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Bioinformatics in Age-Related Macular Degeneration: A Narrative Review

Mehrdad MOTAMED SHARIATI*

Eye Research Center, Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Gharani Boulevard, 9177833719, Mashhad, Iran.
E-mail: Mehrdad_shariati2005@yahoo.com; motamedshariatiMHR@mums.ac.ir

* Author to whom correspondence should be addressed;

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Abstract

Purpose: Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is the leading cause of irreversible blindness worldwide. Understanding AMD's complex pathophysiology of AMD and its associated genetic and molecular mechanisms is critical for the development of effective diagnostics and therapeutics. This review explores the evolving role of bioinformatics in AMD with a focus on current applications and future opportunities in clinical research and patient care. *Methods*: A comprehensive literature search was conducted using major databases to identify articles related to bioinformatic applications in AMD. Selected studies were evaluated to extract data on bioinformatics tools and techniques, including genomic analysis, artificial intelligence (AI), and systems biology, utilized in AMD research. *Results*: Bioinformatics has advanced AMD research through genome-wide association studies (GWAS) that identify susceptibility genes, and transcriptomics and proteomics analyses that reveal biomarkers and pathways. AI and machine learning models enhance disease prediction and classification, whereas integrative omics approaches facilitate personalized treatment strategies. *Conclusion*: Bioinformatics is revolutionizing AMD research by providing insights into its molecular basis, enabling early diagnosis, and aiding in the development of personalized therapies. Continued advancements in computational tools and data integration will further our understanding of AMD and improve preventive and therapeutic outcomes.

Keywords: Age-Related Macular Degeneration (AMD); Ophthalmology; Bioinformatics; Systems Biology; Protein-Protein Interaction Network.

Introduction

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is a major cause of vision loss in older adults. AMD substantially lowers the quality of life by causing central vision loss and making it difficult to perform daily tasks, including reading, driving, and facial recognition. AMD is characterized by macular degeneration. The two main types of AMD are wet (neovascular) and dry (atrophic), and both are complicated multifaceted disorders affected by lifestyle, environmental, and hereditary factors [1].

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is a leading cause of visual impairment worldwide, with an estimated global prevalence of 8.7% in individuals aged 45–85 years. The incidence and prevalence of AMD increase with age, particularly affecting those over 75 years. Epidemiological studies have reported higher AMD prevalence in females, likely due to longer life expectancy, though genetic and hormonal factors may also play a role. Geographical variations exist, with AMD being more common in Western populations than in Asian and African regions, potentially due to genetic predisposition, environmental factors, and lifestyle differences [2].

Over the last two decades, bioinformatics developments have altered the landscape of AMD research, allowing for the integration and analysis of massive genomic, transcriptomic, proteomic, and metabolomic datasets.

Bioinformatics techniques have helped us understand the genetic basis of AMD, discover new biomarkers, and develop prediction models for disease progression and therapeutic responses [3,4]. Several reviews have explored the role of bioinformatics in age-related macular degeneration (AMD). Previous studies have focused on the integration of genomic, transcriptomic, and proteomic data to identify genetic risk factors and disease-associated pathways. For instance, genome-wide association studies (GWAS) have identified multiple susceptibility loci, including Complement factor H (CFH) and ARMS2, contributing to AMD pathogenesis. Other reviews have discussed the application of artificial intelligence in retinal imaging analysis, highlighting the potential of deep learning models for early AMD detection and progression prediction. However, a comprehensive synthesis of how bioinformatics integrates multi-omics data and machine learning approaches to advance precision medicine in AMD remains limited. This review aims to bridge this gap by summarizing recent advancements and future directions in bioinformatics applications for AMD [3,5].

An overview of the contributions of bioinformatics to AMD research, emphasizing the role of bioinformatic techniques in identification of genetic risk factors, establishing molecular pathways implicated in AMD pathogenesis, and in development of new treatment options is presented in this narrative review.

Materials and Methods

A comprehensive search of the literature was conducted to assess bioinformatics applications in age-related macular degeneration (AMD). We searched major databases including PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar for relevant articles published in English. Keywords included "bioinformatics," "AMD," "genomics," "proteomics," "artificial intelligence," and "machine learning." We also reviewed the references of the selected articles to identify additional studies, ensuring a broad understanding of bioinformatics tools and their impact on AMD research. Studies were included in clinical or experimental settings if they described bioinformatics techniques applicable to AMD, such as omics analyses, artificial intelligence, and data integration methodologies. Retrieved articles were screened for relevance based on title and abstract, followed by full-text review. Data from selected studies were extracted and synthesized in a narrative summary, categorizing findings based on bioinformatics applications, such as omics analyses, machine learning models, and AI-based imaging tools. The literature search was conducted between March 2023 and October 2023 to ensure the inclusion of recent and relevant studies.

Pathophysiology of Age-Related Macular Degeneration

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is a multifaceted illness that results from intricate interactions between environmental and genetic variables. The choroidal vasculature, photoreceptors, and retinal pigment epithelium (RPE) cells gradually deteriorate as part of the pathophysiology of AMD, eventually resulting in the formation of extracellular deposits known as drusen. These deposits indicate early stage AMD and are found between the RPE and Bruch's membrane. Two distinct types of AMD develop as the disease evolves: wet AMD, which is defined by macular neovascularization (MNV) and subsequent fluid leakage and hemorrhage into the retina; and dry AMD, which is characterized by geographic atrophy of the RPE and photoreceptors [6,7].

Several molecular pathways have been linked to AMD pathogenesis, including oxidative stress, inflammation, lipid metabolism, and angiogenesis [8]. Numerous important genes involved in these processes have been identified through genetic investigations, and many have been identified through bioinformatics techniques. Understanding the genetic architecture and molecular mechanisms of AMD is essential for developing targeted therapies and personalized treatment strategies [9-11]. Genetic predisposition plays a crucial role in AMD pathogenesis, with genome-wide association studies (GWAS) identifying several key susceptibility genes. The CFH (Y402H variant), ARMS2/HTRA1, C3, CFI, VEGFA, and TIMP3 genes have been frequently reported as significant contributors to AMD development and progression. Besides, Oxidative stress markers such as 8-OHdG are elevated in AMD patients, reflecting mitochondrial dysfunction. Chronic inflammation, largely due to complement system overactivation, is associated with high CRP levels and CFH polymorphisms. Lipid metabolism abnormalities contribute to drusen formation, with APOE and cholesterol esterification enzymes playing key roles. Finally, VEGFA upregulation promotes pathological angiogenesis in neovascular AMD, counteracted by TIMP3 [12].

Recent advancements in omics technologies have provided deeper insight into AMD pathogenesis. Transcriptomic analyses highlight altered expression of inflammatory genes and non-coding RNAs, while proteomics has identified changes in complement factors and extracellular matrix proteins. Metabolomic studies reveal dysregulated lipid metabolism and oxidative stress markers, further linking metabolic dysfunction to AMD progression. Integrating these multi-omics approaches enhances our understanding of AMD pathophysiology and aids in biomarker discovery.

Bioinformatics Approaches in Age-Related Macular Degeneration Research

Genetic Risk Factors

Genetic research is essential to understand the complexities of AMD. More than 50 genetic loci have been linked to AMD susceptibility through genome-wide association studies (GWAS), with the complement pathway accounting for most of these loci. These findings would not have been possible without bioinformatics technologies, which allow for the study of massive genomic datasets and identification of putative causative variations [13,14].

Complement factor H (CFH), which encodes complement factor H, was one of the first AMD-associated genes discovered using GWAS. A higher incidence of AMD is significantly linked to variations in CFH, namely, the single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) rs1061170 (Y402H). Bioinformatic analyses have highlighted the significance of the alternative complement pathway in the pathophysiology of AMD and further clarified the function of complement dysregulation under these conditions [15,16].

Other important genetic risk factors have been identified, including ARMS2/HTRA1, C3, C2/BF, and vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF). Bioinformatic techniques have shed light on the functional implications of these genetic polymorphisms, highlighting their roles in inflammation, extracellular matrix remodeling, and angiogenesis by integrating genomic data with transcriptome and proteomic datasets [17,18].

Transcriptomics

Transcriptomics, the study of RNA expression profiles, has emerged as a powerful tool to investigate the molecular mechanisms underlying AMD. High-throughput RNA sequencing (RNA-seq) and microarray technologies have produced large volumes of data. Bioinformatic tools may evaluate these data to identify dysregulated pathways and differentially expressed genes (DEGs) in AMD [19, 20].

Bioinformatics has helped identify gene expression profiles associated with AMD in various retinal cell types, including RPE cells, photoreceptors, and immune cells. Transcriptome investigations have shown that in AMD, genes related to photoreceptor function and retinal metabolism are downregulated, whereas oxidative stress and inflammatory pathways are upregulated.

One significant bioinformatic application in AMD transcriptomics is the discovery of non-coding RNAs, such as microRNAs (miRNAs) and long non-coding RNAs (lncRNAs), which play crucial regulatory roles in gene expression. Several miRNAs that regulate inflammation and angiogenesis have been linked to AMD pathogenesis. These miRNAs included miR-20b-5p, miR-24-3p, miR-106a-5p, and miR-17-5p. Researchers may use bioinformatic methods to anticipate miRNA target genes and their related pathways, providing new insights into the regulatory networks that contribute to AMD [21-23].

Proteomics and Metabolomics

Proteomics and metabolomics are complementary approaches that provide a deeper understanding of the molecular changes that occur in AMD at the protein and metabolite levels. Proteomic investigations of AMD have identified various biomarkers linked to disease development, including complement proteins, inflammatory mediators, and angiogenic agents [4,24,25]. Proteomic bioinformatics tools use mass spectrometry (MS) data to identify and measure proteins in biological materials. These techniques enable the study of post-translational changes, signaling cascades, and protein-protein interactions implicated in AMD. The deregulation of the

complement cascade in AMD is a significant discovery from proteomic research, which adds more evidence to the function of complement activation in the etiology of the disease [26,27].

Metabolomics—the study of small molecules (metabolites) in biological systems—offers further insights into the disease by identifying metabolic alterations linked to AMD. Researchers can identify key metabolic processes implicated in AMD, such as oxidative stress and lipid metabolism, using bioinformatic techniques in metabolomics, such as data normalization, feature extraction, and pathway analysis [27-29].

Systems Biology and Network Analysis

Systems biology is an integrated technique that builds complete models of interactions between genes, proteins, metabolites, and other components of biological systems by integrating data from different sources. Network analysis, a core component of systems biology, focuses on visualizing and analyzing the relationships between biological entities through the construction of networks, such as protein-protein interaction (PPI) networks, gene regulatory networks (GRNs), and metabolic networks [30-32].

Protein-Protein Interaction Networks

Protein-protein interaction (PPI) network building and analysis are significant uses of network analysis in AMD research. PPI networks monitor the connections between proteins, assisting scientists in identifying the important "hub" proteins necessary for disease-related biochemical pathways [33].
Complement factor H (CFH), vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF), and other inflammatory mediators have been identified as central hubs within the PPI networks in AMD. These hub proteins are frequently implicated in several critical pathways involved in AMD pathogenesis including complement activation, oxidative stress, and lipid metabolism. For instance, genetic variations in CFH, a key regulator of the complement cascade, have been linked to an elevated AMD risk. However, in wet AMD, when aberrant blood vessel development results in retinal damage, VEGF plays a critical role as an angiogenesis driver [33,34].

Bioinformatic methods can determine the direct connections of these hub proteins and the secondary and tertiary interactions that link them to other pathways through the analysis of PPI networks. This all-encompassing perspective aids researchers in identifying possible therapeutic target locations for action. For instance, blocking VEGF has previously been shown to be a successful therapy for wet AMD; however, more research is being conducted to identify other targets in the same or comparable networks [34].

Gene Regulatory Networks

Gene regulatory networks (GRNs) trace the relationships among transcription factors, miRNAs, and target genes, whereas PPI networks focus on protein interactions. GRNs are crucial for understanding how gene expression is regulated in AMD as they can reveal the upstream regulatory mechanisms that control the expression of AMD-associated genes [35,36].

For instance, bioinformatic techniques have created GRNs that connect miRNAs to important AMD-related pathways. Two miRNAs linked to AMD, miR-146a and miR-155, control the expression of inflammation-related genes and immunological responses, including those in the NF-κB signaling pathway. Bioinformatics techniques can identify new regulatory linkages contributing to AMD pathogenesis by combining transcriptome data with miRNA-target prediction methods [36-38].

Furthermore, GRNs can be used to identify transcription factors that act as master regulators of AMD gene expression. Research has shown that NF-κB and HIF-1α are important transcription factors that contribute to the hypoxia and inflammatory reactions observed in AMD. By focusing on these transcription factors, new treatment approaches may be available to alter the disease process at the gene-regulatory level [38,39].

Metabolic Networks

Metabolomics, the study of small-molecule metabolites, has also been integrated into systems biology approaches to provide insights into metabolic changes associated with AMD. Metabolic networks are constructed by mapping the interactions between enzymes and metabolites, allowing researchers to identify key metabolic pathways that are dysregulated in AMD [40,41].

Lipid metabolism is one of the major metabolic pathways implicated in AMD. Bioinformatics tools have helped to identify changes in the levels of specific lipids, such as cholesterol and phospholipids, associated with AMD risk. For instance, the accumulation of lipid-rich drusen in the retina is a hallmark of early AMD, and genetic variants of genes involved in lipid transport, such as *APOE*, have been linked to disease susceptibility [42-44].

By integrating metabolomic data with genetic and transcriptomic information, bioinformatic approaches can provide a more comprehensive view of how lipid metabolism is altered in AMD. This systems biology approach has led to the identification of potential metabolic biomarkers for AMD progression, which could be used for early diagnosis or monitoring of treatment response [33].

Network-Based Drug Discovery and Repurposing

One of the most promising applications of network analysis in AMD research is in drug discovery and repurposing. Traditional drug discovery approaches often focus on single molecular targets; however, the complexity of AMD suggests that targeting multiple pathways or networks may be more effective. Network-based drug discovery aims to identify drugs that can modulate multiple nodes within a network, thereby exerting a comprehensive therapeutic effect [45,46].

Bioinformatics tools can be used to search for drugs that target specific proteins or pathways within PPI or GRNs. For example, by analyzing the interaction network of VEGF and its downstream effectors, researchers have identified several potential drug candidates that could be repurposed to inhibit angiogenesis in wet AMD. Additionally, network analysis can reveal how existing AMD treatments, such as anti-VEGF therapies, influence other parts of the network, potentially leading to the discovery of synergistic drug combinations [46,47].

Bioinformatics Tools and Databases for Age-Related Macular Degeneration Research

Bioinformatics has significantly contributed to AMD research by providing access to **public databases**, computational tools, and **AI-driven platforms** for data analysis. Genetic and transcriptomic data can be retrieved from **GWAS Catalog, the International AMD Genomics Consortium (IAMDGC) dataset, the EyeGene Database, Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO), and ProteomicsDB**, which collectively offer insights into AMD-associated genetic variants, gene expression profiles, and protein interactions. Computational tools such as **PLINK** for GWAS analysis, **FUMA (Functional Mapping and Annotation of GWAS)** for functional interpretation, **STRING** for protein-protein interaction mapping, and **DAVID (Database for Annotation, Visualization, and Integrated Discovery)** for pathway enrichment analysis help identify key molecular pathways underlying AMD. Additionally, **AI-driven platforms** such as **DeepSeeNet**, an OCT-based deep learning model for AMD classification, **Retinal AI by Google Health**, which detects AMD from fundus images, **NVIDIA Clara**, an AI-powered healthcare tool for retinal image segmentation, and **DeepAMD-Net**, a convolutional neural network (CNN)-based system for automated AMD lesion detection, have enhanced diagnostic precision and disease monitoring. The integration of these bioinformatics resources has advanced AMD research by enabling large-scale data analysis, biomarker discovery, and precision medicine approaches.

Genetic susceptibility to AMD has been extensively studied through GWAS. The Y402H variant of CFH increases the risk of AMD with an OR of 2.5 (95% CI: 2.3–2.7, $p < 1\times10^{-6}$). Similarly, the ARMS2/HTRA1 locus confers a higher risk, with an OR of 2.8 (95% CI: 2.6–3.1, $p < 1\times10^{-6}$). Variants in C3 and VEGFA also contribute to AMD susceptibility, whereas C2/BF variants exert a protective effect (OR = 0.5, 95% CI: 0.4–0.6, $p < 0.001$). These findings highlight the polygenic nature of AMD and the importance of integrating genetic risk assessment with bioinformatics tools to enhance disease prediction [12].

Examples of Systems Biology Applications in AMD Research

1. **Identification of Novel Therapeutic Targets**: By integrating genetic, transcriptomic, and proteomic data Systems biology approaches have identified several novel therapeutic targets for AMD by integrating genetic, transcriptomic, and proteomic data. For example, studies using PPI networks have revealed that proteins involved in the regulation of oxidative stress, such as superoxide dismutase (SOD) and catalase,

are connected to AMD-related pathways. Targeting these proteins could help mitigate oxidative damage that contributes to AMD retinal degeneration [47,48].

2. **Predicting Disease Progression**: Systems biology models have been used to develop predictive models for AMD progression based on multi-omics data. Researchers can identify biomarkers that predict the transition from early-to late-stage AMD by analyzing how different molecular pathways interact over time. These predictive models can help clinicians identify high-risk patients and tailor treatment strategies accordingly [32,48].
3. **Multi-Target Therapeutic Approaches**: Network analysis has also been used to explore the potential **of multi-target therapeutic approaches for AMD. For example, by analyzing the interactions between the** complement system and lipid metabolism pathways, researchers have suggested that combining complement inhibitors with lipid-lowering drugs could offer a more effective treatment strategy for AMD patients with a high genetic risk in both pathways [31].

Challenges and Future Directions

Although bioinformatics has made significant contributions to AMD research, several challenges remain. One major challenge is the integration of diverse datasets from different omics platforms and studies, which often vary in quality, format, and scale. Standardization of data formats and analytical methods is crucial for improving the reproducibility and comparability of bioinformatic analyses.

Another challenge is the need for more comprehensive datasets that capture the complexity of AMD, including data from underrepresented populations, and longitudinal studies that track disease progression over time. As new technologies such as single-cell RNA sequencing and spatial transcriptomics become more widely available, bioinformatics will play an increasingly important role in analyzing high-dimensional datasets and uncovering insights into AMD pathogenesis.

In the future, bioinformatics approaches will likely focus on integrating artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) techniques to enhance the predictive power of disease models and identify novel therapeutic targets. Developing more sophisticated bioinformatics tools for analyzing single-cell and spatial omics data will provide a deeper understanding of the cellular and molecular mechanisms that drive AMD. Systems biology approaches in AMD research are likely to become even more integrated, combining data from genomics, transcriptomics, proteomics, metabolomics, and imaging studies to create comprehensive models of AMD pathogenesis. These models will enhance our understanding of the disease, guide the development of new therapeutic strategies, and improve patient outcome.

Conclusion

Bioinformatics has revolutionized AMD research by enabling integration and analysis of large-scale genomic, transcriptomic, proteomic, and metabolomic data. By identifying genetic risk factors, molecular pathways, and biomarkers, bioinformatics has provided valuable insights into the pathogenesis of AMD and has facilitated the development of new therapeutic strategies. As bioinformatics tools continue to evolve, they promise to advance our understanding of AMD and improve patient outcomes through precision medicine.

However, several challenges still need to be addressed, including standardized data formats, comprehensive datasets, and improved analytical methods. Overcoming these challenges will require collaboration among bioinformaticians, clinicians, and researchers to ensure that bioinformatics continues to play a central role in advancing AMD research and treatment.

List of Abbreviations: AMD: Age-Related Macular Degeneration, CFH: Complement factor H, AI: Artificial intelligence; GRN: Gene Regulatory Networks, PPI Network: Protein-Protein Interaction Network, GWAS: Genome-Wide Association Studies, TIMP: Tissue inhibitor of matrix metalloproteinase

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