ACR–ASNR–SPR PRACTICE GUIDELINE FOR THE PERFORMANCE OF FUNCTIONAL MAGNETIC RESONANCE IMAGING (fMRI) OF THE BRAIN

PREAMBLE

These guidelines are an educational tool designed to assist practitioners in providing appropriate radiologic and radiation oncology care for patients. They are not inflexible rules or requirements of practice and are not intended, nor should they be used, to establish a legal standard of care. For these reasons and those set forth below, the American College of Radiology cautions against the use of these guidelines in litigation in which the clinical decisions of a practitioner are called into question.

The ultimate judgment regarding the propriety of any specific procedure or course of action must be made by the physician or medical physicist in light of all the circumstances presented. Thus, an approach that differs from the guidelines, standing alone, does not necessarily imply that the approach was below the standard of care. To the contrary, a conscientious practitioner may responsibly adopt a course of action different from that set forth in the guidelines when, in the reasonable judgment of the practitioner, such course of action is indicated by the condition of the patient, limitations of available resources, or advances in knowledge or technology subsequent to publication of the guidelines. However, a practitioner who employs an approach substantially different from these guidelines is advised to document in the patient record information sufficient to explain the approach taken.

The practice of medicine involves not only the science, but also the art of dealing with the prevention, diagnosis, alleviation, and treatment of disease. The variety and complexity of human conditions make it impossible to always reach the most appropriate diagnosis or to predict with certainty a particular response to treatment.

Therefore, it should be recognized that adherence to these guidelines will not assure an accurate diagnosis or a successful outcome. All that should be expected is that the practitioner will follow a reasonable course of action based on current knowledge, available resources, and the needs of the patient to deliver effective and safe medical care. The sole purpose of these guidelines is to assist practitioners in achieving this objective.

I. INTRODUCTION

This guideline was revised collaboratively by the American College of Radiology (ACR), the American Society of Neuroradiology (ASNR), and the Society for Pediatric Radiology.

Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) using blood oxygenation level dependent imaging (BOLD) technique is a proven and useful tool for evaluating eloquent cortex in relation to a focal brain lesion, such as a neoplasm or vascular malformation. fMRI should be performed only for a valid medical reason [1-9].

II. INDICATIONS

Primary indications for fMRI include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Assessment of intracranial tumoral disease
   - Presurgical planning and operative risk assessment.
   - Assessment of eloquent cortex (e.g., language, sensory motor, visual centers) in relation to a tumor or other focal lesion.
   - Surgical planning (biopsy or resection)
   - Therapeutic follow-up
2. Evaluation of preserved eloquent cortex.
3. Assessment of eloquent cortex for epilepsy surgery.

III. QUALIFICATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF PERSONNEL

See the ACR Practice Guideline for Performing and Interpreting Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI).

The physician supervising and interpreting fMRI must be clinically informed and understand the specific questions to be answered prior to the procedure in order to plan and perform it safely and effectively. Additionally, physicians performing and interpreting this procedure should have experience or formal training in performing and processing fMRI [10,11].

IV. SAFETY GUIDELINES AND POSSIBLE CONTRAINDICATIONS


Peer-reviewed literature pertaining to MR safety should be reviewed on a regular basis.

V. SPECIFICATIONS OF THE EXAMINATION

The supervising physician must have complete understanding of the indications, risks, and benefits of the examination, as well as alternative imaging procedures. The physician must be familiar with potential hazards associated with MRI, including potential adverse reactions to contrast media. The physician should be familiar with relevant ancillary studies that the patient may have undergone. The physician performing MRI interpretation must have a clear understanding and knowledge of the anatomy and pathophysiology relevant to the MRI examination.

The supervising physician must also understand the pulse sequences to be used and their effect on the appearance of the images, including the potential generation of image artifacts. Standard imaging protocols may be established and varied on a case-by-case basis when necessary. These protocols should be reviewed and updated periodically.

The written or electronic request for fMRI should provide sufficient information to demonstrate the medical necessity of the examination and allow for its proper performance and interpretation.

Documentation that satisfies medical necessity includes 1) signs and symptoms and/or 2) relevant history (including known diagnoses). Additional information regarding the specific reason for the examination or a provisional diagnosis would be helpful and may at times be needed to allow for the proper performance and interpretation of the examination.

The request for the examination must be originated by a physician or other appropriately licensed health care provider. The accompanying clinical information should be provided by a physician or other appropriately licensed health care provider familiar with the patient’s clinical problem or question and consistent with the state scope of practice requirements. (ACR Resolution 35, adopted in 2006)

A. Patient Selection

The physician responsible for the examination should supervise patient selection and preparation, and be available in person or by phone for consultation. Patients should be screened and interviewed prior to the examination to exclude individuals who may be at risk by exposure to the MR environment.

Certain indications require the administration of intravenous (IV) contrast media as part of the diagnostic MRI procedure [12]. IV contrast enhancement should be performed using appropriate injection protocols and in accordance with the institution’s policy on IV contrast utilization. (See the ACR–SPR Practice Guideline for the Use of Intravascular Contrast Media.)

Patients suffering from anxiety or claustrophobia may require sedation or additional assistance. Administration of moderate sedation may be needed to achieve a successful examination. If moderate sedation is necessary, refer to the ACR–SIR Practice Guideline for Sedation/Analgesia.

B. Facility Requirements

Appropriate emergency equipment and medications must be immediately available to treat adverse reactions associated with administered medications. The equipment and medications should be monitored for inventory and drug expiration dates on a regular basis. The equipment, medications, and other emergency support must also be appropriate for the range of ages and sizes in the patient population.

C. Examination Technique

1. Prescanning

Communication with the referring physician to determine the appropriate type of fMRI task to be performed needs to take place prior to the study. Also the patient’s ability to comply with the task should be evaluated. Reading level,
handedness, sensory impairments, and ability to focus all require an assessment prior to the scan. Patients should be appropriately trained in performing the selected fMRI tasks before scanning takes place. A mock scanner may be particularly helpful, especially for children, to acquaint patients with the scanner environment itself and what to expect during the study [13].

2. Scanning procedure

Hardware: Imaging can be performed with an MRI scanner having a 1.5 Tesla or higher field strength, depending on availability, and using a head coil with one or more channels. Use of a high performance head coil is recommended for improved signal-to-noise ratio (SNR). Dedicated stimulus presentation hardware and software may be helpful for presentation of stimuli, recording of patient responses, and synchronizing the stimulus paradigm with scan acquisition.

Pulse sequence: fMRI is typically performed using a gradient echo or asymmetrical spin echo echoplanar (EPI) pulse sequence. Imaging parameters may be customized to take advantage the capabilities of a specific scanner. The following imaging parameters may be used as an example: matrix size = 64x64; recovery time (TR) = 2 to 3 sec; field of view (FOV) = 22 cm; slices = 24 (whole brain); slice thickness = 4 to 5 mm.

Stimulus presentation: The imaging is typically performed using the well-established block design although an event related design could be used. The following paradigm parameters may be used as an example. In a block design study the subjects are presented with 6 separate blocks of activation conditions alternating with 6 rest period blocks, depending on the task. During each block (30 sec long), 10 volumes of EPI images are acquired, yielding a total of 120 EPI volumes. As an example, the patients may be asked to engage in sequential movement of finger to thumb or hand squeezes using both the dominant and nondominant hands, or they may be tested for language function and vision. For resting state fMRI studies, local consistency in patient environment should be observed (e.g., eyes open or eyes closed) when possible. Documentation of patient compliance with the tasks conducted is necessary after the study. Patient response data and direct observation of the patient may be used to determine patient compliance with the paradigm, and to aid in result interpretation.

D. Postprocedure Processing

The fMRI images should be postprocessed using programs readily available. Typical postprocessing steps include, but are not limited to:
1. Head motion assessment and/or correction.
2. Coregistration of the fMRI data with anatomic data.
3. Data filtering and/or smoothing.
5. Generation of statistical activation maps.
6. Overlaying of statistical activation map and anatomic data.

Functional activation maps should be reviewed over multiple statistical thresholds with attention to both the voxel-wise statistical significance and the anatomic extent of activations. Consideration may be given to statistical correction for multiple comparisons. These statistical maps can be overlayed in color onto the patient’s Grayscale anatomial images for better delineation of the tumor or other lesion margins and location of the activation regions. Color values representing different statistical thresholds are also typically assigned to these final postprocessed fMRI images.

VI. DOCUMENTATION

Reporting should be in accordance with the ACR Practice Guideline for Communication of Diagnostic Imaging Findings.

In addition to describing and interpreting the relevant findings, it is recommended that the fMRI report specify the following items:
1. Clinical indication as relevant to task selection.
2. Tasks performed.
3. Patient assessment and training.
4. An assessment of fMRI data quality based on available patient behavioral observations and measurements.
5. Description of important functional activations and their anatomic relationship to relevant pathology in the brain.

VII. EQUIPMENT SPECIFICATIONS

The MRI equipment specifications and performance should meet all state and federal requirements. The requirements include, but are not limited to, specifications of maximum static magnetic strength (minimum field strength 1.5 Tesla), maximum rate of change of the magnetic field strength (dB/dt), maximum radiofrequency power deposition (specific absorption rate), and maximum acoustic noise levels. Scanners used for fMRI examinations should exhibit appropriate temporal signal stability.
VIII. QUALITY CONTROL AND IMPROVEMENT, SAFETY, INFECTION CONTROL, AND PATIENT EDUCATION

Policies and procedures related to quality, patient education, infection control, and safety should be developed and implemented in accordance with the ACR Policy on Quality Control and Improvement, Safety, Infection Control, and Patient Education appearing under the heading Position Statement on QC & Improvement, Safety, Infection Control, and Patient Education on the ACR web site (http://www.acr.org/guidelines) [14-16].

Specific policies and procedures related to MRI safety should be in place along with documentation that is updated annually and compiled under the supervision and direction of the supervising MRI physician. Guidelines should be provided that deal with potential hazards associated with the MRI examination of the patient as well as to others in the immediate area. Screening forms must also be provided to detect those patients who may be at risk for adverse events associated with the MRI examination.

Equipment monitoring should be in accordance with the ACR Technical Standard for Diagnostic Medical Physics Performance Monitoring of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) Equipment. To optimize performance of fMRI, specific monitoring for temporal stability of the EPI signal is useful.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This guideline was revised according to the process described under the heading The Process for Developing ACR Practice Guidelines and Technical Standards on the ACR web site (http://www.acr.org/guidelines) by the Guidelines and Standards Committees of the Commissions on Neuroradiology and Pediatric Radiology in collaboration with ASNR and the SPR.

Collaborative Committee – members represent their societies in the initial and final revision of this guideline

ACR
Andrei I. Holodny, MD
Michael L. Lipton, MD, PhD
Jeffrey R. Petrella, MD
Nancy K. Rollins, MD

ASNR
Scott H. Faro, MD, Chair
Jay J. Pillai, MD
Kirk M. Welker, MD

SPR
Laura L. Hayes, MD
Nadja Kadom, MD
James L. Leach, MD

REFERENCES


*Guidelines and standards are published annually with an effective date of October 1 in the year in which amended, revised or approved by the ACR Council. For guidelines and standards published before 1999, the effective date was January 1 following the year in which the guideline or standard was amended, revised, or approved by the ACR Council.

Development Chronology for this Guideline
Revised 2012 (Resolution 18)