Original Article

Meta-analysis of magnetic resonance imaging for the differential diagnosis of spinal degeneration

Ying-Nuo Hou, Wen-Yuan Ding, Yong Shen, Da-Long Yang, Lin-Feng Wang, Peng Zhang

Department of Spine Surgery, The Third Hospital of Hebei Medical University, 139 Zi Qiang Road, Shijiazhuang 050051, China

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Abstract: To systematically evaluate the clinical significance of magnetic resonance imaging for the identification and diagnosis of spinal degenerative changes. We searched Cochrane Library, PubMed, EMbase, CNKI, WanFang Data, Medalink, VIP and CBM databases for clinical studies on the significance of magnetic resonance imaging for the differential diagnosis of spinal degeneration; retrieval time was from database building to October 2014. Two reviewers independently screened the literature, extracted data and evaluated methodological quality according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Meta-DiSc 1.4 software was used for meta-analysis. The study included six documents, 10 independent results and a total of 505 individuals. Meta-analysis showed that: In the present study, the efficacy of magnetic resonance imaging in the differential diagnosis of cervical and lumbar degeneration was firstly analyzed and discussed using the Meta-Disc 1.4 software. SPE: χ² = 77.59, P = 0.000, I² = 88.4%; SEN: χ² = 167.25, P = 0.000, I² = 94.6%; DOR: Cochran-Q = 71.64, P = 0.000. Meta-analysis of random effect model showed that: SEN merge = 0.849 [95% CI (0.816, 0.878)], SPE merge = 0.745 [95% CI (0.695, 0.792)], + LR = 2.735 [95% CI (1.600, 4.676)]; - LR = 0.245 [95% CI (0.122, 0.493)], DOR merge = 21.158 [95% CI (5.234, 85.529)], SROC AUC = 0.8698; the results had good stability. Then the efficacy of magnetic resonance imaging in the differential diagnosis of cervical degeneration was analyzed and the results showed that: SPE: χ² = 6.92, P = 0.075, I² = 56.6%; SEN: χ² = 81.73, P = 0.000, I² = 96.3%; DOR: Cochran-Q = 12.71, P = 0.005. Meta-analysis of random effect model showed that: SEN merge = 0.799 [95% CI (0.741, 0.850)], SPE merge = 0.769 [95% CI (0.683, 0.840)], + LR = 2.506 [95% CI (1.399, 4.489)]; - LR = 0.363 [95% CI (0.149, 0.882)], DOR merge = 11.949 [95% CI (2.195, 65.036)], SROC AUC = 0.8210. The stability was good. Finally, analysis of six independent studies on the efficacy of magnetic resonance imaging in the differential diagnosis of lumbar degeneration was performed: SPE: χ² = 70.13, P = 0.000, I² = 92.9%; SEN: χ² = 78.35, P = 0.000, I² = 93.6%; DOR: Cochran-Q = 58.04, P = 0.000. Meta-analysis of random effect model showed that: SEN merge = 0.732 [95% CI (0.667, 0.791)], SPE merge = 0.883 [95% CI (0.843, 0.916)]; - LR = 3.072 [95% CI (1.330, 7.091)]; - LR = 0.190 [95% CI (0.063, 0.572)], DOR merge = 30.252 [95% CI (3.060, 299.13)], SROC AUC = 0.8994. Sensitivity analysis was performed by excluding each study individually and the results showed no significant changes in SEN and SPE merge, indicating good stability of the meta-analysis. Existing studies confirm that MRI had good sensitivity and specificity for the differential diagnosis of cervical and lumbar degeneration; the positive ratio in cervical and lumbar degeneration group was 3 to 10 times of that in non-degeneration control group; the efficacy for differential diagnosis was good; combined with the good maneuverability in clinical diagnosis of spinal degeneration, it can be used as effective and feasible method for clinical differential diagnosis of spinal degenerative diseases.

Keywords: MRI, cervical degeneration, lumbar degeneration, differential diagnosis, meta-analysis

Introduction

Cervical and lumbar degenerations are the most common degenerative diseases in the clinic. According to different degrees, intervertebral disc degeneration can be classified as cervical disc bulging, herniation and prolapse. Due to loss of normal disc structure and progressive fibrosis, roughness and progressive fibrosis are produced in the annulus lamellar, finally leading to the formation of cracks and degeneration of the cervical spine, with major clinical manifestation of compression in vertebral nerves, spinal cord and blood vessels [1-6].
Clinical application of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) makes a breakthrough in diagnosis of cervical spinal cord disease. Around the cervical transforaminal and epidural, there is an abundance of adipose tissue, showing high luminescence signal in imaging diagnosis; High signal in disc tissue, high signal in vertebral body posterior edge hyperplasia, low signal in the annulus and vertebral bone cortex and its multi-level and multi-directional scanning capability can accurately evaluate the disc degeneration, herniation and cervical stenosis. Some reports suggest that MRI diagnosis of cervical degeneration had a compliance rate of 88% with the surgery. In addition, although two-dimensional and three-dimensional MRI images could clearly determine the lesion location and scope of involvement, there are some restrictions, such as inspection fees are relatively high, a pacemaker must be fitted, the body has a paramagnetic metal and patients with claustrophobia phobia cannot accept MRI examination [7-10].

In this paper, a meta-analysis of magnetic resonance imaging for the differential diagnosis of common spinal degeneration was conducted.

**Material and methods**

**Diagnostic methods:** The evaluation test was MRI detection; gold standard was pathological diagnosis.

**Outcome indicators:** Sensitivity (SEN), specificity (SPE), positive likelihood ratio (+ LR), negative likelihood ratio (- LR), diagnostic odds ratio (DOR) and the area (AUC) under subject operating characteristic curve (SROC).

**Exclusion criteria:** Missing important data or unclear measurement indicators; repeated published in different journals; only topics involved in MRI diagnosis of spinal degeneration but content was independent; retrospective studies.

**Search strategy**

We searched Cochrane Library, PubMed, EMBase, CNKI, WanFang Data, VIP and CBM database for clinical studies on MRI diagnosis of cervical and lumbar degenerations, which were retrieved from database building to October 2014. Meanwhile manual search for MRI diagnosis-related magazines was performed. Chinese search terms included: MRI,
Table 1. General information of included studies

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Table 2. Quality assessment of included studies

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Note: Specific criteria of QUADAS items were as follows: 1. Whether the case spectrum contained a variety of cases and easily confusing cases? 2. Were the inclusion criteria were clear? 3. Was gold standard able to accurately distinguish the sick (malignant) and disease-free (benign) status? Was the time difference between the gold standard diagnosis and evaluation test short? Was there some changes in disease conditions? 5. Whether all the patients or randomly selected patients underwent a gold standard test? 6. Are all cases diagnosed by the same gold standard regardless of the negative or positive evaluation test results? 7. Whether the gold standard diagnosis and evaluation diagnosis were independent of each other (i.e., evaluation test was not an integral part of the gold standard diagnostic test part)? 8. Are the operation of diagnostic evaluation described in great detail and whether it can be repeated? 9. Whether the operation of gold standard test was described in great detail and the repeatability was explained? 10. Whether the results of the evaluation test were determined in the conditions that gold standard results were not informed? 11. Whether gold standard results were determined in the conditions that the results of the evaluation test were not informed? 12. When explaining the test results, were the available clinical data of the clinical data in line with that in the actual application? 13. Are the unexplained/uncertain/intermediate test results described? 14. Whether the quitting cases were described in detail? In which, the 3rd, 8th and 9th items were not necessary for evaluation; finally 11th item was determined as Cochrane diagnostic test criteria; each item was recorded as “Yes”, “No” or “unclear”; “Y” means the study met this standard, “No” represented the study did not meet or did not fully comply this standard; that enough information cannot be obtained from the article was “unclear”.

Figure 2. SEN meta-analysis of MRI for differential diagnosis of cervical and lumbar degenerations.
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dent reviewers according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. In case of disagreement, it was discussed and solved by a third party. The required data mainly included: The general information of studies, including document title, year, authors, and statistical methods; the patient’s basic information, including gender, age, etc., as well as literature quality evaluation.

Statistical analysis

Meta-Disc 1.4 software [11] was used for merger analysis. Random or fixed effect model was selected based on heterogeneity test results to calculate the combined effect value; estimated parameters included merging SEN, SPE, DOR and the 95% CI. SROC curve was drawn and AUC was estimated; the greater of AUC, the closer to 1.0, the better the authenticity of diagnosis [12].

Results

Characteristics of included studies

471 related Chinese documents and 74 English literatures were early selected; after the screening layer by layer, six literature and 10 independent studies were finally included [13-18], including a total of 505 individuals. Document Retrieval and screening process was shown in Figure 1. The basic characteristics of included studies and quality evaluation were shown in Table 1; the methodological quality evaluation results were shown in Table 2.

Figure 3. SPE meta-analysis of MRI for differential diagnosis of cervical and lumbar degenerations.

Figure 4. + LR meta-analysis of MRI for differential diagnosis of cervical and lumbar degenerations.

Figure 5. - LR meta-analysis of MRI for differential diagnosis of cervical and lumbar degenerations.

Literature screening, data extraction and quality assessment

Literature screening, data extraction and quality assessment were performed by two independent reviewers according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. In case of disagreement, it was discussed and solved by a third party. The required data mainly included: The general information of studies, including document title, year, authors, and statistical methods; the patient’s basic information, including gender, age, etc., as well as literature quality evaluation.

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Efficacy of MRI in the differential diagnosis of cervical and lumbar degenerations

In this study, Meta-Disc 1.4 software was used to analyze the efficacy of MRI in differential diagnosis of cervical and lumbar degenerations; 10 studies were included in the analysis, and ROC plane scatter plot showed atypical “shoulder and arm-shape”, suggesting SEN was negatively correlated with and 1-SPE, without threshold effect. Heterogeneity tests of other sources showed: SPE: $\chi^2 = 77.59, P = 0.000, I^2 = 88.4\%$; SEN: $\chi^2 = 167.25, P = 0.000, I^2 = 94.6\%$; DOR: Cochran-Q = 71.64, $P = 0.000$. Random effect model Meta-analysis showed that: SEN merge = 0.799 [95% CI (0.741, 0.850)], SPE merge = 0.769 [95% CI (0.683, -0.840)], + LR = 2.506 [95% CI (1.399, -4.489)], - LR = 0.363 [95% CI (0.149, -0.882)], DOR merge = 11.949 [95% CI (2.195, -65.036)], SROC AUC = 0.8210. Each study will be excluded one by one before sensitivity analysis, and the results showed that the SEN and SPE merge did not change significantly, indicating better stability of Meta-analysis (Figures 9-15).

Efficacy of MRI in the differential diagnosis of lumbar degeneration

Meta-Disc 1.4 software was used to analyze the efficacy of MRI in differential diagnosis of lumbar degeneration; 6 independent studies...
Differential diagnosis of spinal degeneration

were included in the analysis, and ROC plane scatter plot showed atypical “shoulder and arm-shape”, suggesting SEN was negatively correlated with and 1-SPE, without threshold effect. Heterogeneity tests of other sources showed: SPE: $\chi^2 = 70.13$, $P = 0.000$, $I^2 = 92.9\%$; SEN: $\chi^2 = 78.35$, $P = 0.000$, $I^2 = 93.6\%$; DOR: Cochran-$Q = 58.04$, $P = 0.000$. Meta-analysis of random effect model showed that: SEN merge = 0.732 [95% CI (0.667, -0.791)], SPE merge = 0.883 [95% CI (0.843, -0.916)], + LR = 3.072 [95% CI (1.330, -7.091)], - LR = 0.190 [95% CI (0.063, -0.572)], DOR merge = 30.252 [95% CI (3.060, -299.13)], SROC AUC = 0.8994. Each study will be excluded one by one before sensitivity analysis, and the results showed that the SEN and SPE merge did not change significantly, indicating better stability of Meta-analysis (Figures 16-22).
Cervical and lumbar degenerations are the most common in spinal degeneration. In clinical, it is also one class of diseases causing serious damage to the elderly population. Disc degeneration is a natural aging process. With increasing age, intervertebral discs gradually lose flexibility, elasticity, and shock absorption. The ligaments surrounding the disc (called annulus) will become fragile and can be easily torn. At the same time, the soft gelatinous central portion of the intervertebral disc (called nucleus pulposus) begins to lose moisture and shrink. The series of disc injury lead to bone spurs and thickened ligaments to support the spine, resulting in degenerative lumbar arthritis. According to different degrees, intervertebral disc degeneration can be classified as cervical disc bulging, herniation, and prolapse. Lumbar degenerative disc disease mostly begins from the early multi-disc dehydration, followed by the annular tear of inner and outer annulus occurs, eventually leading to the annulus tears, which would exacerbate the process of disc degeneration and narrow the disc space narrowing; and then joints between endplate and annulus appeared osteophytes, finally endplate sclerosis Bone Bridge formed.

Normal lumbar spine plain films and scans can diagnose cervical spine degeneration; intervertebral dis-
Differential diagnosis of spinal degeneration

The clinical application of MRI techniques provides a great space for the diagnosis of spinal cord disorders. In most cases, we will use MRI or CT to help diagnose lumbar disc degeneration. MRI can clearly show the location of disc herniation and nerve root compression. MRI multi-level and multi-directional scanning allows it to accurately evaluate the cervical and lumbar disc degeneration, herniation, cervical stenosis, cervical vertebral segmental instability and spinal cord compression [5-9, 22, 23].

In this study, a systematic review of six domestic and foreign literature, 10 independent studies and a total of 505 patients was performed. In this study, Meta-

cography plays a decisive role in evaluating the degeneration of adjacent intervertebral disc segments; for the patients with two or more sections of lumbar degeneration, discography

Figure 16. SEN meta-analysis of MRI for differential diagnosis of cervical and lumbar degeneration.

Figure 17. SPE meta-analysis of MRI for differential diagnosis of lumbar degeneration.
Disc 1.4 software was used for analysis; firstly, efficacy of MRI in the differential diagnosis of cervical and lumbar degenerations were analyzed and discussed; the combined sensitivity was about 85% and the specificity was about 75%; The positive rate of combined diagnosis in the case group was 21 times of that of the control group; the AUC was 0.8698, and the analysis results had a good stability. Then the efficacy of MRI in the differential diagnosis of cervical degeneration and lumbar degeneration were analyzed and discussed respectively; the results suggested that: for the diagnosis of cervical degeneration, the combined sensitivity was 80% and specificity was about 77%; the positive rate of combined diagnosis in the case group was about 12 times of that in control group; the area under the curve was 0.8210; the stability of the analysis was good. Finally the six independent studies of MRI and lumbar degenerative differential diagnosis were analyzed; the combined sensitivity was about 73% and specificity was around 88%; the positive rate of combined diagnosis in case group was 30 times of that in control group; AUC was 0.8994, and the results had good stability. Although the number of included studies was not large in the separate analysis of cervical and lumbar degenerations, in general, our findings suggested that MRI had good sensitivity and specificity for the differential diagnosis of spinal degeneration, which could be used as effective and feasible method for clinical differential diagnosis.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

None.
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Address correspondence to: Wen-Yuan Ding, Department of Spine Surgery, The Third Hospital of Hebei Medical University, 139 Zi Qiang Road, Shijiazhuang 050051, China. E-mail: wenyding@163.com

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