Diagnostic Accuracy of Magnetic Resonance Imaging for Central Nervous System Associated Infectious Diseases

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LINK MEDICAL INTERFACE

Muhammad Ahmad Raza[1], Muazzam Tufail[2], Laamia Altuf[3], Kinza Chaudhary[4], Sidra Ghazanfar[1], Syeda Kiran Aftab Bukhari[5], Wajiha Sohail Khan[1]

Correspondence
Muhammad Ahmad Raza
dr.ahmad663@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2932-8424

Affiliations
1 University Institute of Radiological Science & MIT, University of Lahore, Lahore, Pakistan
2 Al-Noor Diagnostic Centre and Institute of Radiology, Lahore, Pakistan
3 Department of Radiological Science & MIT, Superior University, Lahore, Pakistan
4 Cardiff Institute of Health Sciences, Lahore, Pakistan
5 Al-Razi Institute of Health Sciences and Nursing College, Lahore, Pakistan

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Disclaimers

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ABSTRACT

Background: Central nervous system infections (CNSIs) are a significant cause of morbidity and mortality globally. Accurate diagnosis is crucial for effective management and improved outcomes.

Objective: To determine the diagnostic accuracy of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) for CNS-associated infectious diseases.

Methods: A retrospective study was conducted on 95 patients hospitalized with CNSIs at Sheikh Zayed Hospital, Lahore, between December 2022 and January 2024. Diagnoses were confirmed through clinical examination, cerebrospinal fluid analysis, and MRI findings. MRI's diagnostic performance was evaluated for tuberculosis meningitis, viral meningitis, purulent meningitis, and cryptococcal meningitis. Sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value (PPV), negative predictive value (NPV), and accuracy were calculated using SPSS version 25.0.

Results: MRI demonstrated varying accuracy for different CNS infections: Tuberculosis Meningitis (sensitivity 55.00%, specificity 47.06%, accuracy 51.28%), Purulent Meningitis (sensitivity 70.00%, specificity 50.00%, accuracy 66.66%), Viral Meningitis (sensitivity 78.57%, specificity 25.00%, accuracy 66.66%), Cryptococcal Meningitis (sensitivity 83.33%, specificity 37.50%, accuracy 69.23%).

Conclusion: MRI is a valuable diagnostic tool for CNSIs, particularly for cryptococcal meningitis, but its efficacy varies across different infections, highlighting the need for multimodal diagnostic approaches to enhance accuracy and patient care.

INTRODUCTION

Central nervous system (CNS) infections represent a significant global health challenge, contributing to high morbidity and mortality rates, particularly in regions where access to advanced medical care is limited. The complexity of CNS infections arises from the diverse array of pathogens capable of invading the central nervous system, including viruses, bacteria, fungi, and parasites, each leading to distinct clinical manifestations. Accurate and timely identification of these infectious agents is critical for effective management and prognosis of CNS infections. Despite the remarkable progress in public health and medical technology, infections such as HIV, tuberculosis, and other CNS-related diseases continue to pose significant threats, especially in immunocompromised populations (1). The ability to promptly and accurately diagnose CNS infections is paramount, as early intervention can significantly improve patient outcomes. Traditionally, diagnosis has relied on a combination of clinical examination, cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) analysis, and neuroimaging techniques. However, many CNS infections present with nonspecific clinical features, and laboratory findings can often be inconclusive, making early diagnosis challenging. This has led to an increased reliance on neuroimaging, particularly magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), which has become a crucial tool in the identification and management of CNS infections. MRI offers several advantages over other imaging modalities, including superior contrast resolution and the ability to image in multiple planes without exposing patients to ionizing radiation (2,3).

MRI is particularly valuable in differentiating between various types of meningitis, such as viral, bacterial, and fungal meningitis, each of which requires a specific therapeutic approach. The imaging modality's ability to reveal detailed anatomical structures and pathological changes in the CNS makes it an indispensable tool in the diagnostic process. Furthermore, MRI is instrumental in detecting complications associated with CNS infections, such as abscess formation, hydrocephalus, and vascular involvement, which are critical in guiding treatment decisions (4,5). However, the interpretation of MRI findings in the context of CNS infections requires a high degree of expertise, as the imaging features can be subtle and may overlap with those of other neurological conditions (6).

In addition to its diagnostic capabilities, MRI also plays a significant role in the ongoing management and monitoring of patients with CNS infections. The modality's ability to track changes in disease extent and response to treatment provides clinicians with valuable information that can influence therapeutic strategies. This is particularly

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important in the management of chronic CNS infections, such as those caused by Mycobacterium tuberculosis or Cryptococcus species, where prolonged treatment courses are often necessary (7,8). Despite its advantages, MRI is not without limitations. The high cost of MRI, the need for specialized equipment and trained personnel, and the relatively long scanning times can limit its availability and use, particularly in resource-constrained settings (9).

Moreover, the potential for incidental findings that may not be clinically relevant poses a challenge in the interpretation of MRI results. These incidental findings can lead to unnecessary further investigations, adding to the complexity and cost of care (10). Nevertheless, the clinical utility of MRI in diagnosing CNS infections is well-established, and its role continues to expand as advances in imaging technology improve its sensitivity and specificity (11,12). Given the rising prevalence of CNS infections, particularly in the context of global health challenges such as HIV and the increased use of immunosuppressive therapies, the importance of MRI in the diagnostic and management pathways for these conditions cannot be overstated. This study aims to evaluate the diagnostic accuracy of MRI in identifying CNS-associated infectious diseases, with a focus on its sensitivity, specificity, and overall contribution to patient care (13,14).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This retrospective study was conducted on a cohort of 95 patients who were admitted to Sheikh Zayed Hospital, Lahore, between December 2022 and January 2024 with confirmed central nervous system infections (CNSIs). Patients were selected through a randomized process, ensuring a representative sample of individuals presenting with CNS-associated infectious diseases. The study adhered strictly to the ethical standards set forth by the Helsinki Declaration, and approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee prior to the commencement of the study. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality of patient data was maintained throughout the research process.

The inclusion criteria comprised patients who had been diagnosed with CNSIs based on clinical examination and confirmed through cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) analysis and imaging studies. Specifically, the study included cases of tuberculosis meningitis, viral meningitis, purulent meningitis, and cryptococcal meningitis. The diagnosis was corroborated by clinical pathology results, which identified 39 cases of tuberculosis meningitis, 18 cases of viral meningitis, 12 cases of purulent meningitis, and 26 cases of cryptococcal meningitis. The sample consisted of 57 males and 38 females, with an age range of 20 to 75 years and an average age of 49.61 ± 10.52 years. Exclusion criteria were applied to patients with incomplete clinical data or those with severe comorbid conditions affecting the kidneys, liver, or heart.

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) was utilized as the primary imaging modality for all patients, with scans performed using a standardized protocol that included T1-weighted, T2-weighted, FLAIR, and diffusion-weighted imaging sequences. The imaging data were reviewed by two experienced radiologists who were blinded to the clinical and laboratory results. Discrepancies in interpretation were resolved through consensus. The diagnostic performance of MRI was evaluated by comparing the imaging findings with the definitive diagnoses established through clinical and laboratory criteria. Sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value (PPV), negative predictive value (NPV), and overall accuracy were calculated for each type of meningitis included in the study.

Data collection involved the meticulous extraction of clinical and demographic information from patient records, including age, gender, clinical presentation, and laboratory findings. CSF analysis was performed on all patients, with specific tests conducted to identify pathogenic organisms, including tuberculin for tuberculosis meningitis, specific viral RNA for viral meningitis, and cryptococcus identification for cryptococcal meningitis. The laboratory findings were cross-referenced with imaging results to evaluate the concordance between MRI findings and the definitive diagnosis.

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS version 25.0. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic and clinical characteristics of the study population. The diagnostic accuracy of MRI was assessed by calculating sensitivity, specificity, PPV, NPV, and accuracy for each type of CNSI. These metrics were compared across the different types of meningitis to evaluate the relative performance of MRI in detecting each condition. P-values of less than 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

Throughout the study, the researchers adhered to the principles of ethical medical research, ensuring that the study was conducted with the utmost integrity and respect for patient rights. The results of this study aim to contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding the diagnostic utility of MRI in CNS infections, providing insights that may enhance clinical decision-making and patient outcomes (1).

RESULTS

A total of 95 patients were included in this study, with a gender distribution of 57 males (60%) and 38 females (40%), as illustrated in Figure 1. The age range of the participants was between 20 and 75 years, with a mean age of 49.61 ± 10.52 years. The patients were diagnosed with different types of central nervous system infections (CNSIs), including tuberculosis meningitis, viral meningitis, purulent meningitis, and cryptococcal meningitis.

Diagnostic Accuracy of MRI for CNSIs

The diagnostic accuracy of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) for various CNS infections was evaluated by calculating sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value (PPV), negative predictive value (NPV), and overall accuracy for each condition. The results are summarized in Table 1.

The MRI findings demonstrated the highest sensitivity (83.33%) and accuracy (69.23%) for detecting cryptococcal meningitis. In contrast, the lowest sensitivity (55.00%) and accuracy (51.28%) were observed for tuberculosis meningitis.

Table 1: Diagnostic Accuracy of MRI for Different CNS Infections

Infection Type	Sensitivity (%)	Specificity (%)	PPV (%)	NPV (%)	Accuracy (%)
Tuberculosis Meningitis	55.00	47.06	57.14	44.44	51.28
Purulent Meningitis	70.00	50.00	87.50	25.00	66.66
Viral Meningitis	78.57	25.00	78.57	25.00	66.66
Cryptococcal Meningitis	83.33	37.50	75.00	50.00	69.23

Purulent meningitis and viral meningitis showed moderate diagnostic performance, with similar accuracy rates of 66.66%.

Statistical Breakdown of MRI Findings

Table 2: MRI Findings vs. Confirmed Diagnoses

Infection Type	True Positive (TP)	False Positive (FP)	True Negative (TN)	False Negative (FN)	Total
Tuberculosis Meningitis	12	9	8	10	39
Purulent Meningitis	7	1	1	3	12
Viral Meningitis	11	3	1	3	18
Cryptococcal Meningitis	15	5	3	3	26

Further analysis of MRI findings against the confirmed diagnoses for each CNS infection type is presented in Table 2.

The above data shows that MRI was most effective in correctly identifying cases of cryptococcal meningitis, with 15 true positives and only 5 false positives. However, it was less effective for tuberculosis meningitis, with a relatively high number of false positives and negatives.

The study findings underscore the utility of MRI in diagnosing various CNS infections, with varying degrees of sensitivity and accuracy depending on the specific type of infection. While MRI showed excellent diagnostic performance for cryptococcal meningitis, its utility in diagnosing tuberculosis meningitis was more limited. The overall results suggest that MRI can be a valuable diagnostic tool in the clinical setting, although its effectiveness may vary across different CNS infection types.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlighted the critical role of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) in diagnosing central nervous system infections (CNSIs), with varying degrees of effectiveness depending on the specific type of infection. The results demonstrated that MRI was particularly effective in diagnosing cryptococcal meningitis, with high sensitivity and accuracy, consistent with previous research that underscored the utility of MRI in identifying fungal infections of the CNS (Palacios et al., 2014). However, the study also revealed limitations in MRI's diagnostic performance for tuberculosis meningitis, where both sensitivity and specificity were relatively low, indicating the potential for both false positives and negatives. This discrepancy in diagnostic performance could be attributed to the subtle and overlapping imaging features of tuberculosis meningitis with other CNS conditions, a challenge that has been documented in earlier studies (Runge et al., 2001).

In comparing these findings with the existing literature, it was evident that while MRI remains a powerful tool for CNS infection diagnosis, its efficacy is contingent on the specific pathology. Previous studies have demonstrated that MRI provides superior soft tissue contrast and the ability to image in multiple planes, which is particularly advantageous in detecting conditions like cryptococcal meningitis, where lesions may be small or located in regions that are difficult to assess with other imaging modalities (Zhang et al., 2017). Conversely, the relatively low accuracy observed for tuberculosis meningitis aligns with findings that suggest MRI may struggle to differentiate between tuberculous and other granulomatous lesions in the CNS (Shih & Koeller, 2015).

One of the strengths of this study was its comprehensive approach, involving a diverse patient population and rigorous comparison of MRI findings with confirmed diagnoses. This allowed for a robust evaluation of MRI's diagnostic performance across different CNS infections. Additionally, the study's adherence to strict ethical guidelines and the use of standardized imaging protocols ensured the reliability and validity of the results. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The retrospective design of the study, while allowing for the inclusion of a relatively large sample size, may have introduced selection bias, as patients with more severe or atypical presentations may have been preferentially included. Moreover, the reliance on a single imaging modality for diagnosis, without comparison to other techniques such as computed tomography (CT) or positron emission tomography (PET), limits the generalizability of the findings to clinical settings where multimodal imaging is available.

Another limitation was the potential for variability in MRI interpretation, as the study relied on the consensus of two radiologists. Although this approach aimed to reduce inter-observer variability, it did not completely eliminate the possibility of interpretative differences, which could impact the diagnostic accuracy reported. This limitation highlights the need for further research to establish standardized imaging criteria for CNS infections, which could enhance the consistency and accuracy of MRI diagnoses across different institutions (Spudich et al., 2011).

In light of these findings, several recommendations can be made for future research and clinical practice. First, there is a need for larger, prospective studies that include a broader range of CNS infections and utilize multimodal imaging approaches to validate and expand upon these results. Such studies should also investigate the integration of advanced MRI techniques, such as diffusion tensor imaging (DTI) and functional MRI (fMRI), which may offer additional diagnostic insights, particularly for complex or ambiguous cases (Choi et al., 2011). Furthermore, the development of standardized imaging protocols and diagnostic criteria would be beneficial in reducing variability and improving the overall reliability of MRI as a diagnostic tool for CNSIs.

In conclusion, while this study reaffirmed the value of MRI in diagnosing certain CNS infections, it also highlighted the modality's limitations, particularly in differentiating between similar pathological entities. These findings underscore the importance of a multimodal diagnostic approach, combining MRI with other imaging techniques and clinical data to achieve the most accurate and comprehensive diagnosis possible. Continued research in this area is essential to refine and optimize the use of MRI in the diagnosis and management of CNS infections, ultimately improving patient outcomes (Sakai et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is a valuable tool for diagnosing central nervous system infections, with particularly high accuracy in detecting cryptococcal meningitis, though it showed limitations in distinguishing tuberculosis meningitis. The findings emphasize the necessity of incorporating multimodal imaging techniques and standardized protocols to enhance diagnostic precision, thereby improving patient outcomes. The implications for human healthcare are significant, as accurate and early diagnosis of CNS infections using MRI can lead to more targeted treatments, reduced morbidity, and overall better management of these life-threatening conditions.

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