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The RSNA Cervical Spine Fracture CT Dataset

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Cervical spine injuries are a common form of traumatic injury, affecting more than 3 million patients per year in North America (1). Cervical fractures can lead to substantial disability, as 10%–11% of all cervical spinal fractures result in spinal cord injury (2). In the United States alone, more than 1 million patients are evaluated for suspected cervical spine injury annually (3). Most of these cases are assessed in the emergent setting and, in the adult population, almost exclusively by using CT, because of its inherent improved quality and coverage relative to plain film radiography.

Interpretation of cervical spine CT can prove challenging, especially in the older population, as images are commonly confounded by superimposed degenerative disease and osteoporosis, making fracture detection more complex. Given the relatively high incidence of cervical injury in trauma patients and the potential for high morbidity, there is a need for fast and accurate diagnosis. This provides an excellent clinical use case for the assistance of an artificial intelligence (AI) algorithm. Although a few cervical spine fracture algorithms have been developed (4–6), most have limited geographic representation within the training data, restricting model generalizability. Even a model trained on a multi-institution dataset (6) had very limited diagnostic accuracy when used in practice on external datasets (7). Additionally, the lack of publicly available, expertly annotated cervical spine fracture datasets hinders further improvements in model performance using recently developed machine learning algorithms.

The Radiological Society of North America (RSNA) collaborated with the American Society of Neuroradiology

(ie, ASNR) and the American Society of Spine Radiology (ie, ASSR) to create the largest publicly available, multi-institutional and multinational expert-labeled dataset of cervical spine fracture CT images for AI research, which was featured in the RSNA 2022 AI Challenge. This dataset is hosted publicly on a machine learning competition platform to help develop machine learning algorithms that can assist in the detection of cervical spine fractures. A summary of how the dataset was constructed can be found in Appendix S1.

Dataset Description and Usage

The final dataset consisted of images of the cervical spine in Digital Imaging and Communications in Medicine (DICOM) format, two comma-separated values files, and pixel-level segmentation of the cervical spine in Neuroimaging Informatics Technology Initiative (NIFTI) format. The dataset included 3112 CT scans; demographics and frequency of fractures per cervical spine level and the number of studies from each institution are shown in Table 1. The dataset is composed of 1445 studies positive for fracture (954 men, 491 women; mean age, 56.78 years \pm 21.97 [SD]), of which 235 were bounding box annotated. This is supplemented with 1667 studies negative for fracture (1022 men, 645 women; mean age, 50.61 years \pm 21.29). Table 2 shows the data distribution used for the Kaggle competition, with 2019 cases in the training set, 304 cases in the public test set, and 789 cases in the private test set.

Image files were organized into folders according to values stored in the Study Instance UID DICOM

Abbreviations

AI = artificial intelligence, DICOM = Digital Imaging and Communications in Medicine, NIFTI = Neuroimaging Informatics Technology Initiative, RSNA = Radiological Society of North America

Summary

This dataset is composed of cervical spine CT images with annotations related to fractures; it is available at <https://www.kaggle.com/competitions/rsna-2022-cervical-spine-fracture-detection/>.

Key Points

- This is, to our knowledge, the largest publicly available adult cervical spine fracture CT dataset, with contributions from 12 institutions across nine countries and six continents.
- This dataset includes medical images, segmentations, and expert annotations from a large cohort of radiologists with subspecialist expertise in spine imaging.
- This dataset was used successfully for the Radiological Society of North America 2022 Cervical Spine Fracture Detection competition hosted on the Kaggle machine learning platform. The dataset is made freely available to the research community for noncommercial use.

Keywords

CT, Informatics, Head/Neck, Spine, Feature Detection, Diagnosis, Segmentation

attribute, a unique study-level identifier. Individual image files within each folder were named according to their position within the stack of DICOM images via the Instance Number DICOM attribute.

The `train.csv` file contains study-level ground truth labels for the training set. Study Instance UID was the unique study-level identifier. The `patient_overall` column indicated if any cervical vertebrae were fractured, while the `C1–C7` columns specified each level of the cervical spine. A value of 0 indicates absence and 1 indicates presence of fracture at that level.

The `train_bounding_boxes.csv` file contains information regarding the fracture bounding boxes for a subset of the training set. Study Instance UID is the unique study-level identifier. The `x` and `y` columns specify the upper left-hand corner position of the bounding box, or the point closest to (0, 0). The width and height indicate the bounding box dimensions. The `slice_number` column indicates the image number within the stack and can be concatenated with “.dcm” to generate the DICOM file name.

The segmentation files were named according to Study Instance UID and represent a subset of the training set. The segmentation labels have values of 1 to 7 for C1 to C7 (seven cervical vertebrae), 8 to 19 for the 12 thoracic vertebrae, and 0 for everything else. All segmented studies have C1 to C7 labels with variable inclusion of thoracic labels. The provided NIFTI files consisted of segmentation in the sagittal plane, while the DICOM files were provided in the axial plane. NIFTI header information was used to determine the appropriate orientation to ensure that the DICOM image and segmentation planes matched, as demonstrated in

Figure 2. Without this information, there was a risk of having the segmentations flipped in the z-axis and/or mirrored in the x-axis.

Discussion

We curated and created expert annotation of a large high-quality cervical spine fracture CT dataset from 12 institutions from six different continents, which, to our knowledge, represents the largest public dataset of cervical spine fractures currently available. Great care was also taken to ensure that data were distributed equally with respect to sex, age, contributing site, and fracture level across the training, validation, and test sets. This additional effort helped to mitigate against unexpected or untoward performance drops between training and external or internal testing. The successful production of this dataset is partially attributed to using unconventional annotation methods by means of prelabeling. Such labels were provided by contributing sites, which allowed for the redistribution of the annotation burden.

Given the size and complexity of the dataset, much time and consideration were devoted to developing an annotation strategy that maximized the use of the annotated data while avoiding overburdening our volunteer annotators. The depth of annotations from patient level to pixel level was considered. Eventually, a hybrid schema was chosen in which images from each patient in the dataset were given a study-level annotation detailing each cervical spine level that was described as fractured in the original radiologist’s report or tagged as no fracture in the control dataset. A smaller subset of patient images (approximately 16% of positive fracture cases) were assigned image-level annotations, including bounding boxes enclosing all the fractured vertebral elements on a given image. This was thought to be the best strategy to optimize the effort of the volunteers to provide “just enough” useful image-level annotations in the dataset along with the large number of additional studies with patient-level annotations. Through trial and error, the most reproducible method for image-level annotations was to have the annotators draw bounding boxes first on key sections where the fracture pattern reached a relative maximum or minimum cross-sectional area. Then the annotators skipped ahead through the image stack to the next relative maximum or minimum section and interpolated the bounding boxes in between these sections.

Establishing a strong overlap between the annotators proved to be challenging. Detailed initial instruction included example bounding boxes, a document outlining the process with image examples, and an instructional video. To help ensure accurate annotation that adhered to the provided instructions, all annotators were provided practice examinations to familiarize themselves with the tools. Performance during the practice phase was evaluated based on the ground truth bounding boxes defined by the committee, and annotators were retrained as needed. The final ground truth bounding box was calculated by taking the largest sum of all individual bounding boxes (Fig 1), which focuses on the sensitivity of fracture detection. An additional subset of cases containing segmentation masks of the vertebrae was also provided so that this could be used to help train the algorithm

Table 1: Demographic Distribution and Number of Positive and Negative Studies for Fracture per Institution

Site	Sex		Age (y)	Positive Cases	Negative Cases	Fracture Level Distribution						
	M	F				C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7
Site 1	212	115	61.37 ± 20.98 (19–97)	169	158	32	47	11	23	24	41	68
Site 2	68	67	52.74 ± 24.35 (18–101)	92	43	15	30	4	12	13	26	33
Site 3	175	112	58.57 ± 22.34 (18–97)	100	187	15	23	10	13	20	28	44
Site 4	245	108	45.86 ± 19.19 (18–92)	182	171	34	50	28	32	48	62	75
Site 5	223	133	51.03 ± 20.95 (18–95)	176	180	26	58	17	18	30	60	76
Site 6	37	29	47.83 ± 21.92 (18–92)	30	36	2	12	3	4	4	4	11
Site 7	234	188	60.22 ± 22.32 (18–104)	187	235	28	59	17	25	35	41	62
Site 8	176	60	42.91 ± 19.28 (18–92)	96	140	18	13	10	22	25	34	34
Site 9	31	8	44.1 ± 17.81 (19–72)	11	28	0	8	2	1	1	2	1
Site 10	94	55	47.38 ± 19.64 (20–90)	41	108	4	9	6	4	7	20	15
Site 11	207	80	50.83 ± 18.74 (18–93)	144	143	35	50	9	15	29	46	67
Site 12	274	181	57.17 ± 21.68 (18–99)	217	238	32	62	21	28	49	71	88
Total	1976	1136	53.78 ± 21.83 (18–104)	1445	1667	241	421	138	197	285	435	574

Note.—Age data are reported as means ± SDs, with ranges in parentheses. The frequency of fracture(s) at each cervical spine vertebra level are tallied for the positive cases. A single study may contain multiple fractures, and thus, the sum of all fracture levels may be greater than the total number of positive cases.

Table 2: Demographic and Case Distribution among Training, Public Test, and Private Test Datasets Hosted on Kaggle

Site	Sex		Age (y)	Positive Cases	Negative Cases	Fracture Level Distribution						
	M	F				C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7
Training	1278	741	53.65 ± 21.57 (16–104)	961	1058	146	285	73	108	162	277	393
Public test	189	115	52.51 ± 20.73 (18–101)	122	182	26	32	8	7	17	30	55
Private test	509	280	53.40 ± 22.86 (18–101)	362	427	69	104	57	82	106	128	126

Note.—Age data are reported as means ± SDs, with ranges in parentheses. The frequency of fracture(s) at each cervical spine vertebra level is tallied for the positive cases.

to detect the fracture level (Fig 2). Thus, this dataset provides multimodal annotation formats of different levels: patient level, vertebra level, bounding box, and segmentation.

The decision to request an abstraction of the radiology report from contributing sites was primarily to explore a different way to reduce the cognitive effort required in the time-consuming annotation process of an entire dataset from scratch. The rationale

was that the report generated at the point of care offers the most accurate assessment, as this is when the radiologist is delivering professional services and attention is most concentrated on the task at hand. Experience has shown that volunteer annotators, even under the best of circumstances, are not reviewing examinations under the same level of scrutiny as they might in the clinical environment (12). Our goal was to redistribute and

“front-load” the annotation burden and use our volunteer annotators in more of a quality-control activity. This approach, in addition to the requirement of smaller batches to contribute and annotate, offered the best balance without overburdening either the data contributors or the volunteer annotators. The challenge to this method is annotator disagreement with the ground truth report. In response to this, annotators were allowed to dispute the ground truth labels, which were subsequently adjudicated by organizing committee members.

In the future, the current dataset may be optimized by increasing the number and detail of image-level annotations or possibly by adding pixel-level annotations. The value of the dataset is not limited only to cervical spine fracture detection. For example, fractures outside of the cervical spine, including skull base, upper thoracic spine, and posterior rib fractures, were all commonly encountered and could be annotated as well to enhance the value of the dataset.

While the fracture-level distribution in the dataset is imbalanced, potentially affecting algorithm training and performance, the data distribution of fractures is similar to what has been described in real-world scenarios. For example, a multicenter study evaluated blunt traumatic cervical spine fractures at 21 different institutions and found that the most frequently fractured vertebrae were C2, C6, and C7, which together accounted for 63.3% of all cervical spine fractures (13). In the RSNA 2022 Cervical Spine Fracture Detection dataset, these three levels were also the most frequently fractured (with C7 being the most common) and accounted for 62.4% of all cervical spine fractures. A real-world distribution of the data is useful for clinical implementation of a fracture detection algorithm trained on the dataset.

There are several limitations of this dataset. The strict inclusion criteria of axial noncontrast 1-mm-thick section images may limit its application to practices that have different section acquisitions or reformat their CT cervical spine scans from a postcontrast acquisition. Additionally, the dataset treats acute and chronic fractures the same; however, detection of chronic fractures may not be as clinically relevant when evaluating trauma patients. Furthermore, this dataset excluded patients who underwent prior surgery because of the challenges of streak artifacts and altered anatomy. As such, machine learning models trained using this dataset may underperform on postsurgical scans of the cervical spine. Finally, evaluation for cervical spine fractures can be challenging, especially in the setting of severe trauma, and some fractures were visualized that were not accounted for in the radiologist’s report. In these cases, the radiologist’s report was chosen to represent the ground truth because of the limitations of viewing these studies in retrospect on a web-based platform. This method is obviously limited compared with radiologists reading these studies in real time on high-resolution monitors within their picture archiving and communication systems environment, with clinical history and prior imaging studies available to assist in image interpretation.

In summary, the RSNA 2022 Cervical Spine Fracture Detection dataset is, to our knowledge, the largest and most geographically diverse, publicly available expert annotated dataset of cervical spine fracture CT studies. The intent of this dataset is to inspire and enable advances in machine learning research to improve the quality, efficiency, and availability of patient care



Figure 1: Axial noncontrast cervical spine CT image with bounding boxes surrounding the fractured vertebrae, annotated by individual neuro-radiologists (red). Ground truth bounding box (cyan) was calculated by taking the largest sum of all individual bounding boxes, representing the largest bounding box.

worldwide. This dataset is made freely available to all researchers for noncommercial use.

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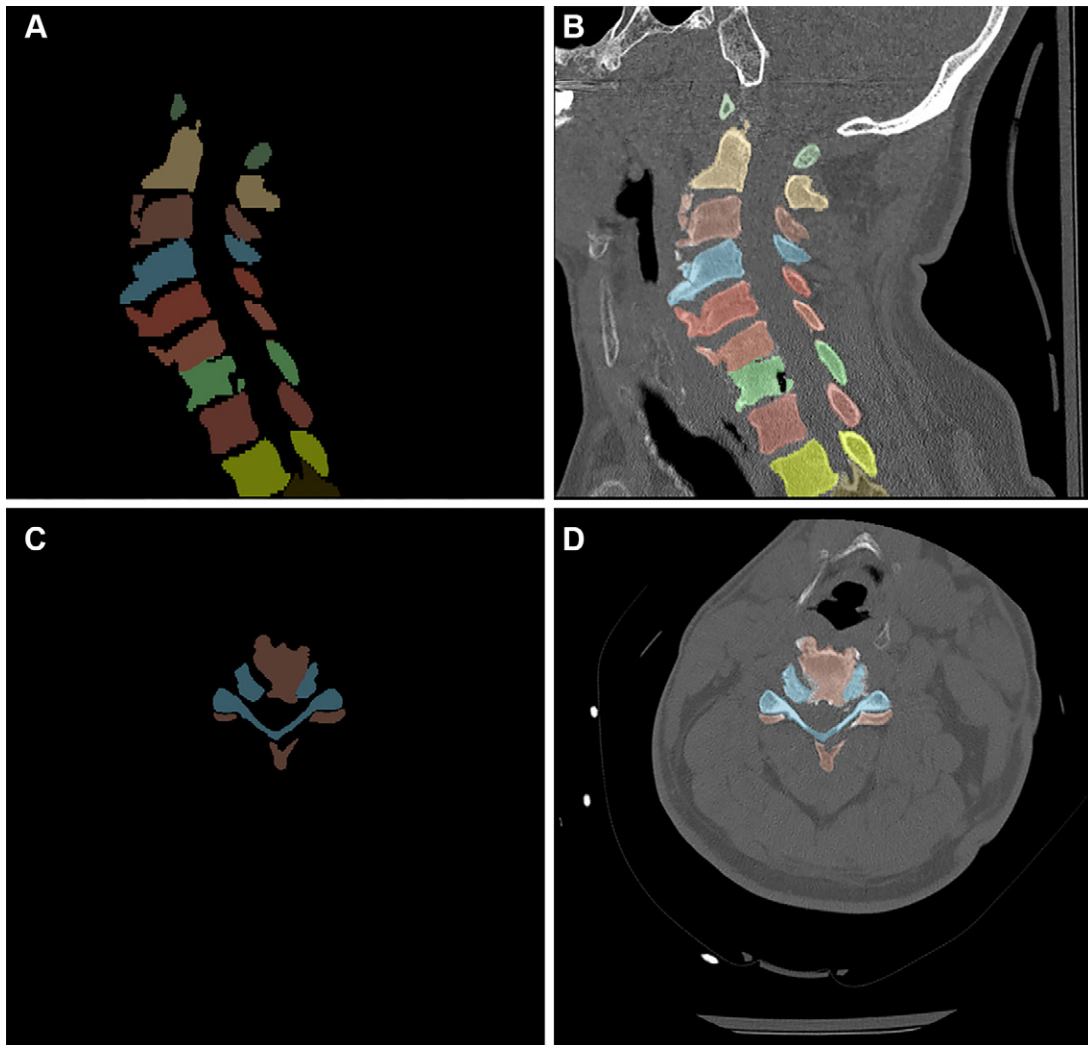


Figure 2: Example of cervical spine segmentation, with each color representing different vertebrae levels. **(A)** Image illustrates the segmentations generated in the sagittal plane. **(B)** Image depicts the segmentation mask overlaying the corresponding reconstructed sagittal DICOM section. The sagittal segmentation can be flipped onto the **(C)** axial plane, which produces **(D)** the segmentation corresponding to the original axial DICOM images. DICOM = Digital Imaging and Communications in Medicine.

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