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Radiological Monitoring of Fibrosis in Non-Alcoholic Steatohepatitis (NASH) Using Elastography

Sanna Nieminen*

Department of Radiology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

Introduction

Non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH) is a progressive form of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) characterized by hepatic inflammation, hepatocellular injury, and varying degrees of fibrosis. It represents a critical stage in the spectrum of NAFLD, with the potential to progress to cirrhosis, hepatocellular carcinoma, and liver failure. Identifying and quantifying liver fibrosis is crucial in the management of NASH, as fibrosis stage correlates with disease prognosis and guides therapeutic decision-making. While liver biopsy remains the gold standard for assessing fibrosis, it is an invasive, costly, and somewhat limited procedure in routine clinical practice. Therefore, non-invasive methods for evaluating fibrosis, particularly radiological techniques like elastography, have become pivotal in the monitoring and management of NASH. This article explores the role of elastography in the radiological monitoring of liver fibrosis in NASH, focusing on its mechanisms, clinical utility, and limitations [1].

Pathophysiology of NASH and Fibrosis Progression

NASH is characterized by the accumulation of lipids in hepatocytes, along with inflammatory cell infiltration and cellular damage. The progression of NASH to more advanced stages of fibrosis is driven by a combination of factors, including hepatic inflammation, oxidative stress, and increased deposition of extracellular matrix components. As the disease progresses, fibrotic tissue replaces normal liver parenchyma, ultimately leading to liver cirrhosis if left untreated. Liver fibrosis in NASH is a significant prognostic factor, as it is directly associated with the risk of developing cirrhosis and its complications, including portal hypertension, variceal bleeding, and hepatocellular carcinoma. Early identification of liver fibrosis allows for appropriate management strategies aimed at halting or reversing disease progression. Therefore, accurate and reliable methods to assess liver fibrosis are critical for optimizing treatment and improving patient outcomes [2].

Elastography in Liver Fibrosis Assessment

Elastography refers to a group of imaging techniques that measure liver stiffness, which correlates with the degree of fibrosis. As fibrotic tissue is stiffer than normal liver parenchyma, elastography can quantitatively assess the extent of fibrosis by evaluating the mechanical properties of the liver. The two primary elastographic techniques used in the assessment of liver fibrosis are transient elastography (TE) and magnetic resonance elastography (MRE).

Transient Elastography (TE)

Transient elastography (TE), commonly known by its brand name FibroScan, is a widely used and established technique for assessing liver stiffness. TE uses a low-frequency elastic wave to measure the velocity at which the wave propagates through the liver. The speed of the wave is directly related to liver stiffness; faster wave propagation indicates stiffer liver tissue, which is indicative of more advanced fibrosis [3]. TE is a non-invasive, rapid, and easy-to-perform procedure, making it highly suitable for routine clinical use. It is particularly effective in detecting moderate to advanced fibrosis and cirrhosis. The results of TE are expressed in kilopascals (kPa), with higher values corresponding to more advanced stages of fibrosis. TE has been extensively validated and is widely used in the assessment of liver fibrosis in patients with NAFLD and NASH. However, its accuracy can be affected by factors such as obesity, the presence of ascites, and technical limitations in patients with high body mass index (BMI) [4].

Magnetic Resonance Elastography (MRE)

Magnetic resonance elastography (MRE) is an advanced, non-invasive imaging technique that combines magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) with elastographic principles to measure liver stiffness. MRE involves applying low-frequency mechanical waves to the liver, and MRI is used to visualize the wave propagation throughout the liver tissue. The data is then processed to generate a map of liver stiffness. MRE is highly sensitive and accurate for detecting liver fibrosis, including early stages of fibrosis, and has shown superior diagnostic performance compared to TE in certain patient populations. It provides a detailed, three-dimensional assessment of liver stiffness and is less affected by BMI or obesity-related challenges, making it particularly useful in patients with higher body fat content, where TE may have limitations. MRE is also highly reproducible and can be performed in conjunction with standard MRI to assess other aspects of liver health, such as the presence of fatty infiltration or liver lesions [5]. Despite its advantages, MRE is a more complex and expensive procedure compared to TE, requiring specialized equipment and expertise. Its use may be limited in some clinical settings due to these factors.

Clinical Applications of Elastography in NASH

Elastography plays a central role in the non-invasive monitoring of fibrosis progression in NASH. It allows for the assessment of fibrosis without the need for liver biopsy, providing a less invasive, safer, and more cost-effective alternative. Several studies have demonstrated that both TE and MRE correlate well with liver biopsy findings, making them reliable tools for staging liver fibrosis in NASH patients. One of the key clinical applications of elastography is its use in the longitudinal monitoring of NASH. As liver fibrosis is a dynamic process, monitoring changes in liver stiffness over time can help assess

***Corresponding author:** Sanna Nieminen, Department of Radiology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA, E-mail Id: niem_sann22@yahoo.com

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the efficacy of treatments aimed at reducing fibrosis progression. For instance, patients undergoing lifestyle interventions, pharmacological treatments, or clinical trials for NASH can be regularly assessed using elastography to determine whether these strategies are achieving the desired effects in terms of fibrosis regression [6]. Furthermore, elastography is particularly useful for identifying patients at higher risk of liver-related complications, such as cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma. By accurately assessing fibrosis stage, clinicians can make informed decisions regarding surveillance strategies, including the need for liver transplantation evaluation, endoscopic screening for varices, or hepatocellular carcinoma screening. Elastography is also used in risk stratification, helping clinicians identify patients who are most likely to benefit from specific treatments. For example, patients with advanced fibrosis may be candidates for interventions aimed at slowing disease progression, while those with minimal or no fibrosis may require less intensive management [7].

Limitations of Elastography

While elastography is a valuable tool in the assessment of liver fibrosis in NASH, it has several limitations. Both TE and MRE are less accurate in detecting very early stages of fibrosis, especially in patients with mild fibrosis (F1 stage). In these early stages, the liver stiffness may still be within normal or near-normal ranges, making it difficult to detect subtle changes. Additionally, elastography can be influenced by several factors unrelated to liver fibrosis. For example, steatosis, inflammation, and congestion can affect liver stiffness measurements, leading to false-positive results or overestimation of fibrosis in certain cases. In obese patients, the increased subcutaneous fat can attenuate the propagation of elastographic waves, potentially affecting the accuracy of TE measurements. Similarly, the presence of ascites can interfere with the measurement of liver stiffness in both TE and MRE [8]. Another limitation of elastography is that it primarily measures liver stiffness as an indirect marker of fibrosis and does not provide detailed information about the distribution or nature of the fibrotic tissue [9]. This can be particularly important when distinguishing between different types of liver fibrosis, such as septal fibrosis or cirrhosis, which may require different management approaches.

Conclusion

Elastography, particularly transient elastography (TE) and magnetic resonance elastography (MRE), has revolutionized the non-invasive assessment of liver fibrosis in patients with non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH). Both techniques provide valuable insights into the degree of fibrosis, helping clinicians monitor disease progression, guide therapeutic decision-making, and stratify risk for liver-related complications. While TE remains widely accessible and easy to perform, MRE offers superior accuracy and reliability, particularly in patients with higher BMI. Despite some limitations, such as reduced sensitivity in the detection of early fibrosis and potential interference from other hepatic conditions, elastography represents a critical tool in the management of NASH and other liver diseases. As research continues and technology improves, elastography will likely play an increasingly central role in the non-invasive monitoring of liver fibrosis and the management of NASH patients.

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