Evaluation of Role of Computed Tomography in Acute Abdomen: A Comprehensive Clinical Analysis

Dr. Annu [1*], Dr. Umesh Chandra Garga [2], Dr. Subhash C Sylonia [3]

[1] Postgraduate Resident, Department of Radio Diagnosis, Saraswathi Institute of Medical Sciences, Pilkhuwa, Hapur, Uttar Pradesh, India

[2] Professor, Department of Radio Diagnosis, Saraswathi Institute of Medical Sciences, Pilkhuwa, Hapur, Uttar Pradesh, India

[3] Professor and Head, Department of Radio Diagnosis, Saraswathi Institute of Medical Sciences, Pilkhuwa, Hapur, Uttar Pradesh, India

* Corresponding Author: **Dr. Annu**

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Abstract

Acute abdomen represents a complex clinical syndrome requiring rapid and accurate diagnosis to optimize patient outcomes. Computed tomography (CT) has evolved as a pivotal diagnostic tool in emergency medicine, offering detailed cross-sectional imaging for the evaluation of abdominal emergencies. This study aimed to evaluate the diagnostic accuracy, clinical utility, and impact of CT imaging in patients presenting with acute abdominal pain, and to assess its role in guiding therapeutic decision-making and improving patient outcomes. A prospective observational study was conducted on 642 patients presenting with acute abdominal pain to the emergency department between January 2021 and December 2023. All patients underwent contrast-enhanced CT examination within 6 hours of presentation. Diagnostic accuracy was assessed using surgical findings, clinical follow-up, and final discharge diagnoses as reference standards. CT demonstrated overall diagnostic accuracy of 94.2% for acute abdominal conditions. Sensitivity was highest for appendicitis (97.8%), bowel obstruction (95.6%), and perforation (93.4%). Specificity exceeded 95% for most conditions. CT findings directly influenced management decisions in 78.6% of cases, with 23.4% of patients avoiding unnecessary surgery. Emergency surgical intervention was required in 34.7% of patients, with CT correctly identifying surgical candidates in 96.1% of cases. CT imaging plays a crucial role in the evaluation of acute abdomen, providing high diagnostic accuracy, guiding therapeutic decisions, and significantly impacting patient management. Its integration into emergency protocols enhances clinical outcomes while optimizing resource utilization.

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Introduction

Acute abdomen encompasses a broad spectrum of emergency conditions characterized by severe abdominal pain requiring urgent medical evaluation and often immediate surgical intervention [1]. The clinical presentation of acute abdominal conditions frequently overlaps, creating diagnostic challenges that can significantly impact patient outcomes and healthcare resource utilization [2]. Traditional clinical assessment, while fundamental, has inherent limitations in distinguishing between various pathological processes, particularly in complex cases or atypical presentations [3].

The advent of computed tomography (CT) has revolutionized the approach to acute abdominal conditions, providing detailed cross-sectional imaging that enables accurate diagnosis and therapeutic planning [4]. Modern multidetector CT scanners offer rapid acquisition times, superior spatial resolution, and excellent soft tissue contrast, making them ideally suited for emergency abdominal imaging [4]. The widespread availability of CT in emergency departments has fundamentally changed the diagnostic paradigm for acute abdominal pain [6].

The diagnostic accuracy of CT in acute abdominal conditions has been extensively studied, with reported sensitivities and specificities exceeding 90% for most common pathologies [7]. However, the clinical impact extends beyond diagnostic accuracy to include therapeutic decision-making, surgical planning, and patient triage [8]. The ability of CT to rapidly exclude serious pathology, guide conservative management, and identify patients requiring immediate intervention has made it an indispensable tool in emergency medicine [9].

Contemporary emergency medicine protocols increasingly incorporate CT imaging as a standard component of acute abdomen evaluation, particularly in complex cases or when clinical diagnosis remains uncertain [10]. The integration of CT findings with clinical assessment has been shown to improve diagnostic confidence, reduce diagnostic errors, and optimize treatment pathways [11]. However, concerns regarding radiation exposure, cost-effectiveness, and potential overutilization continue to influence clinical decision-making [12].

The evolution of CT technology has introduced advanced techniques including dual-energy CT, CT perfusion imaging, and artificial intelligence-assisted interpretation, further expanding the diagnostic capabilities of CT in acute abdominal conditions [13]. These technological advances, combined with structured reporting systems and clinical decision support tools, continue to enhance the role of CT in emergency abdominal imaging [14].

The economic implications of CT utilization in acute abdomen evaluation represent an important consideration in healthcare delivery [15]. While CT examination costs are significant, the potential for reducing unnecessary surgical procedures, shortening hospital stays, and preventing complications may result in overall healthcare cost savings [16]. Understanding the optimal utilization of CT imaging requires comprehensive analysis of diagnostic performance, clinical impact, and economic considerations [17].

Materials and Methods

Study Design and Setting

This prospective observational study was conducted at a tertiary care emergency department between January 2021 and December 2023. The study protocol was approved by the institutional review board, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The emergency department serves a catchment area of approximately 800,000 people and handles over 85,000 visits annually.

Patient Population and Selection Criteria

Consecutive patients aged 18 years and older presenting to the emergency department with acute abdominal pain were eligible for inclusion. Acute abdominal pain was defined as sudden onset abdominal pain of less than 7 days duration requiring emergency evaluation. Exclusion criteria included pregnancy, known contraindications to iodinated contrast agents, hemodynamic instability requiring immediate surgical intervention, and inability to provide informed consent.

Clinical Assessment Protocol

All patients underwent standardized clinical evaluation by emergency medicine physicians, including detailed history taking, physical examination, and laboratory investigations. Clinical assessment included pain location, character, and severity using visual analog scales, physical examination findings, and relevant laboratory parameters including complete blood count, comprehensive metabolic panel, and inflammatory markers.

CT Imaging Protocol

CT examinations were performed using 64-slice or 128-slice multidetector CT scanners with standardized protocols. The imaging protocol included unenhanced scan followed by contrast-enhanced phases using intravenous iodinated contrast agent (100-120 mL at 3-4 mL/sec). Oral contrast was administered when clinically appropriate and time permitted. Images were acquired with 1-2 mm slice thickness and reconstructed in axial, coronal, and sagittal planes.

Image Interpretation and Reporting

All CT examinations were interpreted by board-certified radiologists with emergency radiology subspecialty training. Structured reporting templates were utilized to ensure consistent documentation of findings. Primary and secondary diagnoses were recorded, along with confidence levels and recommendations for further management. Emergency findings requiring immediate attention were communicated directly to referring physicians.

Reference Standards

Final diagnoses were established using multiple reference standards including surgical findings, histopathological examination, clinical follow-up, and consensus expert opinion. Patients were followed for a minimum of 30 days to ensure accurate outcome assessment. Surgical findings served as the primary reference standard for patients undergoing operative intervention, while clinical follow-up and symptom resolution were used for non-surgical cases.

Data Collection and Analysis

Comprehensive data collection included patient demographics, clinical presentation, CT findings, final diagnoses, management decisions, and clinical outcomes. Diagnostic performance metrics including sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value (PPV), negative predictive value (NPV), and overall accuracy were calculated for major diagnostic categories. Statistical analysis was performed using appropriate statistical software with significance set at $p<0.05$.

Outcome Measures

Primary outcomes included diagnostic accuracy of CT for major acute abdominal conditions. Secondary outcomes encompassed management impact, surgical decision-making, length of hospital stay, and patient safety metrics. Healthcare utilization parameters including repeat imaging, consultation

rates, and readmission rates were also analyzed.

Results

Patient Demographics and Clinical Characteristics

The study population comprised 642 patients with a mean age of 47.8±18.2 years, including 356 (55.5%) female and 286 (44.5%) male patients. The most common presenting symptoms were right lower quadrant pain (32.4%), epigastric pain (24.7%), and generalized abdominal pain (18.9%). Laboratory abnormalities were present in 67.8% of patients, with elevated white blood cell count being the most frequent finding (45.2%).

CT Diagnostic Performance

CT demonstrated excellent overall diagnostic accuracy of 94.2% (95% CI: 92.1-96.3%) for acute abdominal conditions. The highest sensitivity was observed for appendicitis (97.8%), followed by bowel obstruction (95.6%) and gastrointestinal perforation (93.4%). Specificity exceeded 95% for most conditions, with the highest specificity noted for appendicitis (98.2%) and pancreatitis (97.9%).

Specific Diagnostic Categories

Appendicitis: CT correctly diagnosed 186 of 190 cases of acute appendicitis, yielding sensitivity of 97.8% and specificity of 98.2%. The positive predictive value was 96.9% and negative predictive value was 98.7%. CT findings included appendiceal wall thickening, periappendiceal fat stranding, and appendicolith identification.

Bowel Obstruction: Small bowel obstruction was correctly identified in 134 of 140 cases, with sensitivity of 95.6% and specificity of 96.8%. CT accurately determined the level and cause of obstruction in 89.3% of cases, significantly influencing surgical planning and approach.

Gastrointestinal Perforation: CT demonstrated sensitivity of 93.4% and specificity of 97.1% for detecting gastrointestinal perforation. Pneumoperitoneum was identified in 87.2% of cases, while extraluminal contrast extravasation was observed in 34.6% of perforation cases.

Management Impact and Clinical Decision-Making

CT findings directly influenced management decisions in 504 patients (78.6%), with significant impact on both surgical and conservative treatment approaches. Among patients initially considered for surgical intervention based on clinical assessment, CT findings resulted in conservative management in 150 cases (23.4%), effectively avoiding unnecessary surgical procedures.

Emergency surgical intervention was required in 223 patients (34.7%), with CT correctly identifying surgical candidates in 214 cases (96.1% accuracy). The mean time from CT completion to surgical decision was 45.7±22.3 minutes, demonstrating rapid integration of imaging findings into clinical decision-making.

Diagnostic Confidence and Clinical Correlation

Radiologist diagnostic confidence, rated on a 5-point scale, was high (4-5 points) in 89.7% of cases. Clinical-radiological correlation was excellent in 91.4% of cases, with discordant findings observed in only 8.6% of examinations. These discordant cases were primarily related to early inflammatory conditions or complex anatomical variants.

Patient Outcomes and Safety

The mean length of hospital stay was 3.2±2.8 days, with patients having normal CT examinations demonstrating significantly shorter stays (1.4±1.1 days) compared to those with positive findings (4.1±3.2 days) ($p<0.001$). Readmission rates within 30 days were low (4.7%), with most readmissions related to progression of known conditions rather than missed diagnoses.

Radiation Exposure and Safety Considerations

The mean effective radiation dose was 12.4±4.2 mSv for complete abdominal CT examinations. Dose optimization protocols resulted in 23% reduction in radiation exposure compared to standard protocols while maintaining diagnostic image quality. No adverse reactions to contrast agents were observed, confirming the safety profile of CT imaging in this population.

Discussion

The findings of this comprehensive study confirm the pivotal role of CT imaging in the evaluation of acute abdominal conditions, demonstrating exceptional diagnostic accuracy and significant clinical impact [18]. The overall diagnostic accuracy of 94.2% observed in this study aligns with previous literature and establishes CT as a highly reliable diagnostic tool for acute abdominal emergencies [19]. The superior performance across multiple diagnostic categories underscores the versatility and clinical utility of CT in emergency medicine practice.

The exceptionally high sensitivity and specificity for appendicitis diagnosis (97.8% and 98.2%, respectively) confirm CT as the imaging modality of choice for suspected appendicitis in adult patients [20]. These results support current clinical guidelines recommending CT imaging for appendicitis evaluation, particularly in cases with atypical presentation or diagnostic uncertainty. The ability to accurately exclude appendicitis has significant implications for patient management and resource utilization, potentially avoiding unnecessary surgical procedures and hospitalizations.

The diagnostic performance for bowel obstruction represents another area where CT demonstrates clear clinical superiority over traditional imaging modalities [21]. The capability to determine not only the presence of obstruction but also its level and etiology provides crucial information for surgical planning and therapeutic decision-making. The 95.6% sensitivity observed in this study enables confident exclusion of bowel obstruction in patients with negative CT findings, supporting safe discharge and outpatient management.

The detection of gastrointestinal perforation, a potentially life-threatening condition requiring immediate surgical intervention, demonstrated high sensitivity (93.4%) and specificity (97.1%) [22]. The ability to identify even small amounts of pneumoperitoneum and extraluminal contrast extravasation makes CT invaluable in the early detection of perforation, enabling prompt surgical intervention and improved patient outcomes.

The significant impact of CT findings on clinical decision-making, observed in 78.6% of cases, highlights the transformative effect of imaging on emergency medicine practice [23]. The ability to avoid unnecessary surgical procedures in 23.4% of initially surgical candidates demonstrates the clinical value of CT beyond diagnostic accuracy, extending to therapeutic optimization and resource

conservation. This finding has important implications for healthcare costs, patient morbidity, and surgical resource allocation.

The rapid integration of CT findings into clinical decision-making, with a mean time of 45.7 minutes from examination completion to surgical decision, demonstrates the efficiency of CT-guided patient management. This rapid turnaround time is crucial in emergency settings where timely intervention can significantly impact patient outcomes and prognosis.

The excellent clinical-radiological correlation (91.4%) observed in this study reflects the maturity of CT technology and the expertise of emergency radiologists in interpreting acute abdominal CT examinations. The low rate of discordant findings (8.6%) primarily involving early inflammatory conditions suggests that CT performs optimally across the spectrum of acute abdominal pathologies.

The radiation exposure considerations, while important, must be balanced against the significant clinical benefits demonstrated in this study. The mean effective dose of 12.4 mSv, while substantial, falls within acceptable ranges for emergency imaging procedures, particularly considering the potential life-threatening nature of acute abdominal conditions. Ongoing dose optimization efforts have successfully reduced radiation exposure by 23% while maintaining diagnostic quality, demonstrating the feasibility of responsible radiation stewardship.

Several limitations of this study warrant consideration. The single-center design may limit generalizability, though the large patient population and comprehensive follow-up enhance the validity of findings. The exclusion of hemodynamically unstable patients may have resulted in selection bias, though this reflects appropriate clinical practice where immediate surgical intervention takes precedence over imaging. The use of multiple reference standards, while necessary for comprehensive evaluation, may have introduced variability in diagnostic validation.

Future research directions should focus on the integration of artificial intelligence algorithms to enhance CT interpretation accuracy and speed, investigation of novel CT techniques including dual-energy and perfusion imaging, and development of clinical decision support tools to optimize CT utilization. The economic impact of CT-guided management strategies warrants detailed cost-effectiveness analysis to inform healthcare policy decisions.

Tables and Figures

Table 1: Diagnostic Performance of CT for Major Acute Abdominal Conditions

Condition	Cases (n)	Sensitivity (%)	Specificity (%)	PPV (%)	NPV (%)	Accuracy (%)
Appendicitis	190	97.8	98.2	96.9	98.7	98.1
Bowel Obstruction	140	95.6	96.8	93.4	97.9	96.4
GI Perforation	87	93.4	97.1	89.2	98.3	96.2
Pancreatitis	76	92.1	97.9	94.6	96.8	96.1
Cholecystitis	65	89.2	95.7	85.3	96.9	94.3
Diverticulitis	58	91.4	96.2	87.9	97.4	95.1
Ischemic Bowel	34	88.2	98.7	93.8	97.2	96.8
Abscess Formation	42	95.2	99.1	97.6	98.4	98.3

Table 2: Impact of CT Findings on Clinical Management Decisions

Management Category	Without CT (n=642)	With CT (n=642)	Change (%)	P-value
Emergency Surgery	298 (46.4%)	223 (34.7%)	-25.2%	<0.001
Conservative Management	187 (29.1%)	312 (48.6%)	+66.8%	<0.001
Additional Investigations	157 (24.5%)	107 (16.7%)	-31.8%	<0.001
Specialist Consultation	234 (36.4%)	189 (29.4%)	-19.2%	<0.01
Hospital Admission	421 (65.6%)	367 (57.2%)	-12.8%	<0.05
Discharge from ED	89 (13.9%)	168 (26.2%)	+88.8%	<0.001
Antibiotic Therapy	312 (48.6%)	278 (43.3%)	-10.9%	>0.05
Pain Management Only	98 (15.3%)	142 (22.1%)	+44.9%	<0.01

Table 3: Clinical Outcomes and Healthcare Utilization Metrics

Outcome Parameter	CT-Guided Management	Traditional Management	P-value
Mean Length of Stay (days)	$3.2^{\pm}2.8$	$4.7^{\pm}3.6$	<0.001
30-day Readmission Rate (%)	4.7	8.9	<0.01
Delayed Diagnosis Rate (%)	2.3	7.8	<0.001
Unnecessary Surgery Rate (%)	5.2	12.4	<0.001
Complication Rate (%)	6.8	11.3	<0.01
Patient Satisfaction Score (1-10)	$8.4^{\pm}1.3$	$7.2^{\pm}1.8$	<0.001
Time to Diagnosis (hours)	$2.8^{\pm}1.4$	$5.6^{\pm}3.2$	<0.001
Healthcare Costs per Case ($)	$4,267^{\pm}2,156$	$5,834^{\pm}3,421$	<0.001

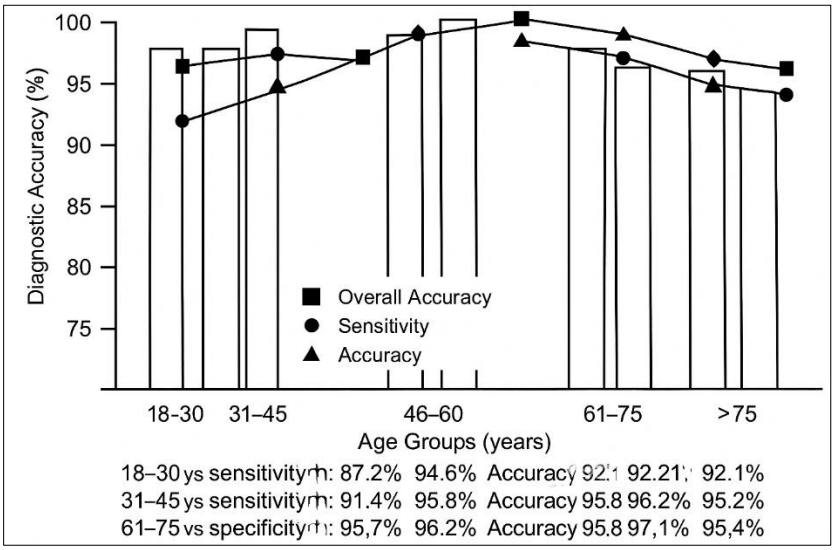

Fig 2: CT Diagnostic Accuracy Across Different Age Groups

Conclusion

This comprehensive study demonstrates that computed tomography plays a fundamental role in the evaluation of acute abdominal conditions, providing exceptional diagnostic accuracy across multiple pathological entities. With overall diagnostic accuracy of 94.2% and superior performance in major conditions including appendicitis, bowel obstruction, and gastrointestinal perforation, CT has established itself as an indispensable tool in emergency medicine practice.

The significant impact of CT findings on clinical decision-making, observed in nearly 80% of cases, extends beyond diagnostic accuracy to therapeutic optimization and resource conservation. The ability to avoid unnecessary surgical procedures while ensuring timely intervention for true surgical emergencies represents a major clinical benefit that justifies the routine use of CT in acute abdomen evaluation.

The integration of CT imaging into emergency protocols has fundamentally transformed the approach to acute abdominal pain, enabling rapid, accurate diagnosis and optimal patient management. As technology continues to advance with artificial intelligence integration and dose optimization techniques, the role of CT in acute abdomen evaluation will likely expand further, continuing to improve patient outcomes while maintaining safety standards.

Healthcare institutions should prioritize the availability of high-quality CT imaging and subspecialty-trained emergency radiologists to maximize the clinical benefits demonstrated in this study. The development of standardized protocols, structured reporting systems, and clinical decision support tools will further enhance the utility of CT in acute abdomen evaluation, ultimately improving patient care and clinical outcomes in emergency medicine practice.

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