Quantifying the Effect of Statin Use in Pre-Diabetic Phenotypes Discovered Through Association Rule Mining

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Abstract

Prediabetes is the most important risk factor for developing type-2 diabetes mellitus, an important and growing epidemic. Prediabetes is often associated with comorbidities including hypercholesterolemia. While statin drugs are indicated to treat hypercholesterolemia, recent reports suggest a possible increased risk of developing overt diabetes associated with the use of statins. Association rule mining is a data mining technique capable of identifying interesting relationships between risks and treatments. However, it is limited in its ability to accurately calculate the effect of a treatment, as it does not appropriately account for bias and confounding. We propose a novel combination of propensity score matching and association rule mining to account for this bias, and find meaningful associations between a treatment and outcome for various subpopulations. We demonstrate this technique on a real diabetes data set examining the relationship between statin use and diabetes, and identify risk and protective factors previously not clearly defined.

Introduction

Diabetes mellitus is a growing epidemic, affecting more than 25 million people in the United States alone. In addition, an estimated 79 million people suffer from prediabetes¹⁴, defined by blood glucose levels above normal but below the threshold for the diagnosis of diabetes. Prediabetes is often accompanied by other comorbidities, such as obesity, hyperlipidemia and hypertension, which require appropriate treatment including the use of multiple drugs. In the case of hyperlipidemia, statin therapy is usually prescribed. While use of statins lowers cholesterol levels, and the overall risk of cardiovascular mortality^{67,8}, there has been recent research indicating an increased risk of incident diabetes associated with their use.^{1,2,3,4}

Association rule mining is a technique used to discover associations between items. Association rules are implications, where a set of co-occurring conditions implies increased risk of another condition. Applied to a treatment and condition, association rules can be viewed as identifying phenotypes or etiologic pathways within a population. They are interpretable, and they suggest interconnections between risk factors. Furthermore, they are rules, which makes them straightforward to implement in a clinical decision support system. While association rules can identify patient subpopulations (phenotypes) at particularly high risk of a given disease, they do not directly give us information about the efficacy of treatments.

In this work, we extend the association rule mining methodology to identify subpopulations where the effect of a treatment on an outcome differs among subpopulations, or differs from the general population. For example, in a pre-diabetic patient population, statin use has been shown to have no significant effect on the diabetes outcome.¹⁵ The proposed methodology can identify phenotypes within the prediabetic patient population, in which statins are significantly harmful; and it can also identify phenotypes where the use of statins may actually be beneficial.

The success of developing such a methodology fundamentally depends on our ability to accurately quantify the effect of a treatment in a phenotype. Suppose we wish to quantify the effect of statins on diabetes in a phenotype defined by the association pattern {hypertension, renal failure}. In association rule mining, a naïve and commonly used technique is to directly compare the prevalence of diabetes among those who take statins and those who do not, among the patients presenting with hypertension and renal failure.

This method provides an accurate quantification of the effect of statins, only if the statin-receiving and non-statinreceiving subpopulations within a phenotype are comparable. We do not believe this assumption to be universally true. In our above example, if the statin-receiving group has higher lipid levels than the non-statin receiving group, then these two groups are not comparable from a diabetes perspective: even if statins had no effect at all, we would see that the statin-receiving group has higher risk of diabetes simply because of their higher LDL levels. Given that statins are drugs that reduce LDL levels, this scenario is not only feasible, but also very likely. Failure to take such differences into account would lead to the erroneous assertion of a relationship between statins and diabetes among untreated hypertensive patients.

To address this issue, we propose a combination of propensity score matching and association rule mining. Our proposed methodology preserves association rule mining's outstanding ability to identify distinct phenotypes, while allowing for accurate estimation of treatment effects.

The key idea is as follows. We use association rule mining to identify distinct phenotypes. Within each phenotype, some patients receive statins and some do not. While the two (statin-receiving and non-statin-receiving) subpopulations are not comparable in their entirety, they may contain pairs of patients who are. In our statin-use example, where the key differentiator between the two subpopulations was LDL level, such patient pairs could be formed from the patients with lowest LDL levels in the statin-receiving group matched with patients with the highest LDL levels in the non-statin-receiving group. We utilize propensity score matching to identify such patient pairs, thus addressing confounding and bias while still fully utilizing this powerful data mining technique.

We first discover association rules (phenotypes) from the diagnosis codes, dichotomized laboratory results and medications. For each association rule, we match patients in the treatment (statin-receiving) and control (non-statin-receiving) groups based on their respective propensity scores. If we can find a sufficient number of pairs to support the estimation of the treatment effect, we calculate the relative risk of the outcome between the treatment and control subpopulations. The result is a set of easily interpretable phenotypes, each with a distinct effect from the treatment.

We applied this methodology to a real clinical data set collected at Mayo Clinic. The data set consists of patients who were prediabetic in 2005 and our clinical interest lies in their progression to over diabetes within 5 years. Specifically, we show the proposed approach identified clinically relevant phenotypes, and we also show that these phenotypes exhibited qualitatively different treatment effects of statins in terms of progression to overt diabetes.

Methods

In order to quantify the effects of statin use among prediabetic patients, we must discover association rules, build a propensity score model, and calculate the statin's effect for each phenotypic group. In the following sections, we describe these steps in detail.

Association Rule Mining

Association rule mining¹² is a data mining technique used to identify interesting relationships between variables. Let an **item** be a binarized variable indicating the presence of some risk factor (e.g., hypertension). The predictors in our data set include diagnosis codes and medications. To increase interpretability, we combined diagnosis codes with their respective medications forming items such as 'hypertension with medication' or 'hypertension without medication'.

Let an **itemset** be a set of items, which indicates whether the corresponding risk factors are all present in the patient. If they are, the itemset is said to **apply** to a patient. The **support** of an itemset *I* is the number of patients to whom *I* applies.

An **association rule** represents an implication defined by an itemset I implying that patients to whom I applies face an increased (or decreased) risk of diabetes. An association rule **applies** to the set of patients to whom its defining itemset I applies and its **support** is the support of I. Another metric that characterizes an association rule is its confidence. Intuitively, the confidence quantifies the strength of the association between the itemset and the outcome. Mathematically, the **confidence** of a rule is the fraction of patients who developed diabetes among the patients to whom the rule applied. In other words, the confidence is the conditional probability of a patient developing diabetes given that the rule applies to this patient. We define the **risk** of progression to diabetes for a patient to whom a rule applies as the confidence of the rule.

The statistical **significance** of the association (between the itemset and the outcome) can be assessed using predictive significance¹⁶. Predictive significance tests the hypothesis that the conditional probability of diabetes given the itemset is statistically significantly higher (or lower) than the prior probability of diabetes, which is the overall rate of diabetes in our entire prediabetic cohort. Since significant association rules select a subpopulation with a disease outcome that is different from the general population, each rule can be viewed as a prediabetic **phenotype**.

A simple (but as we later show, inaccurate) method of quantifying the effect of a treatment (statin use in our application) in each phenotype is as follows. In each phenotype, some patients received statins (we call **treatment**

patients) and some did not (**control** patients). We can quantify the relative risk of developing diabetes between the treatment and the control subpopulations (of the same phenotype) by calculating the ratio of the probability of progression to diabetes in the treatment subpopulation divided by the probability of progression in the control subpopulation. Henceforth, we refer to this quantity as the **unmatched relative risk**. The statistical significance of the unmatched relative risk is assessed using bootstrap simulation.

Propensity Score Matching

Arguably, the most accurate method of estimating the effect of a treatment is through a case-control study or a randomized clinical trial. These studies are designed to minimize variation in non-treatment variables among the study groups. This ensures the two groups are mostly identical, thus minimizing bias and allowing the researcher to be relatively assured that an effect is due to the treatment variable.

With secondary analysis, we must shift our focus from study design techniques to statistical methods to account for bias, as we are no longer in a position to make the two populations identical. Propensity score matching is one technique that can be used to account for the confounding and bias present with receiving a particular treatment.

With this technique, a model is built using the treatment as the dependent variable. The propensity score becomes the model-based probability that the subject received the treatment. This allows a researcher to identify pairs of patients—one having received the treatment and one who has not—such that the two patients in each pair are equally likely to have received a given treatment. While this does not guarantee that these two patients in all pairs are identical, it ensures that no observable variable confounds the treatment effect within each pair.

Using the propensity score, patients in the treatment group are matched to one or more patients in the control group. This is typically achieved using either a nearest neighbor or nearest neighbor within a caliper distance⁹. The nearest neighbor method matches a treatment to the control with the minimum difference between the propensity scores. The nearest neighbor within a caliper matches a treatment to the control with the minimum difference between the propensity scores, provided it is less than a set caliper distance. Additional methods, including matching all treatment patients with all controls using some weight, are available. We will focus on the caliper method, as our data provide good coverage between the treatment and control groups. Specifically, we allow the treatment and control groups to differ at most by 1%.

Once all of the patients in the treatment group have been matched, the analysis can be continued using methods appropriate for the matched pairs.

Combining Association Rule Mining with Propensity Score Matching

Association rules were discovered, as described above. This process identifies the phenotypes that are associated with increased or decreased risk of developing diabetes relative to the general prediabetic population.

Next, within each phenotype, the propensity score model is constructed. While fitting the propensity score model on a per-phenotype basis offers improved ability to account for confounders (i.e. we can eliminate phenotype-specific confounders), we need to exercise caution as we potentially fit the model to a small population. Models fitted to small populations are more susceptible to overfitting. Given this limitation, it is important to utilize a penalized logistic regression model, such as lasso or ridge regression, to avoid overfitting.^{10,11} The treatment, statin use, is the dependent variable for regression, while all variables that are not part of the phenotype definition were used as independent variables.

Once a model was developed, patients were matched using the caliper technique. The risk of developing diabetes was calculated using a logistic regression model. The matched relative risk of developing diabetes was calculated using the model-based diabetes probability. We used bootstrap simulation to assess the statistical significance of the relative risks.

Results

The data set consists of 18,958 patients who were pre-diabetic at the beginning of 2005. The pre-diabetic status was defined as having at least one fasting glucose measurement between 101 and 125 mg/dl in the period from 01/01/1999 to 12/31/2004. Patients were followed until 2010, and our outcome of interest was progression to overt diabetes within 5 years. The data set also contains covariates that are potentially predictive of progression to diabetes. The covariates include laboratory results, medications and co-morbid disease diagnosis codes. The most important covariates are listed in Table 1.

As preprocessing, we created binary variables. Lab variables were dichotomized to indicate abnormal results using the ADA guidelines¹³. Diagnosis and medication variables indicate the presence of a diagnosis or prescription within the study period.

Predictor	Abbr.	%
demo	graphic	
gender male	genderM	49
Dia	gnoses	
hypertension	htn	31
hyperlipidemia	hyperlip	37
obese	obese	20
ischemic heart disease	ihd	10
peripheral vascular disease	pvd	2
Medi	cations	
ACE/ARB	acearb	13
beta blocker	bb	17
Ca channel blocker	ccb	7
diuretic	diuret	13
fibrate	fibra	2
statin	statin	18
aspirin	aspirin	29
abnorma	l lab results	
High systolic blood pressure	sbp	21
High diastolic blood pressure	dbp	9
High total cholesterol	tchol	43
Low high-density lipoprotein	hdl	23
High low-density lipoprotein	ldl	63
High body mass index	bmi	27
High triglycerides	trigl	30

Table 1 Important predictors of progression to overt diabetes

Additional analysis variables were created based on the combination of a diagnosis and its relevant medication. For example, two hypertension variables were created: hypertension with medications, and hypertension without medication. In this example, "hypertension with medications" indicates a diagnosis of hypertension, and a prescription for any medication used to treat hypertension (e.g., diuretic, beta-blocker).

As we are examining the effect of statins, we created a separate dichotomized variable to indicate a prescription for statins. As such, "hyperlipidemia with medications" includes hyperlipidemia medications *other than statins*. This is an important distinction, as including statins in "hyperlipidemia with medication" will produce uninterpretable results.

In what follows, we will estimate the effect of statins in phenotypes we discovered using association rule mining using a naïve method yielding the *unmatched relative risk*. We will then compare the unmatched relative risks to (matched) relative risk computed using the proposed method.

Treatment Effect Estimated from Association Rule Mining – Naïve Method

Association rules were discovered from the population, and the unmatched relative risk of developing diabetes given statin use was calculated for each rule. Thirty rules were discovered, Table 2 shows the 19 rules that achieved a pvalue less than 0.2. The Table presents the phenotypes (in the 'Itemset' column) and the relative risk (RR) that this phenotype confers on the patient. The interpretation is straightforward: patients with a particular phenotype who take statins face a proportional change (increase or decrease) in the risk of diabetes relative to the patients of the same phenotype who did not take statins. For example, the {Obesity, hyperlipidemia w/o medication} phenotype would be interpreted as: patients who are obese, have hyperlipidemia, and are not on any hyperlipidemia medication (other than possibly statins) are 25% more likely to develop diabetes when given statins.

Table 2 suggests that in all phenotypes, where the effect of statins was (even mildely) significant (p-value of .2), statins increased risk of diabetes.

Itemset	RR
Obesity	1.28**
Hyperlipidemia w/o medication	1.22**
Hypertension w/ medication	1.13*
Hypertension w/o medication	1.23
Elevated blood pressure w/ medication	1.23*
Elevated blood pressure w/o medication	1.35
Obesity, hyperlipidemia w/o medication	1.25**
Obesity, hypertension w/ medication	1.21*
Obesity, hypertension w/o medication	1.28
Obesity, elevated blood pressure w/ medication	1.31*
Hyperlipidemia w/o medication, hypertension w/ medication	1.13
Hyperlipidemia w/o medication, elevated blood pressure w/ medication	1.30*
Hypertension w/ medication, elevated blood pressure w/ medication	1.23*
Hypertension w/o medication, elevated blood pressure w/o medication	1.34
Obesity, hyperlipidemia w/o medication, hypertension w/ medication	1.29*
Hyperlipidemia w/o medication, hypertension w/ medication, elevated blood pressure w/ medication	1.30*
Obesity, hyperlipidemia w/o medication, elevated blood pressure w/ medication	1.41*
Obesity, hypertension w/ medication, elevated blood pressure w/ medication	1.31*
Obesity, hyperlipidemia w/o medication, hypertension w/ medication, elevated blood pressure w/ medication	1.41*

Table 2. Risk of diabetes using association rule mining without propensity score matching. `Itemset' defines the phenotype, RR denotes the (unmatched) relative risk of diabetes due to statins and the stars denote the significance of the effect of the statin treatment.

* = p < 0.05; ** = p < 0.01; *** = p < 0.001

The straightforward interpretation of the results makes this method popular, however, it fails to take into account differences among the treatment and control subpopulations within each phenotype. For example, consider the {hyperlipidemia without medications, hypertension with medications} rule. Table 3 shows some differences between patients who received statins and those that did not within this phenotype. In particular, the statin receiving subpopulation has a higher prevalence of renal disease, is more likely to be male, and has higher LDL cholesterol than the non-statin receiving group. An increased LDL is a known risk factor for cardiovascular disease and other complications, thus the observed difference in diabetes outcome between the two groups may be in part due to statin use and other clinical differences.

Instead of producing the treatment effect of statins, the naïve method is reflecting a combination of the treatment effect of statins and differences between the two patient populations. As such, attributing the observed difference entirely to statin use will lead to inaccurate results.

Table 3. Comparison of patient subpopulation characteristics within the {hyperlipidemia w/o drugs; hypertension w/ drugs} phenotype. Subpopulations of patients who take statins and who do not take statins are compared

Characteristic	Statin	No Statin	
Tobacco Use	17.7%	16.1%	
Renal Disease**	2.9%	1.5%	
Male*	49.6%	47.3%	
Total Cholesterol	201	199	
LDL Cholesterol*	118	116	
		110	

* = p < 0.05; ** = p < 0.01; *** = p < 0.0001

Treatment Effect Estimated from Propensity Score

Association rules were discovered for the population, and a propensity score model was used to match statin and non-statin receiving patients together. Propensity scores were modeled specifically for each rule, and there was sufficient overlap between the treatment and control groups to successfully match each treatment patient. Figure 1 illustrates the propensity score distribution of the example phenotype discussed above: {hyperlipidemia without medications, hypertension with medications}. The almost perfect overlap in the propensity score ranges is evident from this figure. This demonstrates that, while the patients that received statins are generally different from those that did not within this phenotype, there are still comparable patients on which to base our analysis.

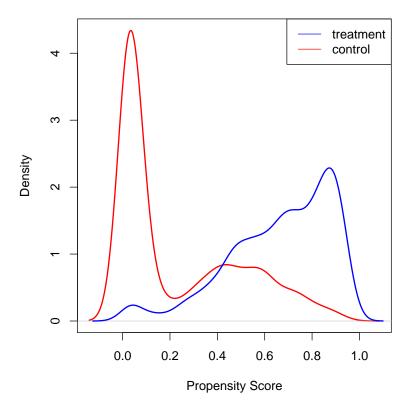


Figure 1. Distribution of propensity scores of an example phenotype for statin (blue) and non-statin (red) groups.

Among the 30 rules discovered, 15 achieved a p-value less than 0.2, and 6 were statistically significant (p < 0.05). These rules are presented in Table 4. Analogously to Table 2, the rule can be interpreted as the proportional change

in risk of diabetes within the given phenotype when the patient is given statins. For example, the phenotype {Obesity, hyperlipidemia w/o medication} can be interpreted as: patients that are obese, have hyperlipidemia, and are not on any hyperlipidemia medication (other than statins) are 15% more likely to develop diabetes when given statins. You will notice that the relative risk has decreased from that calculated using the naïve method (1.25 versus 1.15). Some of the risk of developing diabetes was incorrectly attributed to statin use instead of to the treatment group being at higher risk of diabetes irrespective of statin use.

Itemset	RR	
Obesity, elevated blood pressure w/ meds	1.73*	
Hyperlipidemia w/o meds, hypertension w/ meds	1.35*	
Hyperlipidemia w/o meds, elevated blood pressure w/ meds	1.62*	
Obesity, Hyperlipidemia w/o meds, elevated blood pressure w/ meds	1.76*	
Obesity, hypertension w/ meds, elevated blood pressure w/ meds	1.76*	
Hyperlipidemia w/o meds, hypertension w/ meds, elevated blood pressure	1.61*	
w/ meds		
Obesity, hyperlipidemia w/ meds	0.59	
Hyperlipidemia w/ meds, hypertension w/ meds	0.59	
Hyperlipidemia w/o meds	1.14	
Elevated blood pressure w/ meds	1.32	
Obesity, hyperlipidemia w/o meds	1.15	
Obesity, hypertension w/ meds	1.19	
Hypertension w/ meds, elevated blood pressure w/ meds	1.31	
Obesity, hyperlipidemia w/o meds, hypertension w/ meds	1.41	
Obesity, hyperlipidemia w/o meds, hypertension w/ meds, elevated blood	1.72	
pressure w/ meds		
* = $p < 0.05$; ** = $p < 0.01$; *** = $p < 0.001$		

Table 4. Risk of diabetes using association rule mining with propensity score matching.

These results suggest phenotypes with unique risks of developing diabetes associated with the use of statins. Patients with hyperlipidemia and a prescription for non-statin anti-hyperlipidemia medication, and either obesity or treated and controlled hypertension, appear to be at a lower risk of developing diabetes when they are also prescribed statins. Patients with untreated hyperlipidemia, and hypertension that remains uncontrolled despite medications, are at a higher risk of developing diabetes (RR = 1.62). However, patients with untreated hyperlipidemia, and intermediate risk of developing diabetes (RR = 1.35).

These results generally parallel the results seen using the naïve method, but matching produces relative risks that are more cleanly attributable to the treatment. Figure 2 depicts changes in relative risk by phenotype using these two methods. Each point is a phenotype, the x-axis is the relative risk calculated using the matched method, the y-axis is the relative risk calculated using the naïve method, and the line indicates the two methods being equal. The vast majority of phenotypes (90%) had the same effect direction using the two methods (i.e. the two methods were in agreement regarding whether statin use in the particular phenotype is beneficial or harmful). While the effect for a few phenotypes did change direction, almost all had the relative risk estimates change, as shown in Figure 2.

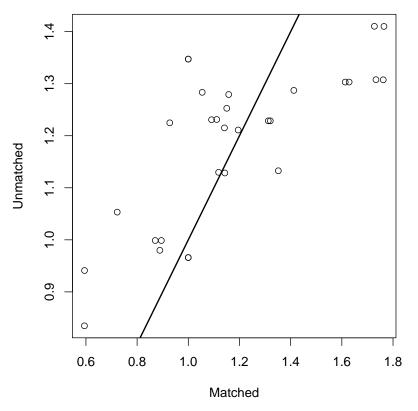


Figure 2. Relative risk of propensity score matched versus unmatched rules

Conclusion

In this study, we measured the unmatched relationship between statin use and diabetes among phenotypes identified through association rule mining. This method found that statins statistically significantly increase the risk of diabetes between 13% and 41% among various phenotypes. However, this method of calculating relative risk assumes that the treatment and control groups are generally similar. We note that this is not always the case — the treatment group tends to be sicker than the control group, and thus more likely to develop diabetes irrespective of their use of statins.

We demonstrated that propensity score matching could be used to account for the bias and confounding present among the treatment and control groups. After introducing this method, we found three distinct relationships with unique risks between statin use and diabetes. For patients with hyperlipidemia, a prescription for a non-statin antihyperlipidemia medication, and either obesity or treated and controlled hypertension, also receiving statins tends to lower their risk of developing diabetes (RR = 0.59). Patients with hyperlipidemia not receiving any non-statin antihyperlipidemia medications and treated and controlled hypertension are at an intermediate risk of developing diabetes when receiving statins (RR = 1.35). While, patients with untreated hyperlipidemia and treated but uncontrolled hypertension are at a higher risk of developing diabetes while receiving statins (RR = 1.62).

From the clinical point of view, these results suggest the multiplicity of prediabetes phenotypes that may have different susceptibilities, and perhaps different outcomes, based on the associated comorbidities and the drugs used to treat such comorbidities. This includes what seems to be a previously unrecognized diabetes risk reduction in some prediabetes phenotypes after statin use.

These association rules are additionally helpful as they are easily interpretable, and could be quickly incorporated into clinical practice using computer-based decision support tools. Furthermore, as demonstrated using this technique, it is possible to identify patient phenotypes that respond to treatment differently, both from the general population and from each other. This characteristic further highlights the importance of properly accounting for confounding while using any data mining technique: it is difficult to ascertain whether a discovered relationship is due to a subpopulation being sicker than another population, or truly due to the presence of a particular treatment.

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