Importance of Early Ischemic Computed Tomography Changes Using ASPECTS in NINDS rtPA Stroke Study

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Background and Purpose—The importance of early ischemic change (EIC) on baseline computed tomography (CT) in the decision to thrombolyze the patient with acute ischemic stroke has been controversial. ASPECTS is a semiquantitative scale that scores the extent of EIC within the middle cerebral artery territory. We examined whether ASPECTS could be a treatment modifier by systematically reviewing the CT scans in the NINDS rtPA Stroke Study.

Methods—Six hundred eight of the 624 CT scans were available and of sufficient quality. One of 2 teams (n=3 each) of expert ASPECTS readers evaluated each scan for an ASPECTS value using a consensus score approach. Each team was blind to all clinical information except symptom side and blind to follow-up imaging and outcome information. ASPECTS values were stratified before analysis. Multivariable logistic regression was used to determine if an ASPECTS by treatment interaction existed on treatment response, outcome, and intracerebral hemorrhage risk.

Results—A total of 57.2% (348 of 608) of scans showed EIC with an ASPECTS <10. ASPECTS dichotomized into 8 to 10 and <8 did not have a treatment-modifying effect on good outcome but showed a trend to lower mortality at 90 days with tPA (relative risk 0.67, 95% confidence interval 0.41 to 1.06, \(P=0.10\)). ASPECTS 8 to 10 were associated with a trend to larger benefit of tPA with a number needed to treat (NNT) of 5 versus ASPECTS 3 to 7 with a NNT of 8.

Conclusion—There was no evidence of treatment effect modification by the baseline ASPECTS value in the NINDS rtPA Stroke Study. Therefore, exclusion of patients for thrombolysis within 3 hours of symptom onset based on EIC is not supported by our data. There is a trend to reduced mortality and increased benefit to rtPA if the baseline CT scan is favorable (ASPECTS >7). (Stroke. 2005;36:2110-2115.)

Key Words: computed tomography ■ diagnostic imaging ■ ischemia ■ thrombolytic therapy ■ stroke, acute
A noncontrast CT scan of the brain was mandatory before enrollment in the study to rule out ICH. All CT scans were performed on third- or fourth-generation CT scanners. All the baseline CT scans were obtained with 10-mm slice thickness and consisted of the following technical factors: 120kV, 170mA, matrix size 512×512.3 second scanning time for posterior fossa, and 2-second scanning time for supratentorial compartment. Window levels and window width were optimized for gray/white matter distinction. (S. Patel, personal communication, 2003)

For this study, all baseline CT scans were reevaluated retrospectively by one of 2 groups of 3 expert CT readers using ASPECTS. Follow-up CT scans were not reevaluated. Hemorrhage detection4 and infarct volume measurement (methodology described in Appendix 2 of reference 10)10 were already available from previous review of follow-up CT scans. This studies’ readers were kept blind from this and all other follow-up CT information, however. ASPECTS was assessed by systematically scoring each of 10 regions on the CT scan and assigning a score of one for a normal and 0 for a region showing signs of ischemia. Signs of ischemia are defined as x-ray hypoattenuation, loss of the gray–white boundary (which is the result of x-ray hypoattenuation of the gray matter), and/or effacement of cortical sulci. ASPECTS is only scored for acute changes. The regions are subdivided into 2 levels, which involve the basal ganglionic axial cuts and supraganglionic cuts. All axial cuts are used to examine individual regions. The individual regions include subcortical structures (lentiform nucleus, caudate nucleus, and posterior limb of internal capsule) and cortical structures (insula, M1.thalamus, M6; see Figure 1 in reference 5). The only clinical information given to reviewers of the scans was symptom-side. Symptom-side information was derived from the baseline NIHSS score based on side of predominant motor weakness, aphasia, or hemispatial neglect. Readers remained blinded to treatment assignment.

Review occurred over a 2-day period with all scans randomly assigned to each group of 3 readers. One member from each group switched teams the second day to ensure uniform rating between the groups. Three raters agreed on a consensus ASPECTS value after the first read. Three raters agreed on a consensus ASPECTS value after the second read. To better understand this trend to lower mortality, we trichotomized the ASPECTS score into 3 groups based on extent of early change (ASPECTS >7, 3 to 7, <3). Prognostically, across the 3 groups, a lower ASPECTS category predicted poorer outcome (mRS 2 to 6) (P=0.015), increased mortality (P=0.002), but not increased symptomatic ICH (P=0.15). When death or symptomatic ICH were considered as a composite outcome, poorer outcome with lower ASPECTS category remained significant (P=0.003). In every case, rtPA treatment improved the proportion of patients achieving an excellent functional outcome. In the ASPECTS >7 group, a mortality benefit is seen with rtPA treatment and in the ASPECTS <3 group, mortality was increased with rtPA compared with placebo (Figure 1).
Examination of the absolute risk differences (Figure 1) among patients with baseline ASPECTS >7 showed improved outcomes (48% vs 29%; 3 month mRS ≤1) with rtPA when compared with placebo. Among patients with more extensive EIC (ASPECTS 3 to 7), improved outcome was observed (36% vs 23%; 3 month mRS ≤1) When the baseline CT scan revealed very extensive EIC (ASPECTS ≤3) no benefit from rtPA could be demonstrated (Table 1). Two of the 5 deaths in the treated group with ASPECTS ≤3 were associated with symptomatic ICH compared with none in the placebo group (Table 2).

An exploratory analysis using the most powerful measures of effectiveness (NIHSS ≤2 at 24 hours or NIHSS 15-point improvement from baseline to 24 hours) of rtPA in the NINDS rtPA Stroke Study14 revealed no evidence of a multiplicative treatment by baseline CT ASPECTS interaction when the baseline CT ASPECTS was dichotomized at ≤7/>7.

There was a negative but nonlinear correlation between baseline ASPECTS and final infarct volume in both the placebo and rtPA groups (r=0.33). Final infarct volumes were different across the 3 categories of ASPECTS (P=0.002) but not according to treatment assignment (Table 3).

**Discussion**

The results from the present study do not support the concept that quantifying EIC using a standardized validated scoring system on the baseline noncontrast CT scan are critical to intravenous thrombolysis decision-making in the first 3 hours from acute stroke symptom onset. The thrombolytic treatment effect is robust. In this regard, our study is consistent with the recently published reevaluation of the NINDS rtPA Stroke Study for EIC on CT scans using the one third MCA rule, which found benefit from tPA even if one third MCA territory is involved.15

**TABLE 1. Outcome Analysis Based on ASPECTS Dichotomy and Trichotomy—Absolute Risk Reduction (ARR) and Number Needed to Treat (NNT) Calculated by 1/ARR With Confidence Intervals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASPECTS</th>
<th>ARR (%)</th>
<th>CI (95% CI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8–10</td>
<td>19.5 (10.2–28.8)</td>
<td>5 (3–10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–7</td>
<td>12.0 (−0.002–24.2)</td>
<td>8 (440 NNH to 8 to 8 NNT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–7</td>
<td>13.3 (0.3–26.3)</td>
<td>8 (4–356)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–2</td>
<td>10.0 (−0.09–28.6)</td>
<td>10 (11 NNH to 8 to 3 NNT)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This NNT analysis based on mRS 0–1 at 3 months. Confidence interval notation is based on the method suggested by Altman. The interpretation of the ASPECTS 0–2 cohort is that the range of benefit is as few as 3 to an infinite number of patients need to be treated to benefit one but as few as 11 to an infinite number needed to be treated to result in net harm. CI indicates confidence interval.

**TABLE 2. Risk of Symptomatic ICH Based on Baseline ASPECTS Value Dichotomized and Trichotomized**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASPECTS</th>
<th>Symptomatic ICH Rate, 95% CI (%)</th>
<th>rtPA</th>
<th>Placebo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8–10</td>
<td>5.0 (2.4–9.0)</td>
<td>1.0 (0.1–3.5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–7</td>
<td>6.1 (2.2–12.7)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–7</td>
<td>4.5 (1.2–11.1)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–2</td>
<td>20.0 (1.6–38.3)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The high risk of hemorrhage occurs in the ASPECTS 0–2 group.
TABLE 3. Relationship Between Baseline CT ASPECTS and Median Final Lesion Volume

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASPECTS</th>
<th>Placebo Final Infarct Volume (interquartile range)</th>
<th>rtPA Final Infarct Volume (interquartile range)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;3</td>
<td>6 205.3 mL (111.4–228.3) 12 226.3 mL (92.8–290.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–7</td>
<td>97 66.0 mL (13–136.6) 88 51.1 mL (6.4–130.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–7</td>
<td>103 79.3 mL (13.0–147.0) 98 56.6 mL (7.6–144.6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8–10</td>
<td>203 15.2 mL (1.55–65.9) 199 7.8 mL (0.9–51.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, this study did reveal value in EIC detection because careful evaluation of the CT scan has useful in predicting likelihood of benefit. Those patients with ASPECTS 8 to 10 had 12% mortality in the rtPA arm and 18% in the placebo arm, suggesting a subgroup of patients with a trend to reduced mortality if rtPA administered. No mortality reduction was seen in the tPA-treated patients in the ASPECTS 3 to 7 subgroup (Figure 1). The extent of ischemic change (ASPECTS score) also predicts the likelihood of benefit with a trend to lower number needed to treat with ASPECTS >7 (ARR 19%, NNT=5) than ASPECTS 3 to 7 (ARR 13%, NNT=8). Patients with a baseline CT ASPECTS <3 had a nonsignificantly higher rate of mortality and symptomatic ICH with rtPA. This observation must be tempered by the small numbers (3% of patients enrolled in the trial), which had such extensive EIC. This study does not provide sufficient evidence to recommend that patients be excluded from rtPA on the basis of extensive EIC (ASPECTS <3).

The European Co-operative Acute Stroke Study (ECASS-1) trial first identified the possible importance of EIC. They identified a trend to increased mortality with tPA treatment of patients with EIC visible in greater than one third of the MCA territory in patients treated up to 6 hours after symptom onset. This led to an assumption of a qualitative approach of assessing and improving reliability of EIC in the preselection of MCA occlusions in PROACT-2, which had such MCA occlusion (large penumbral areas), whereas EIC manifested as cortical sulcal effacement or very subtle hypoattenuation as a result of thrombolysis), whereas EIC manifested as cortical sulcal effacement or very subtle hypoattenuation as a result of thrombolysis, whereas EIC manifested as cortical sulcal effacement or very subtle hypoattenuation as a result of thrombolysis when intracranial occlusion absent (no penumbra).29 In PROACT-2, all high ASPECTS value patients (small regions of core) had such MCA occlusion (large penumbral areas), thus explaining the robust effect of intraarterial prourokinase at high ASPECTS values.

Another very plausible explanation for the lack of effect modification in the current study is that EIC may be a less critical factor for treatment decisions in the early stages of ischemia when time is the most critical factor influencing benefit from rtPA.2,30 In PROACT-2, patients were treated 3 hours later than NINDS rtPA at a time when EIC may represent a more irreversible injury.28

The relative importance of the individual characteristics of EIC (sulcal effacement, parenchymal hypoattenuation, and distortion of gray white differentiation) on CT is not known. The frequently seen subtle signs of ischemia on CT scan may not always represent irreversible injury.31 Regions of ischemic brain showing definite hypoattenuation as a manifestation of tissue edema are likely but not always irreversibly damaged (core of ischemia and therefore not salvageable with thrombolysis), whereas EIC manifested as cortical sulcal effacement or very subtle hypoattenuation as a result of hypoperfusion on baseline CT scan more likely can reverse. Recent work has suggested that sulcal effacement without hypodensity is the result of increased cerebral blood volume and reperfused areas of brain. These areas have not consistently resulted in infarction on follow-up imaging.32 Modification of ASPECTS methodology may be required to ignore the potentially reversible EIC finding of sulcal effacement. CT technology and CT imaging techniques used at the time in the NINDS rtPA Stroke Study may have limited our observations. We have previously suggested 5-mm axial cuts should be used for acute stroke CT imaging to allow visualization of all ASPECTS regions on more than one slice. This allows differentiation of hypoattenuation as a result of volume averaging of adjacent sulci rather than real EIC. The
NINDS rtPA Stroke Study used 10-mm axial cuts at baseline to shorten CT imaging time, which in the early 1990s was relatively slow compared with current high-speed CT scanners (S. Patel, personal communication, 2003). Despite this limitation, the ASPECTS readers considered most available scans to be of good to excellent quality. Adequate scanning power, good window width, and window leveling for filming were used in a majority of scans.

Poor outcome still occurred in some patients despite a high ASPECTS score. In some cases, this may be because ASPECTS does not address ischemic change in other vascular territories such as the anterior cerebral artery, posterior cerebral artery, or vertebrobasilar system. Alternately, ASPECTS may not fully reflect the core of ischemia. Newer contrast-enhanced CT techniques such as blood-pool analysis from CT angiography source images33,34 or CT perfusion studies35–37 are now available using multislice CT scanners and may more accurately identify “core” and “penumbra” than conventional CT and provide better identification of salvageable ischemic brain. Similarly, multimodal magnetic resonance imaging techniques are also available as alternatives for thrombolysis decision-making.38,39

The results of the current study suggest that IEC evaluation by ASPECTS improves early ischemic change detection. Higher ASPECTS values are associated with a greater magnitude of benefit from rtPA and a trend to reduced mortality. ASPECTS does not, however, identify patients who should or should not receive thrombolytics. CT ischemic change may be more relevant for thrombolytic decision-making in the 3- to 6-hour time window after stroke onset given the results of the ECASS-1 trial and PROACT-2 ASPECTS analysis.27 Regions of CT ischemic change may become irreversibly damaged if treatment is delayed. Early treatment appears more critical to thrombolysis and overwhelms the significance of early CT changes.

References


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