Journal of Cardiovascular Disease Research

ISSN: 0975-3583, 0976-2833 VOL14, ISSUE 12, 2023

Rapid Stroke Screening: A 3-Minute Ultrafast MRI/MRA Protocol.

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Publication Date: 12/12/2023

Abstract

Objective: To assess the diagnostic accuracy of a 3-minute ultrafast MRI/MRA protocol for acute ischemic stroke screening.

Methods: Sixty-seven patients undergoing stroke evaluation received both ultrafast and standard MRI/MRA. Two blinded readers independently reviewed images for acute/chronic infarcts, hemorrhage, and large-vessel occlusion/stenosis. Diagnostic quality was rated using a 3-point Likert scale, and interrater agreement was assessed using Cohen's kappa.

Results: The ultrafast protocol demonstrated high diagnostic quality, with 98% of sequences rated as diagnostic. Interrater agreement was perfect for acute infarcts, aneurysms, and vascular occlusions, and near-perfect (>95%) for acute hemorrhage and severe stenosis. Substantial agreement (kappa 0.73-0.76) was observed for chronic infarcts and hemorrhage.

Conclusions: The 3-minute ultrafast MRI/MRA protocol provides rapid and accurate screening for acute ischemic stroke, with excellent diagnostic performance comparable to standard imaging.

Introduction

Acute ischemic stroke (AIS) remains a leading cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide, necessitating rapid and accurate diagnosis to facilitate timely intervention and improve patient outcomes. The concept of "time is brain" underscores the critical importance of minimizing delays in stroke evaluation, as each minute of untreated ischemia results in the irreversible loss of millions of neurons. Consequently, the development and implementation of efficient imaging protocols are paramount in optimizing stroke care pathways. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and magnetic resonance angiography (MRA) have emerged as indispensable tools in the diagnostic workup of AIS, offering comprehensive information about brain parenchyma, vascular anatomy, and perfusion dynamics. Conventional MRI/MRA protocols, while highly sensitive and specific, often require prolonged acquisition times, limiting their applicability in the acute setting where time constraints are critical. These limitations underscore the need for streamlined imaging strategies that can expedite stroke evaluation without compromising diagnostic accuracy.

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Traditional MRI stroke protocols can extend beyond 20-30 minutes, often causing delays in treatment decisions and potentially impacting patient outcomes. This extended acquisition time is due to the need for multiple sequences to assess for infarction, hemorrhage, and vascular occlusion, as well as the need for detailed anatomical imaging. In the acute setting, this time burden can be a major disadvantage. Ultrafast MRI techniques, leveraging advanced acquisition strategies and parallel imaging, have demonstrated the potential to substantially reduce scan times while maintaining diagnostic quality. These techniques offer the prospect of accelerating stroke evaluation, enabling earlier identification of treatable lesions and facilitating prompt initiation of reperfusion therapies, such as intravenous thrombolysis or mechanical thrombectomy. The development of a 3-minute ultrafast MRI/MRA protocol represents a significant advancement in stroke imaging. This protocol aims to provide a rapid and comprehensive assessment of AIS, encompassing the evaluation of acute and chronic infarcts, intracranial hemorrhage, and large-vessel occlusion or stenosis. By minimizing acquisition times, this protocol has the potential to streamline stroke workflows, reduce time-to-treatment intervals, and ultimately improve patient outcomes. The objective of this study is to evaluate the diagnostic performance and interrater agreement of a 3-minute ultrafast MRI/MRA protocol for the screening of acute ischemic stroke. We hypothesize that this ultrafast protocol will demonstrate high diagnostic accuracy and excellent interrater reliability, comparable to conventional MRI/MRA protocols, while significantly reducing scan times. The findings of this study will have important implications for clinical practice, potentially leading to the adoption of more efficient imaging strategies in the acute stroke setting.

Materials and Methods:

1. Study Design and Ethical Considerations:

- **Study Design:** Single-center prospective study.
- **Ethical Approval:** Approved by the local institutional review board.
- **Explanation:** Clearly states the study's design and ethical compliance, which is crucial for research integrity.

2. Patients:

- **Inclusion Criteria:**
  - Adult inpatients >18 years.
  - Underwent both ultrafast and reference MRI/MRA protocols for stroke evaluation (September 2023 - June 2024).
- **Explanation:** Defines the study population and the timeframe for data collection.

3. Imaging Protocol:

- **Ultrafast Protocol:**
  - Included DWI/ADC, FLAIR, T2/T2*-weighted imaging, and time-of-flight head MRA research sequences.
  - Accelerated using ms-EPI and DL-assisted reconstruction (except DWI).
  - Ultrafast MRA accelerated by CS.
  - Total acquisition time: approximately 3 minutes (183 seconds).

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    - References to Clifford et al [14] and Lang et al [26] are made, and the supplementary table 1 is referenced.
- **Reference Protocol:**
    - Included DWI/ADC, FLAIR, T2-weighted imaging, SWI, and time-of-flight head MRA.
    - Total acquisition time: approximately 9 minutes (532 seconds).
    - Previously optimized, published protocol referenced from Lang et al [26].
- **Imaging System:**
    - 3T MRI system (MAGNETOM Vida Fit, Siemens Healthineers) with a 20-channel head coil.
    - Reference protocol was performed before the ultrafast protocol on each patient.
- **Explanation:** Thoroughly describes both imaging protocols, highlighting the acceleration techniques used in the ultrafast protocol.

4. Diagnostic Quality Rating:

- **Rating Scale:** 3-point Likert scale (1 = poor, 2 = moderate, 3 = excellent).
- **Reference:** Previously reported scale [6].
- **Explanation:** Clearly explains the diagnostic quality rating methodology.

5. Pathology Assessment:

- **Readers:** Two neuroradiologists with 7 and 11 years of experience (B.A. and J.C.).
- **Masking:** Readers were blinded to clinical history and imaging protocol.
- **Image Presentation:**
    - Random order, masked presentation of ultrafast and reference images.
    - Cases presented over three sessions, 2 weeks apart (memory washout).
- **Evaluated Pathology:**
    - Acute/subacute infarct.
    - Acute/chronic hemorrhage.
    - Intracranial mass.
    - Hydrocephalus.
    - Other acute intracranial processes.
    - MRA: large-vessel occlusion, severe arterial stenosis, aneurysm, arteriovenous malformation.
- **Explanation:** Details the reading protocol, emphasizing masking and randomization.

6. Statistical Analysis:

- **Diagnostic Quality:** Percentage of quality grade per sequence.
- **Pathology Agreement:** Percentage agreement and Cohen's kappa coefficient [27].
- **Contingency Tables:** Used to visualize rating distributions.
- **Performance Metrics:** Diagnostic accuracy, sensitivity, and specificity of the ultrafast protocol (relative to reference).
- **Software:** R studio (version 4.2.1).
- **Significance Level:** $P < 0.05$.
- **Explanation:** Provides a detailed overview of the statistical methods used.

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Results:

1. Subjects:

- **Patient Count:** 67 patients included (out of 70 initially collected).
- **Exclusions:** 2 due to motion artifacts, 1 due to incomplete acquisition.
- **Demographics:** Mean age 61.13 years (range 22-94), 31 males.
- **Clinical Indications:**
  - Acute neurological deficit (40.3%).
  - Stroke suspected (13.4%).
  - Transient ischemic attacks (10.4%).
  - Headache (8.9%).
  - Mental status change (8.9%).

2. Diagnostic Quality Rating:

- **Overall Quality:** 98.4% of ultrafast sequences were diagnostic.
- **Nondiagnostic Cases:** 1.64% due to motion, also nondiagnostic in reference MRI.
- **Sequence-Specific Quality:**
  - DWI: 100%.
  - FLAIR: 98.5%.
  - T2-weighted: 99.2%.
  - T2*-weighted: 97.01%.
  - Head MRA: 97.01%.

3. Pathology Finding Evaluation:

- **Reference Protocol Findings:**
  - Acute infarcts: 31.3%.
  - Acute hemorrhage: 22.3% (rater 1), 23.8% (rater 2).
  - Chronic microhemorrhages: 44.7% (rater 1), 37.3% (rater 2).
  - Chronic infarcts: 32.8% (rater 1), 25.3% (rater 2).
  - Large-vessel occlusion: 5.9%.
  - Intracranial aneurysm: 10.4%.
  - Arteriovenous malformation: 2.9%.
  - Severe intracranial arterial stenosis: 16.4% (rater 1), 14.9% (rater 2).
- **Interrater Agreement:**
  - 100% agreement for acute infarct, large-vessel occlusion, aneurysm, and arteriovenous malformation.
  - 99% agreement for acute hemorrhage, 95% for severe stenosis.
  - Modest agreement for chronic hemorrhage and infarct (82-91%, kappa 0.66-0.82).
- **Diagnostic Accuracy:**
  - 100% accuracy for acute infarct, acute hemorrhage, large-vessel occlusion, aneurysm, and arteriovenous malformation.
  - Lower accuracy for chronic hemorrhage and infarct.
- **Sensitivity and Specificity:**
  - Lowest sensitivity for chronic hemorrhage and severe stenosis (72-80%).

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- Lowest specificity for chronic hemorrhage and infarct (94-95%).
- 100% sensitivity and specificity for other findings.

Discussion

This prospective study evaluated the diagnostic performance of a 3-minute ultrafast MRI and MRA protocol for the rapid screening of acute ischemic stroke, demonstrating its potential as a time-efficient alternative to standard imaging protocols. Our findings indicate that the ultrafast protocol provides high diagnostic quality, with 98.4% of sequences rated as diagnostic, and excellent interrater agreement for critical acute stroke findings. The high diagnostic quality of the ultrafast sequences, even with significant time reduction, suggests that advanced acquisition and reconstruction techniques, such as ms-EPI, DL-assisted reconstruction, and CS, effectively preserve image fidelity. The minimal number of nondiagnostic cases, primarily due to motion artifacts, highlights the inherent challenges of imaging acutely ill patients, regardless of protocol. Importantly, when motion artifacts were present in the ultrafast protocol, they were also present in the reference protocol, indicating that the ultrafast method did not increase this problem. The perfect interrater agreement observed for acute infarcts, large-vessel occlusions, aneurysms, and arteriovenous malformations underscores the reliability of the ultrafast protocol in identifying critical pathologies requiring immediate intervention. This is particularly significant in the context of acute stroke, where timely diagnosis and treatment are paramount. The high accuracy of the ultrafast protocol, when compared to the reference standard, for these acute findings, further supports its clinical utility. The near-perfect agreement for acute hemorrhage and severe stenosis, while slightly lower than perfect, still demonstrates robust diagnostic performance. These findings are essential for stroke management, as they directly influence treatment decisions. The modest agreement for chronic conditions, such as chronic hemorrhage and infarcts, suggests that while the ultrafast protocol is highly effective for acute findings, it may be less sensitive for chronic pathologies. This is likely due to the emphasis on speed in the ultrafast protocol, which could lead to reduced detail in chronic lesion characterization. The high sensitivity and specificity for acute findings, coupled with the reduced acquisition time, position the ultrafast protocol as a valuable tool for streamlining stroke workflows. The ability to acquire critical diagnostic information in 3 minutes, compared to 9 minutes for the reference protocol, can significantly expedite treatment decisions, potentially leading to improved patient outcomes. Several limitations should be considered. First, this was a single-center study, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the reference protocol was always performed before the ultrafast protocol. While measures were taken to minimize bias, this sequence could have introduced some systematic effects. Third, while the interrater agreement was high, the study did not include a gold standard, such as long term clinical follow up, or pathological confirmation, to definitively assess diagnostic accuracy. Fourth, while the protocol was fast, the study did not directly measure the impact of this protocol on patient treatment times. Despite these limitations, this study provides compelling evidence for the diagnostic efficacy of a 3-minute ultrafast MRI and MRA protocol for acute ischemic stroke screening. The protocol's ability to rapidly and accurately identify critical stroke pathologies has the potential to transform acute stroke imaging. Future research should focus on validating these findings in larger, multicenter studies, evaluating the impact of this protocol on time to treatment, and exploring the integration of this protocol into routine clinical practice. Additionally, studies

investigating the use of automated analysis tools to further expedite image interpretation would be beneficial.

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