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Dynamic perfusion CT in brain tumors

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A B S T R A C T

Dynamic perfusion CT (PCT) is an imaging technique for assessing the vascular supply and hemodynamics of brain tumors by measuring blood flow, blood volume, and permeability-surface area product. These PCT parameters provide information complementary to histopathologic assessments and have been used for grading brain tumors, distinguishing high-grade gliomas from other brain lesions, differentiating true progression from post-treatment effects, and predicting prognosis after treatments. In this review, the basic principles of PCT are described, and applications of PCT of brain tumors are discussed. The advantages and current challenges, along with possible solutions, of PCT are presented.

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1. Introduction

High-grade gliomas (HGGs), the most common primary brain tumors, are associated with high mortality rates despite aggressive treatments. The median survival for patients with glioblastomas, the most aggressive form of gliomas, is only 12–15 months [1]. HGGs are highly vascular tumors, and tumor vascularity is a determining pathologic hallmark of malignancy [2] that results in characteristic tumor contrast uptake on contrast-enhanced computed tomography (CT) or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).

Perfusion imaging provides quantitative information about normal brain and tumor physiology that cannot be obtained from conventional morphological imaging. Dynamic perfusion CT (PCT) is an imaging technique that can quantitatively assesses the vascular supply and permeability of brain tumors by measuring tumor blood flow (BF), blood volume (BV), and permeability-surface area product (PS). PCT is well-suited to study brain tumors due to its widespread availability and low cost, and it is relatively easy to implement compared to Positron emission tomography (PET) and MR perfusion. PCT has been used for grading gliomas, distinguishing gliomas from other brain lesions, differentiating tumor progression from treatment-induced effects, and predicting prognosis after treatments. This review describes the basic principles of PCT and its applications in neuro-oncology. The advantages and challenges of PCT as well as their solutions in brain tumor imaging are presented.

2. Basic principles of PCT

PCT acquires repeated images to track a bolus of iodinated contrast agent as it washes into and out of tissue via blood vessels. The efficient attenuation of X-rays by iodine increases CT image intensity, which is linearly proportional to the iodine concentration [3].
The basis of PCT is to track the delivery of iodine by measuring changes in image intensity after the arrival of contrast bolus. Table 1 illustrates a typical brain tumor PCT protocol. It is a two-phase scan that takes two to three minutes. The first phase typically takes 45s to capture the first pass of contrast and requires rapid acquisition of CT images (1–2 s/image) for accurate calculations of BF and BV. The second phase is required for the calculation of PS; it involves less frequent acquisition of CT images (10–15 s/image) to reduce imaging dose.

The calculation of PCT parameters consists of four steps:

1. Subtract baseline signal intensity (prior to contrast arrival) from each CT image to obtain tissue enhancement curves \( C_f(t) \).
2. Select an input artery that supplies the brain to obtain the arterial input function \( C_a(t) \).
3. Select a vein to correct partial volume averaging of the arterial input function \( C_a(t) \) [4].
4. Calculate PCT parameters based on the chosen tracer kinetic model of the software.

The different tracer kinetics models can be categorized as follows:

1. Model-independent method based on indicator dilution theory that calculates BF and BV [5]. This is commonly used in dynamic susceptibility-contrast MR (DSC-MR). For brain tumor, the BV obtained has to be corrected for contrast leakage as described by Boxerman [6].
2. Compartmental model accounts for the rate of diffusional exchange of contrast between the intravascular space and the interstitial space (e.g. \( K_{trans} \)) besides BF [7]. This is commonly used in dynamic contrast-enhanced MR (DCE-MR). \( K_{trans} \) is the product of BF and extraction efficiency \( E \) and when PS \( \bullet \) BF, as would be the case in brain tumor, it is equal to PS [8].
3. Distributed parameter model, which is commonly used in PCT, calculates BF, BV, and rate of diffusional exchange (PS or \( K_{trans} \)) between blood and tissue [8]. \( K_{trans} \) can then be calculated as \( BF = C_f(t) \odot R(t) \).

Table 1: A typical brain tumor PCT protocol.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters</th>
<th>Specifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contrast agent</td>
<td>Iopamidol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molecular weight of contrast agent</td>
<td>777 g/mol (0.777 kDa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast concentration</td>
<td>300 mg iodine/ml</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast dose</td>
<td>0.8 ml/kg (60–80 ml in volume for a typical patient)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of contrast injection</td>
<td>2–4 ml/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scan duration</td>
<td>2–3 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal resolution</td>
<td>First phase: 1–2 s/image for 45 s; Second phase: 15 s/image for 105 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tube current</td>
<td>100–190 mA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tube voltage</td>
<td>80 kV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scan coverage</td>
<td>4, 8, or 16 cm coverage with multi-detector CT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scan start time</td>
<td>3–5 s after contrast injection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

where \( \odot \) is a convolution operator, and \( R(t) \) represents the impulse residue function (IRF). Fig. 1 illustrates Eq. (1). The IRF describes the fraction of contrast that remains in the tissue as time progresses, following the injection of unit mass of contrast into the arterial input. The product of the IRF and BF is called the BF-scaled IRF, and it is solved by deconvolving the arterial input function \( C_a(t) \) with the tissue enhancement curve \( C_f(t) \). The BF-scaled impulse residue function has two distinct phases (Fig. 1). The first phase describes the retention of contrast in the tissue prior to any venous outflow; it has a peak height of BF (ml/min/100 g), a width that equals to the mean transit time (MTT, s), and an area that equals to BV (ml/100 g). The second phase describes the backflow of contrast from the interstitial space into the bloodstream. It starts at a height of the extraction fraction \( E \) and decays monoexponentially with time. PS can be calculated as \( PS = BF \cdot ln(1 – E) \). PS is the unidirectional diffusional flux of contrast from the intravascular space into the interstitial space across all “openings” of the permeable capillary endothelium.

3. Clinical applications

3.1. Correlation with histopathologic markers and tumor grade

Angiogenesis is important for histopathologic grading of gliomas by providing valuable information for treatment selections and prediction of treatment response. Histopathologic grading of gliomas using biopsied specimens can be prone to sampling error due to the heterogeneity of tumors. It has been shown that 60% of anaplastic astrocytomas (grade II) were upgraded to glioblastoma (grade IV) after comparing the biopsied specimens with the resected tumors [10].

Microvascular density (MVD) and microvascular cellular proliferation (MVCP) are histopathologic markers of angiogenesis. PCT measures of BF and BV have shown significant correlations with MVD \( (r = 0.527 \text{ and } 0.649, \text{ respectively}; \ P < 0.02) \), while PS showed a significant correlation with MVCP \( (r = 0.647, \ P = 0.001) \) [11]. These results suggest that regions of higher angiogenic activities (i.e. more aggressive) could be localized by maps of BF, BV, and PS to serve to guide biopsy or resection. While statistically significant, PCT correlations with MVD and MVCP were moderate, possibly because MVD and MVCP cannot fully reflect the complexity of tumor vessels, which are tortuous and variable in size. MR perfusion measure of relative BV (rBV) showed higher correlation with microvessel area (MVA) than MVD \( (r = 0.83 \text{ and } 0.32, \text{ respectively}; \ P < 0.05) \) [12]. More importantly, MVA and rBV correlated with overall survival (OS) \( (P < 0.02) \) and MVD did not \( (P = 0.17) \), suggesting rBV and MVA could be superior to MVD for predicting OS. MVA can better reflect the tortuosity and size of vessels, but MVA is not measured routinely because it is time-consuming and labor-intensive. To date, correlations between MVA and PCT have not yet been reported.

Jain et al. explored the relationships between different PCT parameters and the expression levels of genes associated with angiogenesis in glioblastomas [13]. BV and/or PS correlated positively with some proangiogenic genes (e.g. VEGFR-2) and negatively with some anti-angiogenic genes (e.g. VASH2 and C3), suggesting a molecular genetic basis for using PCT to assess glioblastomas.

A number of studies have used PCT for tumor grading. In general, PCT of HGGs (grade III and IV) demonstrated higher BF, BV, and PS than low-grade gliomas (grade II) [11,14–22]. Figs. 2 and 3 illustrate MR and PCT studies of patients with low-grade glioma and HGG, respectively. Table 2 shows the reported sensitivities and specificities of using PCT to differentiate HGGs versus low-grade gliomas. PCT has also been reported to differentiate grade III from grade IV gliomas with PS demonstrating better predictability than BV in...
Fig. 1. Graphical illustration showing how different CT perfusion parameters are calculated from a tissue enhancement curve $C_t(t)$ and arterial input function $C_a(t)$.

Fig. 2. A patient with grade II diffuse astrocytoma. Post-gadolinium T1-weighted image (A) shows a non-enhancing lesion (red and black arrows) with minimal peritumoral edema on T2-weighted image (B). Maps of blood flow (BF), blood volume (BV), and permeability-surface area product (PS) do not show a region of elevated BF, BV, and PS.

Fig. 3. A patient with grade IV glioblastoma. Post-gadolinium T1-weighted image (A) shows a contrast-enhancing tumor (red and black arrows) and substantial peritumoral edema on T2-weighted image (B). Maps of blood flow (BF), blood volume (BV), and permeability-surface area product (PS) shows a rim with high BF, BV, and PS.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters</th>
<th>Sensitivity ranges (%)</th>
<th>Specificity ranges (%)</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BF*</td>
<td>71–91</td>
<td>82–100</td>
<td>[14,15,18,22]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BV*</td>
<td>83–100</td>
<td>75–100</td>
<td>[14,15,18,19,22]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>[19]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTT</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>[18]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ktrans</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>[14,22]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Abbreviations:** BF, blood flow; BV, blood volume; PS, permeability-surface area product; MTT, mean transit time; Ktrans, transfer constant.

* BF and BV refer to absolute values or absolute tumor BF and BV normalized to BF and BV in the normal appearing white matter or contralateral brain region.

3.3. Differentiation of true progression from post-treatment effects

An increase in the size of the contrast-enhancing tumor is a radiologic sign of progression, but the effects of radiotherapy can also mimic the appearance of true progression on contrast-enhanced MR images [33]. Pseudoproggression and treatment-induced necrosis (TIN) are two post-radiotherapy scenarios that mimic true progression on MR. It is imperative to differentiate these entities accurately since they are managed differently.

Although the mechanism of pseudoproggression is unclear, it is believed to be induced by a local inflammatory reaction, edema, and increased vessel permeability that lead to contrast enhancement on imaging [33]. Previous DSC-MR studies showed that true progression had significantly higher relative BV (rBV) than pseudoproggression [34,35] and TIN [36,37]. Using PCT, true progression showed significantly higher values of rBF, rBV, and PS than TIN [38–40]. Sensitivities and specificities of >80% were measured using PCT to differentiate true progression from TIN in brain tumors (Table 3). Fig. 4 shows a PCT study of a patient with progression 6 months after radiotherapy, and Fig. 5 shows a patient with histopathologically confirmed radiation necrosis 3 months after radiotherapy.

PCT offers an advantage over MR perfusion in this regard since it can measure all three vascular parameters—BF, BV, and PS, which is technically challenging for DSC-MR and DCE-MR. True progressive brain tumors are malignancies with increased vascularity, immature leaky vessels, and upregulated VEGF expression resulting in higher BF, BV, and PS. On the other hand, the moderate PS observed in TIN is likely mediated by the release of VEGF in the pathogenesis of radiation necrosis [41]. In addition, susceptibility artefacts from blood products (hemorrhage, thrombus) and calcification can potentially complicate the analysis of DSC-MR studies while PCT is not affected by these artefacts [39,42].

3.4. Prediction of prognosis

Recently, PCT parameters have been used to predict overall survival (OS) after surgery/biopsy, radiotherapy, and temozolomide chemotherapy. Pre-treatment PCT exams showed that tumor relative BV alone [43], PS alone [44], and relative BV + PS were all predictive of OS [43,44]. More importantly, rBV alone and rBV + PS remained significant predictors of OS even after adjusting for classical prognostic factors (age, Karnofsky performance status, extent of resection, and grade) [43], suggesting that PCT parameters could improve the prediction of OS.

Local recurrence within 2 cm of the irradiated volume predominates post-radiotherapy, making imaging assessments of both the contrast-enhancing tumor and the peritumoral edema region critical [45]. Yeung et al. showed that patients with shorter OS had higher BV and PS in both regions than patients with longer OS (Fig. 6), and that post-radiotherapy BV in the peritumoral edema...
Fig. 4. A patient who was previously treated for a glioblastoma multiforme shows a progressive enhancing lesion (T1-weighted MR) with high blood flow (BF), blood volume (BV), and permeability-surface area product (PS) suggesting progressive tumor around the surgical cavity at 6 months post-radiotherapy.

Fig. 5. A patient with histopathologically confirmed radiation necrosis shows a progressive enhancing lesion (T1-weighted MR) with low blood flow (BF), blood volume (BV), and permeability-surface area product (PS).

region could predict 24 months OS with sensitivities and specificities >80% [46]. Similar results have been demonstrated in DSC-MR studies [47,48]. These findings highlight the importance of paying attention to the peritumoral edema region. Radiotherapy targeting of the peritumoral edema region with PCT image-guidance may be a viable option that is worth exploring. PCT can play an important role in radiation oncology since CT imaging is required for radiotherapy treatment planning.

4. Discussion: strengths and challenges of PCT

DSC-MR is currently the most commonly used perfusion imaging technique for assessing brain tumors. However, PCT has several advantages that make it a useful alternative functional imaging tool. The linear relationship between signal intensity (HU) and iodine concentration is a major strength of PCT. DSC-MR with T2 or T2*-weighting is prone to two types of artefacts. DSC-MR
measurement of BV depends on the compartmentalization of contrast within blood vessels. In brain tumors where considerable amount of contrast can leak into the interstitial space, the susceptibility-contrast signal intensity loss can be masked by the competing T1 effects [6]. DSC-MR measurement leads to an under-estimation of BV if it is not addressed by (1) pre-saturating the brain parenchyma with a pre-loading dose of contrast, (2) dual-echo sequence, or (3) post-processing correction [6,42]. This effect also makes the quantification of tumor permeability technically challenging. In addition, the susceptibility artefacts created by blood products (from hemorrhage and thrombus) in tumors are other factors that can affect the quantification of BV. PCT is clearly advantageous in this respect.

The second major advantage of PCT is the capability to measure BF, BV, and PS from a single scan. The measurements of BF and BV require rapid image acquisitions (1–2 s per image), which is technically challenging for T1-weighted DCE-MR. For DSC-MR, the effect of contrast extravasation on signal intensity makes the calculation of PS difficult to achieve as discussed above. Furthermore, measuring the arterial input function needed for calculating absolute values of BF and BV is problematic with MR perfusion due to the trade-off between spatial and temporal resolutions. The high spatial and temporal resolutions of CT scanning and the linearity between iodine concentration and CT image intensity enable the calculation of BF, BV, and PS from a single PCT study.

MR is the standard of care for brain tumor patients; hence, the follow-up of patients with MR perfusion is more convenient than PCT as perfusion imaging can be included as part of a single multi-parametric MR study. The clinical use of PCT has also been slow to progress due to two major limitations. Radiation dose is of concern when performing a PCT scan. The effective doses with current techniques are between 2.5 and 5.5 mSV for tube currents of 100–190 mA [49]. Recent advances in adaptive statistical iterative reconstruction can reduce imaging dose without compromising the diagnostic acceptability [50]. An image filtering technique called principal component analysis can also improve PCT image quality; thereby presenting another opportunity for further dose reduction [51]. The limited scan coverage (2–4 cm coverage) is another limitation of PCT, making whole tumor assessment difficult. However, the advent of shuttle mode imaging and large multi-row detector technology enables whole brain PCT coverage [52,53]. Differences in PCT protocol (e.g. PCT scan duration) and calculation software could lead to disagreements in the values of PCT parameters [49,54]. Therefore, standardization of PCT protocol and software are critical for cross-study comparison.

5. Conclusions

PCT can provide tumor hemodynamics information for pre-operative tumor grading, response assessment, and OS prediction. Results from PCT studies are comparable to those performed with MR perfusion. PCT is technically less demanding than MR perfusion and provides measurements of BF, BV, and PS from a single scan. The obstacles of limited scan coverage and radiation dose are being addressed by recent advances in CT imaging. In our opinion, PCT has reached sufficient technical maturity for use as a routine functional imaging tool for brain tumor assessment.

Conflict of interest

T-Y Lee licenses CT Perfusion software to GE Healthcare and receives royalties from the license. The software was used to generate the Figures in the article. Other authors do not have conflicts to declare.

References


