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Radiology

Alzheimer Disease: New Concepts on Its Neurobiology and the Clinical Role Imaging Will Play¹

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Learning Objectives:

After reading the article and taking the test, the reader will be able to:

- List the relationships among pathologic features, biomarkers, and clinical expression of Alzheimer
- Describe the characteristic signature of Alzheimer disease on images obtained with different modalities
- Explain how imaging biomarkers are used in Alzheimer disease clinical trials

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Alzheimer disease (AD) is one of, if not the most, feared diseases associated with aging. The prevalence of AD increases exponentially with age after 60 years. Increasing life expectancy coupled with the absence of any approved disease-modifying therapies at present position AD as a dominant public health problem. Major advances have occurred in the development of disease biomarkers for AD in the past 2 decades. At present, the most well-developed AD biomarkers are the cerebrospinal fluid analytes amyloid-β 42 and tau and the brain imaging measures amyloid positron emission tomography (PET), fluorodeoxyglucose PET, and magnetic resonance imaging. CSF and imaging biomarkers are incorporated into revised diagnostic guidelines for AD, which have recently been updated for the first time since their original formulation in 1984. Results of recent studies suggest the possibility of an ordered evolution of AD biomarker abnormalities that can be used to stage the typical 20-30-year course of the disease. When compared with biomarkers in other areas of medicine, however, the absence of standardized quantitative metrics for AD imaging biomarkers constitutes a major deficiency. Failure to move toward a standardized system of quantitative metrics has substantially limited potential diagnostic usefulness of imaging in AD. This presents an important opportunity that, if widely embraced, could greatly expand the application of imaging to improve clinical diagnosis and the quality and efficiency of clinical trials.

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he clinical manifestation of Alzheimer disease (AD) and its associated brain patholophysiology, senile plaques and neurofibrillary tangles, was described more than 100 years ago (1). For roughly the next three-fourths of a century, the disease was to some extent ignored; it was believed to be an uncommon condition and thus not of great public health concern. This view has changed substantially in recent years, and AD is now recognized as a potentially unprecedented public health problem.

Essentials

- The five most well-established biomarkers of Alzheimer disease (AD) at this time can be divided into two mechanistic categories: (a) measures of brain amyloid-β (Aβ) peptide deposition (cerebrospinal fluid $A\beta_{42}$ and amyloid PET imaging) and (b) measures of neuronal injury and degeneration (cerebrospinal fluid tau, fluorodeoxyglucose PET, and structural MR imaging).
- A recently developed hypothetical model of the temporal evolution of AD biomarkers proposes that these five AD biomarkers depart markedly from normal in a sequential manner, with amyloid biomarkers departing first 15 or more years before the first clinical symptoms appear, and neuronal injury and degeneration biomarkers departing later in the disease course but correlating better with concurrent clinical symptoms.
- Recently updated diagnostic guidelines for AD from the National Institute on Aging-Alzheimer's Association incorporate imaging and cerebrospinal fluid biomarkers.
- A major unmet need in the field is biomarker standardization—in particular, the development of standardized quantitative metrics for imaging biomarkers of AD.

This is driven by three forces: (a) the inexorable aging of the population in all industrialized societies, (b) the fact that the incidence of AD increases exponentially with age in people older than 60 years, and (c) the current absence of any disease-modifying interventions.

Demographics and Public Health Impact

AD is a progressive neurodegenerative condition that primarily affects cognition. AD is not a normal part of aging; however, old age is its single greatest risk factor. Dementia is defined as disease-related loss of memory and other cognitive abilities of sufficient severity to interfere with activities of daily living. While there are a number of possible causes of dementia, the most common cause by far in elderly persons is AD (2). The current estimated prevalence in the United States is 5.3 million individuals, 5.1 million of whom are over the age of 65 years (2). Approximately one-eighth (13%) of all individuals in United States over the age of 65 years and more than half of all persons older than 85 carry a clinical diagnosis of AD dementia. The incidence doubles every 5 years after the age of 60. The prevalence of AD is greater in women than men; however, this is due to the greater life expectancy of women. Because of population aging, the estimated prevalence in the United States alone will be 7.7 million by 2030 and 14 million by 2050. AD is the fifth leading cause of death for those aged 65 years and older (3).

In addition to the personal toll on patients and families, the disease has substantial economic consequences. AD is the most common illness leading to nursing home placement (2). Total payments for health care and nursing home expenses for 2010 were \$172 billion, including \$123 billion for Medicare and Medicaid. By the year 2050, the estimated cost of AD in the United States will exceed \$1 trillion per year. The cumulative cost from 2011 through 2050 is estimated at \$20 trillion (2). The public health problem is not limited to the United States. Estimates of global costs of the disease in 2009 were \$604 billion per year, or 1% of the world's gross domestic product. About 70% of people with dementia live at home. Most of these patients receive unpaid help from family members and friends. In 2009 in the United States alone, in addition to formally counted health care costs described above 10.9 million family and other unpaid caregivers provided an estimated 12.5 billion hours of care, valued at \$144 billion (2).

Clinical Course of the Disease

Longitudinal studies performed over the past 20 years have demonstrated that in individuals who eventually develop AD dementia, the cognitive symptoms begin insidiously and, in most cases, progress gradually. A large literature on mild cognitive impairment (MCI) has arisen since the mid-1990s that documents the gradual impairments of cognitive function (4). MCI refers to the transitional phase between normality and clinically evident dementia (5). The critical clinical distinction between the MCI and dementia phase of AD is loss of functional independence as the defining feature of dementia. Other clinical rating scales likewise reflect gradual development of clinical symptoms (6). The gradual onset and prolonged time course of AD stands in sharp contrast to many other medical conditions that have a clearly definable clinical onset, and often resolution.

Longitudinal studies show that a clinical diagnosis of MCI is a significant risk factor for the subsequent development

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Abbreviations:

 $A\beta = amyloid - \beta$

AD = Alzheimer disease

APOE = apolipoprotein E

CSF = cerebrospinal fluid

FDG = fluorodeoxyalucose

MCI = mild cognitive impairment

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Potential conflicts of interest are listed at the end of this article

of AD dementia. The rate of conversion from MCI to AD dementia is approximately 12% per year, which stands in contrast to the 1%–2% per year rate for cognitively normal elderly persons (7). Within 5 years, approximately 80% of individuals diagnosed with MCI will have converted to dementia (5).

Genetics and Molecular Pathways: The Amyloid Cascade Hypothesis

AD is commonly categorized as either early onset or late onset. Late onset sporadic disease (after age 65 years) accounts for over 95% of cases. The much rarer early onset cases manifest in persons younger than age 65, some as young as their 30s. Fewer than 1% of cases are found in a small number of families worldwide with autosomal dominant mutations in one of three genes: the amyloid precursor protein gene on chromosome 21, the presenilin-1 gene on chromosome 14, or the presenilin-2 gene on chromosome 1 (8-12). These known autosomal dominant mutations are all involved in production or metabolism of amyloid protein, which then implicates amyloid-\(\beta \) peptide, in the causal pathway leading to AD (13).

The vast majority of prevalent AD cases are sporadic with onset after age 65 years. Deterministic genetic mutations for late onset AD have not been found, but the ε4 allele of the apolipoprotein E (APOE) gene is the major genetic risk factor (14). The APOE gene encodes a protein with a key role in cholesterol metabolism. Three normally occurring alleles of APOE exist, $\varepsilon 2$, $\varepsilon 3$, and $\varepsilon 4$. APOE $\varepsilon 3$ is the most prevalent allele in the general population, with a frequency of roughly 80%. The ε4 allele of APOE increases the risk of developing AD and also lowers the mean age at onset of the disease (15-18). APOE $\varepsilon 4$ contributes to AD pathogenesis by modulating the metabolism, aggregation, and clearance of AB peptide and also perhaps by directly regulating brain lipid metabolism and synaptic functions (19,20). From a biomarker perspective, APOE &4 seems to act primarily as a risk factor for brain AB deposition (21,22). The ε 2 allele decreases the risk of developing AD; however, this protective effect is not as strong as the risk conferred to carriers of the $\varepsilon 4$ allele (17).

The available genetic evidence in both autosomal dominant and sporadic late onset AD points to the AB pathway. This evidence led to the amyloid cascade hypothesis, which asserts that dysfunction in the $A\beta$ pathway is the initiating, or at least a very early, pathophysiologic event in the disease (23). Familial AD is sometimes referred to as a disease of overproduction of AB, and late onset sporadic AD is a disease of inadequate AB clearance. The majority of clinical trials on disease modification attempted to date have targeted AB mechanisms on the basis of the amyloid cascade hypothesis (24).

Pathologic Features and Their Relationship to Clinical Symptoms

Two abnormal protein aggregates characterize AD pathologically. These proteinopathies are the basis of the well-known amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles (Fig 1). Neurofibrillary tangles are intracellular aggregates, while amyloid plaques form in the extracellular space. Other important pathologic features are periplaque inflammatory reaction and neurodegeneration, which is characterized by synapse loss, neuron loss, and gross cerebral atrophy (25–28).

The neurofibrillary pathologic process of AD begins in the transentorhinal area and progresses to the hippocampus, then to paralimbic and adjacent medial-basal temporal cortex, to neocortical association areas, and lastly to primary sensorimotor and visual areas (29). Tau protein is a component of the cytoskeletal microtubule system. In AD, tau becomes hyperphosphorylated, disassociates from microtubules, assumes a paired helical filament configuration, and forms insoluble neurofibrillary tangles inside neurons (30).

The second major proteinopathy associated with AD is A β deposition. The hallmark A β peptide deposit in AD is the neuritic plaque, which consists of a dense central A β core with inflamma-

tory cells and dystrophic neurites in its periphery. The core is made up of $A\beta$, which has aggregated into β pleated sheets (31). Amyloid precursor protein is a normal transmembrane protein. Normal proteolytic metabolism of amyloid precursor protein by secretases results in several peptide fragments (32). The most important of these are the $A\beta_{1-40}$ and $A\beta_{1-42}$ fragments (33). Of the two, $A\beta_{1-40}$ is more abundant, while $A\beta_{1-42}$ is more prone to aggregate (34). Soluble oligomeric $A\beta$ fibrils are generally thought to be the neurotoxic $A\beta$ species.

The field has seen intense debate on the question of which of the two hallmark proteinopathies is causative, Aβ or tau. Clinical examination-autopsy correlation studies (30,35-37) have demonstrated a much tighter correlation beneurofibrillary pathologic tween processes and cognitive impairment than between amyloid pathologic processes and cognitive impairment. Conversely, the available genetic evidence cited above strongly implicates a derangement in Aβ metabolism as the primary instigating factor in AD. Autopsy findings in cognitively normal subjects are informative. Approximately 30% of cognitively normal elderly subjects have AD pathologic features at autopsy (38– 40). In most cases, cognitively normal subjects who meet autopsy criteria for AD have neocortical diffuse amyloid plaques but not extensive neocortical neurofibrillary tangles. These observations have been interpreted to support the position that amyloid develops first, while neocortical neurofibrillary tangles appear later (37).

AD Biomarkers

A biomarker is a physiologic, biochemical, or anatomic parameter that can be objectively measured as an indicator of normal biologic processes, pathologic processes, or responses to a therapeutic intervention. The term is used in the AD field to describe both biofluid analytes and imaging measures. *Biofluid analytes* in this context can refer to proteins in any biofluid; however, cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) biomarkers are

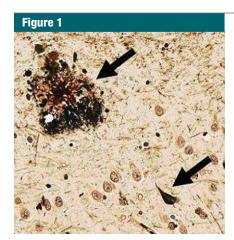


Figure 1: Plaques and tangles. Photomicrograph shows a neuritic plaque (upper arrow) and a neurofibrillary tangle (lower arrow) in an 85-year-old individual with autopsy-verified AD. (Beilchowsky silver stain.)

presently the most well developed. At present, there are five AD biomarkers that have been widely studied and are well enough validated to be commonly considered for use in clinical trials. Two of these are CSF analytes and three are brain imaging measures (Table). These five biomarkers fall into two major mechanistic categories: (a) biomarkers of AB accumulation, which are represented by abnormal radiotracer retention on amyloid PET images and low levels of CSF $A\beta_{42}$, and (b) biomarkers of neuronal degeneration or injury, which are indicated by elevated levels of CSF tau (both total and phosphorylated); decreased FDG uptake on PET images in the temporoparietal cortex; and atrophy on structural MR images in the medial, basal, and lateral temporal lobes and the medial and lateral parietal cortices. Other potential AD biomarkers have been summarized in recent reviews (41,42); some of these are measurements from imaging methods that will be discussed later as potential future applications.

Both CSF $A\beta_{42}$ and amyloid PET findings are biomarkers of brain $A\beta$ plaque deposition (Fig 2). Nearly all subjects who have received a clinical diagnosis of AD have positive amyloid imaging studies (43–45). Excellent correspondence has been seen between

The Five Major Biomarkers of AD	
Biomarker*	Туре
Amyloid accumulation	
CSF Aβ 42	CSF analyte
PET amyloid plaque imaging	Imaging
Neurodegeneration or neuronal injury	
CSF tau (total and phosphorylated)	CSF analyte
Structural MR imaging	Imaging
FDG PET	Imaging

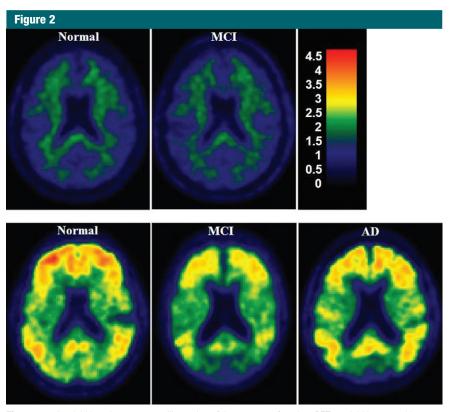


Figure 2: Amyloid imaging spectrum. Illustration of the spectrum found on PET amyloid images with Pittsburgh compound B. Top row: Negative amyloid imaging scans with "low" Pittsburgh compound B retention in an elderly cognitively normal control subject and in a subject with MCl. Bottom: Positive amyloid imaging scans with "high" Pittsburgh compound B retention in an elderly cognitively normal control subject, a subject with MCl, and a subject with AD. Around 70% of cognitively normal elderly people have negative amyloid imaging scans, while 30% have clearly abnormal scans. Around 60% of MCl subjects have positive scans, while 40% have negative scans. Most AD dementia subjects have positive scans.

antemortem amyloid PET imaging findings and $A\beta$ deposition in the brain (or cerebral vasculature) at autopsy (46,47). A consistent finding across different studies is that around 30% of

cognitively normal elderly subjects have abnormal findings from PET amyloid imaging studies, which matches quite well the proportion of cognitively normal elderly subjects with an autopsy

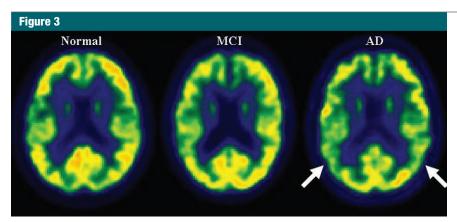


Figure 3: Typical FDG PET uptake pattern in AD. Decreased FDG uptake in lateral temporoparietal cortex (arrows) and posterior cingulate—precuneus area is seen in the AD subject and more mildly in the MCl subject.

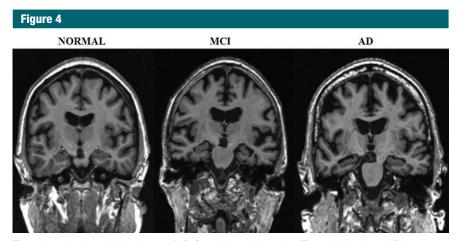


Figure 4: Atrophy and clinical stage of AD. Coronal three-dimensional T1-weighted volume MR images (repetition time msec/echo time msec/inversion time msec, 7/900/2.8/900) in three individuals in their 70s are shown. The cognitively normal control subject shows little atrophy; the AD subject, considerable atrophy; and the MCl subject, an intermediate level of atrophy.

diagnosis of AD, as described above (48-52). Older age, APOE*E4 genotype, and a family history of AD are all associated with greater amyloid PET binding in cognitively normal late-middle-aged to elderly subjects (22,53,54). Measurable increases in amyloid load over time are seen in some cognitively normal elderly subjects (55-57). Although most amyloid imaging investigations published to date have used carbon 11 Pittsburgh compound B (PiB) as the tracer, newer fluorine 18 (¹⁸F)-labeled compounds (58-61) will have a higher clinical effect owing to the greater availability of ¹⁸F-labeled ligands. Depressed levels of CSF AB₄₂

correlate with both the clinical diagnosis of AD and A β pathophysiology at autopsy (62–64). Extremely high concordance is present between an abnormally low level of CSF A β_{42} and positive PiB PET amyloid imaging findings in subjects who have undergone both tests (50,65–69). This is taken as evidence that these two biomarkers are, to a substantial extent, equivalent measures of brain A β pathophysiology.

CSF tau is an indicator of tau pathophysiology and associated neuronal injury. While phosphorylated tau may be a more specific indicator of AD, both phosphorylated tau and total tau levels increase in AD (70). Elevated CSF tau

can be seen in other conditions, such as stroke and head trauma, and therefore is not specific for AD, but it does map to clinical disease severity (71,72). In AD, the cause of elevated tau level in the CSF is speculated to be a direct result of a tau pathophysiology that disrupts neurons, particularly axons, thereby releasing cytoskeletal elements, including tau, into the extracellular space, which appear in the CSF (73,74). Elevated CSF tau correlates with neurofibrillary pathophysiology at autopsy (75).

FDG PET measures of glucose metabolism reflect net brain metabolism, which predominantly reflects synaptic activity (76,77). In the context of AD, decreased FDG uptake is an indicator of impaired synaptic function. FDG PET studies in AD subjects demonstrate a specific topographic pattern of decreased glucose uptake in a lateral temporoparietal and a posterior cingulateprecuneus distribution (78,79) (Fig 3). Imaging-autopsy correlation studies have demonstrated good correlation between the antemortem FDG PET diagnosis of AD and postmortem confirmation (80). Clinically asymptomatic middle-aged carriers of the APOE*E4 gene, who are at increased risk for developing AD dementia later in life, have reduced FDG uptake in an AD-like pattern (81–83).

The structural MR imaging findings in AD are a measure of cerebral atrophy, which reflects microscopic neurodegeneration (loss of synapses, dendritic processes, and neurons) (84). Volumetric or voxel-based measures of brain atrophy display tight correlation between the severity of atrophy and the severity of cognitive impairment (72,85–88). Rates of brain atrophy correlate with rates of concurrent cognitive decline (89,90) (Fig 4). Atrophy on MR images is not specific for AD, but the degree of hippocampal atrophy correlates well with Braak staging at autopsy (29,91-93). The topographic distribution of atrophy on MR images (medial, basal, and lateral temporal lobe and medial parietal cortex) maps well with Braak staging of neurofibrillary tangles in subjects who have undergone antemortem MR imaging and postmortem AD staging (94,95).

Temporal Ordering of AD Biomarkers

On the basis of the observations that AD biomarkers provide information about different AD-related pathophysiologic processes and the idea that these processes may be temporally ordered, great interest has arisen recently in the idea of staging disease by using biomarkers. Several biomarker-based models of disease have been proposed (57,96–98). One biomarker-based disease model (57) was based on empiric observations from serial MR imaging studies and Pittsburgh compound B PET studies (Fig 5). This model (57) embodies the following dataderived (51,57) principles: (a) The presence of brain amyloidosis is necessary but not sufficient to produce cognitive decline; (b) the neurodegenerative component of AD, rather than the amyloid component, is the direct substrate of cognitive impairment, and the rate of cognitive decline is driven by the rate of neurodegeneration; and (c) the rates of amyloid deposition and of neurodegeneration are dissociated: Amyloid deposition is an early event, and neurodegeneration is a later occurring event. These principles are supported by biomarker data (51,57), as well as autopsy data, which indicate that the aspect of the AD pathologic process that is most closely coupled with cognitive impairment is neurodegeneration, particularly synapse loss (26,40,99). In this amyloid and neurodegeneration model (57), which was based on longitudinal and cross-sectional MR imaging and amyloid PET imaging data, clinical symptoms do not appear until fairly late in the disease process (Fig 5).

An expanded version of this disease biomarker model (96), illustrated in Figure 6, incorporates all five of the most well-validated AD biomarkers into a hypothetical comprehensive sequence of biomarker events as subjects progress from cognitively normal in middle age to dementia in old age. This hypothetical model rests on the assumption that these five AD biomarkers become dynamic in a sequential manner. The hypothesis is that amyloid biomarkers—PET amyloid imaging findings and CSF $A\beta_{42}$ measures—depart markedly from normality 15 or more years before the

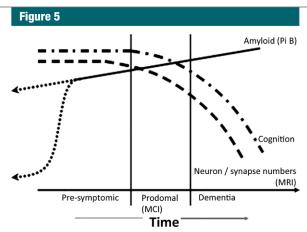


Figure 5: Graph shows amyloid and neurodegeneration model, relating imaging, pathologic, and clinical manifestation over an individual's adult lifetime. The lifetime clinical course of the disease (horizontal axis) is divided into presymptomatic, prodromal (MCI), and dementia phases. The vertical axis illustrates increasing amyoid deposition, decreasing brain volume, and decreasing cognitive ability as the disease progresses from left to right. Dashed line = neurodegeneration detected on MR images, dotted-and-dashed line = cognitive function , solid line = amyloid deposition detected on Pittsburgh compound B (*Pi B*) PET. The time course of amyloid deposition in late middle age is represented as two possible theoretic trajectories (dotted lines), reflecting uncertainty about the time course of early amyloid deposition. (Reprinted, with permission, from reference 57.)

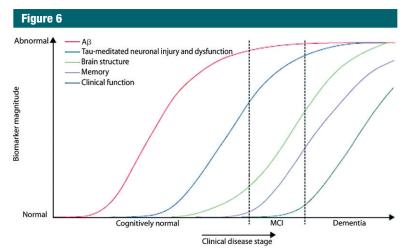


Figure 6: Hypothetical model of the dynamic biomarkers of the AD cascade. Horizontal axis indicates clinical stages of AD: cognitively normal, MCI, and dementia. Vertical axis indicates changing values of each biomarker—from maximally normal (bottom) to maximally abnormal (top). Aβ in the brain is identified by presence of CSF $Aβ_{42}$ or PET amyloid imaging findings (red line). Tau-mediated neuronal injury and dysfunction are identified by means of CSF tau level or FDG PET findings (blue line). Brain atrophy is measured with structural MR imaging (light green line). Onset and worsening of cognitive function are indicated by a purple line. Onset and worsening impairment in functional activities of daily living are indicated by dark green line. (Reprinted, with permission, from reference 96.)

first clinical symptoms appear. Biomarkers of neuronal injury-CSF tau and FDG PET findings-become dynamic later. Structural MR imaging is the most dynamic of the five major biomarkers in the clinically symptomatic phase of the disease, where the MR findings correlate best with clinical symptom severity. Preliminary empiric evidence supports this concept of temporal ordering of AD biomarkers that lies at the heart of the model (100-104). This model follows the principle that none of the biomarkers are static; rates of change in each biomarker vary over time and follow a nonlinear time course, which is hypothesized to be sigmoid shaped. The hypothetical sigmoidshaped trajectory was based in part on the observation that many measurements have floor and ceiling effects with a roughly linear response in the midregion. It was also based in part on biologic considerations. A sigmoid shape as a function of time implies that the biomarker experiences an initial acceleration phase and a later deceleration phase, with the inflection midpoint in the sigmoid curve representing the onset of deceleration (105).

Modifiers of Clinical Expression: Cognitive Reserve and Genetics

A feature of the biomarker model presented in Figure 6 is the lag between AB plague formation and the neurodegenerative cascade followed by clinical symptoms. Intersubject variation in these lag periods is likely due to a number of factors. One factor is person-to-person differences in Aβ processing or in the effects of soluble oligomeric Aβ on neuronal injury. Many of these are likely under genetic control. Recent genomewide association studies have identified new susceptibility loci for late onset AD (other than APOE) that implicate pathways related to brain cholesterol metabolism and inflammation (106–109).

A major modifier of the clinical expression of underlying AD pathophysiology is brain resiliency, or cognitive reserve (110). *Cognitive reserve* is an inclusive term that encompasses different mechanisms, including the numbers of

neurons and synapses, the sensitivity of neurons and glia to pathologic processes, neuroplasticity, and the ability of a person to engage alternative cognitive processing strategies in the face of pathologic brain insult (110). Reserve can be expressed as the difference between the predicted and the observed cognitive performance of an individual for a given level of brain pathophysiology (111). The principle that subjects with higher reserve have a greater capacity to cope with pathologic insults than do those with low reserve is supported by data from several sources. Epidemiologic studies consistently show that higher educational and occupational attainment is protective against dementia (112-116). Clinical-autopsy studies have shown that at a given level of AD pathologic findings at autopsy, highly educated individuals are less likely to manifest clinical symptoms of dementia less-educated individuals are (117,118). Similar findings have been reported in vivo, where among individuals with elevated Pittsburgh compound B uptake on PET amyloid imaging studies, cognitive performance was better with increasing education (119-121). Authors of a recent report (122) also suggest that lifetime cognitive enrichment may reduce amyloid deposition in later life.

Modifiers of Clinical Expression: Coexistent Age-related Brain Abnormality

A core concept essential to understanding relationships between brain pathophysiology and cognitive impairment in elderly persons is the frequency of comorbid brain pathologic conditions in this age group. Community-based clinical-autopsy studies have consistently demonstrated that a substantial majority of elderly subjects who received a diagnosis of AD dementia in life have pathologic conditions in addition to AD at autopsy. The most common of these are cerebrovascular disease (CVD) and Lewy body disease (123,124). The reason mixed conditions are so common is straightforward. As is the case with AD, processes such as Lewy body disease and CVD increase in prevalence with age. The older an individual is, the more likely he or she is to have accumulated different independent brain pathologic conditions.

While pure vascular dementia is uncommon, vascular contributions to cognitive impairment are very common (125,126). CVD is generally regarded to be the second most common pathologic contributor, after AD, to dementia in elderly persons (123,127,128). The most common vascular lesion found in community autopsy studies is microinfarction (124,127,129,130). Evidence to date indicates that the effects of AD abnormalities and vascular brain injury on cognitive expression are additive (131-133). Vascular risk factors likewise increase the risk of developing dementia (134-137). This has led to the recommendation to engage in a "heart healthy" lifestyle as a means of avoiding or delaying the onset of dementia.

The defining neuropathologic feature of dementia with Lewy bodies is pathologic aggregation of α-synuclein protein in neurites to form Lewy bodies (138). Lewy body disease is the proteinopathy underlying both Parkinson disease and dementia with Lewy bodies (139). Lewy body disease is commonly found as a comorbid condition, along with AD and CVD, in demented subjects examined in community autopsy studies (127,130). Hippocampal sclerosis, grain disease, and TDP-43 proteinopathy are also common coexistent conditions at autopsy, although not as common as AD, CVD, and Lewy body disease (140).

One condition that may seem to merit greater coverage in a review on dementia is frontotemporal lobar dementia (FTLD) (141). FTLD describes a family of neuro-degenerative disorders characterized by focal lobar degeneration of the frontal and/or temporal lobes. FTLD is actually as common as AD in subjects under the age of 60 years (142,143); however, in individuals older than 65, AD and Lewy body disease account for the majority of neuro-degenerative dementias, while FTLD is far less common.

Diffusion, Perfusion, Spectroscopy, and Functional MR Imaging

It might seem odd to find discussion of diffusion, perfusion, spectroscopy, and functional MR imaging toward the end of a review on AD biomarkers. However, although these MR imaging techniques have received substantial attention from investigators, none is well enough established to be included as a biomarker in newly formulated diagnostic criteria for AD (144–149), nor are any of these techniques routinely used in AD clinical trials. These techniques might best be regarded presently as of academic interest and awaiting sufficient validation to be accorded wider clinical use. Each of these techniques will be briefly described below.

Diffusion Imaging

A reasonable explanation for the relationship between AD pathologic features and abnormalities in diffusion is as follows (150,151): Cell membranes and intracellular structures act to impede the diffusion of water molecules. The pathologic disruption of cell membranes that occurs in AD increases the mean diffusivity of water. The coherence of directional water diffusion-fractional anisotropy-is also abnormal in AD and MCI (152-163). While mean diffusivity is increased, fractional anisotropy values are decreased due to loss of tract integrity (154,164,165). Of the two measures, fractional anisotropy has received greater attention because it provides unique information about pathologic disruption of regional anatomic connectivity (166) (Fig 7). Fractional anisotropy and mean diffusivity measures scale with clinical disease severity in AD and can help predict future progression from MCI to AD (167,168). Different methods have been used to extract measures related to fractional anisotropy, ranging from manual delineation of regions of interest to tract-based statistics to tractography (169-172).

Perfusion Imaging

A characteristic bilateral temporoparietal decrease in cerebral blood flow has been well documented in AD by using nuclear medicine techniques (173,174). MR imaging measures of tissue perfusion by means of arterial spin labeling techniques mirror the classically established topographic patterns on FDG PET

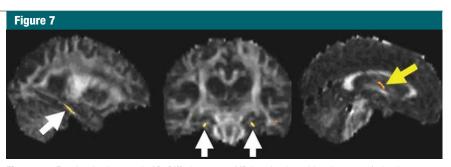


Figure 7: Fractional anisotropy in AD. Diffusion-tensor MR imaging (repetition time msec/echo time msec, 68/12200; 41 diffusion-encoding directions). Voxel-wise analysis with tract-based spatial statistics in patients with AD (n = 17) and control subjects (n = 34) (Mayo Clinic, unpublished pilot data, January 2011). Fractional anisotropy is reduced in the parahippocampal gyrus (cingulum tract) (white arrows) and fornix (yellow arrow) in patients with AD as compared with control subjects, as shown in colored regions.

and single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT) images (175,176). Perfusion MR imaging is attractive because disease-specific regional cerebral blood flow information currently obtained with SPECT or FDG PET can be obtained noninvasively with arterial spin labeling in an integrated examination that includes other MR imaging-based modalities (Fig 8). This is an active area of research, and it remains to be seen if perfusion MR imaging can achieve the same diagnostic sensitivity and specificity that has already been demonstrated with FDG PET (177–179).

Hydrogen 1 MR Spectroscopy

The metabolites that are consistently abnormal in hydrogen 1 MR spectroscopy are N-acetylaspartate (NAA) and myoinositol (180-186). NAA is found in neurons, and a decrease in NAA follows logically from the neuron loss and dysfunction in AD (187). Longitudinal change in NAA has been proposed as a response measure in clinical trials (188-190). myo-Inositol is located primarily in astrocytes and is elevated in AD. One possible explanation for this finding is the fact that activated glial cells surround amyloid plaques (191-194). Elevation in choline level has also been described in AD, but this has not been found consistently.

Functional MR Imaging

Two imaging techniques carry the name functional MR imaging. One is task based, and the other is task free or rest-

ing state. Most investigators find decreased task activation in patients with dementia, as compared with agematched control subjects. Initial functional MR imaging activation paradigms were focused on memory, but investigators have extended this to a variety of paradigms (195–199). The notion of increased activation strength in mildly impaired or asymptomatic subjects who are at elevated risk for developing dementia is now fairly well established (200,201). One explanation offered for increased task activation strength in atrisk subjects is that they are able to compensate by "working harder" mentally to maintain cognitive function in the face of progressing disorder (201–203). An alternative explanation is that hyperactivation may not be compensatory but, instead, a pathologic state that may contribute to further damage (204,205).

An alternative to task-activation functional MR imaging is task-free or restingstate functional MR imaging. Although first described by Biswal et al (206) in 1995, this approach has attracted a great deal of interest recently. Task-free functional MR imaging is based on detection of coincident intrinsic temporal fluctuations in blood oxygen level-dependent, or BOLD, signal intensity across areas of the brain. Temporal synchronicity is inferred to denote functionally connected networks (207). As compared with taskactivation functional MR, task-free functional MR imaging has the obvious advantage in impaired subjects of not requiring active cooperation (208). Interest in ap-

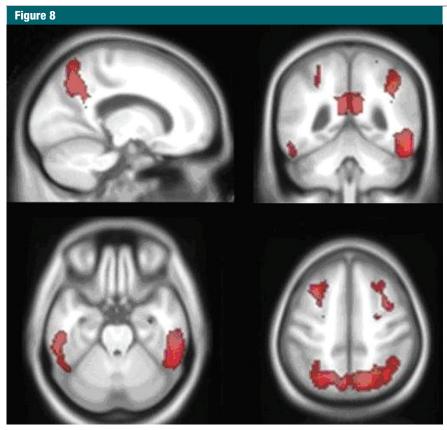


Figure 8: Perfusion MR imaging in AD patients (n = 33) and control subjects (n = 62). Pulsed arterial spin labeling MR imaging (1.5/5.2) shows significant hypoperfusion (red areas) in AD patients, as compared with control subjects. (Reprinted, with permission, from reference 175.)

plying task-free functional MR imaging to the study of cognitive impairment accelerated with the realization that areas that are active in the resting state (ie, default mode) coincide in part with areas that are particularly susceptible to amyloid deposition and to depressed glucose metabolism in AD (209,210). The default mode network undergoes changes not only in AD and MCI but also as a result of aging (211-216). Both increases and decreases in network connectivity have been described in cognitively impaired subjects (208,217-219). Specific reports vary, but converging evidence indicates a pattern of decreased connectivity in the task-negative (default mode) networks and increased connectivity in task-positive networks in AD dementia and MCI (210,211,213,215,216,220-222) (Fig 9).

Cognitively normal subjects who are at future risk for AD dementia by virtue of carrying the APOE $\epsilon 4$ allele have al-

tered resting state connectivity patterns that are topographically similar to those seen in cognitively impaired subjects (223-225). Amyloid deposition measured with amyloid PET imaging is associated with disruption of default mode network functional connectivity in cognitively normal subjects with high amyloid burden (200,223,226-228).Network bances have also been described in cognitively normal elderly to middle-aged subjects who are APOE ε4 carriers but who have been documented to be amyloid PET negative (229). Disturbances have been described in APOE &4 carriers in young adulthood (20s)—that is, subjects who are at elevated risk of AD later in life but who are too young to expect any AD pathophysiology to have developed (224).

Newer classification methods that use global functional connectivity metrics have shown potential for diagnostic use (214,222,230–233).

Applications of Imaging Biomarkers: New Diagnostic Criteria for AD

On the basis of the preceding material, one might assume that CSF and imaging AD biomarkers currently play a prominent role in daily clinical practice. It might be surprising, however, to realize that this is not the case. Several explanations are typically offered for this state of affairs. Perhaps the most common is the fact that the absence of approved disease-modifying therapies minimizes the impetus for early diagnosis because early diagnosis will not change clinical management. An obvious reason that biomarkers are not widely used in clinical practice is that until very recently, diagnostic guidelines for AD did not incorporate CSF or imaging biomarkers. Criteria for the clinical diagnosis of AD were originally established in 1984 by a work group comprising representatives from the National Institute of Neurological and Communicative Disorders and Stroke and the Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association (234). In the 1984 criteria, AD dementia was a diagnosis made solely on clinical grounds. It was also operationalized as a diagnosis of exclusion: AD was diagnosed when other potential causes of dementia were excluded. The role of imaging in the 1984 criteria (234) was, therefore, to help exclude conditions like cerebral infarction, spaceoccupying lesions, or potentially treatable causes such as hydrocephalus or subdural hemorrhage.

Recently, however, diagnostic guidelines for AD have been updated (145-149). One of these efforts was organized by the National Institute on Aging-Alzheimer's Association. In 2010 these organizations commissioned three work groups. Each group was assigned the task of defining or revising diagnostic criteria for one of three recognized phases of the disease: preclinical AD, symptomatic predementia or MCI, and AD dementia (146–149). Biomarkers are used in all three phases of the disease. In addition to their traditional exclusionary role, imaging studies are now expected to provide positive diagnostic information. In the preclinical phase biomarkers are by definition the only indicator of latent disease. They are used to establish the presence of AD pathophysiologic processes in subjects with no overt symptoms. In the symptomatic MCI and AD phases, biomarkers are used to establish the underlying cause for an observed clinical deficit. In addition to aiding in establishing a pathophysiologic etiology to aid diagnosis, imaging and CSF biomarkers provide two additional major classes of clinically useful information. These are prediction of future clinical course (235-243) and longitudinal measurement of disease progression (244).

Applications of Imaging Biomarkers: Clinical Trials

In addition to use as diagnostic criteria in the new diagnostic guidelines (145–149), a second major use category for imaging and CSF biomarkers is in therapeutic trials. Incorporation of imaging and CSF biomarkers into clinical trial design is more advanced than is their incorporation in clinical diagnosis. For several years, nearly every therapeutic trial in AD has incorporated one or more AD biomarkers in the study design, where they can serve one or more specific functions.

Subject Inclusion

As an indicator of AD pathophysiologic processes, AD biomarkers are used for subject inclusion—ie, to insure appropriate targeting of the therapeutic mechanism of action. For example, it is rational to base inclusion in antiamyloid therapeutic trials on biomarker evidence of the presence of A β in the brain by using either amyloid PET imaging or CSF A β_{42} measurement (245–247).

Subject Exclusion

Anatomic MR imaging is commonly used for exclusionary purposes in AD therapeutic trials. For example, hemispheric cerebral infarction, tumor, hydrocephalus, prior brain surgery, and major cerebral hemorrhage are common exclusionary findings on screening MR images. Studies on which a prespecified number of microhemorrhages (re-



Figure 9: Resting-state functional connectivity in AD. Echo-planar MR imaging (2900/30) seed-based voxel-wise connectivity analysis in 56 *APOE* ε4 noncarrier control subjects versus 28 AD subjects. Seed was placed in posterior cingulate gyrus for connectivity analysis. Purple indicates areas where AD patients have greater connectivity than control subjects; green, areas where AD patients have less connectivity than control subjects. Control subjects show greater connectivity with the seed within the posterior cingulate gyrus, precuneus, and left anterior temporal lobe (green) than AD subjects. AD subjects show greater connectivity than control to bilateral medial and lateral frontal regions (purple) (225).

cently renamed amyloid-related imaging abnormalities [248]) are identified are also now an exclusionary finding in antiamyloid trials (249).

Stratification, Enrichment, and Covariates

The neurodegenerative biomarkers—MR imaging and FDG PET or CSF tau level—indicate the severity or stage of neuronal injury and neurodegeneration and can, therefore, be used as covariates in analyses to stratify subjects at baseline or as an enrichment strategy to improve efficiency (41,250).

Outcome

The idea that biomarkers may serve as surrogate outcome measures in AD clinical trials has received a great deal of attention (251). Outcomes are, by definition, longitudinal measures of change over time; therefore, measurement precision is of paramount importance in this context. Enthusiasm for biomarkers as

surrogate outcome measures was initially driven by studies measuring the natural rates of brain atrophy with structural MR imaging. Led by Fox et al (252) investigators demonstrated that the lower variance in serial MR imaging measurements, compared with that of clinical measures of cognition and function, could potentially allow clinical trials to be performed with much smaller sample sizes than is possible with traditional clinical instruments (86,253-261). Similar data were generated with FDG PET (262). In addition, biomarkers are more objective and reliable quantitative measures of AD pathophysiologic processes than traditional cognitive and functional outcomes that are affected by subject motivation and extrinsic factors such as alertness, environmental stresses, and informant mood and distress.

The context in which amyloid biomarkers would serve as surrogate outcome measures differs somewhat. Change



in $A\beta$ load over time has little relationship to change in cognition in natural history studies (57). Also, evidence of therapeutic plaque removal in already demented subjects does not correlate with a change in the trajectory of cognitive deterioration (at least, not in every instance examined) (263). However, change in amyloid biomarkers would provide clear evidence of correct targeting of the intervention (264).

At present, no therapeutic intervention is available that delays or reverses progression of the disease. Currently available treatments for AD are limited to symptomatic intervention (265). Unfortunately, therapeutic attempts at disease modification focused on various targets in the amyloid cascade pathway have been uniformly unsuccessful. Some point to these failed antiamyloid trials as evidence that the amyloid hypothesis is incorrect. A more widely held point of view, however, is that the disease-modifying interventional trials have failed because the wrong phase of the disease has been targeted (245-247). All studies to date have been performed in symptomatic subjects-most with mild to moderate dementia and some with MCI. Note in Figures 5 and 6 that clinical symptoms appear toward the end of the lifetime course of the disease. Many in the field believe that to be effective, disease-modifying therapeutic intervention must occur much earlier in the disease cascade—before onset of clinical symptoms. Imaging and CSF biomarkers will play pivotal roles in future clinical trials targeting clinically asymptomatic or minimally symptomatic subjects.

Need for Standardization of Imaging

The clinical practice of radiology is based on visual assessment of images. This diagnostic assessment is converted to a narrative interpretation which becomes the radiologic contribution to a patient's diagnostic evaluation. Visual assessment of the degree of hippocampal atrophy on MR images (266) (Fig 4) or the degree of temporoparietal hypometabolism (Fig 3) is easily implemented and widely available. However, anatomic or physiologic processes are continuous phenomena, and verbal en-

coding of a visual impression does not lend itself to accurate or reproducible assessment of fine incremental grades of atrophy or glucose uptake.

For years, academic efforts have focused on quantitative measurementsthat is, turning gray-scale images into numbers—for statistical analysis in research papers. This is particularly true for MR imaging. Initial efforts at image quantification focused on methods based on regions of interest, which were often hand drawn. In MR imaging, these efforts often focused on specific named structures such as the hippocampus or entorhinal cortex, which are involved early and progressively in AD (267,268). More recently, methods have been developed to automatically parcellate (269) gray matter density or the thickness of cortical surfaces (270-272) into regions of interest. This approach is reproducible and does not require manual intervention. Several investigators have developed multivariate analysis and machine learning-based algorithms that use the entire three-dimensional MR imaging data set to form a disease model against which individual subjects may be compared. A new incoming study is scored according to the degree and topographic pattern of atrophy as compared with the images from a large database of wellcharacterized subjects (273-279). Such measures capture the severity of neuronal abnormality—that is, Braak staging over the whole brain is better than measurement of hippocampal volume for determining severity (95).

Of the five major biomarkers of AD, three are imaging studies. Although the value of imaging biomarkers in both clinical diagnosis and clinical trials is clear, major barriers exist to actual implementation. The most important barrier has been lack of standardized methods, particularly methods for extracting quantitative information from images. Although initiatives such as the Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative have focused on standardization of image acquisition methods (280,281), universally accepted standards for image quantification have not yet emerged.

An important contribution that the imaging community could make would

be to establish open-source methods for standardized quantification. If imaging is to take its place as a widely used, clinically relevant disease biomarker for AD, then imaging should transform itself to operate as do biomarkers in other fields. For example, measures of blood pressure, serum glucose, or serum lipids have been standardized. Experts in the fields of hypertension, diabetes, and lipid metabolism have agreed on and adopted diagnostic classification criteria that are based on standardized laboratory measurements. Treatment protocols are tied to these universal measures. For imaging to assume a similar role as an AD biomarker, similar standardization of quantitative measures should take place. In an ideal world, a subject could be imaged with a unit by any vendor. An analysis software pipeline would be used to analyze that subject's scan, extract quantitative data, compare those data to a standardized database, and assign the subject a probabilistic differential diagnosis and an imaging-based disease severity rank (282). Ideally this would happen "online" on the imaging unit. These quantitative diagnostic imaging measures would be incorporated into universally recognized diagnostic criteria for AD.

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