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Genomic and transcriptomic signatures in anxiety disorders: applications and implications

Kucheruk Olena

Independent researcher, Szczecin, Poland

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Review

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Abstract

Anxiety disorders, affecting millions globally, are often challenging to diagnose and treat due to their complex etiology. Recent advances in genomics and transcriptomics offer novel biomarkers that can enhance the understanding, diagnosis, and treatment of these disorders. This review synthesizes current research on genomic and transcriptomic markers associated with anxiety disorders, discussing their potential applications in clinical practice. Key findings include associations between specific genetic variants, such as those in the 5-HTT and BDNF genes, and anxiety phenotypes, as well as the role of microRNAs and other transcriptomic signatures in modulating stress responses. The review highlights the promise of these markers in developing personalized therapeutic approaches while also addressing the challenges in their clinical implementation.

Corresponding author. Kucheruk Olena, al. Wojska Polskiego, 61/7, Szczecin, Poland, kucherukhelena@gmail.com

Introduction.

Anxiety disorders are among the most prevalent mental health conditions, with significant implications for individual well-being and public health. These disorders are characterized by excessive fear, worry, and related behavioral disturbances. Traditional diagnostic approaches are largely symptom-based, with treatments often relying on a trial-and-error approach. However, the heterogeneity of anxiety disorders and the complex interplay of genetic, environmental, and neurobiological factors contribute to varied treatment responses and outcomes.

Recent advances in genomic and transcriptomic technologies have paved the way for more precise diagnostic tools and personalized treatments. Genome-wide association studies (GWAS) and transcriptomic analyses have identified numerous biomarkers that can provide insights into the pathophysiology of anxiety disorders. This review explores these markers' roles and potential applications, focusing on their utility in improving diagnosis, predicting treatment response, and understanding the underlying biological mechanisms of anxiety.

Material and methods.

Search Strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted using databases such as PubMed, Web of Science, and Scopus. Keywords included "anxiety disorders," "genomic markers," "transcriptomic markers," "gene expression,"

"GWAS," and "personalized medicine." The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2023. Both original research articles and review papers were included.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they investigated the association of genomic or transcriptomic markers with anxiety disorders in human populations. Exclusion criteria included studies focusing solely on animal models, those that did not directly measure anxiety-related phenotypes, and non-English language publications.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data were extracted on the study population, the specific genomic or transcriptomic markers analyzed, their association with anxiety disorders, and any reported clinical applications or implications.

Results

1. Overview of Genomic Markers in Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders are a complex group of psychiatric conditions influenced by both genetic and environmental factors. Recent advances in genomic research have identified several key genetic markers that contribute to the risk of developing anxiety disorders. This section reviews the current understanding of these markers, focusing on their role and application in both understanding and managing anxiety disorders.

2. 5-HTT (SLC6A4) and Serotonin Transporter Gene

The serotonin transporter gene (5-HTT), encoded by SLC6A4, is a prominent marker associated with anxiety disorders. The 5-HTT gene contains a polymorphic region in its promoter, known as 5-HTTLPR, which exists in two major alleles: short (S) and long (L). The S allele has been linked to higher anxiety susceptibility due to its impact on serotonin reuptake and, consequently, serotonin neurotransmission. Studies have consistently shown that individuals carrying one or two copies of the S allele exhibit increased anxiety-related traits and are more likely to develop anxiety disorders compared to those with the L/L genotype. For instance, a meta-analysis of 26 studies reported a significant association between the S allele and heightened anxiety risk, with an odds ratio (OR) of 1.28 (95% CI, 1.17–1.41) [1, 2]. This association is thought to be mediated by reduced serotonin transporter expression, which leads to increased serotonin availability in the synaptic cleft, impacting mood regulation and stress responses [3].

3. BDNF (Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor)

Brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) is another critical gene implicated in anxiety disorders. BDNF supports neuronal growth and plasticity, and its expression is influenced by genetic variants. The Val66Met polymorphism in the BDNF gene affects protein secretion and has been associated with anxiety and depressive symptoms. The Met allele of BDNF has been linked to impaired neuroplasticity and increased susceptibility to anxiety disorders. A study involving 2,000 participants found that carriers of the Met allele had significantly higher anxiety scores and were more prone to anxiety disorders (OR, 1.35; 95% CI, 1.12–1.63) [4][5]. This polymorphism also affects treatment response, with Met allele carriers showing a poorer response to antidepressants compared to Val/Val homozygotes [6].

4. FKBP5 and the HPA Axis

The FKBP5 gene encodes a co-chaperone of the glucocorticoid receptor and plays a crucial role in regulating the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. Variants in FKBP5 have been linked to altered stress responses and increased anxiety risk. FKBP5 interacts with glucocorticoids to modulate HPA axis function, and certain polymorphisms have been associated with heightened anxiety and stress sensitivity. Research has shown that the FKBP5 rs1360780 polymorphism is associated with increased anxiety, particularly in individuals with a history of early-life stress. A study of 1,500 participants demonstrated that individuals carrying the risk allele of rs1360780 had a significantly higher prevalence of anxiety disorders (OR, 1.45; 95% CI, 1.25–1.68) [7, 8]. This polymorphism affects FKBP5 expression and its interaction with glucocorticoid receptors, influencing stress resilience and anxiety levels [9].

5. MicroRNAs and Post-Transcriptional Regulation

MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are small, non-coding RNAs that regulate gene expression post-transcriptionally. Several miRNAs have been implicated in anxiety disorders by modulating genes involved in neurotransmission, stress response, and neuroplasticity. For example, miR-34a is known to influence the corticotropin-releasing factor (CRF) pathway, which is critical for stress regulation. Elevated levels of miR-34a have been associated with increased anxiety-like behavior in animal models. A study examining the expression of miR-34a in the prefrontal cortex and amygdala of anxiety disorder patients found that higher miR-34a levels correlated with greater anxiety severity [10,

11]. These findings suggest that miR-34a could serve as a potential biomarker for anxiety and a target for therapeutic interventions [12].

6. Corticotropin-Releasing Hormone (CRH)

Corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH) is a key regulator of the HPA axis and is involved in the stress response. Variants in the CRH gene have been associated with anxiety disorders due to their impact on stress sensitivity and HPA axis regulation. The CRH gene influences the release of adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH) and cortisol, which are crucial for managing stress. A genetic study involving 1,200 patients found that specific polymorphisms in the CRH gene were significantly associated with increased anxiety levels (OR, 1.38; 95% CI, 1.20–1.58) [13, 14]. These findings highlight the role of CRH in the etiology of anxiety disorders and its potential as a therapeutic target [15].

7. COMT (Catechol-O-Methyltransferase)

Catechol-O-methyltransferase (COMT) is an enzyme involved in the metabolism of catecholamines, such as dopamine and norepinephrine, which are critical for mood regulation. Variants in the COMT gene can influence anxiety susceptibility by affecting neurotransmitter levels and brain function. The Val158Met polymorphism in COMT has been shown to impact anxiety levels, with the Val allele associated with higher anxiety. A study of 1,000 participants revealed that individuals with the Val/Val genotype had increased anxiety scores compared to those with the Met/Met genotype (OR, 1.30; 95% CI, 1.12–1.50) [16, 17]. This polymorphism affects the enzymatic activity of COMT and influences dopamine metabolism, impacting anxiety levels.

8. GRM3 (Metabotropic Glutamate Receptor 3)

The GRM3 gene encodes the metabotropic glutamate receptor 3 (mGluR3), which plays a role in glutamatergic neurotransmission and synaptic plasticity. Variants in GRM3 have been linked to anxiety disorders due to their impact on glutamate signaling. A study involving 800 patients found that specific polymorphisms in GRM3 were associated with increased anxiety symptoms and susceptibility to anxiety disorders (OR, 1.25; 95% CI, 1.10–1.42) [18, 19]. These findings suggest that GRM3 could be a potential target for developing new therapeutic strategies for anxiety.

9. GRM5 (Metabotropic Glutamate Receptor 5)

GRM5 encodes the metabotropic glutamate receptor 5 (mGluR5), another key player in glutamate signaling and synaptic plasticity. Variants in GRM5 have been associated with anxiety disorders, impacting neurotransmitter systems and brain function. Research has shown that specific GRM5 polymorphisms are linked to increased anxiety risk, with an odds ratio of 1.20 (95% CI, 1.05–1.37) [20, 21]. These findings highlight the role of GRM5 in anxiety and its potential as a therapeutic target.

Discussion

The identification of specific genomic and transcriptomic markers associated with anxiety disorders represents a significant advance in understanding the etiology of these conditions. The markers discussed in this review, including 5-HTT, BDNF, FKBP5, miRNAs, and others, highlight the complex genetic architecture underlying anxiety. These findings also underscore the importance of considering gene-environment interactions, as many of these markers interact with environmental stressors to influence anxiety risk. The use of these markers in clinical practice could revolutionize the diagnosis and treatment of anxiety disorders. For instance, genetic screening for 5-HTTLPR or BDNF polymorphisms could help identify individuals at higher risk for anxiety or predict their response to specific treatments. Similarly, transcriptomic profiling could provide insights into the molecular pathways disrupted in anxiety, guiding the development of targeted therapies.

Clinical Applications

The integration of genomic and transcriptomic markers into clinical practice offers several potential benefits:

1. Personalized Medicine: Tailoring treatment strategies based on an individual's genetic and transcriptomic profile could improve treatment efficacy and reduce adverse effects. For example, patients with specific polymorphisms in the 5-HTT gene may benefit more from SSRIs, while those with BDNF or FKBP5 variants might respond better to alternative therapies, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) or mindfulness-based interventions.

2. Early Diagnosis and Prevention: Identifying individuals at high genetic risk for anxiety disorders could enable early intervention, potentially preventing the onset of symptoms. This approach could be particularly valuable in individuals with a family history of anxiety or those exposed to early-life stress.

3. Biomarkers for Treatment Response: Predicting treatment response remains a challenge in managing anxiety disorders. The use of genomic and transcriptomic markers as biomarkers could help predict which patients are likely to respond to specific treatments, allowing for more efficient and effective management.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite the promise of genomic and transcriptomic markers in anxiety disorders, several challenges remain:

1. Complexity and Heterogeneity: Anxiety disorders are highly heterogeneous, both clinically and genetically. This heterogeneity complicates the identification of universal biomarkers and necessitates the consideration of multiple markers and pathways.

2. Gene-Environment Interactions: The interplay between genetic predisposition and environmental factors is critical in the development of anxiety disorders. Understanding these interactions is essential for the accurate interpretation of genetic and transcriptomic data and their application in clinical practice.

3. Ethical and Practical Considerations: The use of genetic testing in clinical practice raises ethical concerns, including issues related to privacy, consent, and the potential for genetic discrimination. Furthermore, the cost and accessibility of these technologies may limit their widespread adoption.

4. Replication and Validation: Many of the findings discussed in this review require replication and validation in larger, more diverse populations. The generalizability of these markers across different ethnic groups and settings remains an open question.

Future Directions

Future research should focus on several key areas:

1. Larger, More Diverse Studies: Expanding the diversity of study populations in genomic and transcriptomic research is crucial for ensuring that findings are applicable across different demographic groups.

2. Longitudinal Studies: Longitudinal studies tracking individuals over time could provide valuable insights into how genomic and transcriptomic markers interact with environmental factors to influence the development and progression of anxiety disorders.

3. Integration with Other Omics Data: Integrating genomic and transcriptomic data with other omics approaches, such as proteomics and metabolomics, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the biological underpinnings of anxiety disorders.

4. Translation into Clinical Practice: Efforts should be made to translate research findings into clinical tools and interventions. This includes developing standardized protocols for genetic and transcriptomic testing in anxiety disorders and evaluating their cost-effectiveness and clinical utility.

Table I. Summary of genomic and transcriptomic markers in anxiety disorders [1-40]

Marker/ Gene	Category	Role in Anxiety Disorders	Application
5-HTTLPR	Serotonin Transporter	Modulates serotonin reuptake; associated with anxiety sensitivity and increased risk of anxiety disorders.	Used in assessing susceptibility to anxiety disorders and predicting response to SSRIs.
COMT (Catechol-O-methyltransferase)	Dopaminergic Pathway	Impacts dopamine metabolism; associated with stress response and anxiety-related phenotypes.	Considered in personalized treatment strategies for anxiety, particularly in cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT).
BDNF (Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor)	Neurotrophic Factor	Involved in neuroplasticity; associated with resilience and anxiety disorders, especially under stress.	Used in research for resilience mechanisms and potential targets for novel therapies.
CRHR1 (Corticotropin-Releasing Hormone Receptor 1)	Stress Response	Regulates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis; associated with heightened stress response and anxiety.	Potential target for drugs aimed at modulating stress-related anxiety.
FKBP5	Stress Response	Modulates glucocorticoid receptor sensitivity; implicated in the regulation of stress and anxiety, particularly PTSD.	Studied for its role in treatment response, especially in stress-related disorders.
GAD1 (Glutamate Decarboxylase 1)	GABAergic System	Regulates GABA synthesis; associated with anxiety symptoms and disorders.	Explored as a target for anxiolytic drug development.
GRM2 (Metabotropic Glutamate Receptor 2)	Glutamatergic System	Modulates glutamate signaling; linked to anxiety and mood disorders.	Targeted in experimental therapies for anxiety and mood stabilization.
NR3C1 (Glucocorticoid Receptor Gene)	Stress Response	Impacts glucocorticoid receptor function; associated with dysregulated stress response and anxiety.	Potential biomarker for stress-related anxiety and targeted treatment strategies.
SLC6A4 (Serotonin Transporter Gene)	Serotonin Transporter	Variants influence serotonin transport and have been linked to anxiety disorders, especially in response to environmental stressors.	Used in genetic screening to predict anxiety disorder risk and response to antidepressants.

Continuation of table 1

Marker/ Gene	Category	Role in Anxiety Disorders	Application
MAOA (Monoamine Oxidase A)	Monoamine Metabolism	Breaks down monoamines such as serotonin and dopamine; associated with anxiety and aggression.	Investigated in the context of genetic predisposition to anxiety and aggression-related disorders.
NGF (Nerve Growth Factor)	Neurotrophic Factor	Involved in the growth and survival of neurons; associated with anxiety and stress responses.	Studied for its potential in neuroprotective strategies and anxiolytic treatments.
GRIN2B (Glutamate Ionotropic Receptor NMDA Type Subunit 2B)	Glutamatergic System	Involved in synaptic plasticity and memory; linked to anxiety and cognitive deficits.	Explored for its role in anxiety and cognitive symptoms, particularly in anxiety comorbid with other disorders.

Table 2: Summary of genomic and transcriptomic markers in anxiety disorders [1-40]

Marker/ Gene	Category	Role in Anxiety Disorders	Application
DISC1 (Disrupted in Schizophrenia 1)	Neurodevelopmental Gene	Influences neurodevelopment and synaptic function; associated with a range of psychiatric conditions including anxiety.	Potential target for early intervention strategies in neurodevelopmental and anxiety disorders.
TACR1 (Tachykinin Receptor 1)	Neuropeptide Receptor	Modulates stress and anxiety-related neuropeptides; linked to anxiety and depression.	Targeted in research for developing new anxiolytic medications.
RGS2 (Regulator of G-Protein Signaling 2)	Signal Transduction	Involved in G-protein signaling; associated with anxiety and stress regulation.	Potential biomarker for anxiety disorders and a target for novel therapeutic strategies.
AVPR1A (Arginine Vasopressin Receptor 1A)	Neuropeptide Receptor	Modulates social behavior and stress response; linked to anxiety and social anxiety disorder.	Investigated for its role in social anxiety and related therapeutic interventions.
HTR1A (5-Hydroxytryptamine Receptor 1A)	Serotonin Receptor	Modulates serotonin activity; linked to anxiety, depression, and stress response.	Used in genetic studies to understand individual variations in anxiety and treatment response.
GSK3B (Glycogen Synthase Kinase 3 Beta)	Signal Transduction	Involved in various cellular processes, including stress response; associated with anxiety and mood disorders.	Targeted in research for mood and anxiety disorder treatments, particularly in bipolar and comorbid conditions.
IL6 (Interleukin 6)	Inflammatory Cytokine	Pro-inflammatory cytokine involved in immune response; associated with anxiety, especially in chronic stress.	Explored in the context of the inflammation-anxiety link, and potential anti-inflammatory treatments.
NTRK2 (Neurotrophic Receptor Tyrosine Kinase 2)	Neurotrophic Factor	Receptor for BDNF; involved in neuroplasticity and associated with anxiety and depression.	Targeted in neuropsychiatric research for resilience and potential therapeutic interventions.
ADCYAP1R1 (Adenylate Cyclase Activating Polypeptide 1 Receptor Type I)	Signal Transduction	Involved in stress and anxiety modulation through cAMP signaling pathways; associated with PTSD and anxiety.	Potential biomarker for PTSD and anxiety, studied in the context of stress response modulation.
OXTR (Oxytocin Receptor)	Neuropeptide Receptor	Modulates social bonding and stress; associated with social anxiety and other anxiety disorders.	Investigated for its role in social anxiety, particularly in developing oxytocin-based treatments.
SLC6A3 (Dopamine Transporter Gene)	Dopamine Transporter	Involved in dopamine reuptake; associated with anxiety, particularly in the context of dopamine dysregulation.	Used in research to understand dopamine-related anxiety and potential treatment pathways.

Conclusions.

Genomic and transcriptomic markers hold great potential for advancing the diagnosis, treatment, and understanding of anxiety disorders. While challenges remain, the integration of these markers into clinical practice could pave the way for personalized medicine approaches that improve outcomes for individuals with anxiety disorders. Continued research and collaboration across disciplines will be essential for realizing the full potential of these biomarkers in clinical settings.

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