

# Epicardial fat volume and the risk of cardiometabolic diseases among women and men from the general population

**Adela Brahimaj<sup>1,2,†</sup>, Fariba Ahmadizar<sup>1,†</sup>, Meike Willemijn Vernooij<sup>1,3</sup>, Mohammad Kamran Ikram<sup>1,4</sup>, Mohammad Arfan Ikram<sup>1,3,4</sup>, Theo van Walsum<sup>5</sup>, Abbas Dehghan<sup>1,6</sup>, Oscar Horacio Franco<sup>1,7</sup>, Daniel Bos<sup>1,3,8</sup>, and Maryam Kavousi<sup>1,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Epidemiology, Erasmus MC—University Medical Center, office Na-2714 PO Box 2040, 3000 CA, Rotterdam, the Netherlands; <sup>2</sup>Department of General Practice, Erasmus MC—University Medical Center, Rotterdam, the Netherlands; <sup>3</sup>Department of Radiology and Nuclear Medicine, Erasmus MC—University Medical Center, Rotterdam, the Netherlands; <sup>4</sup>Department of Neurology, Erasmus MC—University Medical Center, Rotterdam, the Netherlands; <sup>5</sup>Biomedical Imaging Group Rotterdam, Department Of Radiology and Nuclear Medicine, Erasmus MC—University Medical Center, Rotterdam, the Netherlands; <sup>6</sup>Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, MRC-PHE Centre for Environment and Health, School of Public Health, Imperial College London, London, UK; <sup>7</sup>Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine (ISPM), University of Bern, Bern, Switzerland and and <sup>8</sup>Department of Clinical Epidemiology, Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA, USA

Received 10 May 2020; revised 14 July 2020; editorial decision 21 July 2020; accepted 30 October 2020; online publish-ahead-of-print 18 February 2021

## Keywords

Epicardial fat • Cardiovascular diseases • Type 2 diabetes • Obesity • Gender-specific risk

Epicardial fat is the visceral fat depot located between the visceral pericardium and the myocardium.<sup>1</sup> Increasing evidence points towards a link between larger amounts of epicardial fat and the development of cardiometabolic disorders.<sup>2–4</sup> The contribution of epicardial fat to an unfavourable cardiometabolic risk profile might be due to its endocrine and paracrine effect and its proximity to the heart and the coronary arteries.<sup>5</sup>

Clinical imaging, histological, and several autopsy studies indicate that epicardial fat mass is increased with generalized increases in body fat.<sup>6</sup> Mainly among obese individuals, a strong correlation between the amount of epicardial fat and abdominal visceral adiposity has been reported.<sup>7</sup> While obesity might lead to an increase in visceral adipose tissue deposition in the epicardium, epicardial fat itself could be an important independent contributor to the increased risk for cardiometabolic diseases among obese individuals.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as fat deposits differentially in women and men,<sup>8</sup> the impact of epicardial fat on cardiometabolic risk might differ between sexes. Hence, we studied the associations of epicardial fat volume (EFV) with incident events of various cardiometabolic outcomes including type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2DM),

coronary heart disease (CHD), and stroke among women and men from the large prospective population-based Rotterdam Study.<sup>9,10</sup> We further evaluated the impact of obesity on these associations.

Between 2003 and 2006, 2524 participants from the Rotterdam Study underwent cardiac CT to quantify EFV. Using the cardiac scan, EFV was quantified in millilitres with a fully automatic in-house developed image-analysis tool. This method is capable of segmenting the pericardium and quantifying epicardial fat on non-enhanced cardiac CT. From 2524 participants with available EFV data, 208 were excluded due to image artefacts or segmentation errors or missing data, resulting in a total of 2316 participants (1211 women and 1105 men) included in the current analyses. First, we used Cox proportional hazard models to investigate sex-specific associations between EFV and incident T2DM, CHD, and stroke. Measurements of EFV were used first as a continuous variable per standard deviation (SD). We then created sex-specific EFV tertiles, considering the first tertile as the reference in all analyses. Associations were adjusted for age and traditional cardiometabolic risk factors. To test whether the association of EFV with CHD was modified by the presence of severe

\* Corresponding author. Tel: +31 10 7043997, Fax: +31 10 7044657, Email: [m.kavousi@erasmusmc.nl](mailto:m.kavousi@erasmusmc.nl)

<sup>†</sup>The first two authors contributed equally to the study.

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**Table 1** Association of epicardial fat volume with cardio-metabolic diseases among women and men

Analyses in the total population of women and men						
	Women (N = 1211)			Men (N = 1105)		
	HR (95% CI)			HR (95% CI)		
	Continuous	EFV-tertile 2	EFV-tertile 3	Continuous	EFV-tertile 2	EFV-tertile 3
Type 2 diabetes <sup>a</sup>	<b>1.45 (1.09, 1.93)</b>	1.77 (0.86, 3.63)	<b>2.01 (1.00, 4.20)</b>	1.12 (0.87, 1.46)	0.86 (0.49, 1.49)	1.20 (0.66, 2.16)
Coronary heart disease <sup>b</sup>	1.22 (0.85, 1.75)	1.47 (0.64, 3.39)	1.51 (0.62, 3.68)	1.30 (0.99, 1.68)	1.27 (0.71, 2.29)	<b>1.93 (1.05, 3.54)</b>
Ischaemic stroke <sup>c</sup>	1.02 (0.72, 1.43)	0.82 (0.40, 1.72)	0.92 (0.41, 2.03)	1.04 (0.73, 1.47)	1.02 (0.47, 2.20)	1.27 (0.57, 2.83)
BMI-stratified analyses						
	18.5 < BMI < 30		BMI ≥ 30	18.5 < BMI < 30		BMI ≥ 30
	Women			Men		
	HR (95% CI)			HR (95% CI)		
Type 2 diabetes <sup>a</sup>	<b>1.46 (1.04, 2.07)</b>		<b>1.89 (1.25, 2.86)</b>	<b>1.33 (1.02, 1.74)</b>		0.84 (0.51, 1.38)
Coronary heart disease <sup>b</sup>	1.02 (0.69, 1.51)		1.73 (0.84, 3.53)	1.26 (0.98, 1.61)		1.51 (0.80, 2.87)
Ischaemic stroke <sup>c</sup>	0.81 (0.58, 1.15)		<b>2.88 (1.18, 7.05)</b>	1.04 (0.73, 1.49)		1.95 (0.85, 4.50)

EFV-tertile 1 is the reference. EFV tertiles were <78.11, 78.11–101.46, and >101.46 for women and <104.33, 104.33–139.96, and >139.96 for men. Bold indicates significant results at  $P \leq 0.05$ . Hazard ratios were adjusted for age, BMI, hypertension, smoking, total and high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol levels, lipid-lowering medications, prevalent cardiovascular disease,<sup>a</sup> prevalent diabetes,<sup>b,c</sup> and prevalent atrial fibrillation.<sup>c</sup> The included participants for the analyses of each outcome slightly differed, based on the exclusion of individuals with that prevalent condition at baseline. For the analyses of type 2 diabetes mellitus, 1064 women and 951 men were included. For coronary heart disease analyses, we included 1180 women and 1022 men. For ischaemic stroke, 1173 women and 1053 men were included in the analyses. Incident rates (per 1000 person-years) were 11.97 and 16.26 for type 2 diabetes mellitus, 4.24 and 10.88 for coronary heart disease, and 4.35 and 5.45 for stroke for women and men, respectively. BMI, body mass index; CI, confidence interval; HR, hazard ratio.

coronary calcification, we stratified the analyses based on coronary artery calcification (CAC) scores of 400. We further stratified the analyses based on obesity status (body mass index  $\geq 30$  kg/m<sup>2</sup>).

The mean ( $\pm$ SD) age was 68.9 ( $\pm$ 6.7) years in women and 69.0 ( $\pm$ 6.5) years in men. The median (inter-quartile range) for EFV was 90.1 (71.8–110.1) in women and 121.2 (95.9–152.3) in men. During a follow-up period of up to 12 years, 188 (8.1%) participants developed T2DM, 149 (6.4%) suffered from CHD, and 102 (5.4%) suffered an ischaemic stroke. Larger EFV was significantly associated with an increased risk of incident T2DM among women {multivariable adjusted hazard ratio per 1 SD Ln-transformed EFV [95% confidence interval: 1.45 (1.09, 1.93)]} and with incident ischaemic stroke among obese women [2.88 (1.18, 7.05)]. The association between EFV and T2DM diminished after taking into account serum fasting glucose and insulin. Among men, the third EFV tertile was associated with incident CHD, compared to the first tertile [1.93 (1.05, 3.54)] (Table 1).

We have previously reported that larger EFV was cross-sectionally associated with a larger burden of CAC in men.<sup>2</sup> In the current analyses, the association between EFV and CHD diminished after taking into account the baseline CAC burden among both women and men. When we stratified the analysis based on the CAC burden, the association of EFV and CHD remained statistically significant only among men with a CAC burden of <400, consisting of 66.2% of the male population in our study.

Although CHD and stroke share common risk factors, differences exist in the magnitude or direction of associations of risk factors with CHD and stroke. In our study, no association between EFV and

ischaemic stroke was found among women and men from the general population. The only significant association was between EFV and stroke in obese women.

It has been shown that body fat is independently associated with future cardiovascular events.<sup>11</sup> Compared to non-obese women, the associations of EFV with cardiometabolic outcomes were overall larger among obese women. This might support the hypothesis that epicardial fat might be linked with cardiometabolic events through mechanisms such as obesity. It has been suggested that EFV could be a general marker of a decline in overall health status or compromised immune function. Epicardial fat, which in healthy conditions produces cytokines that nourish the heart, may mediate deleterious effects of obesity and inflammation on the myocardium, representing an important target for therapeutic interventions. This underscores the importance of focusing on simple and effective interventions such as weight loss or other lifestyle changes, particularly among high-risk individuals.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, EFV was independently associated with increased risk for T2DM among women and for CHD among men. Our findings indicate that obesity is associated with a greater impact of epicardial fat on the risk of cardiometabolic disorders, particularly among women.

### Data Availability

Rotterdam Study data can be made available to interested researchers upon request. Requests can be directed to data manager Frank J.A. van Rooij (f.vanrooij@erasmusmc.nl) or visit the following website for more information <http://www.ergo-onderzoek.nl/wp/contact>. We are unable to place data in a public repository due to legal and ethical

restraints. Sharing of individual participant data was not included in the informed consent of the study, and there is potential risk of revealing participants' identities as it is not possible to completely anonymize the data.

## Funding

The Rotterdam Study is funded by Erasmus Medical Center and Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands Organization for the Health Research and Development (ZonMw), the Research Institute for Diseases in the Elderly (RIDE), the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Ministry for Health, Welfare and Sports, the European Commission (DG XII), and the Municipality of Rotterdam. Further support was obtained from the Netherlands Consortium for Healthy Ageing and the Dutch Heart Foundation (2012T008) and the Dutch Cancer Society (NKI-20157737). The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript. The Rotterdam Study has been approved by the Medical Ethics Committee of the Erasmus MC (registration number MEC 02.1015) and by the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (Population Screening Act WBO, license number 1071272-159521-PG). The Rotterdam Study Personal Registration Data collection is filed with the Erasmus MC Data Protection Officer under registration number EMC1712001. The Rotterdam Study has been entered into the Netherlands National Trial Register (NTR; [www.trialregister.nl](http://www.trialregister.nl)) and into the WHO International Clinical Trials Registry Platform (ICTRP; [www.who.int/ictpr/network/primary/en/](http://www.who.int/ictpr/network/primary/en/)) under shared catalogue number NTR6831. All participants provided written informed consent to participate in the study and to have their information obtained from treating physicians.

**Conflict of interest:** The authors have no conflict of interest.

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