Ultrasound and Elastographic Features predicting Axillary Nodal Metastasis in Breast Cancer

Suresh V Phatak, Raju K Shinde, Nipun A Gupta, Gaurangi Pawar, Pallavi S Phatak

ABSTRACT
Lymph node metastasis is an important prognostic factor in cases of carcinoma breast. In this pictorial essay, various sonographic and elastographic signs of lymph node metastasis are described with classical images.

Keywords: Axilla, Breast, Elastography, Metastasis, Ultrasound.


Source of support: Nil
Conflict of interest: None

INTRODUCTION
Axillary lymph node metastasis is an important prognostic factor in early-stage breast cancer and remains crucial on which individual treatment decisions are made.1 Mammography has its limitations in detecting metastatic lymph nodes because the entire axillary region cannot be adequately evaluated with this method. Positron emission tomography combined with computed tomography and magnetic resonance imaging do not have a place in routine staging because of higher costs and possibility of side effects.2 Ultrasonography (USG) is the most widely used imaging method for detection of axillary lymph node metastasis and for their characterization.3

Ultrasoundography Appearance of Normal Axillary Lymph Node (Fig. 1)

Fig. 1: Normal axillary node is seen as elongated morphology, with an elliptical shape, containing a high proportion of central echogenic tissue, due to fat, network of blood and lymphatic vessels in the hilum. The cortex is hypoechoic, with its echogenicity similar to that of the hypoechoic subcutaneous fat

Ultrasoundography Features of Malignant Axillary Lymph Node

Cortical Thickening (Fig. 2)

Fig. 2: Eccentric cortical thickening is seen here, which is caused by metastasis arrested in periphery of node. This usually happens before generalized cortical enlargement

1,2Professor and Head, 3,4Resident, 5Student (Final Year)
1,3,4Department of Radiodiagnosis, Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College, Wardha, Maharashtra, India
2Department of General Surgery, Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College Wardha, Maharashtra, India
5Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College, Wardha, Maharashtra, India

Corresponding Author: Suresh V Phatak, Professor and Head, Department of Radiodiagnosis, Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College, Wardha, Maharashtra, India, Phone: +917152287701
e-mail: suresh_phatak@yahoo.com
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Marked Hypoechogeticity and Loss of Fatty Hilum (Fig. 3)

Longitudinal–transverse Axis Ratio (Fig. 6)

**Fig. 3:** Marked hypoechogeticity and a fatty hilum loss attributable to metastatic deposits in lymph node

**Fig. 6:** Enlargement of the short plane of the lymph node causing low longitudinal–transverse axis ratio (1.1; longitudinal short-axis ratio less than 2 is significant), due to the neoplastic involvement enlarging the short plane of the lymph node causing round shape of node, which is seen in malignant nodes

Calcification (Fig. 4)

Cortex to Hilum Ratio (Figs 7 and 8)

**Fig. 4:** Hypoechoic axillary node containing calcification similar to primary tumor in breast is hallmark of metastasis

**Fig. 7:** Metastatic lymph node showing cortex to hilum of 2.6 taken by trace method. A value more than 2 is an important feature of metastatic lymph node. Hilum is displaced at the periphery of node

Capsular Breach (Fig. 5)

**Fig. 5:** Capsular breach in a lymph node is a salient feature of metastatic lymph node

**Fig. 8:** Color Doppler showing peripheral blood flow in subcapsular region due to tumor angiogenesis is also a characteristic of metastatic lymph node
Sonoelastographic Findings in Metastatic Lymph Node (Figs 9 and 10)

SUMMARY

Metastasis to axillary lymph node is an important factor in the prognosis of early-stage breast cancer and crucial for decision-making in management. There are many classical gray-scale and elastographic features that predict metastasis to axillary lymph node. These features are discussed in brief and classical images are illustrated in patients of breast cancer. These features help in early detection of lymph node metastasis.

REFERENCES