Association between the non-HDLcholesterol to HDL- cholesterol ratio and abdominal aortic aneurysm from a Chinese screening program

By Wenhui Lin

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10	Abstract
11	Background: Abdominal aortic aneurysms (AAAs) can result in high mortality upon
12	rupture but are usually undiagnosed because of the absence of symptoms in the early
13	stage. Ultrasound screening is regarded as an impactful way to prevent the AAA-related
14	death but cannot be performed efficiently; therefore, a target population, especially in
15	Asia, for this procedure is lacking. Additionally, although dyslipidaemia and
16	atherosclerosis are associated with AAA. However, it remains undetermined whether
17	the non-high-density lipoprotein-cholesterol to high-density lipoprotein-cholesterol

- 18 ratio (NHHR) is associated with AAA. Therefore, this study was aimed at examining
- **19** whether NHHR is associated with AAA.
- 20 Method: A total of 9559 participants who underwent AAA screening at Guangdong
- 21 Provincial People's Hospital and through screening in two communities in Dongguan,
- from June 2019 to June 2021 joined in this screening program. The diagnosis of AAA
- 23 was confirmed by the ultrasound examination of the abdominal agra rather than any
- 24 known or suspected AAA. Clinical and laboratory data of participants were collected.
- 25 The participants were separated into a normal group and an AAA group according to
- 26 the abdominal aortic status. To eliminate confounding factors, a propensity score
- 27 matching (PSM) approach was utilized. The independent relationship between NHHR
- 28 and AAA was assessed through the utilization of multivariate logistic regression
- analysis. In addition, internal consistency was evaluated through subgroup analysis,
- **30** which controlled for significant risk factors.
- **Results:** Of all the participants, 219 (2.29%) participants were diagnosed with AAA.
- 32 A significant elevation in NHHR was identified in the AAA group when contrasted with
- that in the normal group (P < 0.001). As demonstrated by the results of the multivariate
- 34 logistic regression analysis, AAA was independently associated with NHHR before
- 35 (odds ratio [OR], 1.440, P<0.001) and after PSM (OR, 1.515, P<0.001). Significant

extension was observed in the areas under the receiver operating characteristic curves 36 37 (AUROCs) of NHHR compared to those of single lipid parameters before and after 38 PSM. An accordant association between NHHR and AAA in different subgroups was 39 demonstrated by subgroup analysis. 40 Conclusion: In the Chinese population, there is an independent association between 41 NHHR and AAA. NHHR might be propitious to distinguish individuals with high risk 42 of AAA. 43 Keywords: Non-HDL-C/HDL-C ratio, Abdominal aortic aneurysm, Ultrasond 44 screening, Chinese population 45 46 Introduction

Abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA) is an irreversible and parlous disease carrying
a mortality rate of 67-94%, and commonly, symptoms do not manifest prior to
rupture[1]. Four screening programs, which were based on randomized controlled trials
from 1991 to 2004, all indicated a decline in AAA-related mortality[2-5]. Ultrasound
screening is regarded as an impactful way to prevent AAA-related death and AAA
rupture[6]. However, studies have reported that in Western Europe and America, the
prevalence of AAA has decreased to 1.3–1.7%, which influences the effectiveness and

cost- effectiveness of screening[7-9]. Therefore, parameters that could identify
individuals at increased risk of AAA, should be explored to enhance the AAA
prevalence in the more targeted screening for AAA[10].

57 AAA is an aortic dilatation of over 3 cm inside the abdominal area[11]. Patients with AAAs usually suffer from atherosclerosis simultaneously, and the relevance 58 59 between peripheral atherosclerosis or coronary heart disease (CAD) and AAA has been 60 proposed in numerous studies[12-14]. According to a 7-year prospective study, 61 atherosclerosis risk factors were strongly connected with AAA prevalence[15]. Lately, 62 there has been an increased focus on elucidating the importance of non-traditional lipid indicators, such as non-high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (non-HDL-C) and the non-63 64 high-density lipoprotein cholesterol to high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (non-HDL-65 C/HDL-C) ratio (NHHR)[16, 17], in predicting atherosclerotic cardiovascular 66 disease[18-20]. As a novel lipid parameter, NHHR, which consists of atherogenic and 67 antiatherogenic lipid particles, has been considered as a diagnostic marker for many 68 dyslipidemia-related diseases, for example diabetes mellitus[21-23], metabolic 69 syndrome[18] and carotid atherosclerosis[19, 20]. However, studies appraising the 70 association between NHHR and AAA are limited. The present study was aimed at 71 exploring whether NHHR was associated with AAA, and increasing the prevalence for AAA in the screening.

Methods

Study population

The study population comprised 10169 Chinese adults who underwent AAA screening at Guangdong Provincial People's Hospital or through screening programs in two communities in Dongguan, China, from June 2019 to June 2021. The diagnosis of AAA was confirmed by ultrasound examination of the abdominal aorta, rather than any known or suspected AAA. In this study, the participant selection standard encompassed (1) any history of malignant tumor, infectious disease, liver disease or renal disease, (2) blunt traumatic abdominal aortic injury, (3) previous aortic intervention, and (4) a lack of data on HDL-C and total cholesterol (TC) levels. Figure I depicts the flowchart for the participant selection standards.

86 Definition

In this study, AAA was defined as having an abdominal aortic diameter (AAD) greater
than 30 millimeters[11]. Non-HDL-C was established through computing the numerical
difference between TC (mmol/L) and HDL-C (mmol/L)[24].

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Measurement and data collection

All study participants had an ultrasound scan, which is recommended for AAA screening in the latest guidelines[25, 26]. Not only does ultrasound scanning exhibit high sensitivity (94%-100%) but it also demonstrates high specificity (98%-100%) in the detection of AAA.[27-31]. Radiologists who were recruited for the screening all satisfied the undermentioned requirements: 1) Over 5 years of radiological experience should be possessed 2) abdominal agrta ultrasound scans should have been conducted at a minimum frequency of once per month over the past 12 months. Before performing measurements, radiologists must learn the measurement standards for AAA screening and adhere to these requirements. The ultrasound scans were performed in a plane perpendicular to the aortic longitudinal axis. Regarding the setting of the caliper, radiologists were required to measure the abdominal aortic diameter with an outer-toouter (OTO) measurement, which was defined as measuring from outer anterior wall to the outer posterior wall. In addition, the measurement was started from the diaphragm, and ended at the bifurcation of the aorta. The maximal abdominal aortic diameter was defined as the largest diameter from the lowest renal artery to the aortic bifurcation in the transverse plane and the longitudinal plane [32-34].

Participants were gauged for weight and height with them donning lightweight attire and standing barefoot. The participants' information pertaining to their health, including age, smoking history, and previous medical conditions, was self-reported by the participants and documented by the researchers. Smoking was regarded as a binary variable denoting whether individuals had ever smoked (yes/no) in the past. Prior to blood sample extraction, participants were required to undergo an 8-hour fasting period. Uric acid (UA), serum creatinine (Cr), low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C), HDL-C, TC and TG were tested with the Hitachi 7600 machine (Kyowa, Japan). Conventional lipid parameters, comprising TC, TG, HDL-C, and LDL-C, could be reliably detected using enzymatic methods. HbA1c was tested with an HLC-723 G7 (Tosoh, Japan). Demographics, clinical characteristics, laboratory and ultrasound scan findings were recorded by 2 researchers independently.

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Propensity score matching analysis

To strengthen the repeatability of the study, propensity score matching (PSM) was applied to eliminate probable confounders and selection bias of this retrospective review. The characteristics used to calculate the propensity score were age, BMI, sex,

smoking, hypertension, diabetes mellitus (DM), coronary artery disease (CAD), peripheral artery disease (PAD), stroke, prior usage of angiotensin system inhibitors, beta-blockers, statins, and metformin. One to-one nearest-neighbor matching was implemented using a 0.2 caliper. After matching, 2 groups of 219 subjects were identified. Standardized mean differences (SMDs) were utilized to estimate the difference between the 2 matched groups. Commonly, it is acceptable to obtain a maximum SMD of 0.10 or even 0.15.

Statistical analysis

Participant characteristics were considered based on the presence or absence of AAA. Continuous variables are presented, with the mean and standard deviation (SD) directed to the data that conforms to a normal distribution, and with medians along with the interquartile range (IQR) when dealing with data that does not follow a normal distribution. Student's t-test was utilized to conduct the comparisons on data demonstrating a normal distribution, while the Mann-Whitney U test was employed for data that did not adhere to normal distribution. Furthermore, in the presentation of categorical variables, they are depicted either in terms of relative frequencies (percentages). Subsequently, the comparison of categorical variables involved the

144 application of either the chi-square test or Fisher's exact test. For the sake of estimating 145 the association between NHHR and AAA, NHHR was categorized into tertiles [low 146 (<2.50 mmol/L), middle (2.50-3.51 mmol/L), high (>3.51 mmol/L)]. An assessment of 147 the independent association between NHHR and AAA was performed through the 148 implementation of logistic regression analysis. As a consequence, this analysis yielded odds ratios (ORs) along with their corresponding 95% confidence intervals (CIs). 149 150 Initially, univariate logistic regression analysis was conducted on all the collected 151 variables. Multivariate logistic regression analysis was employed for investigating 152 factors independently linked to the disease, employing variables with a P < 0.05 in the 153 univariate analysis. Subsequently, three main models were constructed for adjusting the covariate, namely, Model 1, unadjusted; Model 2, adjusted for age, BMI and sex; and 154 155 Model 3, adjusted for age, BMI, sex, smoking, hypertension, DM, CAD, PAD, stroke, levels of alanine aminotransferase(ALT), aspartate aminotransferase(AST), uric acid, 156 157 blood urea nitrogen (BUN), Cr, TG, TC, LDL-C, HBA1C and fasting glucose, and use 158 of angiotensin system inhibitors, beta-blockers, statins and metformin. 159 In the subgroup analysis, NHHR was probed to determine whether it was 160 associated with AAA in the several subgroups, which included age, sex, smoking, 161 hypertension, CAD and previous statin use. In every subgroup, the multiple stepwise

162 logistic regression was implemented.

The diagnostic performance of the variables in predicting AAA was assessed utilizing receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curves. Subsequently, for the purpose of quantifying and comparing results of the analysis, the area under the curve (AUC) along with its paired 95% CI was computed. In addition, the Youden index (YI) was used to determine a cutoff value for NHHR. Based on this cutoff value, the division of participants into two groups was carried out with the objective of exploring the connection between NHHR and AAA.

Results

Baseline characteristics

This study comprised 9559 participants, of whom 6,144 were male (64.3%), and the average age was 70.3 ± 0.1 years. The total number of 97.7% (9340) and 2.3% (219) of the participants were distributed in the normal group and AAA group severally (details in Supplementary Table I). Before matching, the AAA group commonly had a larger percentage of comorbidities (except for diabetes mellitus). There was no substantial difference in comorbidities between the normal and AAA groups, after matching. In the AAA group, NHHR exhibited relatively elevated values compared to the normal group,

HDL-C levels demonstrated a decrease in the AAA group compared to the normal group. 180 181 The baseline characteristics concerning the participants, which were separated by the 182 abdominal aorta status, are displayed in Table I. 183 To enhance clinical utility, three groups were formed among the participants (low 184 NHHR group: NHHR <2.50; medium NHHR group: 2.50 ≤ NHHR ≤3.51; high NHHR 185 group: NHHR >3.51) after dividing NHHR into tertiles. The high NHHR group 186 exhibited a distinct increase in the prevalence of AAA in comparison to the medium NHHR group and low NHHR group (1.0% versus 2.5% versus 3.4%; P<0.001) (Figure 187 188 II A). The high NHHR group showed a remarkably greater maximum AAD in contrast 189 to both the low NHHR and medium NHHR groups. (19.0 versus 19.4 versus 19.6; 190 *P*<0.001) (Figure II B). 191

4 Univariate and multivariate logistic regression analysis

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As demonstrated by the findings of univariate logistic regression analysis, NHHR exhibited a substantial association with AAA (OR, 1.391; *P*<0.001). Other significant parameters comprised age, sex, smoking, hypertension, CAD, stroke, and levels of UA, Cr, BUN, HDL-C and HBAC1. To confirm that no multicollinearity existed among all variables, not only tolerance, but also the variance inflation factor (VIF) were assessed

before conducting the multivariate logistic regression analysis with these significant factors (Supplement. Table II). In this analysis, NHHR was still linked to the prevalence of AAA (OR, 1.440; P<0.001) (Table II). After adjusting for confounders with stepwise multivariate logistic regression analysis, when considering the low NHHR group as a reference, it was observed that the high NHHR group exhibited the strongest association with AAA. (OR, 4.231; 95% CI, (2.754-6.500); P<0.001) (Table III).

Propensity score matching analysis

One-to-one nearest-neighbor matching was utilized to eliminate the possible confounding factors accordingly. Two groups, each consisting of 219 participants, were formed. After matching, NHHR in the AAA group still exceeded that in the normal group. In the meanwhile, the AAA group exhibited a reduced HDL-C level in comparison to the normal group. (Table I). Furthermore, the high NHHR group possessed a considerably highest prevalence of AAA (32.2% versus 57.5% versus 60.3%; *P*<0.01) and maximal AAD (26.1 versus 30.7 versus 31.4; *P*<0.01) than the low NHHR group (Figure II C, D). Subsequently, logistic regression analyses, both univariate and multivariate, were conducted in the matched cohort. (Table II). NHHR, which was revealed by the univariate logistic regression analysis, was in association

216 with the prevalence of AAA (odds ratio [OR], 1.520; P<0.001). Moreover, NHHR, 217 which was proved by the multivariate logistic regression analysis, might be linked to 218 AAA prevalence independently (OR, 1.515; *P*<0.001). 219 220 Subgroups analyses

To validate the internal stability of the study, stratified analyses to probe the odds of AAA with changes in NHHR in different subgroups were performed. In consequence, NHHR remained substantially tied to the prevalence of AAA when considering all stratified subgroups (P < 0.001), which was comprised of age, sex, smoking, hypertension, CAD and previous statin use. (figure III).

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Receiver operating characteristic curve analysis

228 With the intention of calculating the predictive accuracy for NHHR, the ROC 229 curve analysis was employed in this study. A comparison of HDL-C (AUC, 0.636; 95% 230 CI, 0.601-0.671), non-HDL-C (AUC, 0.531; 95% CI, 0.494-0.567), TC (AUC, 0.520; 231 95% CI, 0.482-0.558) and NHHR (AUC, 0.646; 95% CI, 0.615-0.677) indicated that 232 NHHR had the best predictive value. In addition, to enhance the diagnostic efficiency 233 of NHHR, it was combined with the latest guideline-recommended risk determinants 234 of AAA, which was comprised of age, gender, smoking and CAD, to form the Model a[35]. As a result, a favorable predictive performance was exhibited by the Model a 235 236 (AUC, 0.764; 95% CI, 0.738-0.790) (Figure IV A). Following PSM, ROC curve 237 analysis was implemented, without certain confounding factors. Once more, the 238 superior predictive value for AAA was demonstrated by NHHR (AUC, 0.653; 95% CI, 0.602-0.704) in comparison with non-HDL-C (AUC, 0.598; 95% CI, 0.544-0.651), TC 239 (AUC, 0.562; 95% CI, 0.508-0.616) and HDL-C (AUC, 0.560; 95% CI, 0.506-0.614) 240 241 as well (Figure IV B). According to the YI, NHHR held the cutoff values, which were 242 2.83 before PSM and 2.75 after PSM. Based on these cutoff values, NHHR was divided 243 into two groups [before PSM: low (<2.83), high (>2.83); after PSM: low (<2.75), high 244 (>2.75)]. In contrast to the low NHHR group, both before and after PSM, the high 245 NHHR group demonstrated a higher prevalence of AAA (Supplement Figure I).

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Discussion

NHHR is a satisfactory diagnostic biomarker for AAA according to this study. As a result, AAA was found to be strongly associated with a high NHHR, which played a more important role than traditional lipid parameters in AAA screening among a Chinese population.

252 Among the numerous atherogenic lipid parameters presented, NHHR integrated all atherogenic cholesterols, including very low density lipoprotein cholesterol (VLDL-C), 253 254 LDL-C, intermediate density lipoprotein cholesterol (IDL-C) and lipoprotein (a), in 255 addition to HDL-C, which is an anti-atherogenic factor.[24, 36, 37] Lately, numerous 256 researches has demonstrated a connection between NHHR and various dyslipidemia-257 related diseases, such as metabolic syndrome[18], liver disease[38], coronary 258 atherosclerosis[39] and carotid atherosclerosis[20]. Moreover, dyslipidemia, especially 259 the atherogenic dyslipidemia, affects the formation and progression of AAA[15, 40]. 260 Iribarren and his colleagues considered that, when the levels of cholesterol exceed 240 261 mg/dl, it was in significant association with AAA (OR:2.82)[41]. As per the literature 262 suggests,, an association was observed between the presence of AAA and HDL-C levels 263 (MD, -0.15 mmol/L)[42]. Yasuhiko K et al. found that, in contrast to subjects in the 264 lowest quintile of plasma lipoprotein(a), the individuals in the highest quintile exhibited 265 a remarkable elevation on the subject of prevalence of AAA. (HR:1.57; 95% CI:1.19-266 2.08) through follow-up[43]. Nevertheless, there is a paucity of recent studies that have 267 focused on the correlation between AAA and NHHR, which includes various 268 atherogenic and antiatherogenic lipid particles. This study corroborated previous 269 studies validated the correlation between HDL-C with AAA, as well as suggested NHHR could have a significant association with the prevalence of AAA.

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However, the potential mechanism leading to NHHR induced prevalence of AAA was not fully expounded, and the damage of the atherogenic lipid particles to the aortic wall was only partly revealed. While it was documented that there is a notable association between AAA and atherosclerosis[15], it's an oversimplification to regard AAA merely as a upshot of advanced atherosclerosis[44]. The pathophysiological process is complicated and elusive and comprises three pivotal factors: proteolysis, smooth muscle cell apoptosis and inflammation [45]. A cohort study demonstrated a link between elevated LDL-C concentrations and matrix metalloproteinase-9 (MMP-9) allele[46]; in addition, the cholesterol metabolite, hydroxycholesterol (27-OHC), could increase MMP9 at the mRNA level[47]. Yin J et al. reported that cholesterol oxides might be able to trigger apoptosis in vascular smooth muscle cells based on animal experiments[48]. The intracellular redox system and activation of proinflammatory genes seemed to be changed by Lp(a), which led to the chronic inflammation in the aortic wall by means of its oxidized phospholipid content[49, 50]. Similarly, studies revealed that LDL-C could induce inflammation as well[51], and that modified LDL could lead to the NLRP3 inflammasome priming and activation in macrophages[52], of which affect formation of AAA[53]. Non-HDL-C, that is abundant and included more constituents than other lipoprotein particles, comprised all the morbific lipoproteins mentioned above. Apart from these effects, NHHR is adjusted by HDL-C, which exerts anti-inflammatory effects[54].

This study also verified that the association of NHHR with AAA existed in different age, sex, smoking, hypertension and CAD conditions, although are were all the risk factors of AAA[35]. The diagnostic value of NHHR is enhanced by its universality, especially in the widespread AAA screening. Owing to intact AAAs, which are commonly asymptomatic, an AAA screening program with ultrasonography demonstrated timely diagnosis of AAAs and reduced AAA-related mortality[55]. Although the US Preventive Services Task Force have advocated a single AAA ultrasound screening for male individuals between 65 and 75 years old that have a smoking history[56], AAA screening is prone to trigger overdiagnosis. Therefore, NHHR is anticipated to assist in identifying high-risk AAA individuals, while improving screening diagnostic accuracy, thus preventing overdiagnosis during AAA

Strengths and limitations

ultrasound screening.

There are a few limitations to be acknowledged in the current research. First, due to

its cross-sectional nature, this study might be affected by selection bias.. However, to minimize potential bias in the study, both PSM and multivariate logistic regression analyses were employed. Additionally, this study could not establish causative links. Second, only once was the lipid profile evaluated and noted. A lack of reduplicated measurement of the lipid profile could lead to the influence of acute stress and occasionality. Third, although we have already supplemented some of the patient's medication information, there was no detailed information about previous use of drugs, including specific lipid-lowering medications, dosing frequency, and duration of medication use. Therefore the influence of drugs, such as stains, could not be adjusted accurately. Finally, this study was only consisted of 219 AAA patients. However, this was a persistent study with durative AAA screening in the hospital and communities. In prospective research, we intend to prioritize exploring the diagnostic significance and prognostic assessment of NHHR.

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Conclusion

In addition to the traditionally pivotal lipid parameters, NHHR was in association with AAA independently. The association existed in different age, sex, smoking, hypertension and coronary arterial disease conditions. Clinicians could utilize NHHR

324 to assist in identifying high-risk AAA individuals, and improve efficiency of screening, 325 thus preventing overdiagnosis during AAA ultrasound screening. 326 327 **Declarations** 328 **Authors contributions** 329 L.J.F and F.Y.Q proposed the design of the study and provided comprehensive guidance throughout 330 the entire process; L.W.H. finished the principal manuscript text, L.S.Y. was in charge of collecting 331 data, L.W. preside over data quality monitoring, L.J.T., Z.T. and Y.F. contributed to analyzing and 332 interpreting the data, and L.Y. and H.W.H. engaged in the proofreading the manuscript. The 333 submitted version was approved by all the authors. Personal responsibility for their individual 334 contributions has been committed to by the authors. 335 336 Ethics approval and consent to participate 337 Authorization for the research was furnished by the Ethics Committee of Guangdong Provincial 338 People's Hospital (Approval No. GDREC2018215H(R3)). Owing to its retrospective nature, 339 informed consent was waived. 340 341 Availability of data and materials

342	Provided there is a valid and reasonable request made for the information derived from this research,
343	it can be obtained from the primary or corresponding author.
344	
345	Competing interests
346	No conflicts of interest are announced by the authors.
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