

Fetpipe: An Open-Source Pipeline for Reproducible Fetal Brain MRI Analysis

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DOI: [N/A](#)

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Submitted: 01 January 1970

Published: 01 January 1970

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Summary

Fetal brain magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is crucial for assessing neurodevelopment *in utero*. However, fetal MRI analysis remains technically challenging due to fetal motion, low signal-to-noise ratio, and the need for complex multi-step processing pipelines. These pipelines typically include motion correction, super-resolution reconstruction, tissue segmentation, and cortical surface extraction. While specialized tools exist for each individual processing step, integrating them into a robust, reproducible, and user-friendly end-to-end workflow remains difficult. This fragmentation limits reproducibility across studies and hinders the adoption of advanced fetal neuroimaging methods in both research and clinical contexts.

Fetpipe addresses this gap by providing a standardized, modular, and reproducible framework for fetal brain MRI preprocessing and analysis, enabling researchers to process raw T2-weighted acquisitions through to derived volumetric and surface-based outputs within a unified workflow.

Statement of need

Fetpipe is an open-source Python package designed to streamline and standardize the pre-processing and analysis of T2-weighted fetal brain MRI data. The package targets the fetal neuroimaging community, where methodological heterogeneity and complex software dependencies have historically limited reproducibility and comparability across studies.

Existing fetal brain MRI tools typically focus on individual processing steps and require customized code for pre- and post-processing, as well as to connect different modules, making it difficult to reproduce processing results across studies. Fetpipe addresses these challenges by providing a configurable, containerized, and Nipype-driven solution that integrates state-of-the-art fetal MRI processing tools into a cohesive pipeline. By emphasizing reproducibility, extensibility, and ease of use, Fetpipe lowers the barrier to applying advanced fetal MRI analysis methods and facilitates consistent processing across sites, scanners, and studies. In doing so, Fetpipe improves comparability across studies and supports community collaboration by facilitating the dissemination of new image processing methods for clinical applications. The pipeline is publicly available on GitHub (<https://github.com/fetpipe/fetpipe>).

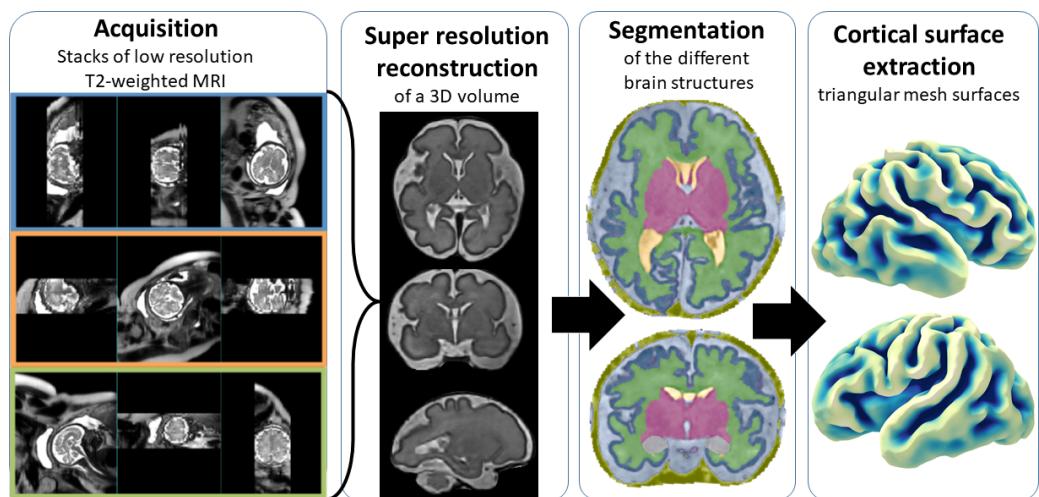


Figure 1: The different steps covered by Fetpipe. Starting from several T2-weighted stacks of thick slices of the fetal brain (*acquisition*), Fetpipe pre-processes data before feeding them to a *super-resolution reconstruction* algorithm that fuses them in a single high-resolution volume. This volume then undergoes *segmentation*, before moving to cortical *surface extraction*.

Software design

Fetpipe is built around four core design principles: data standardization, containerization, workflow orchestration, and flexible configuration:

1. **Data Standardization:** Fetpipe expects input data organized according to the Brain Imaging Data Structure (BIDS) standard (Gorgolewski et al., 2016), promoting interoperability and simplifying data management.
2. **Containerization:** Individual processing tools are encapsulated within Docker or Singularity containers. This ensures reproducibility and reduces installation issues, providing a better experience for the end user.
3. **Workflow Management:** The Nipype library (Gorgolewski et al., 2011) is used to construct processing workflows: it provides a robust interface for combining different steps from different containers or packages, facilitating data caching and parallelization, and allowing pipelines to be easily shareable.
4. **Configuration:** Pipeline configuration is managed using simple YAML files and the Hydra library (Yadan, 2019), allowing users to easily select between different modules or parameters without directly modifying the code. The current implementation of Fetpipe integrates modules for:
 - a. **Data preprocessing:** including brain extraction using Fetal-BET (Faghahpirayesh et al., 2024), non-local means denoising (Manjón et al., 2010) and N4 bias-field correction (Tustison et al., 2010), all wrapped into a single container built at https://github.com/fetpipe/utils_container,
 - b. **Super-resolution reconstruction:** implementing three widely used pipelines: NeSVOR (Xu et al., 2023), SVRTK (Kuklisova-Murgasova et al., 2012; Alena U. Uus et al., 2022), and NiftyMIC (Ebner et al., 2020),
 - c. **Segmentation:** implementing BOUNTI (Alena U. Uus et al., 2023) and the developing human connectome project pipeline (Makropoulos et al., 2018) and
 - d. **Cortical surface extraction:** using a custom implementation available at https://github.com/fetpipe/surface_processing based on (Bazin & Pham, 2005, 2007; Ma et al., 2022).

The overall processing workflow is summarized in Figure [Figure 1](#).

Research impact statement

Fettype is the result of a longstanding collaboration within a European consortium of researchers specializing in fetal neuroimaging. Its default configurations and processing workflows have been the result of extensive testing to achieve robust processing on data acquired across multiple hospitals in France, Spain, and Switzerland, covering a range of scanners and acquisition protocols.

The framework has been used to process large-scale fetal MRI datasets within the consortium, has contributed to a first publication (citation pending), and is supporting ongoing research projects. Fettype is used by multiple research groups and has begun to receive external contributions, including pull requests that integrate additional processing methods. This suggests that Fettype addresses a clear methodological need and can serve as shared community infrastructure for fetal brain MRI research.

In the future, we plan to supplement Fettype with an automated reporting library containing automated quality control ([Sanchez et al., 2026, 2024](#)), subject-wise and population-wise biometry and volumetry ([Esteban et al., 2017; Neves Silva et al., 2025](#)), as well as spectral analysis of surfaces ([Germanaud et al., 2012](#)). We welcome community contributions, particularly implementations of new methods that can be integrated into the existing containerized workflow framework.

AI usage disclosure

GitHub Copilot, integrated within Visual Studio Code, was used during software development to assist with code completion and implementation. ChatGPT (GPT-5.2) was used for proofreading and language refinement of the manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the written content.

Acknowledgements

This work was funded by Era-net NEURON MULTIFACT project (TS: Swiss National Science Foundation grants 31NE30_203977, 215641; GA: French National Research Agency, Grant ANR-21-NEU2-0005; EE: Instituto de Salud Carlos III (ISCIII) grant AC21_2/00016; GMJ, GP, OC, MAGB: Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities: MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/), the SulcalGRIDS Project, (GA: French National Research Agency Grant ANR-19-CE45-0014), the pediatric domain shifts project (TS: SNSF 205320-215641), and NVIDIA research grants with the use of NVIDIA RTX6000 ADA GPUs. We acknowledge the CIBM Center for Biomedical Imaging, a Swiss research center of excellence founded and supported by CHUV, UNIL, EPFL, UNIGE and HUG.

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