



Investigating the role of blood metabolites as biomarkers of cognitive function and dementia in the British 1946 birth cohort

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INTRODUCTION

- Cognitive function is a key predictor of dementia. With a long prodromal phase, the identification of early biomarkers that are easy to routinely measure is urgently required [1].
- Metabolites provide a snapshot into the physiological status of an individual and could present as a minimally invasive and modifiable solution to this problem [2].
- Metabolic dysfunctions have been reported in dementia, but life course influences and causality are rarely interrogated and replication has proved challenging [3:6].
- Participants of the longitudinal MRC 1946 National Survey of Health and Development (NSHD) are now at an age where dementia pathology is likely to be accumulating, providing an opportunity to identify early biomarkers.

This study aimed to evaluate the associations between circulating metabolites and cognitive function and decline at ages 60-64 and 69 in the NSHD cohort, exploring the influence of lifecourse factors.

METHODS

- Participants:** The MRC NSHD initially consisted of 5362 individuals born in March 1946. Metabolite data and complete cognitive function measures at age 60-64 were available for 1742 participants.
- Metabolomics:** Levels of 1542 metabolites were quantified at age 60-64 using liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry. Metabolites with >20% missing data were excluded, leaving 1019 metabolites. Remaining missing data was imputed.
- Cognition measures:** **Ages 60-64** – short-term verbal memory, delayed verbal memory, visual processing speed. **Age 69** – delayed verbal memory, visual processing speed, Addenbrooke's Cognitive Examination-III (ACE-III) (clinically used to screen for cognitive impairment).
- Statistical analyses:** Linear regressions models were performed between metabolites and cognition measures, adjusting for the following covariates presented in Figure 1. A metabolome-wide significance threshold was set to P<0.00011.

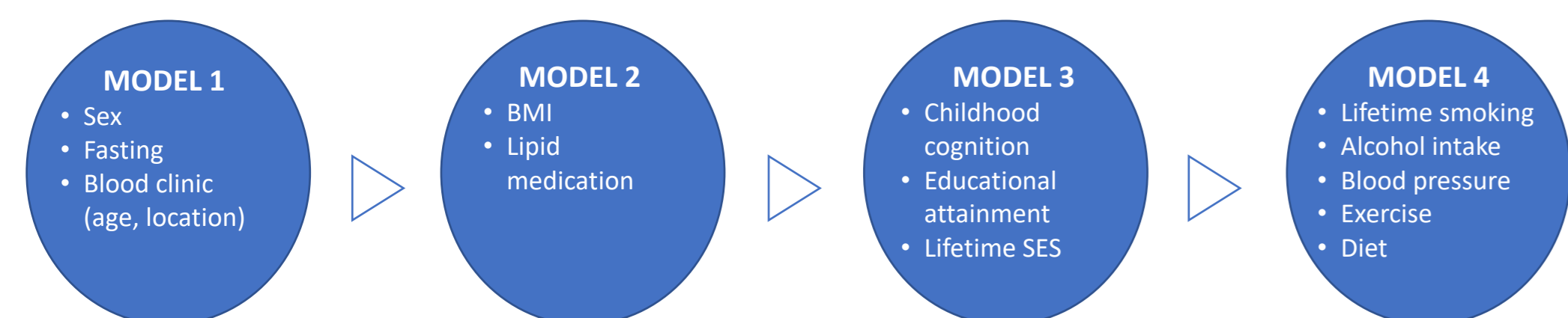


Figure 1. Summary of covariates used for each statistical model. SES = socioeconomic status.

- Two-sample mendelian randomisation (MR):** Significant metabolites were taken forward for MR analysis using publicly available metabolite (exposure) [7] and cognition (outcome) [8] GWAS summary statistics. MR methods included inverse variance weighted and robust methods (MR egger, weighted median, weighted mode).

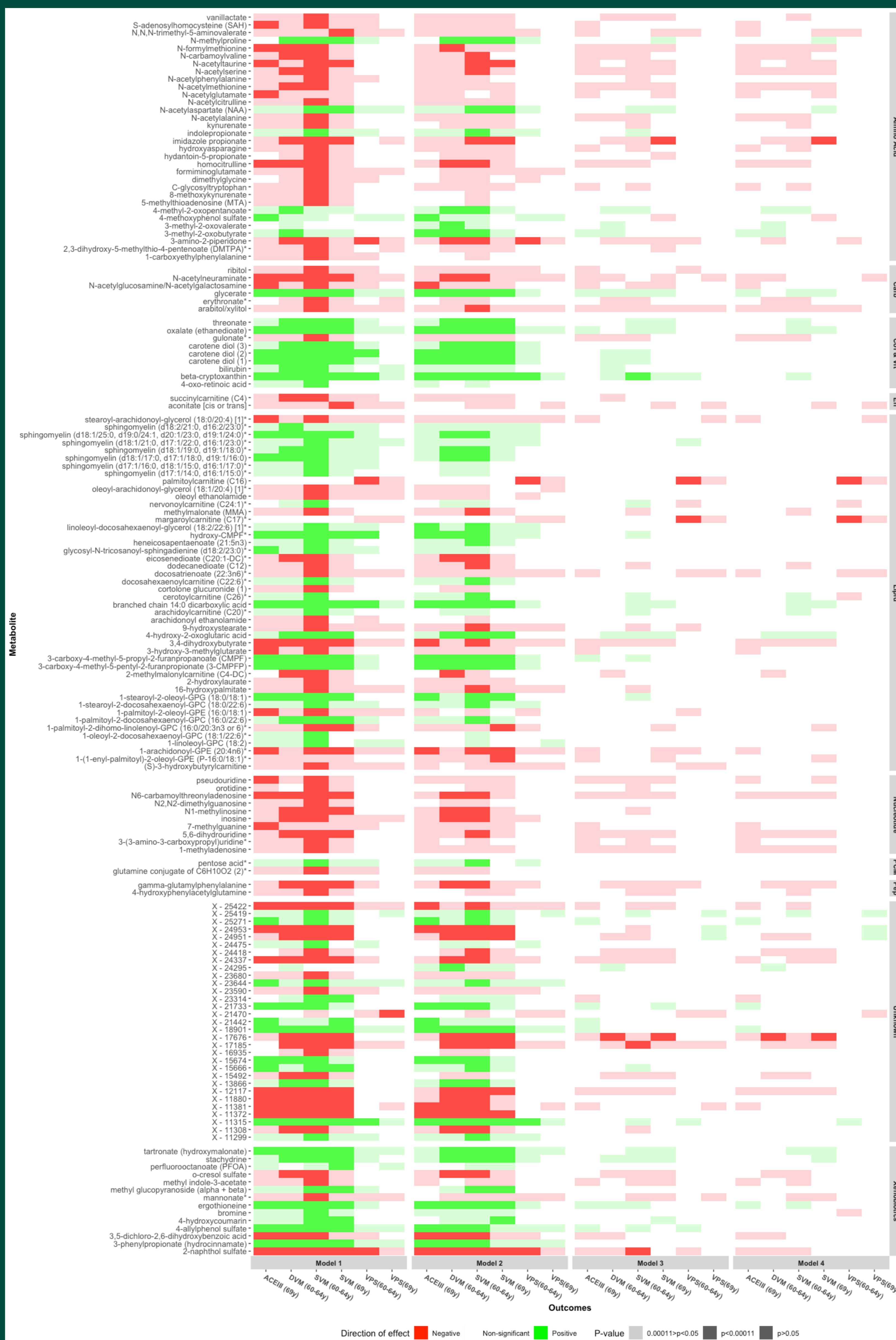


Figure 3. Bar plot demonstrating the top biological pathways implicated.



HIGHLIGHTS

- Similar metabolites and effect directions are seen across memory measures and clinically significant cognitive impairment 5-9 years later.
- Key metabolite families – amino acids, lipids, nucleotides.
- Many associations attenuate when adjusting for early life influences.
- No evidence of causal associations thus far.

Figure 2 (LEFT). Heat map of associations between the 154 metabolites and cognitive outcomes in models 1-4. Panel colours represent the direction of effect and colour intensity represents p-value. Metabolites with an unadjusted p>.05 are displayed in white.

Carb = carbohydrates, Cof & Vit = cofactors & vitamins, En = energy, PCM = partially characterised molecules, Pep = peptides. ACE-III = Addenbrooke's Cognitive Examination-III, DVM = delayed verbal memory, SVM = short-term verbal memory, VPS = visual processing speed

RESULTS

- OBSERVATIONAL:** 154 metabolites were associated with cognitive outcomes in model 1 (p<0.00011) (Figure 2).
- Similar metabolites were associated with short-term and delayed verbal memory at ages 60-64 and 69, and the ACE-III.
- Many associations appear to be mediated by childhood cognition, educational attainment and socioeconomic status (Figure 2).
- KEY PATHWAYS:** fatty acids, sphingomyelins, food/plant intake, unknown (Figure 3).
- MR ANALYSIS:** analysis still in progress. Many metabolites identified have insufficient instrument strength for MR analyses.
- Initial results indicate no casual effect of erythronate, succinylcarnitine or X-11315 on cognitive function (Table 1).

	beta	se	pval
Erythronate	0.21	0.15	0.17
Succinylcarnitine	-0.06	0.14	0.65
X-11315	0.10	0.08	0.20

Table 1. Inverse variance weighted MR results.

CONCLUSION

- We identified 154 metabolites linked to cognitive function, including cognitive impairment 5-9 years later.
- These findings are in line with previous research, highlighting sphingomyelins, amino acids and fatty acids in cognitive function, and bringing new pathways to our attention [3,4,6]. This suggests new interventional targets and mechanistic insights for exploration.
- Most associations do not remain following adjustment for childhood cognition and educational attainment, demonstrating the importance of adopting a combined systems biology and lifecourse approach in biomarker discovery [1,6].
- Metabolites could present as promising biomarkers of early cognitive changes relevant to dementia, but replication is required to validate these findings.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Are there sex and APOE-specific associations between metabolites and cognitive function and decline?
- Are these metabolites able to predict individuals that will be above or below the ACE-III threshold for clinically significant cognitive impairment?

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