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The CODATwins Project: the current status and recent findings of COllaborative project of Development of Anthropometrical measures in Twins

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Abstract

The COllaborative project of Development of Anthropometrical measures in Twins (CODATwins) project is a large international collaborative effort to analyze individual-level phenotype data from twins in multiple cohorts from different environments. The main objective is to study factors that modify genetic and environmental variation of height, body mass index (BMI, kg/m^2) and size at birth, and additionally to address other research questions such as long-term consequences of birth size. The project started in 2013 and is open to all twin projects in the world having height and weight measures on twins with information on zygosity. Thus far, 54 twin projects from 24 countries have provided individual-level data. The CODATwins database includes 489,981 twin individuals (228,635 complete twin pairs). Since many twin cohorts have collected longitudinal data, there is a total of 1,049,785 height and weight observations. For many cohorts, we also have information on birth weight and length, own smoking behavior and own or parental education. We found that the heritability estimates of height and BMI systematically changed from infancy to old age. Remarkably, only minor differences in the heritability estimates were found across cultural–geographic regions, measurement time and birth cohort for height and BMI. In addition to genetic epidemiological studies, we looked at associations of height and BMI with education, birthweight and smoking status. Within family analyses examined differences within same-sex and opposite-sex dizygotic twins in birth size and later development. The CODATwins project demonstrates the feasibility and value of international collaboration to address gene-by-exposure interactions that require large sample sizes and address the effects of different exposures across time, geographical regions and socio–economic status.

Height and body mass index (BMI, kg/m^2) are among the most intensively studied traits in human genetics and public health. The first genetic study on height was published in the late 19th century (Galton, 1886) and on BMI in the early 20th century (Davenport, 1923), both utilizing information on familial resemblance. These anthropometric traits were also among the first traits studied in humans when new scientific innovations in molecular genetics became available (Silventoinen et al., 2015). With the current global obesity epidemic coexisting with severe undernutrition affecting growth in some populations (NCD Risk Factor Collaboration, 2016a) and well-known associations of growth and adult height with several health indicators (Silventoinen, 2015), questions about the roles of genetic and

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environmental factors in variations of these traits in rapidly changing environments are important.

In order to delineate conditions modifying the heritability of height and BMI, genotype-by-exposure (GxE) studies that include large, diverse samples are needed. To address GxE, there have been some previous studies comparing the heritability of height (Silventoinen et al., 2003) and BMI (Hur et al., 2008; Schousboe et al., 2003) between countries or over time periods when mean height (Silventoinen et al., 2000) and BMI have increased (Rokholm et al., 2011a; Rokholm et al., 2011b). In these studies, a significant difference in heritability indicates the modification of gene expression by environment (i.e., for GxE interaction) (Boomsma and Martin, 2002). There is also evidence that the heritability of BMI may change with age, based on both literature-based meta-analyses (Elks et al., 2012; Silventoinen et al., 2010) and pooled individual data (Dubois et al., 2012). Studies investigating factors affecting heritability require large sample sizes and broad ranges of exposures to obtain a comprehensive understanding of this variation. As our environment rapidly changes, with large differences within and between countries in rates of obesity and lifestyle factors, pooling twin data from different environments is critically important to analyze the dependence of heritability on environments.

Objectives of the project

To obtain an accurate answer to the question about how the heritability of height and BMI vary over age and sex as well as time and space, the COllaborative project of the Development of Anthropometrical measures in Twins (CODATwins) project was started in June 2013. The idea behind the CODATwins project was to bring together all globally available twin data on height and weight. Additionally, year of birth, sex, zygosity and age at measurement were collected, as well as data on birth weight and length, birth order, gestational age, ethnicity, own and parental education and own smoking status to analyze how these factors are related to height and BMI including the genetic architecture of these traits. The project is open for all twin cohorts that have collected data on height and weight from monozygotic (MZ) and dizygotic (DZ) twins. Twin cohorts were identified from several sources. The most important was the previous special issue of *Twin Research and Human Genetics* on twin registers (Hur and Craig, 2013), which was complemented with other sources and personal contacts. The first invitation letter was sent in September 2013 to the potential collaborators. Follow-up letters were sent in October 2013, January 2014 and September 2014. The first version of the harmonized database used in the first scientific papers was ready in January 2015 (Silventoinen et al., 2015). However, we have received several new cohorts and updates after this first manuscript. The current version of the CODATwins database includes a vast majority of height and weight measures known to have been collected from twins with information on zygosity.

The initial objective of the project was to analyze the heritability of height and BMI across different cultures and geographic regions. As the project progressed, we also analyzed how birth-related factors were associated with later physical development and education, differences in the physical development of same-sex and opposite-sex DZ twins, and associations between smoking and BMI. Throughout the project, we classified the twin cohorts to three cultural–geographic regions based on average BMI levels: East Asia, having the lowest BMI; Europe, having intermediate BMI; and North America and Australia having the highest BMI (NCD Risk Factor Collaboration, 2016a). These regions reflect different social and nutritional environments, including different obesogenic levels, which may affect not only the heritability of BMI, but also birth size and later height.

Current status of the database

Figure 1 presents the geographic diversity of the 54 individual twin projects who have contributed data to the CODATwins database. The collaborators come from 24 countries. They mainly represent Europe, North America, Australia and, in to a lesser extent, East Asia; individual twin cohorts come from South Asia, Middle East, Africa and South America.

Table 1 presents the basic characteristics of the CODATwins database by country. The footnote indicates that there are 58 twin cohorts in the CODATwins database. Note that one study project can include more than one cohort. Together, the database includes nearly a half million twin individuals, including nearly a quarter million complete twin pairs. Half of the twins are females, but this overall proportion conceals variation in the sex ratios between twin cohorts. In many cohorts including adult twins, there are somewhat more women than men because of more active participation and lower mortality in women than men. However, we have three male-only cohorts including army veterans and conscripts, equalizing the overall sex ratio in the whole database. A larger proportion of twins are same-sex DZ twins (39%), compared to opposite-sex DZ twins (22%). This is mainly because some of the cohorts have collected data only on same-sex twin pairs, but also partly because of lower participation rates of opposite-sex compared to same-sex DZ twins in adult cohorts.

There are about 1 million height and weight measures after 6 months of age from the 489,981 twins available in the database. For around half of twins (N=252,624), we had only baseline data available, and for those having follow-up data, 112,691 twins had only one follow-up measure whereas 5695 had nine or more follow-up measures. The majority of measures are based on self-reports (63%) or parental reports (20%), and only a minority are measured values (17%). For nearly 150,000 twin individuals, we had additional information on birthweight, but only a minority of them were measured weights (7%) and the majority were parentally reported (78%) or self-reported (16%). For slightly less than half of these twin individuals, we have additional information on birth length (41%) and gestational age (44%). However, it is noteworthy that especially in the parental reports of height or length and weight, the reliability of the data probably varies between the cohorts. In some cohorts, parents were able to use the records of measures provided by medical doctors or registered nurses during child health check-ups whereas in others, they needed to rely on their own estimates and recall.

We also collected information on own smoking and own and parental education, but these measures were not mandatory for participation in the project and thus were available in only some of the cohorts, and in some cohorts were not available for all participants. Longitudinal information on smoking was collected if available, provided about a quarter of million assessments of smoking status. For own and parental education, only one measure was collected, preferring the most recent one (i.e., the highest attained educational level measure). We have information on maternal education for nearly 150,000 twin individuals, and for the large majority of them (96%) we have additional information on paternal education. Information on own education is available for about 200,000 twin individuals. However, because parental education is mainly available for children and own education for adults, we have only 63,138 twin individuals with all three educational measures.

Major findings from studies on anthropometric traits

We started this project by detailing the growth development of twins. DZ twins were consistently taller and, in childhood and adolescence especially, they also had somewhat higher BMI than MZ twins. Slightly higher BMI variance was found for DZ twins than for MZ twins in childhood, but this difference disappeared in adolescence; for height, no zygosity differences in the variances were seen (Jelenkovic et al., 2015). First-born twins were heavier in infancy and also slightly taller than second- born twins over childhood and adolescence, but this difference disappeared in adulthood (Yokoyama et al., 2016). Thus, in further genetic modeling, we used different means of BMI and height for MZ and DZ twins. We also randomized the birth order within twin pairs since information on birth order was available for only 39% of the twins.

At birth, genetic factors explained a smaller proportion of the variation of weight, length and ponderal index (PI, kg/m^3) than shared and unique environmental factors; the heritability estimates, however, somewhat increased when the results were adjusted for gestational age (Yokoyama et al., 2018). The heritability estimates of height increased from early childhood until adulthood because of decreasing shared environmental variation (Jelenkovic et al., 2016a). For BMI, the heritability estimates first decreased from infancy to early childhood and then increased being between 0.7 and 0.8 at most ages during late childhood and adolescence; these differences were due to shared environmental variation being highest in early childhood (Silventoinen et al., 2016). The heritability of BMI was highest in early adulthood and then decreased until old age due to increasing unique environmental variation (Silventoinen et al., 2017).

For height, we did not find systematic differences in the heritability estimates or the variances between the geographic–cultural regions in childhood and adolescence (Jelenkovic et al., 2016a) or in adulthood (Jelenkovic et al., 2016b). The variances and heritability estimates of adult height were also roughly similar across birth cohorts from the late 19th to late 20th centuries (Jelenkovic et al., 2016b). For BMI in childhood and adolescence, we found that the variation was highest in North America and Australia and lowest in East Asia, thus also corresponding to the mean BMI differences between the regions (Silventoinen et al., 2016). Similar differences between the cultural–geographic regions were also found in the variances of adult BMI. The adult BMI variance increased from the 1940s to the 2010s along with increasing mean BMI. The genetic and environmental variances, however, showed about the same differences leading to only minor and inconsistent differences in the heritability estimates of BMI over time or between the cultural–geographic regions (Silventoinen et al., 2017). The heritability estimates of height and BMI were about the same in males and females. However, we found sex-specific genetic effects already in childhood, increasing during adolescence and being highest in adulthood for both height (Jelenkovic et al., 2016a; Jelenkovic et al., 2016b) and BMI (Silventoinen et al., 2016; Silventoinen et al., 2017).

We utilized the discordant twin pair design to analyze the effect of differences in intrauterine environment for the twins on later physical development. Within twin pairs, a lighter and shorter twin at birth was also shorter over childhood and adolescence than the co-twin, and this effect was still seen in adulthood (Jelenkovic et al., 2018a). BMI showed similar effects, and a smaller co-twin at birth had lower BMI from early childhood to adulthood; however, the effect sizes somewhat attenuated in adulthood (Jelenkovic et al., 2017).

The comparison of opposite-sex and same-sex DZ twins is uniquely suited to study sex differences that may arise in utero through a putative masculinization process of female twins who have a male co-twin (compared to same-sex twin pairs) that may arise from being exposed in utero to sex hormones of the opposite sex. However, our data did not support these effects for anthropometric traits. When we studied the sex of the co-twin, we found that boys having a female co-twin had a slightly greater birthweight and longer gestational age than DZ boys having a same-sex co-twin; in girls, no differences were seen between opposite-sex and same-sex DZ twins (Jelenkovic et al., 2018b). In adulthood, both men and women having an opposite-sex co-twin were slightly taller than those DZ twins having a same-sex co-twin, whereas BMI showed no differences between these twin-type groups (Bogl et al., 2017).

Major findings from studies on education and smoking

We have harmonized the different educational classifications in the individual datasets by transforming them into educational years. In our first study, we found only minor differences between MZ and DZ twins in own or parental education (Silventoinen et al., 2017). Because of large differences between countries and birth cohorts in educational levels, we decided to focus, in further studies, on relative education (i.e., education years adjusted for birth year and twin cohort). We used the discordant twin pair design to analyze how differences in birthweight between co-twins, which may reflect differences in the intrauterine environment, affect differences in education in adulthood. We found that the lighter co-twin at birth had shorter education than the heavier co-twin, but the differences were very small and somewhat inconsistent between birth cohorts and zygosities (Jelenkovic et al., 2018c). In another study, we analyzed how parental education modifies the genetic and environmental variation of BMI from infancy to old age in the cultural–geographic regions (Silventoinen et al., 2019). We found that the mean BMI and the genetic variance of BMI were greater in those whose parents had low education when compared to the offspring of highly educated parents. These associations were strongest in North America and Australia and weakest or non-existent in East Asia. These results suggest that the interplay between genetic predisposition, childhood social environment and macro-social context is important for socio–economic differences in BMI.

We wished to have smoking data as widely available as possible and therefore collected information on the current smoking status of twins themselves and harmonized it to three categories: never smokers, current smokers and former smokers. In our first study utilizing these measures, we examined twin pairs discordant for smoking, contrasting never, current and former smokers (Piirtola et al., 2018). As expected, the currently smoking twin had slightly lower BMI than the co-twin who had never smoked. Also as expected, the former smoking twins had a higher BMI than their current smoking co-twins. However, when comparing twins from MZ pairs discordant for former smoking and never smoking, we found only small differences, which suggests that the net effect of smoking initiation and subsequent quitting on weight trajectory is minor.

Further study plans

There are numerous opportunities for further studies. Previous studies have presented literature-based meta-analyses of educational attainment (Branigan et al., 2013; de Zeeuw et al., 2015), but our database offers possibilities to study in much more detail how the genetic and environmental variation of educational years have changed over birth cohorts and vary between countries. We also plan to analyze how parental education modifies the genetic architecture of height and birthweight by using the same approach as in the previous study on parental education and BMI (Silventoinen et al., 2019). Further, we can analyze the associations of height and BMI with own education. By using the discordant twin pair design, as previously used by Piirtola et al. (2018), it is possible to analyze whether the association between smoking and education is causal or due to common genetic or common environmental factors.

We have not yet addressed longitudinal associations. Since around half of the participating twin cohorts have longitudinal measures of height and weight, the CODATwins database offers good opportunities for this type of research. We can analyze how genetic factors affect the tracking of height and BMI over childhood and weight change in adulthood. Finally, thus far most studies, including ours, have ignored the well-known skewness of BMI distribution, which may well be associated with both the increasing mean and variance of BMI (Pak et al., 2016). New methods to analyze the skewness of BMI distribution utilizing twin data are now available (Tsang et al., 2018), and the CODATwins database would allow for analyzing, in detail, the differences in the skewness of BMI distribution between different ages, measurement years and cultural–geographic regions.

Discussion

The CODATwins project shows that conducting a large-scale international collaborative project of existing twin cohorts is feasible. Such large data sets can provide reliable answers to research questions that have not been resolved using small or moderate size cohorts. In addition, they can answer new research questions impossible to analyze in any single cohort, which rarely span multiple determinants such as age from birth to old age, time period and sufficient geo-cultural diversity. We have been able to collect an international database and answer several new research questions related to the genetic and environmental determinants of height and relative weight.

Our main results concern the heritability estimates of height and relative weight. We found that the heritability estimates of both height and relative weight (BMI or PI) varied considerably by age (Jelenkovic et al., 2016a; Jelenkovic et al., 2016b; Silventoinen et al., 2016; Silventoinen et al., 2017; Yokoyama et al., 2018). Thus, it is likely that in some previous literature-based meta-analyses on the heritability of BMI (Elks et al., 2012; Min et al., 2013), the age ranges of original studies may have been too broad to capture this complexity, and the differences in the reported heritability estimates may reflect age differences between the cohorts. This further emphasizes the need for pooled analyses instead of relying only on meta-analyses of published results. On the other hand, we found only little evidence that the macro-environment modifies the heritability estimates of height or BMI. Height has increased all over the world during the 20th century (NCD Risk Factor Collaboration, 2016b), and it could be speculated that this has affected the genetic architecture of height as environmental stress has diminished. However, we found that the heritability estimates of adult height, and also total, genetic and environmental variances, were very similar between the cohorts born from the late 19th to late 20th centuries despite considerable differences in mean height across these environments (Jelenkovic et al., 2016b). On the other hand, we found that the variance of BMI was higher in more obesogenic environments measured by both the cultural–geographic regions with different mean BMI levels as well as when analyzing BMI measures from the 1940s to the 2010s, over which time the mean BMI has increased (Silventoinen et al., 2016; Silventoinen et al., 2017). However, even for BMI, we did not find any systematic differences in the heritability estimates across the measurement years or the cultural–geographic regions. This suggests that the heritability estimates of height and BMI are robust for differences in macro–environment. In the case of height, this seems to be because total variation is not sensitive to the change of environment. In contrast, BMI variation increased along with increasing mean BMI, but this was due to increases in both the genetic and environmental variations. This suggests that factors affecting increasing mean BMI may operate partly by amplifying the effect of genes on BMI variation.

In our studies not focusing on heritability, we found results both supporting and contradicting previous studies. Using the twin design, we demonstrated that intrauterine conditions affecting smaller birth size are associated with shorter height and lower BMI from early childhood to adulthood (Jelenkovic et al., 2017; Jelenkovic et al., 2018a), which are consistent with prior studies. On the other hand, our findings that birthweight was only weakly associated with adult education in discordant twin pairs (Jelenkovic et al., 2018c) and that males and females having opposite-sex co-twins showed no consistent differences as compared to those having same-sex co-twins in height and BMI (Bogl et al., 2017) are not consistent with previous hypotheses. Because there is a well-known tendency to publish positive results (Thornton and Lee, 2000), these types of large collaborative studies are important to validly test hypotheses and estimate effect sizes not inflated by publication bias.

This project provides a good estimation of the total number of twins in different cohorts potentially available for further collaborative studies, and thus demonstrates the opportunities, as well as certain limitations, of the currently available twin data. Height and weight are among the most commonly collected traits, and we are aware of only a few twin cohorts that are not part of the database. Thus, the total number of participants in any twin study in the world may not be much higher than the half million twin individuals assembled in the CODATwins database. Less than one-fifth of the height and weight values were based on direct measures, with the rest being self- or parentally reported. When studying physiological traits requiring clinical examination, such as blood pressure or cholesterol level, the number of participants available is likely to be much smaller. However, in the future, the linkage of twin cohorts to population-based biobanks together with health-care databases is an avenue to address more detailed biomedical and clinical research questions. This approach has already been exploded to estimate heritability by using an extended family design (Polubriaginof et al., 2018). The current twin data disproportionately represents Western populations and, to a lesser extent, East Asian populations. Thus, new data collections would be very important especially in the geographic regions currently having only limited twin data available.

In conclusion, the CODATwins project demonstrates the scientific value of an international collaboration that aims to pool individual phenotypic datasets. This allowed the analyses of macro-environmental effects on genetic and environmental variations and resulted in a tremendous increase in statistical power. A similar approach could be used to study many other traits not yet included in the CODATwins project. This would lead to new knowledge and make the maximal use of data already collected.

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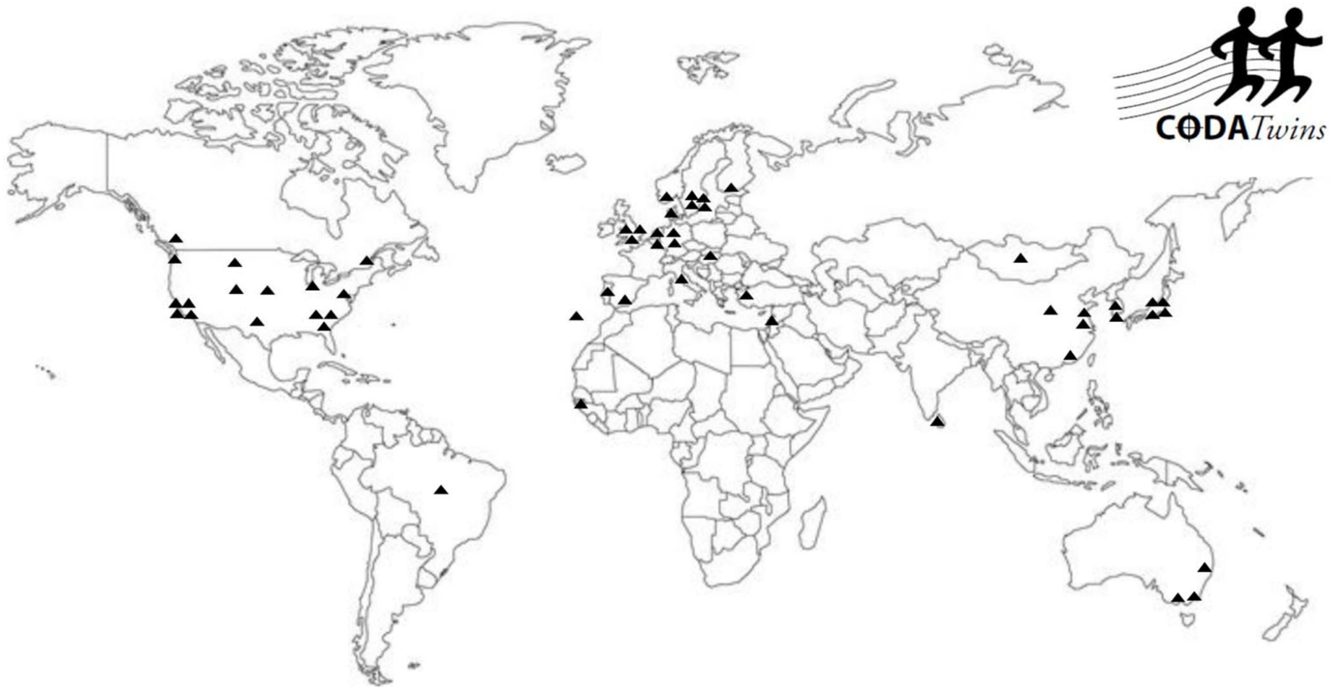

Figure 1.
Geographic distribution of the CODATwins collaborators.

Table 1.

The current status of the CODATwins database by country.

Country	Twin individuals[1]		Complete twin pairs[1]			Number of measures[2]		Number of twin individuals[3]		
	N	% of females	N	% of MZ	% of OSDZ	BMI	Smoking status	Birth weight	Maternal education	Own education
Australia[4]	26435	61	12116	47	22	58586	35578	2354	2179	23403
Belgium[5]	803	52	379	64	11	803	803	803	747	803
Brazil[6]	211	76	97	79	12	211	NA	NA	NA	206
Canada[7]	2792	59	1387	46	21	7441	NA	1171	NA	NA
China[8]	22531	50	11264	54	20	22531	1006	19738	943	1006
Denmark[9]	65459	52	27261	27	33	108790	NA	NA	NA	NA
Finland[10]	40224	51	18735	29	17	110118	79965	10038	7621	36611
Germany[11]	2833	72	1395	66	10	2941	478	NA	NA	1793
G-Bissau[12]	253	53	108	15	58	1042	NA	253	NA	NA
Hungary[13]	825	66	387	59	13	825	805	259	NA	303
Israel[14]	995	49	489	23	35	1228	NA	818	745	NA
Italy[15]	17361	56	8630	44	25	18834	5651	1904	5767	11417
Japan[16]	9994	52	4932	54	18	52342	1023	9276	4900	431
Mongolia[17]	164	50	82	43	22	164	NA	138	NA	NA
Netherlands[18]	44169	53	22023	37	31	157287	NA	33779	34338	5873
Norway[19]	13941	53	5254	46	0	20188	20004	7900	8327	9228
Portugal[20]	432	51	216	40	26	432	NA	NA	430	NA
S-Korea[21]	4513	55	2248	59	18	5862	2649	779	3203	1346
Spain[22]	2258	57	1000	35	27	4392	4358	588	NA	2222
Sri Lanka[23]	2485	56	933	45	27	2485	NA	NA	NA	2469

Country	Twin individuals[1]		Complete twin pairs[1]			Number of measures[2]		Number of twin individuals[3]		
	N	% of females	N	% of MZ	% of OSDZ	BMI	Smoking status	Birth weight	Maternal education	Own education
Sweden[24]	74709	51	33768	33	19	185454	73828	5769	5310	29921
Turkey[25]	584	46	288	37	27	584	584	NA	584	NA
UK[26]	32545	61	15865	39	24	112198	NA	21262	3495	NA
USA[27]	123465	43	59778	42	19	175047	45396	31430	70316	77014
Total	489981	51	228635	39	22	1049785	272128	148259	148905	204046

MZ = monozygotic twins; OSDZ = opposite-sex dizygotic twins; BMI = body mass index; NA = not available.

[1] Only twins including information on height, weight, age at the time of measurement, sex and zygosity are included

[2] Longitudinal measures available for part of twins

[3] Only one measure available for each twin

[4] Australian Twin Registry, Peri/Postnatal Epigenetic Twins Study (PETS), Queensland Twin Register

[5] East Flanders Prospective Twin Survey

[6] Brazilian Twin Registry

[7] Quebec Newborn Twin Study, University of British Columbia Twin Project

[8] Chinese National Twin Cohort Study, Guangzhou Twin Eye Study, Qingdao Twin Registry (Children), Qingdao Twin Registry (Adults)

[9] Danish Twin Cohort

[10] Finnish Older Twin Cohort, FinnTwin12, FinnTwin16

[11] Berlin Twin Register Health (TwiSt), Bielefeld Longitudinal Study of Adult Twins

[12] Guinea Bissau Twin Study

[13] Hungarian Twin Registry

[14] Longitudinal Israeli Study of Twins

[15] Italian Twin Registry

[16] Japanese Twin Registry, Ochanomizu University Twin Project, Osaka University Aged Twin Registry, West Japan Twins and Higher Order Multiple Births Registry

[17] Mongolian Twin Registry

[18] Netherlands Twin cohort (children), Netherlands Twin cohort (adults)

[19] Norwegian Twin Registry

[20] Portugal Twin Cohort, Madeira Twin Family Study

[21] Korean Twin-Family Register, South Korea Twin Registry

[22] Murcia Twin Registry

[23] Sri Lanka Twin Registry

[24] Child and Adolescent Twin Study in Sweden (CATSS), TCHAD-Study, Swedish Twin Cohorts, Swedish Young Male Twins Study

[25] Turkish Twin Study

[26] Gemini Study, Genesis 12–19 study, Twins Early Developmental Study, TwinsUK

[27] Boston University Twin Project, California Twin Program, Carolina African American Twin Study of Aging, Colorado Twin Registry, Michigan Twins Study, Mid-Atlantic Twin Registry, Minnesota Twin Family Study, Minnesota Twin Registry, NAS-NRC Twin Cohort, SRI-International, Texas Twin Project, University of Southern California Twin Study, University of Washington Twin Registry, Vietnam Era Twin Registry