upon exposure to ultraviolet B (UVB) radiation, are biologically inert precursors. The initial and crucial activation step occurs in the liver, where these precursors are hydroxylated by cytochrome P450 enzymes, primarily CYP2R1 and to a lesser extent CYP27A1, to form 25-hydroxyvitamin D (25(OH)D), also known as calcifediol. This metabolite is the major circulating form of vitamin D and serves as the most reliable clinical biomarker of an individual's vitamin D status due to its relatively long half-life and stable concentration in the bloodstream. Circulating 25(OH)D is predominantly bound to the vitamin D-binding protein (DBP) and albumin, which transport it throughout the body and protect it from rapid degradation.

The final activation step takes place primarily in the proximal tubules of the kidneys, where the enzyme 1α-hydroxylase (CYP27B1) converts 25(OH)D into the biologically active hormone, 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D (1,25$(OH)_2$D), or calcitriol. This conversion is tightly regulated by a sophisticated

feedback loop involving parathyroid hormone (PTH), serum calcium, phosphate levels, and fibroblast growth factor 23 (FGF23). Low serum calcium stimulates PTH secretion, which in turn upregulates CYP27B1 activity to increase calcitriol production. Conversely, high levels of calcium, phosphate, and FGF23 inhibit CYP27B1, thereby reducing calcitriol synthesis. While the kidneys are the primary site of systemic calcitriol production, numerous extrarenal tissues, including immune cells like macrophages, skin cells, and placental tissue, also express CYP27B1. This localized production of calcitriol facilitates autocrine and paracrine signaling, allowing for tissue-specific regulation of cellular processes without significantly altering systemic calcium levels. The catabolism of both 25(OH)D and calcitriol is primarily managed by the enzyme 24-hydroxylase (CYP24A1), which converts them into inactive, water-soluble metabolites like calcitroic acid for excretion. Recent research has also identified an alternative metabolic pathway initiated by CYP11A1, producing novel metabolites with potential anti-proliferative effects that lack the calcemic activity of calcitriol.

The biological functions of vitamin D, mediated principally by calcitriol, are vast and extend far beyond its classical role in mineral homeostasis. The primary mechanism of action is genomic, involving the binding of calcitriol to the nuclear vitamin D receptor (VDR). This binding induces the VDR to form a heterodimer with the retinoid X receptor (RXR). The VDR-RXR complex then translocates to the nucleus, where it binds to specific DNA sequences known as vitamin D response elements (VDREs) in the promoter regions of target genes. This interaction recruits a complex of co-activator or co-repressor proteins to modulate the transcription of hundreds of genes. Classically, this process governs calcium and phosphate balance by enhancing their intestinal absorption, promoting their reabsorption in the kidneys, and regulating bone mineralization to prevent diseases like rickets and osteomalacia. However, the widespread expression of VDR in nearly all body tissues underpins a diverse range of non-classical, or pleiotropic, functions. These include profound immunomodulatory effects, such as enhancing innate immunity through the induction of antimicrobial peptides and regulating adaptive immunity by suppressing T-cell proliferation. Furthermore, vitamin D metabolites exhibit anti-proliferative, pro-differentiative, and pro-apoptotic effects in various cell types, suggesting a protective role against certain cancers. Non-genomic mechanisms, involving rapid signaling through membrane-associated VDR, also contribute to its functions by activating intracellular signaling cascades that influence processes like calcium influx and cell proliferation.

Pathophysiology of Type 2 Diabetes

Type 2 Diabetes (T2D) is a complex metabolic disorder characterized by chronic hyperglycemia resulting from a progressive decline in insulin action and secretion. Its pathophysiology is fundamentally rooted in two core defects: **insulin resistance** and **pancreatic beta-cell dysfunction**. These two processes are intricately linked in a dynamic and often vicious cycle that drives the progression from normal glucose tolerance to prediabetes and ultimately to overt T2D. Insulin resistance is typically the initial defect, defined as a diminished response of target tissues—primarily skeletal muscle, liver, and adipose tissue—to the physiological effects of insulin. In a state of insulin resistance, a greater amount of insulin is required to achieve a normal glucose-lowering effect. This impairment stems from defects within the insulin signaling pathway, such as reduced phosphorylation of the insulin receptor substrate (IRS) proteins and subsequent disruption of downstream cascades like the PI3K-Akt pathway. This leads to decreased translocation of the glucose transporter GLUT4 to the cell surface in muscle and fat cells, resulting in impaired glucose uptake, and a failure to suppress hepatic glucose production (gluconeogenesis), further contributing to elevated blood glucose levels.

In the early stages of insulin resistance, the pancreatic beta-cells compensate by increasing insulin secretion, a state known as compensatory hyperinsulinemia, which successfully maintains euglycemia. However, this places a significant and sustained demand on the beta-cells. Over time, this chronic

overstimulation, coupled with the toxic metabolic environment created by elevated levels of glucose (glucotoxicity) and free fatty acids (lipotoxicity), leads to beta-cell dysfunction. This dysfunction is multifaceted, encompassing a reduction in glucose-stimulated insulin secretion (GSIS), particularly the loss of the first-phase insulin response, impaired proinsulin processing, and a gradual loss of beta-cell mass through apoptosis. Furthermore, recent evidence suggests that beta-cells can undergo dedifferentiation, losing their specialized identity and reverting to a progenitor-like state, or transdifferentiate into other endocrine cell types, further diminishing the functional beta-cell pool.

The progression to T2D is therefore a continuum where insulin resistance creates a demand for insulin that the beta-cells are ultimately unable to meet. While insulin resistance is a necessary prerequisite, it is the failure of the beta-cells to sustain their compensatory response that marks the transition to hyperglycemia. This decline is exacerbated by a state of chronic, low-grade inflammation, often originating from visceral adipose tissue in obesity, where pro-inflammatory cytokines like tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α) and interleukin-6 (IL-6) are released into circulation. These cytokines can directly impair insulin signaling in peripheral tissues and are toxic to beta-cells. Oxidative stress, resulting from an imbalance between the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and the body’s antioxidant defenses, also plays a critical role by damaging cellular components, including mitochondria, and triggering apoptotic pathways in beta-cells. The risk of developing T2D is heavily influenced by a combination of genetic predisposition, with numerous identified gene variants affecting both insulin action and secretion, and modifiable lifestyle factors such as obesity, physical inactivity, and unhealthy dietary patterns.

Biological Mechanisms Linking Vitamin D Deficiency to T2D

The association between vitamin D deficiency and an increased risk of T2D is supported by a compelling body of evidence from mechanistic and observational studies, which point to several plausible biological pathways through which vitamin D status influences glucose homeostasis. These mechanisms converge on the core pathophysiological defects of T2D: impaired beta-cell function, insulin resistance, and systemic inflammation. The active form of vitamin D, calcitriol, exerts direct effects on pancreatic beta-cells, which express the vitamin D receptor (VDR). In vitro and animal studies have demonstrated that calcitriol, by binding to the VDR in beta-cells, can directly modulate the transcription of genes involved in insulin synthesis and secretion. For instance, it has been shown to upregulate the insulin receptor gene and enhance the cellular machinery responsible for insulin exocytosis. Furthermore, vitamin D plays a critical role in regulating intracellular calcium flux, a process fundamental to glucose-stimulated insulin secretion. It achieves this in part by controlling the expression of calcium-binding proteins like calbindin within the beta-cell, thereby ensuring an optimal calcium environment for the insulin release cascade. Consequently, a state of vitamin D deficiency can lead to dysregulated calcium handling and impaired insulin secretory capacity in response to a glucose challenge.

Beyond its direct effects on secretion, vitamin D also appears to play a protective role for beta-cells. The chronic low-grade inflammation characteristic of T2D pathogenesis exposes beta-cells to cytotoxic pro-inflammatory cytokines. Vitamin D possesses potent anti-inflammatory properties and can shield beta-cells from this cytokine-induced damage and apoptosis. It achieves this by downregulating the activity of the pro-inflammatory transcription factor nuclear factor-kappa B (NF-κB), thereby reducing the production and deleterious effects of cytokines like TNF-α and IL-1β. This protective mechanism helps preserve beta-cell mass and function over time.

In addition to its influence on beta-cells, vitamin D status is intricately linked to insulin sensitivity in peripheral tissues. Vitamin D deficiency is often associated with secondary hyperparathyroidism, where elevated levels of parathyroid hormone (PTH) can contribute to insulin resistance by increasing

intracellular calcium concentrations in skeletal muscle and adipose tissue, which interferes with insulin signaling pathways. By maintaining calcium homeostasis and suppressing PTH, adequate vitamin D levels can indirectly improve insulin sensitivity. More directly, calcitriol can enhance insulin action by upregulating the expression of the insulin receptor gene in peripheral tissues and by activating the peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor-delta (PPAR-δ), a nuclear receptor that plays a key role in regulating fatty acid metabolism and improving insulin sensitivity. The anti-inflammatory actions of vitamin D also contribute to improved insulin sensitivity systemically. By suppressing the production of inflammatory cytokines that are known to disrupt insulin signaling, vitamin D helps to mitigate the chronic inflammation that drives insulin resistance, particularly in the context of obesity.

Genetic Factors in Vitamin D Metabolism and T2D Risk in African Ancestry Populations

The genetic architecture underlying vitamin D metabolism and its downstream effects is a critical determinant of an individual's vitamin D status and susceptibility to related diseases, with significant variations observed across different ancestral populations. For individuals of African ancestry, specific genetic polymorphisms in key vitamin D pathway genes—including VDR (Vitamin D Receptor), GC (encoding Vitamin D-Binding Protein), CYP2R1 (25-hydroxylase), and CYP27B1 (1α-hydroxylase)—play a pivotal role. These variants can influence the synthesis, transport, activation, and cellular response to vitamin D, thereby contributing to the higher prevalence of vitamin D deficiency and potentially modulating the risk for T2D in this population.

The GC gene, which encodes the Vitamin D-Binding Protein (DBP), is highly polymorphic, and certain variants are more common in African ancestry populations. These polymorphisms can alter the binding affinity of DBP for vitamin D metabolites, affecting their transport, bioavailability, and half-life. For example, a study focusing on African Americans identified two single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in the GC gene, rs2298849 and rs2282679, that were significantly associated with lower circulating 25(OH)D levels. Individuals carrying the risk alleles for these SNPs exhibited substantially reduced serum vitamin D concentrations, highlighting a direct genetic contribution to deficiency independent of environmental factors like sun exposure. The distribution of these and other GC variants often correlates with historical ultraviolet B (UVB) radiation levels, suggesting an evolutionary adaptation. However, the patterns observed in African populations are distinct, indicating a complex interplay between genetics and environment that is unique to this ancestry.

Polymorphisms in the genes encoding the hydroxylase enzymes are also crucial. The CYP2R1 gene is responsible for the primary conversion of vitamin D to 25(OH)D in the liver. Variants in this gene can affect the efficiency of this hydroxylation step. Population-based studies have shown that the frequencies of certain CYP2R1 variants differ significantly between African, European, and East Asian populations. Similarly, the CYP27B1 gene, which encodes the enzyme for the final activation to calcitriol, contains variants that impact vitamin D metabolism. The SNP rs10877012 in CYP27B1 was found to be associated with lower 25(OH)D levels specifically in African Americans. A combined genotype score incorporating risk alleles from both GC and CYP27B1 was shown to explain a significant portion of the variance in vitamin D levels and was associated with a six-fold increased risk of vitamin D insufficiency in this population.

The VDR gene, which mediates the cellular actions of calcitriol, also harbors numerous polymorphisms (e.g., ApaI, BsmI, TaqI, FokI) that have been investigated for their association with T2D and other chronic diseases. These variants can affect VDR expression, stability, and transcriptional activity, thereby altering cellular responsiveness to vitamin D. While findings have been inconsistent across studies and populations, some evidence suggests that certain VDR haplotypes may modify T2D risk, potentially through their influence on inflammation, insulin secretion, or insulin sensitivity. The

distribution of these VDR variants also shows significant ancestry-specific differences. For instance, the VDR SNP rs4516035 has a frequency of 0.43 in European populations but is nearly absent in African and East Asian populations. This genetic heterogeneity underscores the necessity of conducting ancestry-specific research to understand how these polymorphisms contribute to health disparities in vitamin D status and T2D risk.

Genomics Research Findings

Genome-wide association studies (GWAS) have been instrumental in dissecting the complex genetic landscape of T2D and vitamin D metabolism, revealing numerous genetic loci associated with disease risk and biomarker levels. Critically, these studies have highlighted significant differences in the genetic architecture across ancestral populations, underscoring the importance of conducting research specifically within African ancestry groups. GWAS in African American populations have successfully replicated associations for several T2D risk loci first identified in European or Asian cohorts, such as variants in TCF7L2, IGF2BP2, and KCNQ1. The SNP rs7903146 in TCF7L2, for example, has consistently shown a strong association with T2D risk across multiple studies in African Americans, confirming its role as a major susceptibility locus pan-ancestrally. However, these studies have also uncovered novel, ancestry-specific signals that would have been missed in European-centric research. For instance, a GWAS conducted in continental African populations identified a novel genome-wide significant signal, rs73284431 in the AGMO gene, which is specific to individuals of African descent. Furthermore, admixture mapping studies, which leverage the mosaic of African and European ancestry in the genomes of African Americans, have identified genomic regions, such as those on chromosomes 3q26 and 12q23, where a higher proportion of African ancestry is associated with an increased risk of T2D. These findings suggest that variants unique to or more frequent in African populations contribute to the higher disease burden.

In parallel, GWAS focused on the determinants of vitamin D status have identified key genetic variants that influence circulating 25(OH)D concentrations, with profound implications for African ancestry populations. The most significant and consistently replicated associations are with SNPs in or near the GC (encoding DBP) and DHCR7/NADSYN1 (involved in cholesterol synthesis precursor to vitamin D3) genes. Specifically, SNPs like rs4588 and rs7041 in the GC gene are strongly associated with 25(OH)D levels, and their effects are known to be ancestry-dependent. These variants influence the levels and binding affinity of DBP, which in turn affects the measurement and bioavailability of vitamin D. This genetic context is crucial for interpreting the “vitamin D paradox” in African Americans, who often have low total 25(OH)D levels but do not exhibit the expected rates of bone disease.

The integration of these genomic findings has led to the development of genetic risk scores (GRS) or polygenic risk scores (PRS) to quantify an individual’s inherited susceptibility to T2D. Early GRS developed from European GWAS performed poorly when applied to African ancestry populations due to differences in allele frequencies, linkage disequilibrium patterns, and effect sizes. This has spurred the development of trans-ancestry PRS, which incorporate data from diverse populations to improve predictive accuracy. Such scores have demonstrated significantly better performance in African ancestry cohorts, with individuals in the highest percentile of the score distribution having a substantially increased risk of developing T2D. These advanced genomic tools hold promise for risk stratification and personalized prevention strategies, but their utility is contingent on continued efforts to increase the representation of African ancestry individuals in large-scale genomic research.

Proteomics Research Findings

Proteomics, the large-scale study of proteins, provides a functional lens through which to examine the molecular mechanisms linking vitamin D and T2D. A central protein in this nexus is the Vitamin D-Binding Protein (DBP), also known as GC-globulin. Synthesized primarily in the liver, DBP is a multi-functional plasma protein whose primary role is the transport of vitamin D metabolites, including 25(OH)D and calcitriol, in the circulation. By binding over 90% of these metabolites, DBP regulates their bioavailability, protects them from rapid clearance, and ensures a stable reservoir for cellular uptake and activation. Proteomic studies have highlighted DBP's high degree of polymorphism, with common genetic variants (Gc1f, Gc1s, Gc2) leading to different protein isoforms that vary in their binding affinity for vitamin D metabolites and in their glycosylation patterns. These variations, which are known to differ in frequency across ancestral populations, can significantly impact an individual's effective vitamin D status and are a key area of investigation in proteomic analyses of health disparities.

Beyond its transport function, DBP has critical roles in the immune system and inflammatory response, processes deeply implicated in T2D pathophysiology. DBP is a potent scavenger of monomeric G-actin released from necrotic cells during tissue injury. This actin-scavenging function is crucial for preventing microvascular obstruction and limiting further tissue damage. In states of severe inflammation or trauma, DBP levels can decrease as it is consumed in this process, making it a potential negative acute-phase reactant and a proteomic biomarker of tissue damage. Furthermore, DBP can be converted into a powerful macrophage-activating factor (DBP-MAF) through the sequential deglycosylation of its carbohydrate moiety by enzymes on the surface of B- and T-lymphocytes. DBP-MAF enhances the phagocytic and tumoricidal activity of macrophages, directly linking the vitamin D system to cellular immunity. DBP also acts as a co-chemotactic factor for neutrophils, amplifying the inflammatory cascade in response to complement C5a. Proteomic profiling in various inflammatory conditions has consistently identified DBP as a protein whose levels or modifications are altered, correlating with disease severity and cytokine profiles.

The direct link between DBP and insulin signaling is less well-established, but indirect connections can be inferred through its modulation of vitamin D bioavailability and inflammation. By controlling the concentration of "free" or unbound vitamin D metabolites, DBP influences the amount of substrate available for local conversion to calcitriol in tissues like adipose and muscle, which could in turn affect local insulin sensitivity. Moreover, by modulating the inflammatory milieu, DBP can indirectly impact insulin resistance, as chronic inflammation is a known driver of impaired insulin signaling. Proteomic studies in metabolic diseases like non-alcoholic fatty liver disease have shown correlations between DBP levels and the degree of metabolic disturbance, including insulin resistance. Therefore, DBP stands as a key proteomic node, integrating vitamin D transport, immune modulation, and inflammatory responses, all of which are central pathways in the development and progression of T2D.

Metabolomics Research Findings

Metabolomics, the comprehensive analysis of small-molecule metabolites in a biological system, offers a dynamic snapshot of the physiological state and provides powerful insights into the metabolic dysregulation underlying T2D. This approach has been instrumental in identifying novel biomarkers and elucidating metabolic pathways that are altered years before the clinical onset of the disease. A consistent and robust finding from numerous metabolomic studies is the association of elevated circulating levels of branched-chain amino acids (BCAAs; leucine, isoleucine, and valine) and aromatic amino acids (phenylalanine and tyrosine) with an increased risk of future T2D. These amino acid signatures are thought to reflect and contribute to insulin resistance, potentially by interfering with insulin signal-

ing and promoting mitochondrial stress. Metabolomic profiling has also revealed widespread disturbances in lipid metabolism, including alterations in specific species of acylcarnitines, glycerophospholipids, and sphingolipids, which are linked to impaired fatty acid oxidation and lipotoxicity.

The influence of vitamin D status on the metabolome is an emerging area of research that directly connects it to T2D-related pathways. Studies have shown that vitamin D insufficiency is associated with distinct metabolic profiles. For instance, lower vitamin D levels have been linked to alterations in lipid metabolism, including higher concentrations of short-chain fatty acids and lower levels of certain glycerophospholipids. Importantly, vitamin D supplementation has been shown to modulate these profiles. In older adults, supplementation led to a decrease in acylcarnitine concentrations, suggesting an improvement in mitochondrial function and lipid oxidation, which could be protective against the metabolic stress that drives insulin resistance. Other studies have identified metabolites such as serine and betaine as being influenced by vitamin D status, with these metabolites also being independently associated with T2D risk. This suggests that one mechanism through which vitamin D may exert its protective effects is by favorably altering the metabolic milieu.

Integrated metabolomic and genomic approaches, such as Mendelian randomization, have further strengthened the causal inference for certain metabolites in T2D. These studies have identified metabolites related to the urea cycle, such as creatine, as being causally linked to T2D and its cardiovascular complications. This points to disturbances in ammonia detoxification and energy metabolism as key pathogenic events. Ethnic-specific metabolomic studies have also highlighted the heterogeneity of T2D. For example, research in Tibetan Chinese individuals with T2D revealed dysregulation in phenylalanine metabolism and arachidonic acid metabolism, the latter of which produces pro-inflammatory eicosanoids that can exacerbate insulin resistance. The application of machine learning algorithms to complex metabolomics data has enhanced the ability to identify predictive biomarker panels for T2D, with metabolites like phenylactate, taurine, and cysteine emerging as important contributors to predictive models. These findings collectively illustrate that T2D is characterized by a complex metabolic signature involving interconnected pathways of amino acid, lipid, and energy metabolism, and that vitamin D status is a significant modulator of these pathways.

Health Disparities and Social Determinants of Health

Populations of African ancestry, particularly African Americans, face a stark and persistent disparity in the prevalence of both vitamin D deficiency and T2D. This dual burden is not a coincidence but rather the result of a complex interplay between biological predispositions, environmental exposures, and deeply entrenched social and systemic inequities. The most significant biological factor contributing to vitamin D deficiency in this population is skin pigmentation. Melanin, which is more abundant in darker skin, is a highly effective natural sunscreen that absorbs UVB radiation. While this provides protection against skin cancer, it significantly reduces the skin’s capacity to synthesize vitamin D3. Consequently, individuals of African ancestry require much longer sun exposure than their fair-skinned counterparts to produce the same amount of vitamin D, a challenge that is compounded for those living at higher latitudes where UVB radiation is less intense, especially during winter months. National survey data from the United States reveals the magnitude of this disparity: approximately 75% of non-Hispanic Black Americans have vitamin D deficiency (serum 25(OH)D <20 ng/mL), compared to about 20% of non-Hispanic Whites. Severe deficiency (<10 ng/mL) is over 15 times more prevalent in Black Americans.

This high prevalence of vitamin D deficiency is a significant contributor to health disparities, as it is linked to an increased risk for a host of chronic conditions that disproportionately affect African Americans, including T2D, cardiovascular disease, certain cancers, and adverse pregnancy outcomes. The incidence of T2D is nearly twice as high in African Americans as in non-Hispanic Whites, and they are

also more likely to suffer from severe complications of the disease. While the link between vitamin D and T2D is multifactorial, the chronic deficiency experienced by a majority of the African American population likely exacerbates the underlying pathophysiology of insulin resistance and beta-cell dysfunction.

These biological vulnerabilities are amplified by social determinants of health (SDOH)—the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age. Systemic factors such as lower socioeconomic status, residential segregation into neighborhoods with limited access to healthy foods (food deserts), fewer safe spaces for physical activity, and reduced access to quality healthcare create an environment that promotes both T2D and vitamin D deficiency. Lower consumption of vitamin D-fortified foods like dairy, which can be related to both access and higher rates of lactose intolerance, further limits dietary intake. The cumulative stress associated with systemic racism and discrimination also contributes to chronic inflammation and metabolic dysregulation, worsening disease risk. Therefore, the health disparities observed in African ancestry populations cannot be attributed to a single cause but are the product of a synergistic interaction between genetic and biological factors, like skin pigmentation and vitamin D metabolism, and the pervasive influence of adverse social and environmental conditions. Addressing these disparities requires a multi-pronged approach that includes targeted public health interventions, such as promoting vitamin D supplementation, alongside broader policy changes aimed at dismantling systemic inequities.

Existing Multi-Omics Studies and Integrated Analysis

The complexity of the relationship between vitamin D and T2D, particularly within the context of African ancestry, necessitates a systems-level approach that moves beyond single-domain analyses. Multi-omics integration, which combines data from genomics, proteomics, metabolomics, and other molecular layers, provides a more holistic and powerful framework for understanding disease mechanisms, identifying causal pathways, and discovering robust biomarkers. By examining the flow of biological information from the genetic blueprint (genomics) to functional protein machinery (proteomics) and downstream metabolic output (metabolomics), researchers can construct a more complete picture of how vitamin D status influences T2D pathophysiology.

Integrated multi-omics studies in T2D have begun to reveal how these different biological layers interact. For example, by combining GWAS data with metabolomic profiles, researchers can use techniques like Mendelian randomization (MR) to infer causal relationships between specific metabolites and T2D risk. MR studies have provided strong evidence that genetically elevated levels of BCAAs are causally associated with an increased risk of T2D. When vitamin D is incorporated into this framework, multi-omics analyses can test whether genetic variants that influence vitamin D levels are associated with changes in the metabolome that, in turn, affect T2D risk. Such studies have shown that higher vitamin D status is associated with a metabolic signature indicative of reduced T2D risk, including favorable changes in bile acid and fatty acid metabolism.

Proteomic data adds another critical layer of functional information. Integrated analyses can link genetic variants (e.g., in the GC gene) to variations in DBP protein levels and isoforms (proteomics), and then connect these protein-level changes to downstream metabolic profiles and ultimate disease risk. This hierarchical approach allows for the tracing of a potential causal chain from gene to protein to metabolite to disease. For instance, a multi-omics analysis might reveal that a specific GC variant common in African ancestry populations leads to a DBP isoform with lower binding affinity, resulting in altered free vitamin D levels, which in turn modulates inflammatory protein expression (e.g., cytokines) and shifts the metabolic profile towards one that promotes insulin resistance.

Advanced computational methods, including machine learning and network-based approaches, are essential for integrating these large, heterogeneous datasets. These tools can identify complex patterns and interactions that would be missed by traditional statistical methods. For example, deep-learning models can integrate multi-omics data to uncover novel associations between drug exposures, molecular signatures, and disease outcomes, potentially identifying how vitamin D status might modify the response to T2D medications like metformin. While multi-omics studies specifically focused on the vitamin D-T2D axis in African ancestry populations are still nascent, the existing research in broader T2D cohorts demonstrates the immense potential of this approach. By applying an integrated multi-omics strategy, future research can move beyond simple correlation to elucidate the precise molecular mechanisms through which vitamin D deficiency contributes to the disproportionate burden of T2D in this population.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite the growing body of evidence linking vitamin D to T2D, significant research gaps remain, particularly concerning populations of African ancestry. These gaps limit our ability to draw definitive conclusions and develop effective, targeted interventions. A primary and overarching limitation is the profound underrepresentation of individuals of African ancestry in large-scale genetic and clinical studies. The vast majority of GWAS and randomized controlled trials (RCTs) have been conducted in populations of European descent, meaning that findings, including genetic risk scores and optimal vitamin D thresholds, may not be generalizable. This ancestry-anchored bias can lead to the misinterpretation of risk and the overlooking of ancestry-specific genetic variants and gene-environment interactions that are critical for understanding disease in this population.

A second major gap lies in the standardization and interpretation of vitamin D biomarkers. The “vitamin D paradox” in African Americans—where low total 25(OH)D levels coexist with robust bone health—suggests that total 25(OH)D may not be the optimal biomarker of vitamin D status in this group. The role of DBP genetics, free versus total 25(OH)D, and the contribution of vitamin D2 versus D3 are poorly understood and require further investigation to establish ethnicity-specific thresholds for deficiency and sufficiency. Furthermore, RCTs of vitamin D supplementation have yielded inconsistent results, often because they failed to enroll participants with true baseline deficiency or did not stratify analyses by ancestry, thereby diluting potential effects in high-risk subgroups.

Future research must be intentionally designed to close these gaps. The foremost priority is to increase the inclusion of diverse African ancestry populations (including African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and continental Africans) in all levels of research, from large-scale genomic and multi-omics cohorts to clinical trials. This will enable the discovery of ancestry-specific genetic loci and the development of more accurate polygenic risk scores. Future studies should employ a multi-omics framework to integrate data from genomics, proteomics, and metabolomics in a hierarchical fashion. This will allow for the elucidation of causal pathways from genetic predisposition (e.g., GC variants) to functional changes (e.g., DBP levels and inflammatory proteins) to metabolic signatures (e.g., BCAA and lipid profiles) and finally to clinical endpoints (T2D incidence).

Future clinical trials of vitamin D supplementation should specifically target populations with a high prevalence of both vitamin D deficiency and prediabetes, such as African ancestry males. These trials must be designed with adequate statistical power, stratify participants by baseline 25(OH)D levels and relevant genetic markers, and investigate optimal dosing strategies. Research should also explore gene-diet interactions, examining how dietary patterns and vitamin D intake modulate genetic risk for T2D. Ultimately, the goal is to move towards a precision medicine approach, where interventions can be tailored to an individual’s unique genetic, molecular, and metabolic profile. This requires a concerted, multidisciplinary effort to conduct inclusive research that can translate into equitable public

health strategies and clinical guidelines to mitigate the disproportionate burden of T2D in African ancestry populations.

Conclusion

The evidence synthesized in this review establishes a strong, multifaceted correlation between vitamin D status and Type 2 Diabetes, a relationship that is particularly salient for males of African ancestry who bear a disproportionate burden of both conditions. The biological plausibility is robust, with vitamin D directly influencing core T2D pathophysiological processes, including pancreatic beta-cell function, insulin sensitivity, and systemic inflammation, through well-defined molecular mechanisms mediated by the vitamin D receptor. Genetic studies have identified ancestry-specific polymorphisms in key vitamin D pathway genes, such as GC and CYP27B1, that contribute to the high prevalence of vitamin D deficiency in African ancestry populations and may independently modulate T2D risk. Findings from genomics, proteomics, and metabolomics are beginning to converge, painting a picture where genetic variants influence protein function (e.g., DBP) and alter metabolic profiles (e.g., amino acids and lipids) in ways that connect vitamin D metabolism directly to the pathways of glucose dysregulation. However, the current body of research is hampered by significant gaps, most notably the underrepresentation of African ancestry populations in major clinical and genetic studies and inconsistencies in the results of supplementation trials. To move forward, a dedicated research agenda focused on this high-risk population is imperative. By leveraging integrated multi-omics approaches in diverse cohorts and conducting well-designed clinical trials, it will be possible to elucidate causal mechanisms and develop targeted, evidence-based strategies for prevention and treatment, ultimately addressing a critical health disparity.

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