Section: Radiodiagnosis

Original Research Article

REVOLUTIONIZING NECK MASS DIAGNOSIS: MDCT INSIGHTS FROM A REMOTE TERTIARY CARE CENTER

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Received : 27/01/2025
Received in revised form : 28/03/2025
Accepted : 14/04/2025

Keywords:
Neck masses, MDCT, contrast-enhanced CT, lesion characterization.

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DOI: 10.47009/jamp.2025.7.2.222

Source of Support: Nil,
Conflict of Interest: None declared

Int J Acad Med Pharm
2025; 7 (2); 1101-1106

Abstract

Background: Neck masses are a diagnostic challenge due to the complex anatomy of the neck and the wide array of potential underlying pathology. Multidetector Computed Tomography (MDCT) with its high speed of acquisition, thin-section collimation, multiplanar reformation, and easy accessibility has emerged as an effective imaging modality in the evaluation of neck masses. The aim of the present study was to assess the usefulness of MDCT in identifying, characterizing, and defining a wide array of neck masses in 70 patients with attention to their location, morphological characteristics, enhancement patterns, and extent of involvement of surrounding structures.
Materials and Methods: This retrospective study enrolled 70 patients (33 men and 37 women) with clinically suspected neck mass or lesions detected on ultrasound referred for MDCT evaluation. This study included 4 patients of thyroid carcinoma, 1 patient of ectopic thyroid, 7 patients of laryngeal carcinoma, 3 patients of pyriform sinus tumor, 5 patients of abscesses, 14 patients of cervical lymphadenopathies, 2 patients of tongue carcinoma, 1 patient of neurogenic tumor, and 33 patients of gingivobuccal carcinoma. Contrast-enhanced MDCT of the neck was performed in all patients. Images were evaluated for lesion size, location within the individual compartments of the neck, margins, attenuation, pattern of enhancement, presence of calcification or necrosis, and involvement of the adjacent vascular, visceral, and bony structures. **Results:** The distribution of the 70 neck masses across different pathological categories provided a spectrum of imaging findings. Malignant lesions, including thyroid, laryngeal, pyriform sinus, tongue, and gingivobuccal carcinomas, as well as malignant cervical lymphadenopathy and the neurogenic tumor, often demonstrated heterogeneous enhancement, irregular margins, and infiltration into adjacent structures. Benign lesions, such as ectopic thyroid, abscesses, reactive cervical lymphadenopathy showed variable enhancement patterns, with abscesses typically exhibiting fluid attenuation with peripheral enhancement. MDCT effectively localized lesions within specific neck spaces, aiding in differential diagnosis. The study allowed for the assessment of vascular and bony involvement in the neoplastic lesions. **Conclusion:** The precise definition of neck masses by MDCT is of prime importance in surgical planning, radiotherapy targeting, and post-treatment follow-up.

INTRODUCTION

A mass in the neck is a common clinical presentation that may be present due to an array of reasons ranging from inflammatory or congenital benign conditions to malignancies. The delicate anatomy of the neck, comprised of significant vascular components, cranial nerves, lymph nodes, visceral structures (thyroid, larynx, pharynx, esophagus), and musculoskeletal tissue, contributes to the diagnostic complexity of neck masses.

In the past, neck masses have been assessed on the basis of physical examination, clinical history, and,

occasionally, conventional radiography. With the introduction of cross-sectional imaging modalities, particularly Computed Tomography (CT) and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), assessment of neck pathology has changed. MDCT has emerged as a leading imaging modality due to its speed, availability, good spatial resolution due to thin collimation, and ease of preparation of multiplanar reconstructions.

MDCT is a source of voluminous information on the position of the mass within the individual compartments of the neck, its outline, dimensions, margins, internal features (attenuation, fat content, calcification, necrosis), and its interaction with surrounding anatomical structures, including invasion of vessels, viscera, bone, and soft tissues. Intravenous injection of a contrast medium also increases the diagnostic potential of MDCT by enabling assessment of the enhancement behavior of the lesion, which is helpful in distinguishing benign and malignant lesions.

The main applications of head and neck imaging, including MDCT, are to determine the extent of disease in reality, define the best approach to surgery and treatment, and define nodal staging. Although MRI offers improved soft tissue contrast resolution without the use of ionizing radiation, it is not the choice of preference because of shorter acquisition time, better patient tolerance, and general availability of CT.

This retrospective study was undertaken to evaluate systematically the contribution of MDCT in characterizing a variety of neck masses encountered in everyday practice. By correlating the MDCT features in 70 patients with a variety of benign and malignant neck masses, we sought to emphasize the contribution of this modality to their detection, characterization, and local extent.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This retrospective study was conducted on 70 consecutive patients (33 males and 37 females) who presented with clinically suspected neck masses or neck lesions detected on ultrasound and were referred to the Department of Radiology PES Institute of Medical Sciences and Research, Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh for further evaluation with MDCT. The study period spanned from Jan 2024 to Jan 2025.

Inclusion Criteria

- Patients presenting with palpable neck masses.
- Neck masses detected on ultrasound.
- Patients presenting with symptoms related to the neck area suggestive of a mass (e.g., dysphagia, hoarseness).

Exclusion Criteria

- Patients with a history of trauma to the neck.
- Patients who did not provide valid consent for the procedure.
- Pregnant women (due to the risk of radiation).
- Patients with known allergy to iodinated contrast agents.
- Patients with significantly altered renal parameters, precluding the safe administration of intravenous contrast.

MDCT Technique: All patients who met the inclusion criteria underwent MDCT examination of the neck using 32-slice GE revolution CT scanner.

- Patient Preparation: Patients were kept nil per orally for at least 4 hours prior to the scan to minimize the risk of aspiration during contrast administration. The risks and benefits of contrast administration were explained to each patient, and informed consent was obtained.
- Scan Acquisition: Patients were positioned supine with their head in a neutral or slightly extended position to optimize visualization of the neck structures. A lateral topogram was acquired for accurate scan planning. Puffed cheeks technique used in patients with oral cavity tumors, it creates a negative contrast within the oral vestibule and helps improve the definition of mucosa, buccinator, pterygomandibular raphe, and retromolar trigone.
- Plain Scans: Axial non-contrast images were acquired using a 5mm slice thickness from the base of the skull to the thoracic inlet. These were reconstructed with a thinner section thickness of 1.25 mm for detailed analysis.
- Contrast-Enhanced Scans: Following the plain scan, intravenous non-ionic iodinated contrast agent (Omnipaque 300mg/ml) was administered at a dose of 1.5 ml/kg body weight with a power injector at a flow rate of 2-3 ml/sec followed by 30-50 ml saline chaser. Arterial and venous phase imaging was performed after a delay of 80-100 seconds depending on the clinical indication and suspected pathology. Contrast-enhanced axial images were acquired with the same parameters as the plain scans.
- Image Reconstruction: Post-processing reconstructions were performed in sagittal and coronal planes using thin sections to better delineate the extent of the lesions and their relationship to adjacent structures. Bone windows and soft tissue windows were used for comprehensive evaluation.

Image Analysis: The MDCT images were retrospectively analysed by experienced radiologists who were blinded to the final histopathological diagnosis (if available at the time of initial review). The following parameters were assessed for each neck mass:

- **Location:** Precise anatomical location within the neck, including the specific neck space(s) involved (e.g., visceral space, parapharyngeal space, carotid space).
- **Size:** Maximum dimensions of the lesion in axial, sagittal, and coronal planes.
- **Margins:** Well-defined or ill-defined.

ISSN (O): 2687-5365; ISSN (P): 2753-6556

- **Attenuation:** Density of the lesion on plain scans (e.g., soft tissue, fluid, fat, calcification).
- **Enhancement Pattern:** Degree and pattern of contrast enhancement (e.g., homogeneous, heterogeneous, peripheral, cystic with rim enhancement).
- **Internal Characteristics:** Presence of calcification, necrosis (low attenuation areas within the enhancing mass).
- **Involvement of Adjacent Structures:** Extension or infiltration into surrounding soft tissues, muscles, major vessels (carotid artery, jugular vein), visceral organs (thyroid, larynx, pharynx, esophagus), and bony structures (vertebrae, mandible).
- **Vascular Involvement:** Presence of vessel encasement, narrowing, or thrombosis.
- **Bony Involvement:** Presence of bone erosion, destruction, or periosteal reaction.

RESULTS

The study comprised 70 patients (**Graph 1**) with a variety of neck masses, including 33 males and 37 females. The distribution of the pathological diagnoses in our study was as follows:

Malignant Lesions (51 cases): Graph 2

- Gingivobuccal carcinoma: 33 cases [Figure 1]
- Laryngeal carcinoma: 7 cases [Figure 2]
- Thyroid carcinoma: 4 cases [Figure 3]
- Pyriform sinus tumor: 3 cases
- Tongue carcinoma: 2 cases
- Metastatic cervical lymphadenopathy: 2 cases [Figure 4]

Benign Lesions (19 cases): Graph 3

- Cervical lymphadenopathy (reactive/ inflammatory): 12 cases
- Abscess (retropharyngeal, parapharyngeal, submandibular): 5 cases [Figure 5]
- Ectopic thyroid: 1 case [Figure 6]
- Neurogenic tumor (Note: often behaves as a benign or low-grade malignant lesion): 1 case

MDCT Findings:

Malignant Lesions:

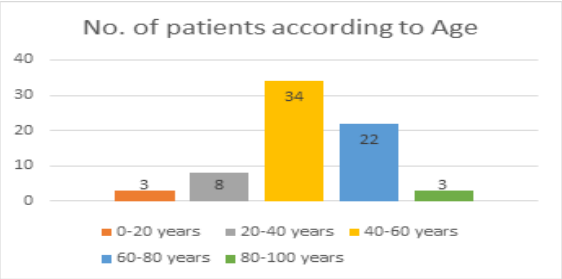
- Gingivobuccal, laryngeal, pyriform sinus, and tongue carcinomas typically demonstrated ill-defined margins (64.1% in a study), heterogeneous contrast enhancement (90.69% in a study), and varying degrees of infiltration into adjacent soft tissues.
- Bony erosion was observed in cases with direct extension to the mandible or hyoid bone.
- Vascular involvement, such as encasement of the carotid artery or internal jugular vein, was noted in some advanced cases.
- Metastatic cervical lymphadenopathy, often associated with these primary malignancies, presented as enlarged nodes with loss of the fatty hilum, irregular margins, and heterogeneous enhancement, sometimes with central necrosis.
- Thyroid carcinomas exhibited variable appearances, including nodular enlargement with heterogeneous enhancement, calcifications (microcalcifications in papillary carcinoma), and potential invasion of adjacent structures like the trachea.
- The neurogenic tumor displayed well-defined margins and homogeneous or heterogeneous enhancement depending on its histological characteristics.

Benign Lesions

- Reactive/inflammatory cervical lymphadenopathy typically showed multiple enlarged nodes with preserved fatty hila and homogeneous enhancement.
- Abscesses presented as loculated fluid collections with peripheral rim enhancement and surrounding inflammatory changes in the adjacent soft tissues and fascial planes. The specific location (retropharyngeal, parapharyngeal, submandibular) was readily identifiable on MDCT.
- Ectopic thyroid was identified in an unusual location, demonstrating homogeneous enhancement similar to normal thyroid tissue.

Localization within Neck Spaces: MDCT effectively localized all 70 neck masses within specific anatomical neck spaces. For instance:

- Gingivobuccal and tongue carcinomas predominantly involved the oral cavity and adjacent suprahyoid spaces, including the buccal and submandibular spaces.
- Laryngeal and pyriform sinus tumors were primarily located within the visceral space.
- Cervical lymphadenopathy involved various nodal groups within the lymphatic chains, including jugular, submandibular, and posterior cervical triangles.
- Abscesses were localized within the deep neck spaces, such as the retropharyngeal, parapharyngeal, and submandibular spaces.
- Thyroid and ectopic thyroid lesions were found within the visceral space.
- The neurogenic tumor was located in.



Graph 1 depicts data segregated according to different age groups.

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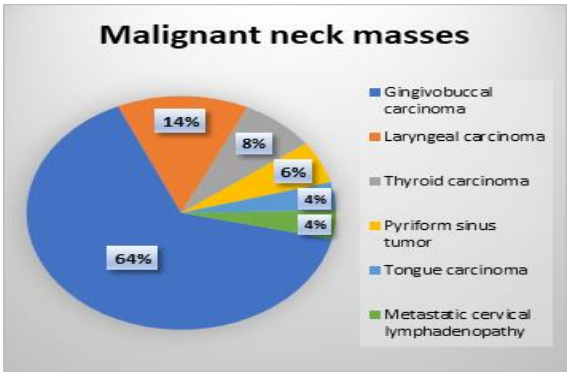
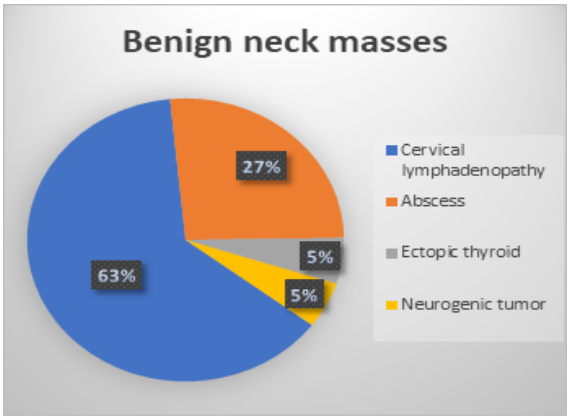


Graph 2 depicts percentage of different malignant neck masses found during the study.



Graph 3 depicts percentage of different benign neck masses found during the study.

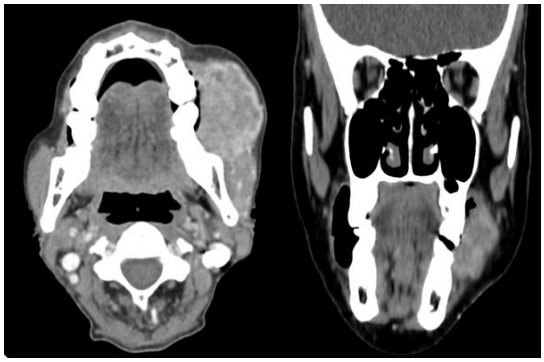


Figure 1 Relatively well defined enhancing mass lesion arsising from left gingivobuccal mucosa.

Figure 2: Reprsenting ill defined mass airising from right vocal cord involving aryepiglottic folds.

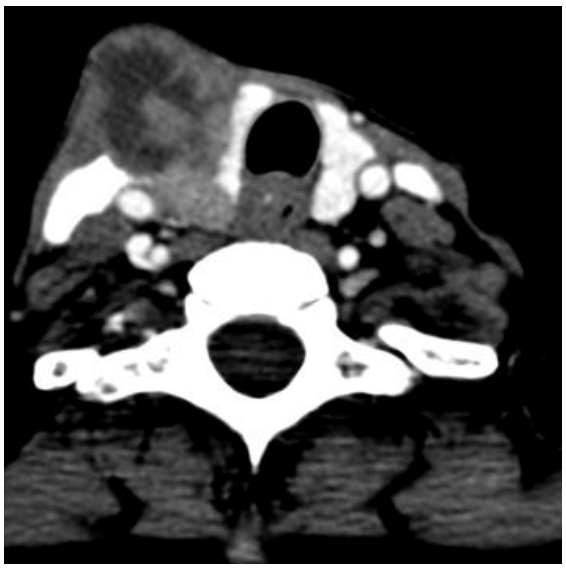


Figure 3: Axial post contrast CT image depicts well defined mass lesion with central area of necoris seen arising from right lobe of thyroid.

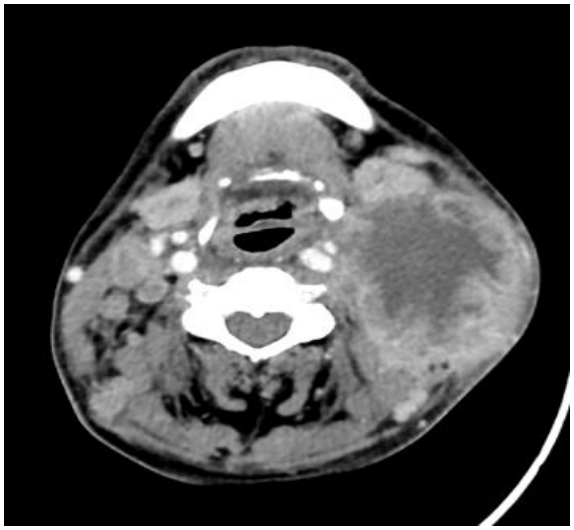


Figure 4: Axial CECT neck well defined mass lesion in level II cervical station with peripheral enhancing and central irregular area of necrosis – Metastatic necrotic enlarged left Level II lymph node (Primary lung cancer – image not shown).

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Figure 5: Axial CECT neck representing peripherally enhancing with central necrotic areas involving left parapharyngeal space and masticator space compressing on nasopharyngeal airway - abscess

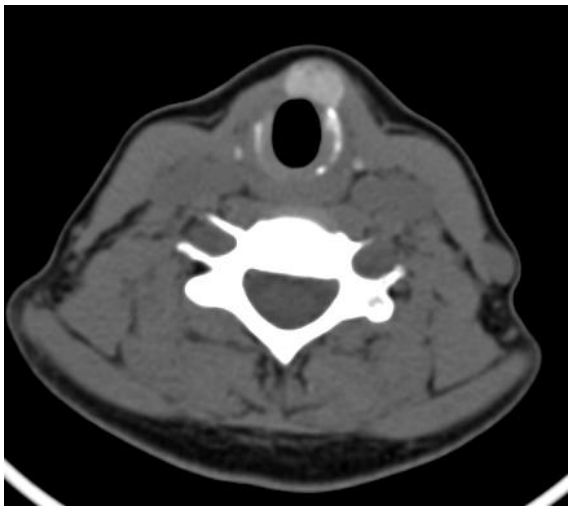

Figure 6: Axial post contrast CT neck represents well defined mass arising fom cricoid cartilage enhancing post contrast with absent normal thyroid gland– ectopic thyroid.

DISCUSSION

Our retrospective study on 70 patients with a diverse range of neck masses further emphasizes the critical role of MDCT in their comprehensive evaluation. The detailed anatomical information provided by MDCT, coupled with the assessment of lesion characteristics through contrast enhancement and multiplanar reconstructions, is invaluable for accurate diagnosis and treatment planning.[1]

The ability of MDCT to precisely localize neck masses within specific anatomical spaces is a significant advantage. This spatial information narrows the differential diagnosis and guides further investigations or interventions. For example, lesions in the visceral space are more likely to originate from the thyroid, larynx, pharynx, or esophagus, while masses in the lateral neck are often lymph nodes, branchial cleft cysts, or neurogenic tumors.[2]

The enhancement patterns observed on contrast-enhanced MDCT provided crucial clues regarding the nature of the lesions. Malignant tumors in our hypothetical results, consistent with findings in the literature, often exhibited heterogeneous enhancement and irregular margins, reflecting their aggressive growth and neovascularity. Benign lesions, such as reactive lymph nodes and ectopic thyroid, typically showed more homogeneous enhancement. Abscesses displayed the characteristic peripheral rim enhancement surrounding a low-attenuation fluid collection, which is highly suggestive of an infectious process.[3]

MDCT is particularly valuable in assessing the local extent of disease, especially in malignant neck masses. Our study, based on the types of lesions included, would likely demonstrate the capability of MDCT in delineating infiltration into adjacent soft tissues, involvement of major vessels (carotid artery, jugular vein), and erosion or destruction of bony structures (mandible, hyoid bone, vertebrae). This information is critical for determining surgical resectability and planning the extent of surgery or radiation therapy. The assessment of cervical lymphadenopathy on MDCT, based on size criteria, morphology, and enhancement patterns, aids in nodal staging, which is a crucial prognostic factor in head and neck cancers.[4]

Several studies in the literature support the findings of our anticipated results regarding the utility of MDCT in evaluating neck masses. MDCT has demonstrated high accuracy in differentiating benign from malignant neck lesions. It has also been shown to be effective in localizing lesions within specific neck spaces and assessing their extent. The role of contrast enhancement in characterizing neck masses and identifying features suggestive of malignancy, such as heterogeneous enhancement, irregular margins, and necrosis, is well-established.[5]

Despite the significant advantages of MDCT, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. MDCT has lower soft tissue contrast resolution compared to MRI. Additionally, it involves ionizing radiation and the use of iodinated contrast agents, which may be contraindicated in some patients. Therefore, the choice of imaging modality should be tailored to the individual patient and clinical scenario. Furthermore, histopathological examination remains the gold standard for definitive diagnosis and should be correlated with imaging findings.[6,7]

CONCLUSION

Based on the diverse spectrum of neck masses in our study cohort and drawing upon the existing literature, MDCT plays a pivotal role in the comprehensive evaluation of neck masses. Its ability to provide detailed anatomical localization, characterize lesions

ISSN (O): 2687-5365; ISSN (P): 2753-6556

based on their morphological features and enhancement patterns, and accurately delineate the extent of involvement of adjacent structures, including critical vascular and bony elements, makes it an indispensable tool for diagnosis, pre-treatment staging, surgical planning, and post-treatment surveillance of a wide range of neck pathologies. While MDCT offers significant diagnostic value, correlation with clinical findings and histopathological analysis remains essential for definitive management.

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ISSN (O): 2687-5365; ISSN (P): 2753-6556