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RADIATION DOSE OPTIMIZATION IN COMPUTED TOMOGRAPHY: ROLE OF ITERATIVE RECONSTRUCTION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE—A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

Nidish[1], Tanu Devi[2], Palak Sharma[3], Anjali Devi[4], Deeksha[5], Anuj Kumar*[6]

[1]Email nidish9e.23663@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0009-0000-0818-9037, BMRIT 2nd YEAR STUDENT, ARNI UNIVERSITY
[2]Email id- tanuc2806@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0009-0008-8905-5548. BMRIT 2nd YEAR STUDENT, ARNI UNIVERSITY
[3]Email id- sharmakhajuria787@gmail.com, ORCID ID : 0009-0009-9411-9750, BMRIT 2nd YEAR STUDENT ARNI UNIVERSITY
[4]EMAIL:anjalirajput95966@gmail.com, ORCID ID:0009-0009-2242-3681, BMRIT 2nd YEAR ARNI UNIVERSITY
[5]Email - deekshagangwar225@gmail.com, BMRIT 2nd YEAR STUDENT, Rit Group of College, Rudrapur, Uttarakhand
[*6]EMAIL: anuj93annu@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2826-1491, Assistant Professor, Department of Radiology and Imaging Technology, Arni University

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Abstract
Background: The increasing clinical utility of Computed Tomography (CT) has raised significant concerns regarding cumulative patient radiation exposure. Consequently, radiation dose optimization, guided by the As Low As Reasonably Achievable (ALARA) principle, has become a paramount focus in radiological practice.
Objective: This comprehensive review examines the evolution and impact of image reconstruction techniques—from conventional Filtered Back Projection (FBP) to Iterative Reconstruction (IR) and contemporary Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based deep learning reconstruction (DLR)—on CT dose optimization.
Methods and Discussion: While FBP struggles with image noise at low doses, IR successfully enabled dose reductions by mathematically reducing noise, albeit sometimes introducing an artificial image texture. Recently, AI has revolutionized this domain. Rather than serving merely as post-processing denoisers, AI-driven solutions are integrated into the entire dose-optimization pathway, including automated protocol selection and patient-size–based modulation. However, a recent 2025 meta-analysis indicates that while AI significantly improves image quality and contrast-to-noise ratio, its direct impact on absolute dose reduction requires nuanced interpretation, showing a positive trend rather than universally statistically significant pooled reductions. This highlights the need to avoid overclaiming AI's dose-reduction capabilities and instead focus on task-based validation. **Conclusion:** The transition from IR to AI represents a paradigm shift. Future perspectives demand a shift toward personalized, task-based CT protocols where AI orchestrates both acquisition and reconstruction, ensuring optimal diagnostic accuracy at the lowest achievable radiation dose.

Keywords: Computed Tomography; Radiation Dose Optimization; Iterative Reconstruction; Deep Learning Reconstruction; Artificial Intelligence; ALARA; Image Quality.

Introduction

Computed Tomography (CT) has fundamentally transformed diagnostic imaging by providing rapid, high-resolution cross-sectional anatomical details. However, this diagnostic power comes at the cost of ionizing radiation exposure. The dramatic increase in CT utilization over the past two decades has established it as the largest contributor to medical radiation exposure globally [1]. Given the potential stochastic risks of radiation-induced carcinogenesis, minimizing patient exposure without compromising diagnostic confidence remains a critical challenge in modern radiology [2].

1.1 CT and Radiation Exposure

Unlike conventional radiography, CT involves multiple X-ray projections, leading to a comparatively higher radiation burden. The cumulative effective dose from recurrent CT examinations has become a public health concern, particularly for pediatric patients and individuals requiring routine follow-ups (e.g., oncology patients) [3].

1.2 The Need for Dose Optimization and the ALARA Principle

The cornerstone of radiation protection is the ALARA (As Low As Reasonably Achievable) principle. Dose optimization is the delicate balance of reducing radiation exposure while maintaining an image quality sufficient for a specific diagnostic task [4]. Over-reduction of dose can lead to unacceptable image noise, potentially masking subtle pathologies and necessitating a repeat scan. Historically, hardware advancements were the primary tools for achieving ALARA, but the limitations of conventional image reconstruction algorithms created a bottleneck for further dose reduction [5].

2. CT Radiation Dose Metrics

To effectively optimize dose, standardized metrics are required to quantify scanner output and estimate biological risk.

2.1 Volume CT Dose Index (CTDIvol) and Dose Length Product (DLP)

CTDIvol (measured in mGy) represents the radiation dose output of the scanner within a standardized phantom, factoring in beam pitch. DLP (measured in mGy·cm) reflects the total radiation output for a complete examination, calculated by multiplying CTDIvol by scan length [6].

2.2 Effective Dose and Factors Affecting CT Dose

Effective dose (mSv) estimates the stochastic risk of radiation using tissue-specific conversion factors. Radiation exposure is primarily governed by tube current, tube potential, pitch, and scan length. Reducing photon flux exponentially increases quantum mottle (image noise), leading to the historical reliance on reconstruction algorithms to compensate for this signal loss [7].

3. Conventional Filtered Back Projection (FBP)

3.1 Principle and Limitations at Low Dose

For decades, Filtered Back Projection (FBP) was the industry standard due to its computational efficiency. It operates by applying a high-pass mathematical filter to raw projection data and back-projecting it [8]. However, FBP assumes a noise-free CT system. In low-dose settings, FBP amplifies statistical noise and streak artifacts, creating a "dose floor" that cannot be breached without severe degradation in image quality [9].

4. Iterative Reconstruction (IR) Techniques

4.1 Basic Principle, Hybrid IR, and MBIR

To break the FBP dose barrier, Iterative Reconstruction (IR) was introduced. IR reconstructs images through multiple feedback loops, mathematically separating true signal from noise. Early "Hybrid IR" blended FBP and IR techniques. Later, Model-Based IR (MBIR) incorporated complex statistical models of photon behavior, system optics, and electronic noise, enabling dose reductions up to 50–70% compared to FBP [10, 11].

4.2 Limitations of IR

Despite its success, IR alters the Noise Power Spectrum (NPS). This disproportionate removal of high-frequency noise often results in a "plastic" or overly smooth image texture, which can visually fatigue radiologists and potentially obscure low-contrast lesions. Additionally, MBIR requires massive computational power [12].

5. Artificial Intelligence in CT Dose Optimization

The limitations of IR have paved the way for Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML), specifically Deep Learning (DL), to redefine dose optimization.

5.1 Deep-Learning Reconstruction (DLR)

DLR utilizes deep Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) trained on massive datasets of high-dose, high-quality reference images (often MBIR or high-dose FBP) paired with low-dose acquisitions. Once deployed, the neural network can rapidly reconstruct low-dose raw data into high-quality images without the iterative computational delay of MBIR [13].

5.2 AI as a Complete Dose-Optimization Pathway

Crucially, AI should not be viewed merely as a post-processing "image denoising" tool. Contemporary literature emphasizes AI as an integrated pathway across the entire CT workflow [14].

- Patient-Size–Based Optimization: AI algorithms now utilize 3D camera data to calculate patient habitus and precisely center the patient, automatically optimizing automatic tube current modulation (ATCM) [15].
- Automated Protocol Optimization: AI assists in selecting the optimal kVp and mAs based on the specific clinical indication (e.g., angiography vs. non-contrast head), ensuring the scanner only delivers the dose necessary for that specific diagnostic task.

6. IR vs AI-Based Reconstruction

6.1 Radiation Dose and Image Quality Parameters

Comparisons between IR and AI demonstrate profound differences in image handling. AI consistently provides superior spatial resolution and Contrast-to-Noise Ratio (CNR) at equivalent or lower doses compared to IR [16]. Unlike IR, which alters the NPS and creates artificial textures, well-trained DLR models maintain a noise texture closely resembling traditional FBP, thereby preserving diagnostic confidence for radiologists [17].

6.2 The 2025 Meta-Analysis Context

While the transition to AI is revolutionary, a critical perspective is necessary. A comprehensive 2025 meta-analysis evaluating AI-based CT interventions confirmed significant improvements in objective image quality and subjective diagnostic confidence. However, regarding absolute dose reduction, the pooled analysis showed a positive trend but was not uniformly statistically significant across all vendors and anatomical regions [18]. This indicates that while AI facilitates ultra-low-dose imaging, claims that "AI universally reduces dose" are oversimplified. The primary immediate benefit of AI is unparalleled image quality preservation at lower dose spectrums, rather than an automatic, drastic reduction in all clinical scenarios.

7. Clinical Applications

- Chest CT and Low-Dose Lung Cancer Screening: AI excels in high-contrast regions. DLR has enabled ultra-low-dose chest CTs (approaching the dose of a standard chest X-ray) without sacrificing the detection of ground-glass opacities or small nodules [19].
- Head CT: DLR effectively reduces beam-hardening artifacts from the skull base and improves gray-white matter differentiation at standard doses, which is crucial for early stroke detection [20].
- Abdominal CT: In low-contrast abdominal imaging, AI successfully maintains lesion conspicuity (e.g., hepatic metastases) even in obese patients where photon starvation typically limits IR performance [21].
- Pediatric CT: AI-driven optimization is highly beneficial for pediatric populations, minimizing stochastic risk while maintaining rapid scan times to avoid sedation [22].

8. Challenges and Limitations

Despite robust advantages, AI in CT reconstruction faces ongoing challenges:

- Loss of Subtle Pathology and Over-smoothing: Over-aggressive AI denoising can inadvertently erase true anatomical micro-structures, mimicking the limitations of early IR algorithms.
- AI Hallucination Concerns: A significant concern with generative AI models is the potential to "hallucinate" or fabricate anatomical structures that do not exist, or artificially alter the morphology of subtle lesions based on the network's training bias [23].
- Generalizability and Vendor-Specific Algorithms: Most DLR algorithms are proprietary and vendor-specific. An AI model trained on one vendor's scanner may not generalize well to different hardware, diverse patient demographics, or atypical pathologies not represented in its training data [24].

9. Future Perspectives

The future of CT dose optimization lies in Task-Based Optimization. Protocols will evolve from generic anatomical scans to highly specific diagnostic tasks (e.g., "rule out 2mm renal calculus"). AI will soon facilitate fully AI-controlled acquisition, where real-time feedback during the initial scout scan dictates the precise photon modulation required millisecond by millisecond. Ultimately, personalized CT protocols driven by AI will ensure that every patient receives a bespoke scan tailored to their physiology and clinical question, cementing ultra-low-dose CT as the global standard [25].

10. Conclusion

The evolution of CT image reconstruction from Filtered Back Projection to Iterative Reconstruction, and now to Artificial Intelligence, marks a continuous pursuit of the ALARA principle. While IR broke the initial dose barriers, it introduced textural limitations. AI and Deep Learning Reconstruction represent a holistic dose-optimization pathway—from automated patient positioning to advanced image reconstruction—preserving natural noise textures and maximizing diagnostic accuracy. However, cautious implementation is essential; relying on task-based validations rather than blanket assumptions of dose reduction will ensure that AI serves as a reliable tool for enhancing patient safety in modern radiology.

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