METAGENOME-ASSEMBLED GENOMES FROM A POPULATION-BASED COHORT UNCOVER

NOVEL GUT SPECIES AND STRAIN DIVERSITY, REVEALING PREVALENT DISEASE

ASSOCIATIONS

A short running title: Utility of MAGs in large cohort study

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ABSTRACT

Metagenomic profiling has advanced understanding of microbe-host interactions. However,

widely used read-based approaches are limited by incomplete reference databases and the

inability to resolve strain-level variation. Here, we present a scalable, genome-resolved

framework that integrates population-specific metagenome-assembled genomes (MAGs) to

discover novel species, strain diversity, and disease associations. From 1,878 deeply sequenced

samples in the Estonian microbiome cohort (EstMB-deep), we reconstructed 84,762 MAGs

representing 2,257 species, including 353 (15.6%) previously uncharacterized species reaching

up to 30% relative abundances in some individuals. We integrated these MAGs with the Unified

Human Gastrointestinal Genome (UHGG) collection to create an expanded reference (GUTrep),

enabling profiling of 2,509 EstMB individuals and testing associations with 33 prevalent

diseases. Of 25 diseases with significant associations, 8 involved newly identified species,

underscoring the value of population-specific MAGs. To quantify within-species diversity, we

developed the Strain Richness Index (SRI), a novel MAG-based metric that informed strain-level

analyses. Based on SRI, we prioritized *Odoribacter splanchnicus,* a prevalent species with the

lowest strain heterogeneity, yielding sufficient power for strain-level analysis. We identified two

dominant strains, N1 and N2, with distinct gene repertoires and divergent disease associations.

Notably, strain N1 was negatively associated with gastritis and duodenitis and hypertensive

heart disease, associations undetected at the species level. Our study expands the human gut

reference landscape, demonstrates the importance of population-specific MAGs for uncovering

novel microbial diversity, and reveals strain-level disease associations obscured at higher

taxonomic levels, highlighting the need for genome-resolved approaches in microbiome

research.

KEYWORDS

Gut microbiome, Metagenome-assembled genomes, strain richness index, population

microbiome, metagenomics, metagenome-wide associations study, strain-level diversity.

INTRODUCTION

The human gut microbiome exhibits remarkable diversity across individuals and populations,

necessitating comprehensive global reference databases to enable accurate taxonomic and

functional profiling of microbial communities. In recent years, considerable research effort has

been directed towards establishing collections of global reference genomes of the human gut

microbiome. Initially, the focus was on sequencing bacteria that could be isolated and

cultured[1,2]. However, rapid technological advancements have facilitated the generation of vast

amounts of metagenomic data and the development of techniques for assembling genomes from

unculturable species, consequently improving reference databases. These Metagenome-

Assembled Genomes (MAGs) substantially expand the number of gut microbial species, as 81%

of the species in the current version of the Unified Human Gastrointestinal Genome (UHGG)

collection were identified by MAGs while having no corresponding representative in any human

gut culture database[3]. Moreover, MAG assembly enables genome-centric analyses, such as

identifying strains of species present in a population and conducting strain-level association

studies[4,5]. Therefore, MAGs enable us to significantly improve our understanding of the

ecosystem under study.

The importance of MAGs recovery is exemplified in population biobanks that include deeply

phenotyped individuals and their microbiome samples. In this case, it becomes possible to

identify correlations between known, newly reconstructed species and specific genome

structure and various environmental, dietary, or health-related factors. In recent years, several

population-based biobanks with metagenomic datasets have been established, for example, the

Dutch Microbiome cohort from the Lifelines biobank[6], the Israeli Project 10K cohort[7,8], the

FinRisk cohort[9], and the EstMB cohort from the Estonian Biobank[10]. Analyses of these datasets

have demonstrated that gut microbiome composition is associated with a range of

environmental and lifestyle factors, particularly diet and medication use[10,11], and that variation

in the microbiome is associated with several diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases[12,13],

mental health disorders[14] and cancers[15,16]. Furthermore, emerging evidence suggests that the

gut microbiome has predictive power, as demonstrated in the context of incident heart failure[17].

However, many of these studies still rely solely on reference databases. These databases may

lack representatives for many uncultured or underrepresented population-specific microbial

species, leading to incomplete or biased interpretations.

In the present study, we leveraged deep metagenomic sequencing of a population‐based

Estonian microbiome-deep (EstMB-deep) cohort to assemble a comprehensive collection of

metagenome‐assembled genomes (MAGs), substantially expanding the reference database of

human gut microbes with hundreds of previously uncharacterized species. We integrated these

population‐specific MAGs with public reference data and conducted association analyses with

33 prevalent diseases. To systematically assess within-species diversity, we developed a novel

Strain Richness Index (SRI). We demonstrated its utility by identifying strain‐specific disease

associations in *Odoribacter splanchnicus* that were not apparent at the species level. Our

findings demonstrate that genome‐resolved, strain‐aware microbiome profiling can uncover

novel disease‐linked microbial signatures beyond that remain hidden using conventional

approaches.

RESULTS

Study design and cohort overview

The study aimed to first recover metagenome-assembled genomes (MAGs) from a deeply sequenced Estonian gut microbiome cohort (EstMB-deep, N=1,878) and expand the reference database by combining these newly assembled genomes with the existing public Unified Human Gastrointestinal Genome (UHGG) collection and demonstrate the added value of genome-resolved, strain-level analysis in identifying disease associations[3] (**Figure 1a**).

The EstMB-deep subcohort used in the study is a subset of the volunteer-based Estonian Microbiome cohort that is resequenced with much deeper coverage than the initial sample set. In brief, the EstMB cohort included 1,764 women (70.31%) and 745 men (29.69%), and the EstMB-deep subcohort consists of 1,308 women (69.65%) and 570 men (30.35%), with both cohorts representing individuals aged 23 to 89 (**Figure 1b**). Compared to the EstMB average sequencing depth (30.63 ± 3.12 million reads per sample), EstMB-deep achieved over threefold higher coverage (106.70 ± 42.1 million, **Figure 1c**). A detailed description of the EstMB, including omics and phenotypic data, is provided in Aasmets & Krigul et al. 2022[10].

Creating a representative MAG pool of gut bacteria in the Estonian population

To characterize population-specific microbes and expand publicly available human gut microbiome databases with microbial genomes from the Estonian population, we performed *de novo* Metagenome Assembled Genomes (MAGs) reconstruction from all 1878 samples in the EstMB-deep cohort. The MAG reconstruction pipeline is summarized in **Figure 1d**. We successfully reconstructed 84,762 MAGs from EstMB-deep, with an average of 45.13 MAGs per sample. Among these, 42,049 (49.61%) were high quality (HQ) MAGs, i.e. MAGs with completeness > 90% and contamination < 5%; 26,806 (31.63%) were medium quality (MQ) MAGs, i.e. MAGs with completeness > 50% and contamination < 10%; and all others 15,907 (18.77%) were low quality (LQ) MAGs according to CheckM **(Figure S1)**. To describe the

Estonian population species pool, we clustered all MAGs with dRep using a 95.0% ANI

threshold, ensuring that the final clusters represent distinct species.

The species-level clustering procedure yielded 2,257 clusters (**Table S1**). For each cluster, the

representative MAG was selected based on genome completeness, minimal contamination,

strain heterogeneity, and N50 (a parameter reflecting assembly fragmentation level). We refer

to these 2,257 species representative MAGs as the "ESTrep" collection. The majority of ESTrep

MAGs from the ESTrep collection (72.97%, n=1647 MAGs) were >90% complete and <5%

contaminated (**Figure 1e-g**). Additionally, 475 of them (21.04%) contained the 5S, 16S, and 23S

rRNA genes along with at least 18 tRNAs, meeting the 'high quality' criteria defined by the

Genomic Standards Consortium[18], and we refer to these as HQ-mimag MAGs (**Figure 1e**).

MAG assembly remains essential for detecting novel population-specific species

Next, we identified previously uncharacterized species within the ESTrep MAGs collection.

MAGs were categorized as novel species if their taxonomic classification at the species level or

higher couldn't be assigned using the GTDB-Tk[19], a common approach for evaluating whether a

newly reconstructed MAG represents a new species[20,21]. Of the 2,257 representative MAGs, 353

(15.64%) were classified as novel. Among these, 231 MAGs (65.44%) had > 90% and < 5%

contamination, and 57 (16.15%) also contained rRNA and tRNA genes, meeting the MIMAG

guidelines for high-quality MAGs[18]. We observed a strong correlation between the number of

novel species discovered and the number of samples analyzed ($R^2 = 0.97$). Specifically, for every

500 samples, approximately 102 novel species were identified (**Figure 2a**). As we have not

observed any indication of a plateau with the current sample size, we expect that analysing

more samples will reveal additional species.

Although Estonia is considered a Westernised population, novel species still make up a

significant proportion of the microbiome community. These newly identified species were

distributed across multiple phyla (**Figure 2b**). On average, 2.82% of the total reads per sample

were assigned to these novel species, even reaching a maximum relative abundance of 32.34%

in some samples (**Figure 2c**). Since these species are absent from public databases and may be

population-specific, microbiome studies that rely solely on existing references may substantially

underestimate microbial diversity.

Integrating population-specific and global MAGs improves reference quality and

uncovers assembly biases

As the success of metagenome assembly and genome reconstruction depends on multiple

technical and analytical factors, we did not expect to recover all microbial genomes present in

the gut. Therefore, we constructed an integrated species-level reference by combining newly

reconstructed MAGs from the Estonian population with publicly available human gut-associated

species. This integrated reference, called the GUTrep collection (**Figure 1a**), was generated by

deduplicating the ESTrep MAGs collection and UHGG MAGs collection[22] at a 95.0% ANI

threshold, retaining the highest-quality MAG for each species. When two MAGs from one species

were present (one from ESTrep and one from UHGG), the highest-quality MAG was selected for

the final collection. The final GUTrep database comprises 4,792 species, of which 3,285

(68.55%) originated from UHGG and 1,507 (31.45%) from ESTrep, thereby substantially

improving the UHGG dataset. Notably, the ESTrep contribution includes 353 novel species, 607

known species absent from UHGG and 927 higher-quality MAGs already represented in UHGG.

To estimate microbiome composition across the EstMB dataset (n = 2,509), we mapped all reads

against the GUTrep collection. This approach, which does not require deep sequencing,

identified 3,423 species in total. On average, each sample contained 292 species, whereas MAG

assembly yielded an average of 45 MAGs per sample (**Figure 2d**). The most prevalent (>95%)

species detected by read mapping were all well-known gut microbes: *Phocaeicola dorei*,

Bacteroides spp (*B. uniformis*, *B. xylanisolvens*, *B. ovatus*), *Faecalibacterium prausnitzii*, and

Odoribacter splanchnicus, P. dorei and B. uniformis also being among the most abundant species

in addition to *Prevotella copri* (>2% on average) **(Figure S2)**. We observe that samples with

more species detected by mapping also tended to have more MAGs recovered (**Figure S3**).

However, the number of assembled genomes per species did not clearly correlate with species

prevalence or mean abundance (**Figure 2e, Table S2**). Moreover, the difference between these

values can range from minimal to substantial. For example, despite one of the most prevalent

species, *Bacteroides xylanisolvens,* being detected in 97.13% of samples and having a mean

relative abundance of 0.39%, only 18 MAGs were assembled for this species. This pattern,

common among newly identified species, highlights that many species detected by mapping are

represented only by a few MAGs, complicating genome-centric analysis (**Figure 2f, Table S3**).

Among 3,423 species detected, only 199 were represented by more than 100 assembled MAGs

and just 19 species had over 500 recovered MAGs (**Figure S4**), illustrating the challenges of

comprehensive genome reconstruction.

Newly assembled species provide valuable input for association studies

Next, we utilized the comprehensive electronic health records (EHR) data from the Estonian

population to perform a microbiome-wide association study (MWAS) of common diseases, using

the population-based GUTrep reference. We included 33 prevalent diseases (≥ 100 cases each;

Table S4), spanning various categories, such as the respiratory system (7 diseases), circulatory

system (7 diseases), and digestive system (4 diseases) disorders. Associations between species

abundance and diseases were assessed using linear regression models adjusted for BMI, gender,

and age. To reduce multiple testing, we limited the analysis to species present in ≥1% of the

samples, resulting in 1,595 species.

We identified 105 significant associations (Bonferroni-adjusted $p < 2.71 \times 10^{-5}$) between 96

bacterial species and 25 diseases (**Table S4, Table S5**). Notably, newly assembled species were

associated with 8 out of the 33 diseases, including asthma, chronic ischemic heart disease,

chronic rhinitis, nasopharyngitis and pharyngitis, female infertility, heart failure, haemorrhoids,

iron deficiency anaemia, and vitamin D deficiency. For example, one of the strongest

associations was observed for chronic ischemic heart disease, involving a newly assembled

species from the *Nanosynbacter* genus (species ID: H2144_Nanosynbacter_undS, adjusted p =

3.13 × 10^{-6}) (**Figure 2g, Table S4**). These findings emphasize the importance of population-

specific reference databases for detecting disease-associated microbiome changes. However,

further studies are needed to confirm whether these associations generalize beyond the

Estonian cohort.

MAG data enables strain-level diversity analysis across species

Most large-scale microbe-disease or MWAS studies are conducted at the species level, although

strain-level analysis is often recommended for understanding the functional insights[23–25].

However, not all species exhibit a strain structure that allows sufficient case numbers for robust

strain-level association testing. Metagenome assembly provides the opportunity to characterize

this diversity within species and describe strain structures and prevalences in the population.

Here, we introduce the Strain Richness Index (SRI), a metric that quantifies genetic variation

within species, i.e. how many strains per individual species can be detected in the population.

Specifically, the number of strain clusters detected per species is normalized by the number of

MAGS:

Strain Richness Index (SRI) = (Number of strains / Number of MAGs) x * 100%

This normalization allows comparison of within-species diversity and allows for systematic

assessment of strain structure across bacterial species in the human gut microbiome. We

focused on species with >10 reconstructed MAGs, yielding 376 species across diverse phyla.

Notably, none of the newly identified species were included due to an insufficient number of

MAGs. Strain clusters were defined at 99% Average Nucleotide Identity (ANI).

The SRI values varied widely, ranging from 0.4 to 100 (**Figure 3a, Table S6**), indicating

substantial differences in strain diversity across species in the population. *Odoribacter*

splanchnicus exhibited the lowest SRI (0.4), with one strain per ~250 MAGs, reflecting low

diversity despite high prevalence. In contrast, *Prevotella copri* had one of the highest SRIs (94.0),

consistent with its well-documented heterogeneity, where nearly every MAG represents a

unique strain, making it difficult to conduct strain-level association analysis in the population.

Interestingly, *Alistipes_A* genus appeared in both the lowest and highest SRI groups.

We also examined SRI distribution across six phyla with ≥10 species present in each: *Bacillota,*

Bacteroidota, Verrucomicrobiota, Bacillota_A, Proteobacteria, and *Cyanobacteroidota* - all of

which exhibited a broad range in SRI distributions (**Figure 3b**). *Bacillota* species tended to have

higher SRI values, indicating that this phylum generally tends to have a higher number of strains

per species. In contrast, *Verrucomicrobiota*, *Cyanobacteroidota*, and *Proteobacteria* exhibited

lower SRI values, suggesting that species in these phyla typically have fewer strains per species.

However, due to the small sample sizes in some phyla, further studies are needed to confirm

whether these differences represent true phylum-level trends.

Strain-level analysis reveals novel phenotype associations undetected at the species level

In order to demonstrate the value of strain-level MWAS analysis, we selected *O. splanchnicus*

due to its low SRI (SRI = 0.4) and high prevalence (detected in 96.14% of samples, assembled in

72.68%, **Figure 3c**). Among its MAGs, we identified four distinct strain clusters, two of which

were rare (found in 2 and 19 samples, respectively). Therefore, we focused on the two major

clusters with high case numbers: strain N1(n=974 samples, original strain ID: 1_2.3.4.6.9) and

strain N2 (n=335 samples, original strain ID: 1_1) (**Figure 3d**).

Logistic regression models adjusted for BMI, gender, and age were used to assess the

association between the presence or absence of *O. splanchnicus* strains N1 and N2 and the same

33 diseases previously analyzed at the species-level MWAS. Our analysis identified a significant

association between the presence of strain N1 and two different diseases - gastritis and

duodenitis, and hypertensive heart disease (**Figure 3e**). The odds ratio for strain N1 was less

than 1 in both diseases (gastritis and duodenitis OR = 0,56, hypertensive heart disease OR =

0,63), indicating that its presence is associated with a reduced likelihood of having the disease.

Notably, these associations were not detected at the species level, highlighting the added

resolution of strain-level analysis.

To explore functional differences, we performed a pan-genome analysis of strains N1 and N2.

We carried out Principal coordinate analysis of predicted gene cluster presence/absence, which

showed clear separation between the strains (**Figure 3f**). We identified that the two strains

formed distinct clusters, indicating clear genomic differentiation based on gene content (**Figure**

3g), with 40 gene clusters unique to one of the two (**Figure 3h, Table S7**). While most encoded

hypothetical or uncharacterized proteins, some were annotated with putative functions based

on the Clusters of Orthologous Genes (COG20)[26]. Strain N2 harboured a broader repertoire of

genes associated with stress response, iron acquisition, and antimicrobial resistance—traits

consistent with enhanced survival in inflammatory gastrointestinal environments. These

included elevated copy numbers of the extracytoplasmic stress sigma factor RpoE ($\sigma^\wedge E$), iron

transport components FecR and CirA, and multidrug resistance elements such as AcrR and an

ABC-type efflux pump (YadH). In contrast, strain N1 was enriched for redox maintenance

proteins such as YyaL/DsbD, suggesting a distinct strategy centered on oxidative stress

mitigation.

DISCUSSION

Our study presents a scalable, genome-resolution framework for population-scale microbiome

analysis, enabling improved species and strain-level characterization and discovery of disease

associations. By expanding the gut microbial reference database with thousands of

metagenome-assembled genomes (MAGs), including novel bacterial species and diverse strains

of known taxa, we address a major limitation in current reference datasets, which often

underrepresent global microbiome diversity. We demonstrate that genome-resolution

microbiome analysis, coupled with population-specific MAG catalogues, enables more

comprehensive species- and strain-level association studies. Furthermore, we introduce the

Strain Richness Index, a novel quantitative metric of within-species genetic diversity, which we

applied across 378 gut species to guide candidate selection for strain-level analysis. Using this

framework, we uncovered strain-specific disease signals for *O. splanchnicus* that were invisible

at the species level and provided functional genomic insights that may explain these
associations.

Read-based taxonomic profiling remains the most widely adopted approach to characterize
microbial communities, particularly in association studies[27,28]. Alternatively, metagenome-
assembled genomes (MAGs) offer a culture-independent, reference-free approach to recover
community structure[29]. Despite deep sequencing (an average of 106 million read pairs per
sample), metagenome assembly reconstructed only ~45 genomes per sample on average,
compared to 292 species detected by read mapping, highlighting that even abundant taxa are
not always fully recoverable by assembly and *de novo* assembly alone fails to capture the full
microbial diversity. This finding challenges the common assumption that high-abundance taxa
can be reliably assembled given sufficient sequencing depth[30-32]. We observed multiple cases
where prevalent and relatively abundant species yielded few MAGs. For instance, *Bacteroides*
xylanisolvens, present in 97.13% of samples at 0.39% mean abundance, yielded only 18 MAGs.
Similar trends were observed for novel species, e.g., an undefined sp from the *Butyricimonas*
genus (ID: H0366) was assembled from just 36 samples but detected in >55% samples by
mapping. These findings support earlier observations that low-abundance but genetically
distinct species may assemble more readily than abundant, genetically diverse taxa[33] and
underscore the need for a hybrid strategy combining MAG assembly and high-resolution read
mapping against population-specific reference. Our GUTrep database exemplifies such a
strategy, integrating local MAGs with the Unified Human Gastrointestinal Genome (UHGG)
collection to improve reference coverage. Notably, 31% of dereplicated GUTrep species
originated from our Estonian-specific MAGs, illustrating the added value of local assembly
efforts.

A common argument against investing in resource-intensive *de novo* assembly is that the
rapidly growing and regularly updated public gut genome catalogues increasingly capture
known microbial diversity, suggesting that most gut species will soon be represented, and
further assembly may become redundant. However, our findings challenge this assumption, and

support continued *de novo* assembly in new population studies. Early efforts reported high

proportions of novel taxa, with 77% of MAGs classified as novel in Pasolli et al[34] and 66% in

Almeida et al[35]. More recent studies, such as Leviatan et al., still report 310 novel species out of

3,594 assembled (8.6%)[36]. In our cohort, we recovered 353 novel species from 2,257 MAGs

(15.6%), with ~102 additional novel species per 500 samples, and no indication of a discovery

plateau. Moreover, we confirm a previously reported finding that many novel species assembled

from a few samples were nonetheless widespread by mapping, suggesting that assembly

remains essential even in well-characterized industrialized populations[33]. These results

reinforce the idea that local assembly efforts complement global references and remain critical

for uncovering the full spectrum of microbial diversity.

Another advantage of *de novo* assembly is its ability to uncover strain-level variation[5,24]. Strains

of the same species can differ significantly in function and disease associations[37]. As a classic

example, well-known gut microbe Escherichia coli species includes strains which can be

pathogenic (e.g., enterohaemorrhagic O157:H7), probiotic (Nissle 1917), or commensal (K-12),

and this demonstrates how it can be insufficient to study the microbe at the species level[38].

While strain-level taxonomic profilers such as MetaPhlAn 4.0[39] offer efficient resolution, they

lack the genomic content necessary for detailed functional analyses.

In contrast, reconstructing MAGs directly from samples linked to host metadata allows for in-

depth investigation of within-species genomic variation in relation to specific phenotypes.

Nevertheless, this approach is not feasible for all species in the population. Many taxa, especially

newly discovered ones, are only recovered in a small number of samples, limiting their use in

association analysis. In our dataset, no newly identified species was assembled in more than 36

samples; the most prevalent was a novel species from the *Butyricimonas* genus (MAG ID:

H0366). For species that are well represented in the MAG dataset, high intraspecies genomic

diversity can further complicate analysis. Thus, within-species genomic variability becomes a

critical consideration when selecting candidate species for strain-level analysis.

Our strain richness index, or SRI, helps to assess whether strain-level analysis is feasible by

quantifying within-species diversity. High SRI value of the species might indicate that each

individual harbours a unique strain, complicating population-level associations. In this study,

we analysed within-species diversity across 378 gut species, expanding upon previous work

that showed a strain richness of 92 gut species based on pure isolates from at least three

different individuals[40]. Our results significantly expand on this by including a broader range of

species, each represented by more than 10 MAGs. Consistent with earlier findings, we observe

substantial variability in strain richness across species[40]. However, our data provides a more

detailed and comprehensive picture due to the larger number of species and genomes analysed,

allowing for a broader estimation range of the SRI estimation. Among the 14 overlapping

species between the two studies, some show similar patterns of genomic diversity - for example,

Odoribacter splanchnicus and *Barnesiella intestinihominis* exhibit consistently low diversity,

while others like *Bifidobacterium longum* remain highly diverse. Other overlapping examples,

such as *Fusicatenibacter saccharivorans* and *Coprococcus eutactus*, display divergent diversity

estimates, likely reflecting methodological differences (culture isolate vs metagenome-based)

and highlighting the need for further comparative research. Highly diverse species such as

Prevotella copri well known from other studies[41,42], are absent from the Chen-Liaw dataset, but

prominent in ours. Our larger dataset also allowed the investigation of phylum-level patterns,

suggesting that the common phyla, such as *Bacteroidota and Bacillota_A* species, tend to have

higher SRI values, while *Verrucomicrobiota, Cyanobacteroidota, and Proteobacteria* exhibit

lower diversity. These phylum-level differences in strain richness suggest possible evolutionary

or ecological constraints. However, further studies are needed, particularly for the less common

phyla, to validate and understand the underlying mechanisms.

Understanding microbiome diversity at both species and strain levels enhances resolution in

metagenome-wide association studies (MWAS). At the species level, we identified 96 bacterial

species significantly associated with 25 common diseases, of which 8 diseases involved

previously uncharacterized species, highlighting the limits of relying solely on global references.

These differences may reflect population-specific variation driven by local differences in diet,

genetics, and lifestyle[11]. At the strain level, we identified associations undetectable at the species

level, such as *Odoribacter splanchnicus* strain N1 negative association with gastritis, duodenitis

and hypertensive heart disease. Previous research has shown that the abundance of the genus

Odoribacter is negatively correlated with systolic blood pressure in overweight and obese

pregnant women, suggesting that SCFA-producing taxa may influence host blood pressure[43].

Comparative genomic analysis of the MAGs from two *O. splanchnicus* strains helped us to

identify a set of gene clusters that differed between the two groups. These genomic features

suggest that strain N1 is functionally better adapted to conditions characteristic of gastritis and

duodenitis, such as oxidative stress, nutrient limitation, and host antimicrobial pressure.

Together, our findings highlight the value of strain-resolved metagenomic approaches in

revealing disease-relevant microbial functions that would remain hidden in broader taxonomic

analysis. While our study focused on a single, ethnically homogeneous Northern European

population, several key findings, such as the detection of widespread yet previously

uncharacterized species and low-diversity strain structures within common gut taxa, are likely

to extend beyond the Estonian population. However, microbiome composition is influenced by

genetic, dietary and environmental factors that vary between populations. Future studies in

diverse cohorts will be essential to evaluate the generalizability of our results and validate the

species - and strain-level disease associations uncovered here. The genome-resolved analytical

framework we present is scalable and readily applicable to other population-scale microbiome

datasets, enabling cross-cohort comparison and discovery.

Our study also has some limitations that should be considered. First, the reliance on short-read

sequencing, may reduce assembly contiguity and strain resolution compared to long-read

approaches[44]. Although long read technologies offer higher genomic completeness , their

current cost limits their use in large-scale population studies. A practical compromise could

involve using short-read sequencing for most samples and applying long-read sequencing to key

or novel taxa. Second, the observed associations are correlative, and further validation in

longitudinal and experimental studies is needed to assess causality. Third, our strain-level

analysis focused on one species due to sample representation and analytical feasibility, and

broader application across species remains a key next step. Finally, while functional differences

between strains were identified, interpretation was limited by the prevalence of unannotated

genes. Future improvements in genome annotation and cross-cohort replication will be

essential to build on these findings. Despite these challenges, our findings demonstrate the

value of population-scale metagenomics in uncovering novel microbial diversity and strain-level

functional signatures relevant to human health.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study expands the human gut genomic reference, underscores the

importance of population-specific MAGs in uncovering novel microbial diversity, and reveals

strain-level disease associations obscured at higher taxonomic levels, thereby highlighting the

critical need for genome-resolved approaches in microbiome research.

METHODS

Estonian Microbiome cohort description

The Estonian Microbiome Cohort (EstMB) was established in 2017, when stool, oral, and blood

samples were collected from 2509 Estonian Biobank (EstBB) participants[10]. The EstBB is a

volunteer-based population cohort initiated in 1999 that currently includes over 212,000 adults

of European ancestry (≥ 18 years old) across Estonia[45]. Extensive information is available for

the EstMB participants, including data from self-reported questionnaires and electronic health

records (EHRs) (completed by medical professionals) covering diseases, medication use and

medical procedures both before and after sample collection. In addition to the questionnaire

and EHR data, the participants' anthropometric measurements (e.g., height, weight, blood

pressure, and waist and hip circumferences) were taken during a pre-registered visit upon

delivering the stool sample. The Estonian Microbiome Deep cohort (EstMB-deep) includes a

subset of stool samples from the EstMB cohort that have been resequenced with over three

times deeper coverage (N = 1878).

Microbiome sample collection and DNA extraction

The participants collected a fresh stool sample immediately after defecation with a sterile

Pasteur pipette and placed it inside a polypropylene conical 15 mL tube. The participants were

instructed to time their sample collection as close as possible to the visiting time in the study

center. The samples were stored at −80 °C until DNA extraction. The median time between

sampling and arrival at the freezer in the core facility was 3 h 25 min (mean 4 h 34 min), and the

transport time was not significantly associated with alpha (Spearman correlation, p-value 0.949

for observed richness and 0.464 for Shannon index) nor beta diversity (p-value 0.061, R-

squared 0.0005). Microbial DNA extraction was performed after all samples were collected

using a QIAamp DNA Stool Mini Kit (Qiagen, Germany). For the extraction, approximately 200

mg of stool was used as a starting material for the DNA extraction kit, according to the

manufacturer's instructions. DNA was quantified from all samples using a Qubit 2.0

Fluorometer with a dsDNA Assay Kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific).

Shotgun metagenomic sequencing

Sequencing for the main EstMB cohort was done using shotgun metagenomic paired-end

sequencing on the Illumina NovaSeq 6000 platform and described in detail in[10]. The EstMB-

deep cohort samples were selected based on DNA quality and resequenced at higher depth

using paired-end shotgun metagenomic sequencing on the MGISEQ-2000 platform. Sequencing

reads' quality control (QC) was performed using FastQC (v0.12.1)[46], and human reads were

filtered using Bowtie2 (v0.6.5)[47] against the GRCh38.p14 human genome reference. While

following the QC, the EstMB cohort had an average of 30.63 ± 3.12 million reads per sample, the

EstMB-deep cohort resulted in 106.70 ± 42.1 million reads per sample, indicating over three

times deeper sequencing coverage.

EstMB MAGs metagenome assembly and binning

EstMB MAGs collection refers to all MAGs recovered from the EstMB-deep cohort, which

comprises 1,878 samples sequenced at deep coverage. Reads were assembled into contigs with

MEGAHIT (v1.2.9)[48]. Binning was performed separately for each sample from the EstMB-deep

cohort. Contigs were binned using binners: MetaBAT (v2.15)[49], MaxBin (v2.2.7)[50], and VAMB

(v3.0.7)[51], with further refining with DAS Tool (v1.1.4)[52]. MAGs resulting from this process form

the EstMB MAGs collection. MAG quality, including completeness and contamination, was

estimated using CheckM (v2.3.1)[53].

ESTrep MAGs collection

ESTrep MAGs collection refers to representative MAGs from the EstMB MAGs collection

described earlier. Representative MAGs were selected from the EstMB MAGs collection by

clustering MAGs from the EstMB MAGs collection on the species level (Average Nucleotide

Identity, ANI index = 95) with dRep[54]. Taxonomy of all representative MAGs was assigned using

GTDB-Tk (v2.3.0)[19], a software toolkit for assigning objective taxonomic classifications to

bacterial and archaeal genomes based on the Genome Taxonomy Database (GTDB)[19,55]. If a MAG

could not be taxonomically classified at the species level or higher using GTDB-Tk, this indicates

that the genome does not closely match any existing entries in the GTDB reference database.

Therefore, it was treated as a novel species. This criterion is widely used in studies involving

MAG assembly[20,21]. MAG completeness and contamination were estimated using CheckM

(v2.3.1)[53]. Ribosomal RNA genes were identified with Barrnap v0.8[56], and tRNA genes were

predicted using tRNAscan-SE v2.0.0[57].

MAGs were classified into three quality tiers. High-quality (HQ) MAGs were defined as those

with >90% completeness and <5% contamination. A subset of HQ MAGs meeting the Minimum

Information about a Metagenome-Assembled Genome (MIMAG) standards—defined by the

presence of ≥21 tRNA genes and a full complement of rRNA genes (5S, 16S, and 23S)—were

named as HQ-mimag[18]. Medium-quality (MQ) MAGs were defined as those with >50%

completeness and <10% contamination. MAGs not meeting HQ or MQ thresholds were classified

as low-quality (LQ). Assembly statistics, including total assembly size, number of contigs, N50,

and GC content, were calculated using SeqKit (v2.3.1)[58].

Population-based reference GUTrep MAGs collection

The GUTrep MAG collection is a non-redundant set of representative MAGs, created by

combining MAGs from the current study (ESTrep MAGs) with those from the Unified Human

Gastrointestinal Genome (UHGG) collection[35]. This integrated reference includes both

population-specific taxa identified in our cohort and globally distributed species that, while

detected in our samples, could not be completely assembled but are present in public databases.

To remove redundancy, MAGs from both collections were clustered at the species level using an

average nucleotide identity (ANI) threshold of 95% with dRep[54]. For each species cluster

containing MAGs from both sources, the higher-quality MAG — based on completeness,

contamination, and assembly statistics, was retained as the representative.

Species relative abundance and prevalence estimation

To evaluate species-level relative abundance and prevalence, we used all samples from the

EstMB cohort, as it includes more samples than the EstMB-deep cohort. Deep sequencing is less

critical for read profiling against an established reference database, whereas the larger sample

size of the EstMB cohort is crucial for the subsequent association analyses. Reads were mapped

against the GUTrep MAGs collection using CoverM[59] and aggregated into a relative abundance

table with a custom Python script.

Species-level association study

For the association study, we used species-level relative abundance data from the EstMB cohort

as previously described. We tested associations between centered log-ratio (CLR) transformed

species abundances and participants' health status for common diseases in the Estonian

population. We selected 33 diseases based on ICD10 codes from the electronic health records,

each with at least 100 prevalent cases within the EstMB cohort. The remaining samples were

considered as controls for each studied disease. From the 4,792 bacterial species in the GUTrep

reference, we included 1,842 species with a prevalence >1% for the association analysis. Linear

regression models, adjusted for BMI, gender, and age, were constructed to evaluate the

association between the selected diseases and CLR-transformed species abundance. A stringent

Bonferroni correction was applied to the significance level, adjusting for the number of analyzed

species, resulting in a corrected alpha of 2.71×10^{-5} (from an original alpha of 0.05).

Strain richness index estimation

The strain richness index quantifies the normalized number of strains observed for a given

species per 100 assembled MAGs. To calculate this value, strain clusters were identified for each

species using dRep[54] with a 99% ANI index threshold, considering only those species with more

than 100 assembled MAGs. The number of strain clusters was then divided by the total number

of MAGs for that species and multiplied by 100 to express the result as a percentage. The

corresponding formula is shown below:

$$SRI = \frac{Number\ of\ strain\ clusters}{Total\ number\ of\ MAGs} * 100\%$$

Strain level association study

Candidate species for strain-level association analysis were selected based on two criteria: (1) a

high number of reconstructed MAGs per species, and (2) the lowest strain richness index (SRI),

indicating fewer strain clusters per species. These criteria were established to ensure

sufficiently large sample sizes for robust microbiome-wide association studies (MWAS). Strain

clusters were defined using dRep[54]. Based on these criteria, *O. splanchnicus* was selected as the

candidate species for strain-level analysis. We examined *O. splanchnicus* strain-level population

structure and focused on two out of the five most prevalent identified *O. splanchnicus* strain

clusters. The remaining three clusters were excluded due to their presence in only a small

subset of samples. For association analyses, we used presence/absence data from the two

selected clusters. These clusters were designated as strain N1 (n = 974; original strain ID:

1_2.3.4.6.9) and strain N2 (n = 335; original strain ID: 1_1). Logistic regression analyses

adjusted for sex, age, and BMI were performed for the same 33 diseases previously examined at

the species level. To account for multiple testing, a stringent Bonferroni correction was applied,

resulting in a corrected significance threshold of $\alpha = 1.5 \times 10^{-3}$ (original $\alpha = 0.05$).

For species cluster structure visualisation, we used ANIclustermap[60]. Pangenome analysis and

pangenome visualisation were performed using the Anvi'o workflow with standard

parameters[61].

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, K.P., K.L.K. and E.O.; Methodology, K.P. and O.A.; Data analysis, K.P.;

Visualization, K.P.; prepared the first draft of the manuscript, which all authors reviewed and

edited, K.P. All authors agreed to submit the manuscript, read and approved the final draft, and

assumed full responsibility for its content, including the accuracy of the data.

DATA AND CODE AVAILABILITY

The source code for the analyses is available at GitHub:

https://github.com/Chartiza/EstMB_MAGs_db_paper.

Representative MAGs from the EstMB-deep cohort samples have been deposited in the European Nucleotide Archive under study accession PRJEB76860. The phenotype data contain sensitive information from healthcare registers, and they are available under restricted access through the Estonian biobank upon submission of a research plan and signing a data transfer agreement. All data access to the Estonian Biobank must follow the informed consent regulations of the Estonian Committee on Bioethics and Human Research, which are clearly described in the Data Access section at https://genomics.ut.ee/en/content/estonian-biobank. A preliminary request for raw metagenome and phenotype data must first be submitted via the email address releases@ut.ee.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no competing interests.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental Figures (pantiukh_Suppl_Figures.docx). Fig. S1 to S4.

Supplemental Tables (pantiukh_Supplementary_Tables_S1-S7.xlsx). Tables S1 to S7.

Figure 1. Study overview and cohort description. **a.** Study workflow overview. **b.** Distribution of
age and gender across the Estonian Microbiome cohort (EstMB) and Estonian Microbiome deep
sequencing cohort (EstMB-deep). **c.** Distribution of the number of reads across different
genders of EstMB and EstMB-deep cohorts. **d.** Overview of the metagenome assembled genomes
(MAGs) recovery pipeline. **e.** Quality distribution of ESTrep MAGs (HQ, high quality; MQ,
medium quality; and LQ, low quality). **f.** Completeness (%) of MAGs in the ESTrep Collection. **g.**
Contamination (%) of MAGs in the ESTrep collection.

Figure 2. Overview of species from the EstMB MAG collection. a. The relationship between
the number of samples analyzed and the cumulative number of novel species identified. **b**.
Phylogenetic tree of the ESTrep species. The inner circle displays a phylogenetic tree of species,
with branches colored by phylum (according to the Genome Taxonomy Database (GTDB-Tk
v2.3.0), the outer ring highlights novel species assembled in this study. **c.** Relative abundances
of known and novel species. **d.** Average number of species detected by read mapping (yellow)
versus number of recovered MAGs per sample (blue). **e.** Relationship between species
prevalence, mean relative abundance, and number of assembled MAGs per species. **f.** Prevalence
of the top 10 novel species with the highest number of recovered MAGs, comparing recovery by
MAG assembly (green bars) and detection by read mapping (grey bars). **g.** Metagenome-wide
association results between GUTrep species abundances and chronic ischemic heart disease.
Each data point corresponds to a single species, with vertical position reflecting the log-
transformed *p*-value from linear regression; significant associations for newly reconstructed
species are highlighted with a box.

Figure 3. Within-species diversity and strain level analysis of *Odoribacter splanchnicus*. a.
Strain richness index (SRI) for the top 50 species with the highest number of metagenome-
assembled genomes. **b.** Distribution of SRI values across major gut bacteria phyla. **c.** *Odoribacter*
splanchnicus relative abundance, number of recovered MAGs and prevalence across samples. **d.**
Heatmap of Average Nucleotide Identity (ANI) values among *O. splanchnicus* MAGs, revealing
two distinct strain clusters. **e.** Volcano plot of associations between the two major *O.*
splanchnicus strains and 33 disease phenotypes. The red line indicates the Bonferroni-corrected
significance threshold. **f.** Pan-genome analysis of five representative MAGs from each *O.*
splanchnicus strain (N1 and N2). **g.** Principal coordinates analysis (PCoA) of *O. splanchnicus*
representative MAGs based on predicted gene cluster presence/absence profiles. **h.** Gene
clusters uniquely present in only one of the two major *O. splanchnicus* strains.