

Original Research Article

Alcohol consumption and molecular subtypes of colorectal cancer: pooled observational and Mendelian randomization analyses



Christos V Chalitsios^{1,*†}, Wing Ching Chan^{2,†}, Georgios Markozannes^{1,2}, Elom K Aglago², Sonja I Berndt³, Daniel D Buchanan^{4,5,6}, Peter T Campbell⁷, Yin Cao^{8,9,10}, Niki Dimou¹¹, David A Drew^{12,13}, Amy J French¹⁴, Steven Gallinger¹⁵, Peter Georgeson^{4,5}, Marios Giannakis^{16,17}, Stephen B Gruber¹⁸, Marc J Gunter^{2,11}, Tabitha A Harrison¹⁸, Hermann Brenner¹⁹, Michael Hoffmeister¹⁹, Mary-Jose Urruchúa-Rodríguez^{19,20}, Li Hsu^{18,21}, Wen-Yi Huang³, Meredith AJ Hullar¹⁸, Jeroen R Huyghe¹⁸, Mark A Jenkins²², Harindra Jayasekara^{22,23}, Victor Moreno^{24,25,26,27}, Christina C Newton²⁸, Jonathan A Nowak²⁹, Mireia Obón-Santacana^{24,25,26}, Shuji Ogino^{17,29,30,31}, Andrew J Pellatt³², Anita Peoples²⁸, Conghui Qu¹⁸, Stephanie L Schmit^{33,34}, Robert S Steinfeldt¹⁸, Wei Sun¹⁸, Claire E Thomas¹⁸, Amanda E Toland³⁵, Quang M Trinh³⁶, Tomotaka Ugai^{29,30}, Caroline Y Um²⁸, Bethany Van Guelpen^{37,38}, Syed H Zaidi³⁶, Ulrike Peters^{18,39,‡}, Amanda I Phipps^{18,39,‡}, Konstantinos K Tsilidis^{1,2,‡}

¹ Department of Hygiene and Epidemiology, University of Ioannina, Ioannina, Greece; ² Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, School of Public Health, Imperial College London, London, United Kingdom; ³ Division of Cancer Epidemiology and Genetics, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, United States; ⁴ Colorectal Oncogenomics Group, Department of Clinical Pathology, Melbourne Medical School, The University of Melbourne, Parkville, Australia; ⁵ University of Melbourne Centre for Cancer Research, The University of Melbourne, Parkville, Australia; ⁶ Genomic Medicine and Family Cancer Clinic, The Royal Melbourne Hospital, Parkville, Australia; ⁷ Department of Epidemiology and Population Health, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, NY, United States; ⁸ Division of Public Health Sciences, Department of Surgery, Washington University School of Medicine, St Louis, MO, United States; ⁹ Alvin J. Siteman Cancer Center at Barnes-Jewish Hospital and Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis, MO, United States; ¹⁰ Division of Gastroenterology, Department of Medicine, Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis, MO, United States; ¹¹ Nutrition and Metabolism Branch, International Agency for Research on Cancer, Lyon, France; ¹² Division of Gastroenterology, Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, United States; ¹³ Clinical and Translational Epidemiology Unit, Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, United States; ¹⁴ Division of Laboratory Genetics, Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN, United States; ¹⁵ Lunenfeld-Tanenbaum Research Institute, Sinai Health System, Toronto, ON, Canada; ¹⁶ Department of Medical Oncology, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston, MA, United States; ¹⁷ Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, Cambridge, MA, United States; ¹⁸ Public Health Sciences Division, Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center, Seattle, WA, United States; ¹⁹ Division of Clinical Epidemiology and Aging Research, German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ), Heidelberg, Germany; ²⁰ Medical Faculty, University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany; ²¹ Department of Biostatistics, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, United States; ²² Centre for Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia; ²³ Cancer Epidemiology Division, Cancer Council Victoria, Melbourne, Australia; ²⁴ Unit of Biomarkers and Susceptibility, Oncology Data Analytics Program, Catalan Institute of Oncology, L'Hospitalet del Llobregat, Barcelona, Spain; ²⁵ ONCOBELL Program, Bellvitge Biomedical Research Institute (IDIBELL), L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, Barcelona, Spain; ²⁶ Consortium for Biomedical Research in Epidemiology and Public Health (CIBERESP), Madrid, Spain; ²⁷ Department of Clinical Sciences, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences and Universitat de Barcelona Institute of Complex Systems, University of Barcelona, L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, Barcelona, Spain; ²⁸ Department of Population Science, American Cancer Society, Atlanta, GA, United States; ²⁹ Program in MPE Molecular Pathological Epidemiology, Department of Pathology, Brigham and Women's

Abbreviations: BRAF, B-Raf proto-oncogene, serine/threonine kinase; CI, confidence interval; CCFR, Colon Cancer Family Registry; CIMP, CpG island methylator phenotype; CPS-II, Cancer Prevention Study II; CRC, colorectal cancer; DACHS, Darmkrebs: Chancen der Verhütung durch Screening Study; DALs, Diet, Activity and Lifestyle Study; EPIC, European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition; GECCO, Genetics and Epidemiology of Colorectal Cancer Consortium; GWAS, genome-wide association study; HPFS, Health Professionals Follow-up Study; HR, hazard ratio; IVW, inverse variance-weighted; KRAS, KRAS proto-oncogene, GTPase; MCCS, Melbourne Collaborative Cohort Study; MR, Mendelian randomization; MSI, microsatellite instability; NFCCR, Newfoundland Familial Colorectal Cancer Registry; NHS, Nurses' Health Study; NSHDS, Northern Sweden Health and Disease Study; OR, odds ratio; SNP, single-nucleotide polymorphism.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: christos.chalitsios@uoi.gr (C.V. Chalitsios).

†CVC and WCC joint first authors.

‡UP, AIP, and KKT joint senior authors.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajcnut.2026.101308>

Received 4 August 2025; Received in revised form 25 March 2026; Accepted 1 April 2026; Available online 22 April 2026

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Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, United States;³⁰ Department of Epidemiology, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Harvard University, Boston, MA, United States;³¹ Institute of Science Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan;³² Department of Medicine, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA.;³³ Genomic Medicine Institute, Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland, OH, United States;³⁴ Population and Cancer Prevention Program, Case Comprehensive Cancer Center, Cleveland, OH, United States;³⁵ Department of Cancer Biology and Genetics, The Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center, College of Medicine, The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center, Columbus, OH, United States;³⁶ Ontario Institute for Cancer Research, Toronto, ON, Canada;³⁷ Department of Diagnostics and Intervention, Oncology Unit, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden;³⁸ Wallenberg Centre for Molecular Medicine, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden;³⁹ Department of Epidemiology, University of Washington School of Public Health, Seattle, WA, United States

ABSTRACT

Background: Alcohol consumption is associated with colorectal cancer (CRC) risk, yet its association with distinct molecular subtypes remains unclear. Clarifying this could reveal insights into alcohol's carcinogenic mechanisms.

Objectives: We examined the association between alcohol consumption and the risk of CRC subtypes defined by individual tumor markers (and marker combinations), namely microsatellite instability (MSI) status, CpG island methylator phenotype (CIMP) status, *BRAF*, and *KRAS* mutations.

Methods: Pooled observational ($n_{\text{cases}} = 11,826$, $n_{\text{controls}} = 10,888$; $n_{\text{studies}} = 10$) and genome-wide association data ($n_{\text{cases}} = 8178$, $n_{\text{controls}} = 10,472$; $n_{\text{studies}} = 10$) were used. Multivariable logistic regression models and Mendelian randomization (MR) analyses were conducted to assess the association between alcohol consumption, modeled in MR as genetically predicted mean drinks per week per 1 SD increase (≈ 2.9 drinks/wk), and risk of CRC subtypes defined by individual tumor markers (and marker combinations). Case-only analyses tested for differences between molecular subtypes. Bonferroni correction was applied for multiple tests.

Results: Among drinkers, each additional 14 g/d of alcohol was associated with a 10% higher CRC risk [odds ratio (OR) = 1.10; 95% confidence interval (CI): 1.07, 1.13], but this association was primarily driven by heavy alcohol consumption (>28 g/d). Including nondrinkers revealed a J-shaped association (P -nonlinearity = 0.002). The associations with higher alcohol consumption were stronger in males compared with females. No significant heterogeneity was observed across MSI, CIMP, *BRAF*, or *KRAS*-defined subtypes. All associations were similar across smoking status, folate intake, tumor anatomical site, study design, early/late-onset CRC, and across individual studies (P -heterogeneity > 0.05). MR analyses supported that higher genetically predicted alcohol consumption was associated with CRC risk (OR_{IVW-per 1SD} = 1.25; 95% CI: 1.01, 1.57), but similarly to the observational analysis, without evidence of heterogeneity across molecular subtypes.

Conclusions: Heavy alcohol consumption may initiate colorectal carcinogenesis through mechanisms that operate across all examined molecular pathways for CRC. Although the largest available data were used, power is lower for subtype heterogeneity analyses, and modest interaction effects cannot be excluded.

Keywords: alcohol, colorectal cancer, subtypes, GECCO, CCFR, molecular epidemiology

Introduction

Colorectal cancer (CRC) is among the most common cancers and contributes substantially to cancer-related mortality [1]. A key strategy for CRC prevention involves identifying modifiable lifestyle factors that influence disease risk. The International Agency for Research on Cancer classified alcoholic beverages as carcinogenic to humans (group 1) based on sufficient evidence of causality for CRC [2]. Epigenome-wide association studies have shown that alcohol consumption can alter DNA methylation in both blood and tissues [3,4]. Aberrant DNA methylation, an epigenetic mechanism that regulates gene expression, has also been implicated in the development of CRC [5]. Moreover, alcohol may interact with genetic polymorphisms in susceptibility genes, contributing to CRC tumorigenesis [6].

CRC is characterized by significant genetic and epigenetic diversity [7]. Detailed molecular characterization of CRC using clinically relevant genetic and epigenetic markers shows great potential for improving prognosis [8] and guiding treatment decisions [9]. *KRAS* proto-oncogene, GTPase (*KRAS*) mutations occur in $\sim 30\%$ – 40% of sporadic CRC and are implicated in adenoma progression [10]. Microsatellite instability (MSI), found in $\sim 15\%$ of CRCs, is associated with a better prognosis [11]. Some MSI-high tumors also exhibit the CpG island methylator phenotype (CIMP) and B-Raf proto-oncogene, serine/threonine kinase (*BRAF*) p.V600E mutations [7]. The latter phenotype is associated with a worse prognosis [12]. *BRAF* mutations predict a response to encorafenib plus cetuximab [13,14]; *KRAS* and *BRAF* mutations indicate a poor response to epidermal growth factor receptor inhibitors [15,16], and MSI-high status predicts a response to immunotherapy [17,18].

Although several studies have assessed whether established risk factors—including smoking, obesity, and diabetes—are differentially associated with CRC molecular subtypes [19–21], the role of alcohol consumption across these subtypes remains inadequately investigated. To date, over 10 studies have evaluated alcohol consumption in relation to CRC molecular characteristics; however, only 3 have been published in the past 12 y, and the results have been inconsistent [22–34]. In the largest and most recent study—a German case-control study, which is included in the present analysis, consisting of ~ 2500 CRC cases with molecular subtype information—no significant heterogeneity was observed for associations between alcohol consumption and CRC risk by *BRAF*, *KRAS*, CIMP, or MSI status (all P -heterogeneity > 0.05) [23]. However, the categorization of alcohol consumption was binary (≤ 24.6 g/d (reference group) compared with > 24.6 g/d), precluding a nuanced understanding of dose–response associations. Moreover, the study did not distinguish nondrinkers, who may include individuals abstaining for health reasons, from light drinkers, limiting the ability to observe potential differential associations. Earlier studies employed more detailed categorizations of alcohol consumption but were constrained by small numbers of cases within molecular subtypes—often < 600 cases per subtype—and particularly low numbers of participants with higher alcohol consumption [e.g., < 20 cases consuming > 1 drink per day (14 g/d)], limiting statistical power and the precision of the estimates.

To address these limitations, we conducted a pooled observational analysis and a 2-sample Mendelian randomization (MR) analysis leveraging data from 2 large, well-characterized consortia—the Genetics and Epidemiology of Colorectal Cancer Consortium (GECCO) and the Colon Cancer Family Registry (CCFR)—to examine the association

between alcohol consumption and CRC risk across molecular subtypes defined by MSI, CIMP, and *BRAF* and *KRAS* mutation status.

Methods

Observational analysis

Study population

This study included CRC cases and controls nested within 6 cohorts [Cancer Prevention Study II (CPS-II) [35,36], Nurses' Health Study (NHS) [37], Health Professionals Follow-up Study (HPFS), European Prospective Investigation into Cancer (EPIC) Sweden [38], Melbourne Collaborative Cohort Study (MCCS) [39], Northern Sweden Health and Disease Study (NSHDS) [40]] and 4 case-control studies [Darmkrebs: Chancen der Verhütung durch Screening Study (DACHS) [41,42], Diet, Activity and Lifestyle Study (DALs) [43,44], CCFR Australia, Ontario, Seattle [45], and Newfoundland Familial Colorectal Cancer Registry (NFCCR) [46]]. These studies are part of the GECCO and the CCFR and contributed data on tumor molecular markers and alcohol consumption. CRC cases were defined as colorectal adenocarcinoma and confirmed via pathological records, medical records, and/or death certificate information. Additional information on the contributing studies is provided in the Supplements (Supplemental Table 1 and Appendix 1). All participants provided written informed consent, and each study was approved by the relevant institutional review or ethics committee.

Data harmonization and exposure definition

The cohort studies collected sociodemographic and lifestyle information at baseline through in-person interviews or structured self-administered questionnaires. In case-control studies, this information was gathered from cases and controls with reference to the period 1–2 y before enrolment. Dietary variables were ascertained using food frequency questionnaires. A multistep iterative data-harmonization procedure was applied, reconciling each study's unique protocols and data collection instruments [8,47,48]. Multiple quality-control checks were performed, and outlying values of variables were truncated to the minimum or maximum value of an established range for each variable. Variables were combined into a single dataset with standardized definitions, coding, and permissible values.

The exposure of interest was alcohol consumption, assessed using food frequency questionnaires and diet histories [49–51]. Participants were subsequently categorized into nondrinkers (≤ 1 g/d accounting for trace alcohol from fermented foods), light (< 7 g/d), moderate (7–28 g/d), and heavy (> 28 g/d) drinkers, following the definitions used by the National Center for Health Statistics of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. An intake of 14 g of alcohol per day is approximately equivalent to 1 standard alcoholic drink.

Tumor molecular subtypes of CRC

Testing for MSI, CIMP, and mutations in the *BRAF* and *KRAS* genes was conducted previously by each study and according to individual study protocols (Appendix 2). Briefly, MSI testing was primarily conducted using polymerase chain reaction following accepted guidelines (CCFR, CPS-II, MCCS, HPFS, and NHS) [52], with ≥ 4 interpretable markers typically required to classify tumors. DALs and DACHS used a mononucleotide panel of 3 and 2 markers, respectively. Tumors were classified as MSI-high if $\geq 30\%$ of the markers showed instability. Other studies used immunohistochemistry for the correlated DNA mismatch repair proteins (NSHDS, EPIC Sweden, and subsets of

CCFR and MCCS). Studies assessed *BRAF* and *KRAS* mutations using polymerase chain reaction, sequencing, and immunohistochemistry. Most studies evaluated *BRAF* c.1799T>A (p.V600E) mutations in exon 15 and *KRAS* mutations in codons 12 and 13, although any mutation identified by 1 of the studies in the *BRAF* and *KRAS* genes was included. CIMP status was determined using methylation analyses. The CCFR, CPS-II, HPFS, MCCS, NSHDS, EPIC Sweden, and NHS used MethyLight to determine CIMP status. CPS-II, HPFS, NSHDS, EPIC Sweden, and NHS used an 8-gene panel [53]; CCFR, DACHS, and MCCS used a 5-gene panel [54], and DALs determined CIMP status using a classic panel of CpG islands [55,56]. Additionally, we combined markers to create subtype classifications: subtypes 1–5 were created according to the Jass classification [57], and types 6–16 were numbered consecutively by the status of MSI, CIMP, *BRAF*, and *KRAS*.

Statistical analysis

Alcohol consumption was analyzed continuously (per 14 g/d) and categorically, as defined above. Logistic regression analysis was used to estimate the association between alcohol consumption and overall CRC. To assess potential nonlinear association, a logistic regression model with restricted cubic splines was also fitted. Knots were placed at the fifth, 50th, and 95th percentiles of alcohol consumption, with the median (50th percentile) serving as the reference point. Multinomial logistic regression models were used to estimate the relative risk ratio (RRR) for the association between alcohol consumption and CRC molecular subtypes (compared with controls) defined by tumor markers (MSI-high compared with microsatellite stable/MSI-low, CIMP-high compared with low/negative, and *BRAF* or *KRAS* mutated compared with wild type). To test for heterogeneity between subtypes, case-only multivariable logistic regression models were used. The multivariable models included study, age (continuous and years), sex (males and females), smoking status (never, former, and current smokers), BMI (continuous and kg/m²), and education (less than high school graduate, high school graduate, some college, and college graduate). We also examined the above, considering Jass types instead of each molecular subtype for those subtypes with ≥ 50 cases.

To reduce potential bias from including nondrinkers (who may differ systematically from drinkers) [58], our primary analysis was restricted to current drinkers. The analysis included only participants with complete information. Separate analyses were conducted by study design (cohort, case-control studies), sex, smoking status, folate intake, CRC anatomical site (colon, rectum), and across the 10 included studies. Two sensitivity analyses were conducted to evaluate the robustness of our findings. First, we further adjusted our main model for diabetes, physical activity, total folate intake, and red and processed meat. Second, we reran all the above analyses, including nondrinkers. We applied a Bonferroni-corrected *P* value threshold of 0.004 [0.05/12 tests: 4 molecular markers $\times$ 3 groups (males, females, and combined)] and 0.002 [0.05/30 tests: 10 Jass types $\times$ 3 groups (males, females, and combined)] to assess statistical significance in primary subtype and Jass type analyses, respectively. For analyses, including overall CRC and subgroup evaluations, a 2-sided *P* value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant. Analyses were performed using R v4.3.1 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing).

Mendelian randomization

Alcohol consumption and selection of genetic instruments

Genetic instruments for alcohol consumption were selected from the genome-wide association study (GWAS) by Liu et al. [59], which

included 941,280 individuals of European ancestry. Assessment of alcohol intake varied across studies included in the GWAS, typically asking about mean weekly intake over the past week or year. Alcohol consumption was therefore harmonized and defined as the mean number of drinks per week (combining all beverage types) and log-transformed before GWAS analysis to reduce the influence of outliers and minimize undue leverage on model estimates. One SD corresponds to ~2.9 drinks per week. We used genome-wide significant ($P < 5 \times 10^{-8}$), independent ($r^2 < 0.001$, clumping window: 10,000 kb) single-nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) associated with the phenotype. SNPs were harmonized with the outcome dataset, ensuring alignment of effect alleles and removal of palindromic SNPs with intermediate allele frequencies. The strength of the instruments was evaluated using F-statistics, with all SNPs exceeding the conventional threshold of $F > 10$, minimizing the risk of weak instrument bias [60].

CRC and molecular subtypes

Summary data for CRC molecular subtypes were drawn from a GWAS meta-analysis of 10 studies with participants of European descent [CCFR [45], CPS-II [35,36], NHS [37], HPFS, DACHS [41,42], DALIS [43,44], Early Detection Research Network (EDRN) [61], EPIC Sweden [38], MCCS [39], NSHDS [40]] within the CCFR and the GECCO consortia (Supplemental Table 1). The current study included 10,472 controls and 8178 CRC cases with available information on the 4 molecular markers (Supplemental Tables 2 and 3). Polytomous regressions were performed for all Jass types and individual tumor markers, adjusting for age at diagnosis or selection, sex, GWAS set, and 3 principal components to account for underlying population structures.

Statistical analysis

The primary method was random-effects inverse variance-weighted (IVW) MR [62]. To account for potential horizontal pleiotropy, 2 MR sensitivity analyses (MR-Egger [63], weighted median [64]) were performed, each providing a valid MR estimate under different combinations of assumptions. We additionally implemented the MR pleiotropy residual sum and outlier test to detect and exclude potential outlying genetic variants [65]. Finally, the MR-accounting for Pleiotropy and Sample Structure (APSS) method was applied, which accounts for pleiotropy and sample structure using genome-wide summary statistics. It employs a foreground-background model to decompose observed SNP effect estimates, where the background component captures latent confounding, including polygenicity, correlated pleiotropy, and sample structure (e.g., population stratification, cryptic relatedness, and sample overlap), under linkage disequilibrium (LD) score regression assumptions. The foreground component is then used to estimate the causal effect while allowing for uncorrelated pleiotropy. MR analyses were performed using R v4.3.1 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing) and the “TwoSampleMR” and “MR-APSS” packages.

Results

Observational analysis

Study population characteristics

The study sample comprised 11,826 CRC cases and 10,888 controls from 10 observational studies (Table 1). Compared with controls, individuals with a CRC diagnosis were more likely to be former or current smokers (53.5% compared with 50.7%), obese (21.7%

compared with 16.2%), and to have a first-degree relative with CRC (21% compared with 10%). Among cases, 14.7% were MSI-H ($n = 1739$), 12.1% were CIMP-high ($n = 1431$), 10.9% were *BRAF* mutated ($n = 1285$), and 25.6% were *KRAS* mutated ($n = 3026$), with type 4 ($n = 3381$; 28.6%) being the most common Jass type. Compared with individuals without CRC, those with CRC were slightly more likely to report no alcohol consumption (40.2% compared with 37.2%) and heavy alcohol consumption (>28 g/d; 12.3% compared with 10.2%), and less likely to report moderate consumption of 7–28 g/d (21.3% compared with 24.9%). The characteristics by alcohol consumption category are also presented in Supplemental Table 4.

Alcohol consumption and molecular subtypes

Among drinkers, a 14 g/d increase (~1 drink/d) in alcohol consumption was linearly associated with a 10% higher risk of CRC [odds ratio (OR) = 1.10; 95% confidence interval (CI): 1.07, 1.13], with no evidence of nonlinearity (P -nonlinearity = 0.46) (Table 2 and Supplemental Figure 1A). When nondrinkers were included in the analysis, a J-shaped association was observed between alcohol consumption and overall CRC risk (P -nonlinearity = 0.002) (Supplemental Table 5 and Supplemental Figure 1B). Compared with light drinkers, both nondrinkers (OR = 1.11; 95% CI: 1.03, 1.20) and heavy drinkers (OR = 1.38; 95% CI: 1.24, 1.54) exhibited higher CRC risks, and light drinking was not associated with risk.

In both analyses, restricted to drinkers and including nondrinkers, alcohol consumption was positively associated with all examined molecular subtypes of CRC when compared with controls (Table 2 and Supplemental Table 5). Case-only heterogeneity tests showed no significant differences by any molecular subtype. The above associations did not vary by sex (Supplemental Table 5), smoking status (Supplemental Tables 6 and 7), folate intake (Supplemental Tables 8 and 9), tumor anatomical site (Supplemental Tables 10 and 11), study design (Supplemental Tables 12 and 13), across individual studies (Supplemental Table 14), or early/late-onset (Supplemental Table 15) (all P -interaction > 0.05). Further adjustment for additional potential confounders did not materially alter the results compared with the model with the initial adjustments (Supplemental Table 16).

Of the 16 possible combined CRC subtypes defined by MSI, CIMP, *BRAF*, and *KRAS* status, 10 subtypes had ≥ 50 cases and were included in the Jass classification analysis. When compared with controls, alcohol consumption (per 14 g/d increase) was associated with a higher risk of Jass types 3 (OR = 1.10; 95% CI: 1.05, 1.15), 4 (OR = 1.12; 95% CI: 1.09, 1.16), 9 (OR = 1.15; 95% CI: 1.03, 1.28), and 14 (OR = 1.31; 95% CI: 1.14, 1.50), with consistent finding across sexes. However, no heterogeneity was detected in case-only analyses across Jass subtypes, either in the sex-combined or sex-specific models, after correcting for multiple comparisons (P -heterogeneity > 0.002) (Figure 1).

MR analysis

Alcohol consumption and molecular subtypes

Thirty-seven SNPs were used as genetic instruments for alcohol consumption, with the F-statistics ranging from 28.4 to 964.4, indicating sufficient instrument strength. Higher genetically predicted alcohol intake per week (per 1-SD increase in log-transformed drinks per week) was associated with a higher overall CRC risk (OR_{IVW} = 1.25, 95% CI: 1.01, 1.57) (Figure 2A, Supplemental Table 17). When stratified by molecular subtypes, positive associations

TABLE 1

Baseline characteristics of cases and controls used in observational analysis

Characteristics	Cases (<i>n</i> = 11,826)	Controls (<i>n</i> = 10,888)
Study		
CCFR Australia	1349 (11.4)	179 (1.6)
CCFR Ontario	1708 (14.4)	1222 (11.2)
CCFR Seattle	1847 (15.6)	747 (6.9)
CPS-II	860 (7.3)	1003 (9.2)
DACHS	2009 (17)	2789 (25.6)
DALS	1095 (9.3)	1162 (10.7)
EPIC Sweden	146 (1.2)	381 (3.5)
HPFS	629 (5.3)	602 (5.5)
MCCS	490 (4.1)	674 (6.2)
NFCCR	573 (4.8)	472 (4.3)
NHS	793 (6.7)	1242 (11.4)
NSHDS	327 (2.8)	415 (3.8)
Age, ¹ mean (SD), y	62 (13)	66 (11)
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	140 (1.2)	<5
Sex		
Males	6117 (51.7)	5523 (50.7)
Females	5709 (48.3)	5365 (49.3)
Alcohol consumption, mean (SD), g/d	11 (21)	10 (16)
Nondrinker	4750 (40.2)	4048 (37.2)
<7 g/d (<0.5 drink/d)	2,555 (21.6)	2592 (23.8)
7–28 g/d (0.5–2 drinks/d)	5230 (21.3)	2716 (24.9)
>28 g/d (>2 drinks/d)	1451 (12.3)	1113 (10.2)
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	556 (4.7)	419 (3.8)
Smoking status		
Never smoker	4843 (41)	4999 (45.9)
Former smoker	4612 (39)	4345 (39.9)
Current smoker	1718 (14.5)	1181 (10.8)
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	653 (5.5)	363 (3.3)
BMI (kg/m ²)		
Mean (SD)	27.1 (4.9)	26.3 (4.3)
Underweight (<18.5)	138 (1.2)	99 (0.9)
Normal (18.5 to <24.9)	3953 (33.4)	4348 (39.9)
Overweight (25–30)	4798 (40.6)	4511 (41.4)
Obese (>30)	2561 (21.7)	1762 (16.2)
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	376 (3.2)	168 (1.5)
Dietary intake, mean (SD)		
Red meat (servings/d)	0.8 (0.6)	0.7 (0.6)
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	751 (6.4)	629 (5.8)
Processed meat (servings/d)	0.4 (0.4)	0.4 (0.4)
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	4445 (38)	2000 (18)
Fruits (servings/d)	1.7 (1.5)	1.8 (1.6)
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	819 (6.9)	738 (6.8)
Vegetables (servings/d)	2.3 (1.9)	2.4 (2)
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	629 (5.9)	695 (6.4)
Fiber (g/d)	23 (11)	23 (10)
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	5849 (49)	4161 (38)
Total folate intake, (μg/d)	572 (599)	680 (605)
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	2009 (17)	2789 (26)
Education level		
Less than high school graduate	2287 (19.3)	1786 (16.4)
High school graduate or completed GED	2827 (23.9)	2610 (24)
Some college or technical school	2943 (24.9)	2304 (21.2)
College graduate	3380 (28.6)	3992 (36.7)
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	389 (3.3)	196 (1.8)
First-degree relative with CRC	2487 (21)	1084 (10)
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	417 (3.5)	543 (5)
Location of CRC		
Distal colon	3570 (30.2)	—
Proximal colon	4502 (38.1)	—
Rectum (including rectosigmoid junction)	3341 (28.3)	—
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	413 (3.5)	—
CRC stage		

TABLE 1 (continued)

Characteristics	Cases (<i>n</i> = 11,826)	Controls (<i>n</i> = 10,888)
Stage 1 or local	2732 (23.1)	—
Stage 2/3 or regional	6829 (57.7)	—
Stage 4 or distant	1236 (10.5)	—
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	1029 (8.7)	—
<i>BRAF</i>		
Wild type	9469 (80.1)	—
Mutated	1285 (10.9)	—
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	1072 (9.1)	—
<i>KRAS</i>		
Wild type	6135 (51.9)	—
Mutated	3026 (25.6)	—
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	2665 (22.5)	—
Microsatellite instability (MSI)		
MSS/MSI-L	9097 (76.9)	—
MSI-H	1739 (14.7)	—
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	990 (8.4)	—
CIMP		
Low/negative	7338 (62)	—
High	1431 (12.1)	—
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	3057 (25.8)	—
Jass type (subtype combinations)		
[1] MSI-high, CIMP-high, <i>BRAF</i> mutated, <i>KRAS</i> wildtype	471 (4)	—
[2] MSS/MSI-low, CIMP-high, <i>BRAF</i> mutated, <i>KRAS</i> wildtype	212 (1.8)	—
[3] MSS/MSI-low, CIMP-low/negative, <i>BRAF</i> wildtype, <i>KRAS</i> mutated	1983 (16.8)	—
[4] MSS/MSI-low, CIMP-low/negative, <i>BRAF</i> wildtype, <i>KRAS</i> wildtype	3381 (28.6)	—
[5] MSI-high, CIMP-low/negative, <i>BRAF</i> wildtype, <i>KRAS</i> wildtype	231 (2)	—
[6] MSS/MSI-low, CIMP-low/negative, <i>BRAF</i> mutated, <i>KRAS</i> wildtype	187 (1.6)	—
[7] MSS/MSI-low, CIMP-low/negative, <i>BRAF</i> mutated, <i>KRAS</i> mut	25 (0.2)	—
[8] MSS/MSI-low, CIMP-high, <i>BRAF</i> wildtype, <i>KRAS</i> wildtype	147 (1.2)	—
[9] MSS/MSI-low, CIMP-high, <i>BRAF</i> wildtype, <i>KRAS</i> mutated	216 (1.8)	—
[10] MSS/MSI-low, CIMP-high, <i>BRAF</i> mutated, <i>KRAS</i> mut	3 (<0.001)	—
[11] MSI-high, CIMP-low/negative, <i>BRAF</i> wildtype, <i>KRAS</i> mutated	131 (1.1)	—
[12] MSI-high, CIMP-low/negative, <i>BRAF</i> mutated, <i>KRAS</i> wildtype	35 (0.3)	—
[13] MSI-high, CIMP-low/negative, <i>BRAF</i> mutated, <i>KRAS</i> mutated	3 (<0.001)	—
[14] MSI-high, CIMP-high, <i>BRAF</i> wildtype, <i>KRAS</i> wildtype	143 (1.2)	—
[15] MSI-high, CIMP-high, <i>BRAF</i> wildtype, <i>KRAS</i> mutated	26 (0.2)	—
[16] MSI-high, CIMP-high, <i>BRAF</i> mutated, <i>KRAS</i> mutated	10 (0.1)	—
Unknown, <i>n</i> (%)	4622 (39.1)	—

Abbreviations: CCFR, Colon Cancer Family Registry; CIMP, CpG island methylator phenotype; CPS-II, Cancer Prevention Study II; CRC, Colorectal Cancer; DACHS, Darmkrebs: Chancen der Verhütung durch Screening Study; DALS, Diet, Activity and Lifestyle Study; EPIC, European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition; GED, general educational development; HPFS, Health Professionals Follow-up Study; MCCS, Melbourne Collaborative Cohort Study; MSI, Microsatellite Instability; MSS, Microsatellite Stable; NFCCR, Newfoundland Familial Colorectal Cancer Registry; NHS, Nurses' Health Study; NSHDS, Northern Sweden Health and Disease Study.

¹ Age at diagnosis (cases) and selection (controls).

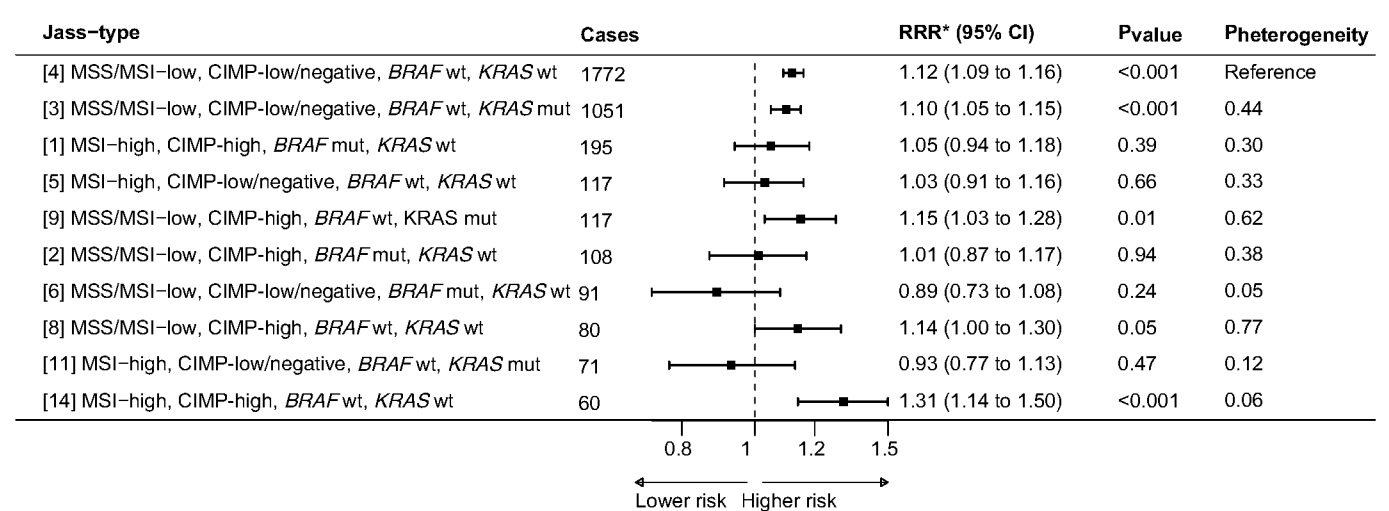
TABLE 2Association between alcohol consumption, colorectal cancer, and its molecular subtypes among drinkers only according to the observational analysis¹

Alcohol consumption	Overall CRC OR (95% CI)	<i>BRAF</i>		<i>KRAS</i>		CpG island methylator phenotype		Microsatellite instability	
		<i>BRAF</i> -wild type RRR (95% CI)	<i>BRAF</i> mutated RRR (95% CI)	<i>KRAS</i> -wild type RRR (95% CI)	<i>KRAS</i> mutated RRR (95% CI)	CIMP-low/negative RRR (95% CI)	CIMP-high RRR (95% CI)	MSS/MSI-L RRR (95% CI)	MSI-H RRR (95% CI)
Sex-combined									
<i>n</i> cases	6022	4881	587	3133	1592	3900	686	4747	835
<7 g/d (<0.5 drink/d)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)
7–28 g/d (0.5–2 drinks/d)	1.00 (0.82, 1.09)	1.00 (0.91, 1.10)	0.97 (0.80, 1.19)	1.02 (0.92, 1.14)	0.90 (0.79, 1.03)	1.01 (0.92, 1.12)	0.94 (0.78, 1.13)	1.00 (0.91, 1.09)	1.01 (0.85, 1.20)
>28 g/d (>2 drinks/d)	1.34 (1.20, 1.50)	1.35 (1.20, 1.51)	1.22 (0.94, 1.58)	1.34 (1.18, 1.53)	1.28 (1.09, 1.51)	1.34 (1.19, 1.52)	1.26 (1.00, 1.60)	1.38 (1.23, 1.54)	1.19 (0.95, 1.49)
Per 14 g/d (1 drink/d)	1.10 (1.07, 1.13)	1.10 (1.07, 1.13)	1.05 (0.98, 1.12)	1.10 (1.07, 1.14)	1.10 (1.06, 1.14)	1.10 (1.07, 1.13)	1.09 (1.03, 1.16)	1.11 (1.07, 1.14)	1.07 (1.02, 1.12)
<i>P</i> -heterogeneity	—	0.1		0.9		0.78		0.16	
Males									
<i>n</i> cases	3803	3161	284	1983	993	2560	352	3071	461
<7 g/d (<0.5 drink/d)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)
7–28 g/d (0.5–2 drinks/d)	1.08 (0.96, 1.21)	1.09 (0.96, 1.23)	1.08 (0.81, 1.45)	1.08 (0.94, 1.24)	1.01 (0.84, 1.20)	1.07 (0.94, 1.22)	0.98 (0.74, 1.28)	1.08 (0.96, 1.22)	1.03 (0.81, 1.31)
>28 g/d (>2 drinks/d)	1.43 (1.26, 1.64)	1.46 (1.27, 1.68)	1.24 (0.88, 1.74)	1.40 (1.19, 1.64)	1.41 (1.16, 1.72)	1.42 (1.23, 1.65)	1.28 (0.95, 1.74)	1.47 (1.28, 1.69)	1.10 (0.83, 1.46)
Per 14 g/d (1 drink/d)	1.11 (1.08, 1.14)	1.12 (1.08, 1.15)	1.06 (0.99, 1.14)	1.11 (1.08, 1.15)	1.11 (1.07, 1.16)	1.11 (1.07, 1.15)	1.11 (1.04, 1.19)	1.12 (1.08, 1.15)	1.06 (1.00, 1.13)
<i>P</i> -heterogeneity	—	0.14		1		0.95		0.06	
Females									
<i>n</i> cases	2219	1720	303	1150	599	1340	334	1676	374
<7 g/d (<0.5 drink/d)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)	1 (ref)
7–28 g/d (0.5–2 drinks/d)	0.91 (0.79, 1.04)	0.86 (0.75, 0.99)	0.84 (0.65, 1.09)	0.90 (0.77, 1.06)	0.78 (0.64, 0.95)	0.87 (0.75, 1.01)	0.90 (0.70, 1.15)	0.86 (0.74, 0.98)	0.88 (0.69, 1.11)
>28 g/d (>2 drinks/d)	1.21 (0.97, 1.52)	1.10 (0.86, 1.40)	1.14 (0.74, 1.75)	1.15 (0.88, 1.50)	1.06 (0.76, 1.49)	1.12 (0.87, 1.45)	1.17 (0.77, 1.76)	1.12 (0.88, 1.42)	1.39 (0.94, 2.06)
Per 14 g/d (1 drink/d)	1.05 (0.98, 1.12)	1.06 (0.99, 1.13)	1.01 (0.89, 1.16)	1.06 (0.98, 1.14)	1.04 (0.94, 1.14)	1.06 (0.98, 1.14)	1.03 (0.91, 1.17)	1.05 (0.98, 1.12)	1.10 (0.98, 1.23)
<i>P</i> -heterogeneity	—	0.55		0.78		0.59		0.72	

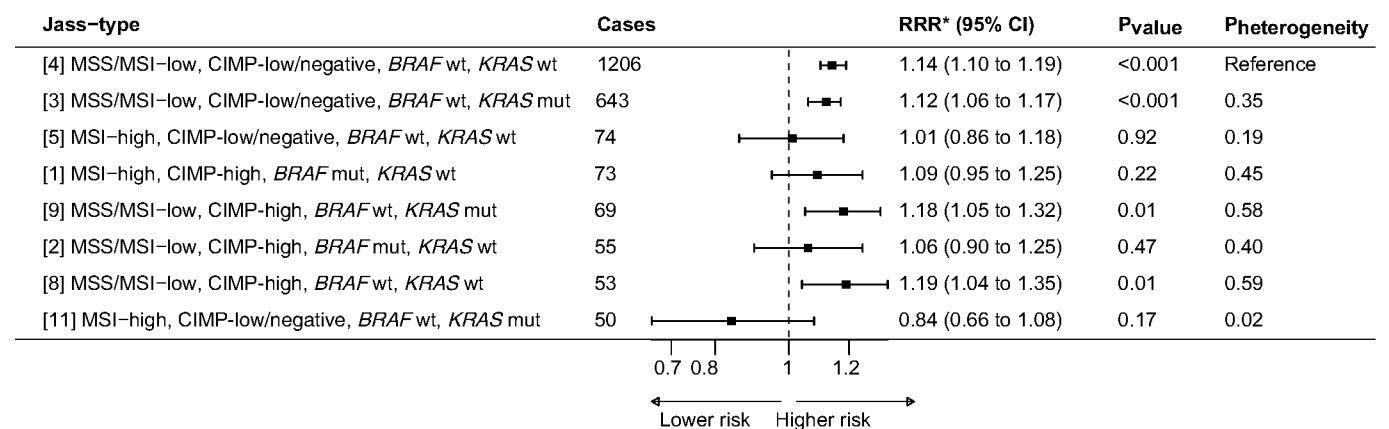
Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; CIMP, CpG island methylator phenotype; CRC, colorectal cancer; MSI, microsatellite instability; MSS, microsatellite stable; OR, odds ratio; RRR, relative risk ratio.

¹ Controls were used as the reference for all effect estimates. Models were adjusted for the study population, age, sex (when not stratified), smoking status, alcohol consumption, education, BMI, and red meat intake. Case-only analysis used to calculate *P*-heterogeneity.

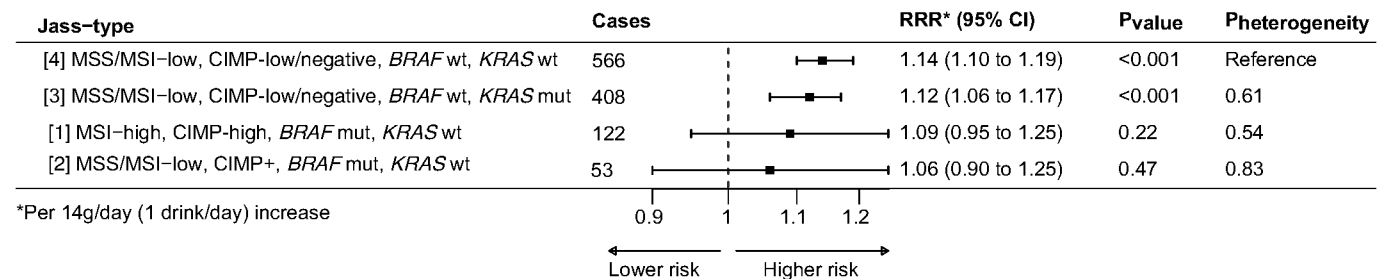
A) Both sexes



B) Males



C) Females



*Per 14g/day (1 drink/day) increase

FIGURE 1. Association between alcohol consumption [per 14 g/d (1 drink/d) increase] and Jass classified types of colorectal cancer, overall and stratified by sex, according to the observational analysis. Controls were used as the reference for all relative risk ratios. The models were adjusted for age, sex, study population, BMI, smoking status, and education. Jass types with >50 cases were included. *P* value was calculated using multinomial logistic regression, comparing CRC cases to cancer-free controls separately for each defined Jass type. *P*-heterogeneity was calculated using multinomial logistic regression, comparing cases of each Jass type to all additional cases not belonging to that type. CI, confidence interval; CIMP, CpG island methylator phenotype; CRC, colorectal cancer; MSI, microsatellite instability; MSS, microsatellite stable; OR, odds ratio; RRR, relative risk ratio.

were observed across all subtypes, including MSI status, CIMP status, *BRAF*, and *KRAS* mutation status; however, these did not reach statistical significance, likely due to limited statistical power. No evidence of heterogeneity was detected across all subtypes (*P*-heterogeneity > 0.05). Identical findings were found when we employed the MR-APSS method (Supplemental Table 17). Similarly, in Jass type stratified analyses, all examined subtypes showed directionally positive

associations, with no significant heterogeneity compared with the reference Jass type 4 (Figure 2B, Supplemental Table 18).

Discussion

In this large, pooled observational and MR study, we found consistent evidence that higher alcohol consumption is associated with

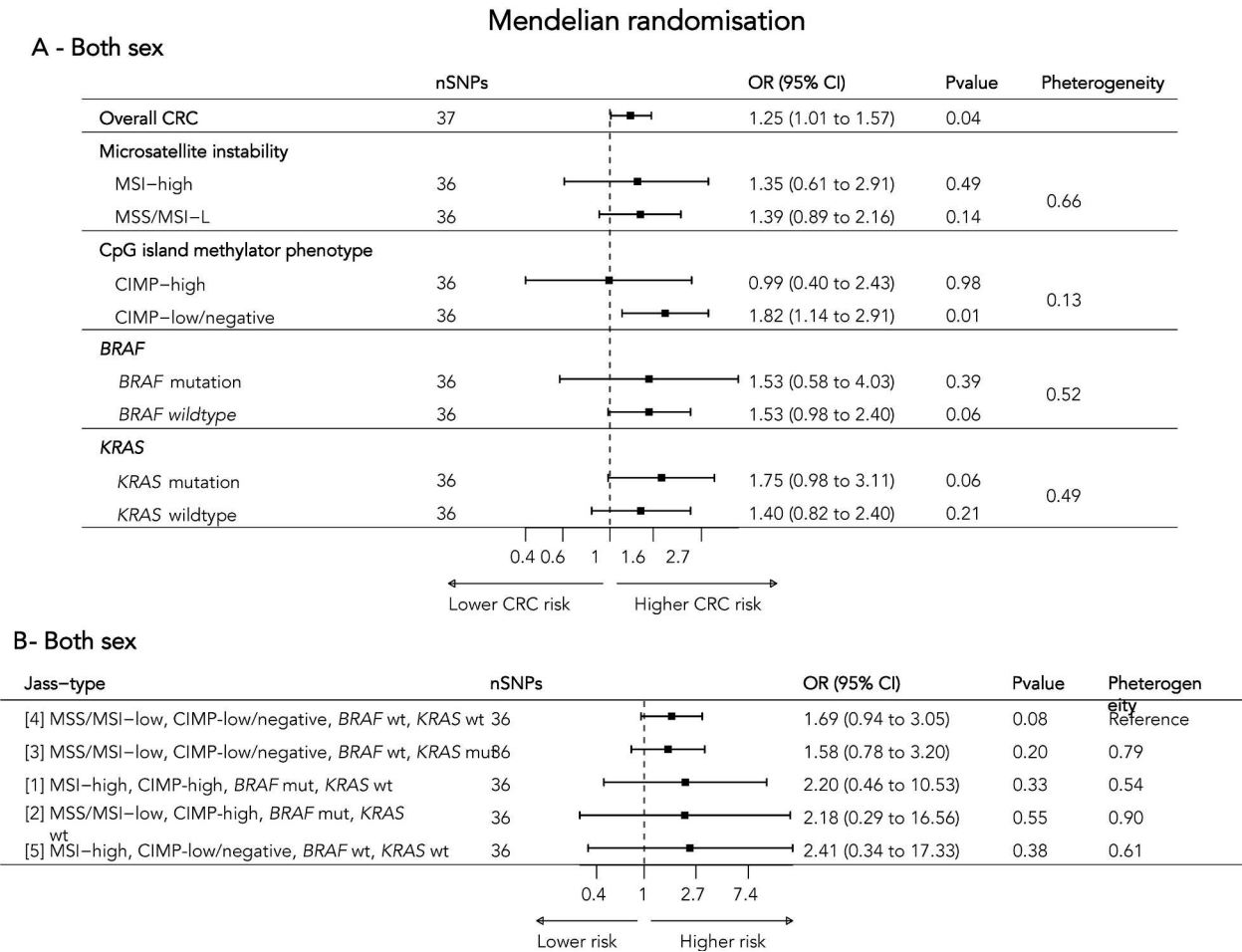


FIGURE 2. The association of genetically predicted alcohol intake (per 1-SD Increase In log-transformed drinks per week) with (A) CRC risk overall and by individual tumor molecular markers and (B) Jass classified types of CRC, according to the 2-sample Mendelian randomization inverse variance-weighted analysis. *P* value was calculated using the inverse variance-weighted method, comparing CRC cases to cancer-free controls. *P*-heterogeneity was calculated using the inverse variance-weighted method, comparing cases of each molecular subtype. CI, confidence interval; CIMP, CpG island methylator phenotype; CRC, colorectal cancer; MSI, microsatellite instability; MSS, microsatellite stable; OR, odds ratio; SNP, single-nucleotide polymorphism.

a higher risk of CRC. Among drinkers, each additional 14 g/d of alcohol (~1 drink/d) was associated with a 10% higher CRC risk, but this association was primarily driven by heavy alcohol consumption (>28 g/d). A J-shaped association was observed when nondrinkers were included. Alcohol consumption was positively associated with all major molecular subtypes across *BRAF*, *KRAS*, CIMP, or MSI status, with no significant heterogeneity by subtype. Results were consistent across strata defined by smoking, folate intake, tumor site, study design, and sex. Consistently, the MR analysis found no evidence of heterogeneity in the association between alcohol consumption and CRC risk across molecular subtypes.

Although previous research has shown subtype-specific associations for exposures such as smoking [19], the evidence for alcohol remains limited and inconclusive. In this study, we found that alcohol consumption was associated with a higher risk of CRC, consistently across individuals with tumors defined by CIMP, MSI, *BRAF*, and *KRAS* status, without evidence of heterogeneity. These findings are broadly consistent with a body of molecular pathological epidemiology literature, although previous studies vary in design, population, and methodological detail. Our findings are consistent with those of Razzak et al. [26], who reported no associations specific to molecular

subtypes, including those defined by MSI and CIMP status, in the Iowa Women's Health Study. Our results also align with those of 3 prior studies based on cohorts included in our pooled analysis. Amitay et al. [23] found no heterogeneity by CIMP, *BRAF*, or *KRAS* status in the DACHS study, and Schernhammer et al. [25] reported no differences by CIMP status in the NHS. In contrast, Jayasekara et al. [24] found an association with *BRAF* wildtype [hazard ratio (HR) = 1.06, 95% CI: 1.01, 1.11] but not with *BRAF* mutated (HR = 0.89, 95% CI: 0.78, 1.01) tumors (*P*-heterogeneity = 0.003) in the MCCS, although their analysis was based on a smaller sample. Other investigations did not report associations between alcohol consumption and risk of specific CRC molecular subtypes compared with controls; however, they did not examine for heterogeneity by mutation status within cases [30, 32–34].

The consistency of our findings across all examined molecular subtypes suggests that alcohol may increase CRC risk through common alcohol-related mechanisms rather than by acting specifically through epigenetic or mismatch repair-related pathways. Several factors may contribute to the absence of meaningful heterogeneity by subtype. First, alcohol-related mechanisms such as acetaldehyde exposure, oxidative stress, chronic inflammation, and impaired DNA

repair are thought to operate broadly and may promote colorectal carcinogenesis irrespective of downstream molecular characteristics. Second, although we examined established molecular subtypes for CRC, these classifications may not fully capture etiologically relevant heterogeneity in alcohol-related carcinogenesis.

Our study included a large number of cases with complete molecular data, allowing us to examine alcohol-related CRC risk across CIMP, MSI, *BRAF*, and *KRAS* subtypes with higher power to test for potential heterogeneity. Unlike earlier studies that often focused on a single cohort or used only binary (ever/never) definitions of alcohol consumption, we used harmonized alcohol exposure categories and molecular subtype definitions across multiple studies, enabling more detailed, stratified, and pooled analyses. Taken together, our results inform mechanistic pathways and provide robust evidence that alcohol contributes to CRC development, irrespective of molecular subtype. These findings support the need for broad-based alcohol reduction strategies as part of public health efforts to lower the overall burden of CRC. Although we evaluated well-established molecular subtypes (defined by CIMP, MSI, *BRAF*, and *KRAS*), a more comprehensive tumor characterization—including genome-wide DNA methylation profiling, histone modification analysis, gene expression studies, immune profiling, and spatial transcriptomics—could provide deeper insights into subtype-specific associations.

Although the precise biological mechanisms linking alcohol consumption to CRC development remain incompletely understood, several plausible pathways have been proposed. A central hypothesis involves the metabolic conversion of ethanol to acetaldehyde and the concurrent generation of reactive oxygen species, both of which can damage critical cellular components, including DNA, proteins, and lipids, leading to cellular dysfunction and increased oncogenic potential [66,67]. One proposed mechanism suggests that acetaldehyde disrupts mucosal adhesion in the colon by promoting tyrosine phosphorylation, particularly in the presence of specific gut microbiota that facilitate its accumulation within the colonic lumen [68]. This disruption compromises the integrity of adhesive proteins within the epithelium [69], thereby weakening intercellular junctions and enhancing cellular proliferation and migration processes central to tumor initiation and metastasis. Additionally, chronic alcohol consumption has been associated with altered folate metabolism [69–71], a micronutrient vital for DNA synthesis, repair, and methylation. Impaired folate status may therefore contribute to genomic instability and colorectal carcinogenesis. Moreover, alcohol-induced alterations in the gut microbiome—referred to as dysbiosis—may further promote inflammatory and carcinogenic processes within the colon [72].

To our knowledge, this is the largest study examining the associations between alcohol consumption and CRC molecular subtypes. A major strength of our study is the ability to pool individual-level data from 10 observational studies with available information on alcohol consumption measurements and tumor-marker status, providing insights into how it is associated with different pathways of colorectal tumorigenesis. Another key strength is the triangulation of evidence through a pooled observational and MR analysis. Triangulation integrates evidence from distinct methodologies, each with different sources of bias, thereby strengthening the robustness of the results [73]. Limitations should also be considered when interpreting the findings. Alcohol consumption was self-reported in observational studies, which may lead to underreporting, particularly among heavy drinkers, and could attenuate risk estimates. Moreover, the nondrinker category included former drinkers, some of whom may have stopped drinking due to ill health, potentially biasing comparisons; to minimize

misclassification, our primary analyses focused on current drinkers. Reverse causation remains a potential concern, particularly for case-control studies, although stratified analyses by study design showed consistent results. Despite adjusting for multiple potential confounders, residual confounding cannot be entirely excluded, although sensitivity analyses were reassuring. Finally, as our study population was predominantly of European descent from the United States, Europe, Canada, and Australia, generalizability to other racial and ethnic groups may be limited.

In conclusion, this study provides evidence that heavy alcohol consumption is associated with a higher risk of CRC across all examined major molecular subtypes (*BRAF*, *KRAS*, CIMP, or MSI). These findings seem to suggest that alcohol may act through mechanisms that transcend specific tumor molecular profiles. Our results support existing public health guidelines advocating for reduced alcohol consumption and underscore the relevance of lifestyle-based prevention strategies across the 4 major molecular pathways defined by *BRAF*, *KRAS*, CIMP, and MSI status in colorectal carcinogenesis, although further stratification by alcohol-related molecular features may reveal subtype-specific differences. This analysis leverages the largest available consortium resource for molecularly characterized CRC; statistical power is inherently lower for subtype heterogeneity analyses, and modest interaction effects cannot be excluded.

Acknowledgments

Colon Cancer Family Registry (CCFR): The CCFR graciously thanks the generous contributions of its study participants, dedication of study staff, and the financial support from the US National Cancer Institute, without which this important registry would not exist. We would like to thank the study participants and staff of the Seattle CCFR and the Hormones and Colon Cancer study (CORE Studies). Cancer Prevention Study II (CPS-II): We express sincere appreciation to all Cancer Prevention Study II participants, and to each member of the study and biospecimen management group. We would like to acknowledge the contribution to this study from central cancer registries supported through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Program of Cancer Registries and cancer registries supported by the National Cancer Institute's Surveillance Epidemiology and End Results Program. The study protocol was approved by the institutional review boards of Emory University, and those of participating registries as required. We assume full responsibility for all analyses and interpretation of results. The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the American Cancer Society or the American Cancer Society—Cancer Action Network. Darmkrebs: Chancen der Verhütung durch Screening Study (DACHS): We thank all participants and cooperating clinicians, and everyone who provided excellent technical assistance. European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition: Where authors are identified as personnel of the International Agency for Research on Cancer/WHO, we alone are responsible for the views expressed in this article, and we do not necessarily represent the decisions, policy, or views of the International Agency for Research on Cancer/WHO. Harvard cohorts (NHS/HPFS): The study protocol was approved by the institutional review boards of the Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, and those of participating registries as required. We acknowledge Channing Division of Network Medicine, Department of Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital as home of the NHS. We would like to acknowl-

edge the contribution to this study from central cancer registries supported through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Program of Cancer Registries (NPCR) and/or the National Cancer Institute's Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results (SEER) Program. Central registries may also be supported by state agencies, universities, and cancer centers. Participating central cancer registries include the following: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, Seattle SEER Registry, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, Wyoming. We assume full responsibility for analyses and interpretation of these data. NSHDS investigators thank the Västerbotten Intervention Programme, the Northern Sweden MONICA study, the Biobank Research Unit at Umeå University and Biobanken Norr at Region Västerbotten for providing data and samples and acknowledge the contribution from Biobank Sweden, supported by the Swedish Research Council. This manuscript is the result of funding in whole or in part by the NIH. It is subject to the NIH Public Access Policy. Through acceptance of this federal funding, NIH has been given a right to make this manuscript publicly available in PubMed Central on the Official Date of Publication, as defined by NIH. This manuscript is the result of funding in whole or in part by the NIH. It is subject to the NIH Public Access Policy. Through acceptance of this federal funding, NIH has been given a right to make this manuscript publicly available in PubMed Central on the Official Date of Publication, as defined by NIH.

Author contributions

The authors' responsibilities were as follows – CVC, WCC, UP, AIP, KKT: designed research and designed methodology; CVC, WCC: data curation, analyzed data or performed statistical analysis, and wrote paper; UP, AIP, KKT: provided essential reagents or provided essential materials; CVC, UP, AIP, KKT: primary responsibility for final content; and all authors: conducted research and read and approved the final manuscript.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

The authors declare that no generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used in the writing of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

UP was a consultant with AbbVie, and her husband holds individual stocks in the following companies: BioNTech SE—ADR, Amazon, CureVac BV, NanoString Technologies, Google/Alphabet Inc Class C, NVIDIA Corp, and Microsoft Corp. MG reports research funding from Janssen and Sunbird Bio; consulting fees from Nerviano Medical Sciences; and honoraria from PER and OncLive—all unrelated to the present work. CET is an epidemiology contractor for Pfizer, unrelated to the present study. BVG reports a lecturer honorarium from AstraZeneca AB, for educational activities unrelated to this study.

Funding

This work was funded by a Wereld Kanker Onderzoek Fonds grant to KKT, which was administered by World Cancer Research Fund

International (WCRF; IIG_FULL_2020_022). Genetics and Epidemiology of Colorectal Cancer Consortium (GECCO): National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, US Department of Health and Human Services (U01CA137088, R01CA297681, R01CA176272). Genotyping/Sequencing services were provided by the Center for Inherited Disease Research contract number HHSN2682017000061. This research was funded in part through the NIH/NCI Cancer Center Support Grant P30 CA015704. Scientific Computing Infrastructure at Fred Hutch funded by Office of Research Infrastructure Programs (ORIP) grant S10OD028685. The Colon Cancer Family Registry (CCFR, www.coloncfr.org) is supported in part by funding from the National Cancer Institute (NCI), NIH (award U01 CA167551). Support for case ascertainment was provided in part from the Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results (SEER) Program and the following US state cancer registries: AZ, CO, MN, NC, NH; and by the Victoria Cancer Registry (Australia) and Ontario Cancer Registry (Canada). The CCFR Set-1 (Illumina 1M/1M-Duo) was supported by NIH awards U01 CA122839 and R01 CA143237 (to GC). The content of this manuscript does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the NCI, NIH or any of the collaborating centers in the CCFR, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the US Government, any cancer registry, or the CCFR. CPS-II: The American Cancer Society funds the creation, maintenance, and updating of the Cancer Prevention Study II (CPS-II) cohort. Darmkrebs: Chancen der Verhütung durch Screening Study: This work was supported by the German Research Council (BR 1704/6-1, BR 1704/6-3, BR 1704/6-4, CH 117/1-1, HO 5117/2-1, HE 5998/2-1, KL 2354/3-1, RO 2270/8-1 and BR 1704/17-1), the Interdisciplinary Research Program of the National Center for Tumor Diseases, Germany, and the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (01KH0404, 01ER0814, 01ER0815, 01ER1505A and 01ER1505B). Diet, Activity and Lifestyle Study: National Institutes of Health (R01 CA048998 to M. L. Slattery). European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition (EPIC): The coordination of EPIC is financially supported by International Agency for Research on Cancer and also by the Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, School of Public Health, Imperial College London which has additional infrastructure support provided by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Imperial Biomedical Research Centre. The national cohorts are supported by: Danish Cancer Society (Denmark); Ligue Contre le Cancer, Institut Gustave Roussy, Mutuelle Générale de l'Éducation Nationale, Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale (France); German Cancer Aid, German Cancer Research Center, German Institute of Human Nutrition Potsdam-Rehbrücke, Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Germany); Associazione Italiana per la Ricerca sul Cancro-AIRC-Italy, Compagnia di SanPaolo and National Research Council (Italy); Dutch Ministry of Public Health, Welfare and Sports (VWS), Netherlands Cancer Registry, LK Research Funds, Dutch Prevention Funds, Dutch Zorg Onderzoek Nederland, World Cancer Research Fund, Statistics Netherlands (The Netherlands); Health Research Fund (FIS)—Instituto de Salud Carlos III, Regional Governments of Andalucía, Asturias, Basque Country, Murcia and Navarra, and the Catalan Institute of Oncology—ICO (Spain); Swedish Cancer Society, Swedish Research Council and Region Skåne and Region Västerbotten (Sweden); Cancer Research UK (14136 to EPIC-Norfolk; C8221/A29017 to EPIC-Oxford), Medical Research Council (1000143 to EPIC-Norfolk; MR/M012190/1 to EPIC-Oxford). (United Kingdom). Harvard cohorts: HPFS is supported by the NIH (P01 CA055075, UM1 CA167552, U01 CA167552, R01 CA137178, R01 CA151993, and

R35 CA197735), NHS by the National Institutes of Health (P01 CA087969, UM1 CA186107, R01 CA137178, R01 CA151993, and R35 CA197735). Additionally, SO was supported by the American Cancer Society Clinical Research Professor Award (grant # CRP-24-1185864-01-PROF). Melbourne Collaborative Cohort Study (MCCS): MCCS cohort recruitment was funded by VicHealth and Cancer Council Victoria. The MCCS was further supported by Australian National Health and Medical Research Council grants 209057, 396414, and 1074383 and by infrastructure provided by Cancer Council Victoria. Cases and their vital status were ascertained through the Victorian Cancer Registry. Cases and their vital status were ascertained through the VCR and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, including the National Death Index and the Australian Cancer Database. NFCCR: This work was supported by an Interdisciplinary Health Research Team award from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CRT 43821); the National Institutes of Health, US Department of Health and Human Services (U01 CA074783); and National Cancer Institute of Canada grants (18223 and 18226). We wish to acknowledge the contribution of Alexandre Belisle and the genotyping team of the McGill University and Génome Québec Innovation Centre, Montréal, Canada, for genotyping the Sequenom panel in the NFCCR samples. Funding was provided to Michael O. Woods by the Canadian Cancer Society Research Institute. Northern Sweden Health and Disease Study: The research was supported by the Swedish Research Council (VR 2017-01737 and, through funding to Biobank Sweden, VR 2017-00650), the Swedish Cancer Society (CAN 2017/581, 23 3153 Pj), Region Västerbotten, Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation, the Cancer Research Foundation in Northern Sweden and the Lion's Cancer Research Foundation in Northern Sweden.

Data availability

Tumor markers and epidemiologic data are available on request and permission. Please contact gecco@fredhutch.org to request the standardized proposal form. The principal investigators of each contributing study will evaluate and approve the proposal, and data access will be managed centrally.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajcnut.2026.101308>.

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