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Expert Opinion Article

The Role of Ultra-High-Resolution Magnetic Resonance Imaging (UHD-MRI) In the Early Detection of Neurodegenerative Diseases: Systematic Review

ATEF EID MADKOUR ELSAYED[1]*, Haneen Ali Alshahrani[2], Shahad Mushabab Andous[3], Zohor Shinan Alqahtani[4], Ayshah Ali Alasmari[5], Wajd hamad Almoqati[6], Ibrahim Salem Binrabaa[7], Alanud Fuhaid Altamimi[8], Ruba Mahmoud Abdullah Almuallim[9], Rawan Hussain Q Albalawi[10], Fay Naif Abdullah Alanazi[11]

[1]*Consultant, King Abdelaziz Hospital Sakaka Saudiarabia, a_b65155@yahoo.com
[2]Specialist-Radiological Technology, Saudia Arabia- Abha, hanin.shahrani9@gmail.com
[3]Specialist-Radiological Technology, Saudi Arabia- Abha, Andous.sh@gmail.com
[4]Specialist-Radiological Technology, Saudi Arabia, Zohorshinan@gmail.com
[5]MRI Technologist -MNGHA, Saudi Arabia, Alasmariaisha99@gmail.com
[6]Diagnostic Radiology, Saudi Arabia, Whalmoqati@gmail.com
[7]Medical intern, KSAU-HS Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, is-rabaa@hotmail.com
[8]Medical Intern - Dammam, Saudi Arabia, Alanudtamimi@gmail.com
[9]Medical student – University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia, rubalmoallim@gmail.com
[10]Student, Faculty of Medicine in Tabuk University, Tabuk, KSA., rawanalf2@gmail.com
[11]Student, Faculty of Medicine in Tabuk University, Faynaifalanazi@gmail.com

***Corresponding Author:** ATEF EID MADKOUR ELSAYED
*Consultant, King Abdelaziz Hospital Sakaka Saudiarabia, a_b65155@yahoo.com

Abstract

Background: Early detection of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease (AD), Parkinson's disease (PD), and multiple sclerosis (MS) remains a major clinical challenge. Conventional neuroimaging often fails to capture subtle anatomical changes at the preclinical stage. Ultra-high-resolution magnetic resonance imaging (UHD-MRI), especially at field strengths of 7 Tesla (7T) or higher, presents new opportunities for early diagnosis.

Objectives: This systematic review aimed to synthesize recent evidence on the diagnostic utility of UHD-MRI in identifying early structural and functional brain changes associated with neurodegenerative diseases.

Methods: Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, we searched five databases and included peer-reviewed human studies published between 2010 and 2024. Studies were screened for use of UHD-MRI (≥7T) and relevant neurodegenerative outcomes. A narrative synthesis was conducted based on imaging resolution, anatomical targets, diagnostic performance, and integration with adjunct technologies.

Results: A total of 15 studies met inclusion criteria. UHD-MRI consistently demonstrated superior anatomical resolution, improving detection of hippocampal subfields, cortical laminae, and deep brain nuclei. Sensitivity improvements ranged from 15–30% over 3T MRI. Integration with AI and PET further enhanced diagnostic accuracy, while automated segmentation reduced operator variability.

Conclusion: UHD-MRI offers substantial improvements in detecting early pathological changes in neurodegenerative diseases. Its combination with AI-driven analysis and hybrid PET approaches holds promise for future diagnostic frameworks, though issues of accessibility, cost, and standardization remain.

Keywords: Ultra-high-resolution MRI; 7T MRI; Neurodegenerative diseases; Alzheimer's disease; Parkinson's disease; Early diagnosis; Structural imaging; Cortical laminae; Subcortical segmentation; Advanced neuroimaging.

Introduction

Ultra-high-resolution magnetic resonance imaging (UHD-MRI), particularly at 7 Tesla and beyond, has transformed our ability to visualize fine brain structures previously inaccessible through conventional MRI techniques. These advances provide crucial insights into the early pathological changes associated with neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease (AD), Parkinson's disease (PD), and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Recent studies have demonstrated that UHD-MRI offers unparalleled anatomical detail, enabling earlier and more precise diagnosis than ever before (Avram et al., 2024).

One of the major applications of UHD-MRI lies in the assessment of the hippocampus and surrounding medial temporal lobe structures, which are among the first to show pathological changes in Alzheimer's disease. In comparative studies between 3T and 7T MRI, 7T imaging revealed cortical thinning and

atrophy patterns associated with early AD stages more reliably (Lüsebrink et al., 2013). This capability improves diagnostic sensitivity, especially in patients with mild cognitive impairment (MCI), a precursor to AD.

Beyond Alzheimer's disease, UHD-MRI has made significant strides in detecting early-stage Parkinson's disease by allowing clear visualization of the substantia nigra, a region crucially affected in PD. Using advanced segmentation techniques on 7T images, researchers have succeeded in identifying microstructural changes within the substantia nigra pars compacta, an area often affected before clinical symptoms emerge (Fred et al., 2024).

Emerging evidence also points to the value of UHD-MRI in amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Using 7T MRI, subtle cortical and subcortical changes, including iron deposition and microstructural degeneration in the motor cortex, have been observed (Düzel et al., 2021). These findings support the use of UHD-MRI as a tool not only for early detection but also for monitoring disease progression and therapy response.

In a broader context, UHD-MRI enhances our understanding of vascular contributions to neurodegenerative processes. For instance, high-resolution susceptibility-weighted imaging (SWI) can detect cerebral microbleeds and microinfarcts associated with cerebral amyloid angiopathy, a common comorbidity in Alzheimer's disease (van Veluw et al., 2016). This multimodal insight bridges structural and vascular pathology.

PET–MRI hybrid systems are also gaining momentum, combining molecular imaging with ultra-high anatomical resolution. These systems provide synergistic data useful in identifying metabolic deficits and amyloid or tau pathology while simultaneously mapping structural brain alterations with high spatial accuracy (Cho et al., 2008).

Innovations in diffusion imaging have enabled techniques such as MAP-MRI (Mean Apparent Propagator MRI), which models microstructural environments in unprecedented detail. Using MAP-MRI with 7T scanners, researchers have achieved whole-brain microstructural mapping, allowing detection of early axonal degeneration (Avram et al., 2024).

However, UHD-MRI is not without challenges. The need for advanced infrastructure, specialized coils, and patient motion sensitivity at high field strengths limits its accessibility. Nevertheless, as protocols become standardized and more cost-effective, integration into clinical workflows is becoming feasible (Costagli et al., 2021).

Another promising application involves mapping the human cortex's laminar architecture. Zeng et al. (2024) demonstrated that 7T ex vivo imaging can distinguish cortical layers, such as supragranular and infragranular zones, helping researchers pinpoint layer-specific degeneration patterns associated with diseases like frontotemporal dementia.

In summary, UHD-MRI represents a leap forward in the early detection of neurodegenerative disorders. From detailed structural insights in Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease to advanced functional and microvascular assessments, UHD-MRI holds transformative potential in clinical neurology and research.

Methodology

Study Design

This study employed a systematic review methodology, following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines to ensure transparency, reproducibility, and methodological rigor. The primary aim was to synthesize current empirical evidence regarding the utility of ultra-high-resolution magnetic resonance imaging (UHD-MRI)—typically involving field strengths of 7 Tesla or higher—in the early detection and diagnosis of neurodegenerative diseases. The review focused exclusively on peer-reviewed studies involving human subjects that evaluated structural or functional imaging outputs derived from UHD-MRI modalities and reported associations with neurodegenerative pathology, clinical staging, or biomarkers.

Eligibility Criteria

Studies were selected based on the following pre-specified inclusion and exclusion criteria:

- **Population**: Human subjects aged ≥18 years, including healthy controls, patients at risk (e.g., mild cognitive impairment), or individuals diagnosed with neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer's disease (AD), Parkinson's disease (PD), frontotemporal dementia (FTD), or multiple sclerosis (MS).
- **Interventions/Exposures**: Use of **ultra-high-resolution MRI** (typically ≥7T), including protocols assessing subcortical nuclei, cortical thickness, hippocampal subfields, or laminar structures.
- **Comparators**: Any relevant comparator groups, including standard-field MRI (e.g., 1.5T, 3T), healthy controls, or different disease stages.
- **Outcomes**: Diagnostic yield, structural or functional differentiation of brain regions, quantifiable imaging biomarkers, and early disease detection markers.
- **Study Designs**: Randomized controlled trials (RCTs), prospective or retrospective cohort

studies, cross-sectional imaging studies, and case-control studies.
- **Language**: Only articles published in **English** were included.
- **Publication Period**: Studies published between **2010 and 2024** were considered to capture the modern generation of ultra-high-field imaging technologies.

Search Strategy
A structured and comprehensive literature search was conducted in the following databases: **PubMed**, **Scopus**, **Web of Science**, **IEEE Xplore**, and **Embase**. Additionally, **Google Scholar** was used to identify grey literature. The search strategy involved the use of Boolean operators and keyword combinations such as:
- ("ultra-high-field MRI" OR "7 Tesla" OR "7T MRI" OR "UHF-MRI" OR "high-resolution neuroimaging")
- AND ("neurodegenerative disease" OR "Alzheimer's" OR "Parkinson's" OR "multiple sclerosis" OR "dementia")
- AND ("early diagnosis" OR "early detection" OR "biomarkers" OR "structural changes")

Manual searches of bibliographies from key review articles were also performed to identify additional studies that may not have been indexed in the selected databases.

Study Selection Process
All retrieved references were imported into **Zotero**, where duplicates were removed. Two independent reviewers screened the **titles and abstracts** for relevance. Full-text articles were then retrieved for studies that met the inclusion criteria or where eligibility was unclear. Each full-text article was assessed independently by both reviewers. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion or, when necessary, adjudication by a third reviewer. The final inclusion set comprised **15 studies** that met all predefined criteria.

Data Extraction
A standardized data extraction form was developed and piloted prior to full extraction. The following information was systematically recorded from each eligible study:
- Authors, year of publication, and country of origin
- Study design and sample size
- Participant demographics (age, sex, disease status)
- MRI modality (field strength, resolution, pulse sequences)
- Brain regions analyzed
- Imaging outcomes (e.g., thickness, volume, contrast, signal-to-noise ratio)
- Clinical correlates or diagnostic outcomes
- Comparison with standard MRI or clinical assessments
- Statistical methods and key findings

Data were extracted by one reviewer and verified by a second to ensure completeness and accuracy.

Quality Assessment
The **methodological quality and risk of bias** of each included study were evaluated using validated tools suited to the respective study designs:
- The **Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS)** was applied for observational studies.
- The **Cochrane Risk of Bias (RoB 2.0) Tool** was used for randomized controlled trials.

Each study was assessed across domains such as selection bias, comparability of groups, imaging methodology standardization, and outcome reporting. Studies were categorized as **low**, **moderate**, or **high risk of bias** based on the cumulative score.

Data Synthesis
Due to the expected heterogeneity in MRI protocols, field strengths, subject populations, and outcome measures, a **narrative synthesis** approach was employed. Key findings were categorized thematically by:
- Imaging modality (7T, 8T, ex vivo, multi-parametric)
- Disease target (AD, PD, MS, etc.)
- Brain region (e.g., hippocampus, substantia nigra, cortex)
- Clinical or diagnostic relevance

Quantitative findings such as **accuracy rates**, **sensitivity/specificity**, or **volumetric differentials** were reported where applicable. **Meta-analysis was not performed** due to inconsistencies in outcome definitions and lack of pooled data formats.

Ethical Considerations
This review involved only the analysis of **previously published, publicly available data**, and as such, **ethical approval** and **informed consent** were not required. All studies included in this review were assumed to have obtained ethical clearance through their respective institutional review boards, as evidenced by their publication in peer-reviewed journals.
Results

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Summary and Interpretation of Included Studies on the Role of UHD-MRI in Early Detection of Neurodegenerative Diseases

1. Study Designs and Imaging Modalities

Studies span both ex vivo and in vivo imaging methods, predominantly using **7 Tesla (7T)** and even **8T** MRI, enabling sub-millimeter structural visualization of neurodegenerative markers like hippocampal subfields and cortical laminae. Modalities often integrate **TOF-DOI PET**, **OCT**, or **adaptive optics (AO)** for hybrid imaging.

2. Populations and Diagnostic Applications

Studies mainly focus on **Alzheimer's disease (AD)** and **Parkinsonian syndromes**, targeting structures like the **locus coeruleus**, **hippocampus**, **deep gray nuclei**, and **cortical laminae**. Many samples involve early or preclinical patients (e.g., mild cognitive impairment or amyloid-positive but asymptomatic individuals).

3. Quantitative Imaging Results

Findings include improved sensitivity and precision:

- Zeng et al. (2024) achieved **layer-specific segmentation accuracy of 91.2%** using 7T ex vivo imaging.
- Lüsebrink et al. (2013) demonstrated **15–30% enhanced cortical thickness delineation at 7T vs 3T**.
- Parekh et al. (2015) identified hippocampal endfolial pathway boundaries **in 93% of cases**, not visible on 3T.

4. Clinical Implications and Early Detection

These technologies enable visualization of tissue microarchitecture changes long before cognitive symptoms manifest, with potential for earlier therapeutic intervention. Snyder et al. (2021) and Svetozarskiy & Kopishinskaya (2015) underscore how retinal OCT, complementing UHD-MRI, captures retinal thinning correlated with brain atrophy.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

Common constraints include cost, limited availability, and motion artifacts in in vivo setups. Further research is suggested in combining machine learning and ultra-high-resolution imaging for automated diagnosis.

Table 1: Characteristics and Results of UHD-MRI Studies in Early Neurodegenerative Disease Detection

Study	Imaging Type	Population	Target	Resolution/Field	Key Findings
Zeng et al. (2024)	7T ex vivo MRI	Human cortex	Supragranular & infragranular layers	0.5 mm	Layer segmentation 91.2% accuracy
Lüsebrink et al. (2013)	3T vs 7T MRI	Healthy adults	Cortex	0.7 mm (7T)	15–30% enhanced thickness mapping
Parekh et al. (2015)	In vivo 7T	Early AD patients	Hippocampus	Submillimeter	Endfolial pathway visible in 93%
Snyder et al. (2021)	OCT-AO + MRI	Preclinical AD	Retina	Micron scale	Retinal thinning correlates with Aβ burden
Svetozarskiy & Kopishinskaya (2015)	OCT	AD cohort	Retina	Micron scale	Identifies early retinal atrophy
Zeng et al. (2023)	TOF–DOI Prism PET	Human subjects	Neuro targets	0.8 mm^3 voxel	19% improvement over standard PET
Bourekas & Christoforidis (1999)	8T MRI	Pilot sample	Deep gray nuclei	0.5 mm	Visualized vascular changes unseen in 3T
Gizewski et al. (2015)	MRA at 7T	Various	Cerebral microvessels	0.3 mm	High resolution shows plaque microstructure
Kanel et al. (2023)	UHD MRI + PET	AD & Parkinson's	Small brain regions	<1 mm	22% error reduction using hybrid imaging
Doyon et al. (2023)	2 µL PET	Normal vs impaired	Whole brain	2 µL resolution	Early function loss detectable in asymptomatics

Discussion

The findings of this systematic review highlight the significant promise of ultra-high-resolution magnetic resonance imaging (UHD-MRI) in the early detection of neurodegenerative diseases. The reviewed studies converge on the central idea that field strengths of 7 Tesla (7T) and above provide unparalleled detail in visualizing fine anatomical structures—such as cortical laminae, hippocampal subfields, and deep nuclei—often implicated in the early pathological processes of Alzheimer's disease (AD), Parkinson's disease (PD), and other neurodegenerative conditions (Zeng et al., 2024; Fred et al., 2024).

One of the most consistent themes across the included studies was the improved diagnostic precision associated with UHD-MRI. For example, Zeng et al. (2024) reported 91.2% accuracy in segmenting cortical layers in 7T ex vivo scans, surpassing conventional imaging limits. Similarly, Fred et al. (2024) demonstrated that a 3D U-Net model applied to 7T scans improved substantia nigra segmentation, boosting diagnostic sensitivity by 18% in early PD detection. These findings illustrate how machine learning applications, when paired with UHD imaging, can dramatically enhance diagnostic workflows.

From a neuroanatomical standpoint, UHD-MRI excels at delineating hippocampal subfields, an area frequently targeted in early AD studies. Parekh et al. (2015) highlighted how the endfolial pathway—a structure critical to memory encoding—was visible in 93% of 7T scans but nearly undetectable using 3T MRI. This structural resolution is essential, as early hippocampal atrophy precedes clinical dementia by several years (Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative, 2017).

The potential of UHD-MRI extends beyond the hippocampus. Kanel et al. (2023) emphasized its utility in resolving small brain regions, often obscured by partial volume effects in lower-resolution modalities. Their study showed that hybrid imaging combining UHD-MRI and PET resulted in 22% error reduction in small region analysis, a vital advancement for diseases like PD where structures like the substantia nigra and locus coeruleus are affected early.

In addition to anatomical insights, UHD-MRI provides quantitative biomarkers such as cortical thickness and tissue contrast, which are pivotal for tracking disease progression. Lüsebrink et al. (2013) found that 7T imaging produced 15–30% improved cortical thickness measurements compared to 3T, supporting its role in early-stage monitoring. Quantitative mapping, such as T1 and T2* relaxation times, further enriches the dataset, providing metabolic insights that may precede atrophy (Pine et al., 2024).

Studies focusing on retinal OCT and peripheral imaging suggest that UHD imaging technologies are not limited to the brain. Snyder et al. (2021) and Svetozarskiy & Kopishinskaya (2015) demonstrated that retinal nerve fiber layer thinning—detected using OCT—correlates with hippocampal atrophy and amyloid burden. While not a substitute for MRI, these modalities could serve as accessible adjuncts in resource-limited settings.

Nevertheless, technical limitations remain a barrier to routine clinical implementation. Motion artifacts, high cost, and long acquisition times limit patient accessibility. Fred et al. (2024) acknowledged these issues and called for enhanced denoising algorithms and patient-adaptive scanning protocols. Despite these drawbacks, studies like Doyon et al. (2023) suggest that the 2 μL resolution achieved using the UHR-PET scanner, when combined with MRI, can overcome some of these barriers, offering a powerful diagnostic platform.

Another vital consideration is the integration of UHD-MRI with artificial intelligence (AI). The combination of deep learning algorithms and ultra-high-field imaging has already demonstrated improved sensitivity and reproducibility. Elias et al. (2024) and Zeng et al. (2023) independently concluded that AI integration is not only viable but necessary for real-time diagnosis and for reducing inter-operator variability—an often-overlooked challenge in high-resolution imaging.

The heterogeneity of neurodegenerative diseases necessitates imaging modalities that can differentiate overlapping pathologies. For instance, Kanel et al. (2023) observed that small region-specific biomarkers in AD and FTD could only be accurately visualized at field strengths above 7T. Similarly, Zeng et al. (2023) found that combining Prism-PET with UHD-MRI increased lesion detectability by 19%, particularly in mixed dementia cases.

From a policy perspective, the adoption of UHD-MRI should be weighed against its cost-effectiveness and accessibility. Gizewski et al. (2015) and Ineichen et al. (2021) both called for centralized UHD-MRI hubs and shared imaging consortia to broaden access while reducing per-scan costs. These recommendations align with the growing trend toward open-access brain atlases and harmonized scanning protocols.

Importantly, the ethical implications of UHD-MRI, especially regarding early diagnosis, must be considered. Detecting preclinical markers of disease raises concerns about psychological burden, insurance implications, and treatment gaps. However, as Snyder et al. (2021) noted, early intervention trials hinge upon early diagnosis, and UHD-MRI could be the gateway to identifying

suitable candidates before irreversible damage occurs.

In summary, this systematic review affirms that UHD-MRI significantly advances our ability to detect, characterize, and monitor neurodegenerative diseases in their earliest stages. Its integration with AI, hybrid PET systems, and peripheral imaging creates a multi-layered diagnostic ecosystem. While barriers remain, the collective evidence strongly supports UHD-MRI's role as a cornerstone of next-generation neurodiagnostic.

Conclusion

This systematic review demonstrates that ultra-high-resolution MRI, particularly at 7 Tesla and above, provides unprecedented anatomical detail that significantly enhances the early detection of neurodegenerative diseases. From improved visualization of hippocampal subfields and cortical microstructure to more precise delineation of deep gray nuclei, UHD-MRI offers diagnostic capabilities well beyond those of conventional 3T MRI. Studies also highlight the advantages of integrating UHD imaging with automated segmentation, quantitative mapping, and PET hybrid systems, providing a robust and multidimensional framework for preclinical disease detection.

While the clinical utility of UHD-MRI is evident, its broader implementation depends on overcoming key challenges such as cost, scan time, artifact susceptibility, and protocol standardization. Nonetheless, the current body of evidence strongly supports UHD-MRI as a transformative modality in neuroimaging, capable of reshaping how neurodegenerative diseases are diagnosed, monitored, and potentially treated at their earliest and most modifiable stages.

Limitations

Several limitations of this review and the included studies must be acknowledged. First, technological heterogeneity in UHD-MRI protocols—ranging from 7T in vivo to 8T ex vivo—limits direct comparability across studies. Second, most studies had relatively small sample sizes and were conducted in highly controlled research settings, which may not reflect real-world clinical populations. Third, standardized outcome measures for early disease detection are lacking, and follow-up durations were often insufficient to assess long-term prognostic validity. Additionally, publication bias cannot be ruled out, as positive findings are more likely to be reported and published. Finally, due to methodological differences across studies, meta-analysis was not feasible, and a narrative synthesis was employed instead.

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