EXTENDED REPORT

Screening for interstitial lung disease in systemic sclerosis: performance of high-resolution CT with limited number of slices: a prospective study

Thomas Frauenfelder,1 Anna Winklehner,1 Thi Dan Linh Nguyen,1 Rucsandra Dobrota,2,3 Stephan Baumueller,1 Britta Maurer,2 Oliver Distler2

ABSTRACT

Objectives Early diagnosis of interstitial lung disease (ILD), currently the main cause of death in systemic sclerosis (SSc), is needed. The gold standard is high-resolution CT (HRCT) of the chest, but regular screening faces the risk of increased radiation exposure. We performed a prospective validation of a dedicated, 9-slice HRCT protocol with reduced radiation dose for the detection of ILD in patients with SSc.

Methods We analysed 170/205 consecutive patients with SSc. Whole-chest HRCT, serving as standard of reference, and the reduced HRCT with nine slices allocated according to a basal–apical gradient were obtained. ILD presence, extent (> or <20%) and diagnostic confidence were assessed. The reduced HRCT was independently analysed by two blinded radiologists, who also evaluated image quality. Radiation dose parameters were calculated.

Results Standard chest HRCT showed ILD in 77/170 patients. With the reduced HRCT, 68/77 cases with ILD were identified (sensitivity 88.3%, both readers). The accuracy (91.8%, reader 1; 94.7%, reader 2), diagnostic confidence (98.8%, reader 1; 95.3%, reader 2) and image quality rates were high. Minimal ILD was correctly quantified in 73.1% (reader 1)/71.2% (reader 2) and extensive ILD in 88% (reader 1)/100% (reader 2). Importantly, the reduced HRCT had a significantly lower radiation dose. The mean dose length product (effective dose) was only 5.66±4.46 mGycm (0.08±0.06 mSv) compared with the standard protocol dose of 149.00±95.90 mGycm (2.09±1.34 mSv).

Conclusions The above-described reduced chest HRCT protocol reliably detects even mild SSc-ILD in clinical practice, with the advantage of a much lower radiation dose compared with standard whole-chest HRCT.

INTRODUCTION

Interstitial lung disease (ILD) is frequent in patients with systemic sclerosis (SSc) and is the leading cause of disease-related death.1 Nowadays, high-resolution CT (HRCT) is the standard of reference for diagnosis of ILD. It allows an early detection of lung involvement, even from the subclinical stages. New methods enable a quantitative assessment and favour the use of HRCT for longitudinal studies.2–4

On the downside, CT uses ionising radiation,5 which has been linked to an increased cancer risk.5,6 As patients with SSc are often screened annually, dose reduction is an important issue.6,7 In the last decade, many methods have been introduced to lower the radiation dose by maintaining diagnostic image quality. Lowering tube current is the most widely employed approach in chest CT.8 Alternatively, the number of slices can be reduced by performing a sequential CT protocol.

In an earlier, smaller, retrospective study, our group evaluated ‘virtually’ calculated series with a reduced number of slices for the detection and quantification of ILD. The results were promising, showing a high accuracy for the detection of SSc-ILD.9

The goals of this prospective study were therefore (1) to evaluate the robustness of the scan protocol concerning image acquisition; (2) to analyse the accuracy of a reduced chest scan with limited number of HRCT slices compared with a standard HRCT of the entire chest for the detection and quantification of ILD in patients with SSc and to validate thereby the results of the first retrospective study in a larger, prospective cohort and (3) to measure the reduction in radiation dose versus standard HRCT.

METHODS

Patients’ population A total of 205 consecutive patients with a diagnosis of SSc and annual follow-up in the Department of Rheumatology, University Hospital Zurich, were prospectively included in this study. All patients fulfilled either the American College of Rheumatology classification criteria10 or the Very Early Diagnosis Of Systemic Sclerosis (VEdOSS) criteria for SSc.11 Assessment of clinical parameters and image acquisition was done prospectively following international standards.12 All patients signed informed consent. The study was approved as part of the Zurich cohort of the European Scleroderma Trial and Research registry by the institutional review board.

Image acquisition All patients were examined between January 2012 and September 2013. CT scans were performed with a 64-slice multidetector CT (Somatom Definition AS, Siemens Healthcare, Erlangen, Germany) or a 128-slice multidetector CT (Definition Flash Dual Source, Siemens Healthcare, Germany). Patients were examined in prone position and at end inspiration. Standard HRCT of the entire chest was performed and considered the standard of reference (tube potential 120 kV reference tube current–time product 40 or 110 mAs, care dose on). Data were...
reconstructed with filtered back projection (FBP), a slice thickness of 1 mm, an increment of 0.8 mm, using a sharp (B60f) or very sharp convolution kernel (B70f).

Furthermore, a low-sampling HRCT of the chest with nine sequential slices, the so-called ‘reduced HRCT’, was obtained (tube potential 120 kV, reference tube current-time product 30 or 110 mAs, care dose on). The first three slices had an increment of 80 mm and were placed as follows: the first slice at the manubrium sterni, the second at the carina and the third at the lower lobe. For the following six basal slices, the increment was 15 mm (figure 1). Due to technical reasons, the CT scanner performed two slices per level. Data were reconstructed with FBP, a slice thickness of 1 mm and a very sharp (B70f) or ultrasharp convolution kernel (B80f).

**Image assessment**

The readout was performed on dedicated PACS-viewer (Impax 6.4, AGFA, Dübendorf, Switzerland) and licensed reading screens. The readers were allowed to use all functions without multiplanar reformation, including changing window and level setting. All images were displayed on lung window.

On standard HRCT of the entire chest, presence of ILD (yes/no; for ILD definition, see online supplementary text) was assessed by one reader experienced with chest CT (TF, 12 years of experience) as previously described. The extent of ILD was graded as no lung involvement, lung involvement less than 20% (i.e. limited disease), lung involvement more than 20% (i.e. extensive disease) or indeterminate (i.e. extent not readily classifiable) as described by Goh et al. In cases of uncertainty concerning the presence of ILD, the CT scans from previous annual follow-ups were taken into account. Degree of diagnostic confidence was recorded (score 1 to 4; 1=fully confident; 2=probably confident; 3=confident only under limited conditions; 4=not confident). Before the analysis of the reduced HRCT scans, all three readers underwent a training session including assessment and discussion of 10 non-study-related cases.

The reduced HRCT scans were evaluated in a blinded manner, without knowing the results of the standard HRCT, by two radiologists (AW, 4 years of experience; SB, 6 years of experience). Again, presence and extent of ILD and the related diagnostic confidence were assessed. Furthermore, the quality of the image acquisition of reduced HRCT scans was rated on a scale from 1 to 3 as follows: 1=excellent (all slices contain lung tissue, base of the lung covered, second slice less than 2 cm above or below the level of the carina); 2=acceptable (1–2 slices without capture of lung tissue and/or second slice more than 2 cm above or below the level of the carina); and 3=not acceptable (three or more slices without capture of lung tissue and/or second slice more than 3 cm above or below the level of the carina).

**Radiation dose**

Radiation dose parameters of standard HRCT of the entire chest and reduced HRCT were assessed from the patient protocol. Effective radiation dose in millisievert was estimated by multiplying the dose length product (DLP) with the region-specific conversion coefficient (chest 0.014 mSv/mGycm).14

**Statistical analysis**

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS (SPSS, release V21.0 for Windows; SPSS, Chicago, Illinois, USA). Continuous variables were reported as mean±SD, and categorical variables as frequencies or percentages. Cohen’s κ statistics or Kendall’s τ test was calculated for interobserver agreements as appropriate. Presence of ILD was compared with Cochrane’s Q test and McNemar test. Sensitivity, specificity, accuracy and negative predictive value were calculated concerning the detection of ILD. The CI was 95%. Statistical significance was inferred at a p value below 0.05.

**RESULTS**

**Patients’ demographics**

Of the 203 patients with SSc included, 35 could not be analysed (HRCT of the entire chest not available, n=11; image reconstruction with iterative reconstruction and not FBP n=16; no available image protocol, n=6; reduced HRCT acquired with more than nine slices, n=2). Thus, CT scans of 170 patients with SSc were assessed in this study (139 women, 31 men; median age 56 (Q1,Q3 = 48,65.75)). Clinical characteristics of these 170 patients with SSc are summarised in table 1.

**Image acquisition**

CT images were acquired with a tube potential of 120 kV in all patients. The reference tube current–time product was 110 mAs in standard HRCT and reduced HRCT in 72 patients (42.4%), and 40 mAs in standard HRCT and 30 mAs in reduced HRCT in the remaining 98 patients (57.6%). Both standard and reduced HRCT were reconstructed with a very sharp convolution kernel (B70f) in 89 patients (52.4%), whereas in 66 patients (38.8%) standard HRCT was reconstructed with a very sharp convolution kernel (B70f) and reduced HRCT with an ultrasharp convolution kernel (B80f). In 15 patients (8.8%), a sharp convolution kernel was used in standard HRCT (B60f) and a very sharp convolution kernel in reduced HRCT (B70f).

**Image assessment**

Inter-reader agreement for reduced HRCT was good for the assessment of quality of image acquisition (κ=0.71) (τ=0.78) and for the analysis of extent of ILD (κ=0.76) (τ=0.84), and it
was excellent for the detection of ILD (κ=0.82), as well as concerning diagnostic confidence (κ=0.89) (τ=0.94).

Quality of image acquisition of reduced HRCT scans was rated as excellent or acceptable in 93.5% (n=159) by both readers (reader 1: 112 excellent/47 acceptable/11 not acceptable; reader 2: 96 excellent/63 acceptable/11 not acceptable).

ILD was present in 45.3% of subjects (n=77/170) in standard HRCT. ILD was correctly diagnosed in 88.3% (n=68/77) of reduced HRCT scans, with a sensitivity of 88.3% for both readers (reader 1: 91.2% fully confident; 7.6% probably confident, 1.2% confident only under limited conditions; reader 2: 70.0% fully confident, 25.3% probably confident, 4.7% confident only under limited conditions; p<0.05 vs. standard HRCT, both readers). No reader felt ‘not confident’ (score 4) concerning the diagnosis of presence or absence of ILD in reduced or standard HRCT.

In patients with evidence of ILD (n=77/170), the extent of ILD was estimated as minimal (i.e. <20%) in 52/77 patients and as extensive (i.e. >20%) in 25/77 patients in standard HRCT.

From the patients with minimal involvement on standard HRCT, 73.1% (reader 1) and 71.2% (reader 2) were classified correctly on reduced HRCT, 17.3% (both readers) were wrongly classified as no ILD and 9.6% (reader 1) and 11.5% (reader 2) were overestimated. Regarding patients classified as

Table 1 Characteristics of the study population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Sex (n)</th>
<th>Disease duration* (months)</th>
<th>Disease subsets (n)</th>
<th>mRSS*</th>
<th>Antibody profile (n of positives)</th>
<th>Lung function parameters (n)</th>
<th>Major organ involvement except ILD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>56 (48,66)</td>
<td>Men n=31/170 Women n=139/170</td>
<td>60 (28, 120)</td>
<td>lcSSc (n=66/166)</td>
<td>lcssc4 (2, 7)</td>
<td>lcssc13.5 (11, 19)</td>
<td>ANA n=163/170</td>
<td>DLC&lt;70% of predicted n=43/168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 (28, 120)</td>
<td>Men n=31/170 Women n=139/170</td>
<td>60 (28, 120)</td>
<td>dcSSc (n=34/166)</td>
<td>dcssc early sinse sclerosis (n=6/166)</td>
<td>dcssc early sinse sclerosis (n=6/166)</td>
<td>RNA polymerase III n=11/160</td>
<td>DLCO&lt;70% of predicted n=11/168</td>
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<tr>
<td>60 (28, 120)</td>
<td>Men n=31/170 Women n=139/170</td>
<td>60 (28, 120)</td>
<td>early sinse sclerosis (n=66/166)</td>
<td>early sinse sclerosis (n=66/166)</td>
<td>early sinse sclerosis (n=66/166)</td>
<td>U1-RNP n=27/164</td>
<td>TLC&lt;70% of predicted n=13/168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 (28, 120)</td>
<td>Men n=31/170 Women n=139/170</td>
<td>60 (28, 120)</td>
<td>lcSSc: 4 (2, 7)</td>
<td>lcSSc: 13.5 (11, 19)</td>
<td>lcSSc: 0 (0, 0)</td>
<td>RNA polymerase III n=11/160</td>
<td>TLC&lt;70% of predicted n=13/168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Degree of confidence score 1 or 2 (i.e. 1=fully confident; 2=probably confident).

### Table 2 Estimated accuracy and diagnostic certainty in detecting ILD on reduced HRCT scans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reader 1</th>
<th>Reader 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity (95% CI)</td>
<td>88.3% (78.5% to 94.2%)</td>
<td>88.3% (78.5% to 94.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specificity (95% CI)</td>
<td>94.6% (87.3% to 98.0%)</td>
<td>100% (95.1% to 100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>91.8%</td>
<td>94.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPV (95% CI)</td>
<td>90.7% (82.7% to 95.4%)</td>
<td>91.2% (83.5% to 95.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High diagnostic confidence*</td>
<td>98.8%</td>
<td>95.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Degree of confidence score 1 or 2 (i.e. 1=fully confident; 2=probably confident).

**Clinical and epidemiological research**

**Figure 2** A female patient (35 years) with minimal interstitial lung disease missed by both readers in the reduced high-resolution CT (HRCT) scan. (Top) Transverse image of standard HRCT at basal level showing slight changes at the costodiaphragmatic sinus. (Bottom) The ninth most basal slice of the reduced HRCT scan, not capturing parenchymal changes.
extensive in standard HRCT, 88% (reader 1) and 100% (reader 2) were correctly classified as extensive in reduced HRCT (table 3). All misclassified cases were also borderline on standard HRCT.

**Radiation dose**

In standard HRCT, mean overall DLP was 149.00 ±95.90 mGycm with an estimated effective radiation dose of 2.09 ±1.34 mSv, while in reduced HRCT, the mean overall DLP was 5.66 ±4.46 mGycm with an effective radiation dose of 0.08 ±0.06 mSv (p<0.001), resulting in an overall radiation dose reduction of 96.2%.

**DISCUSSION**

This prospective study evaluated a dedicated HRCT protocol consisting of only nine slices with a basal–apical gradient for the detection of ILD in patients with SSc. Our results show that this protocol has a high accuracy and sensitivity in the detection of SSc-ILD, significantly reduces the radiation dose and can be implemented in daily routine.

Screening and early detection of ILD in patients with SSc is important as pulmonary involvement is a negative prognostic factor. Goh et al\(^6\) showed that interstitial changes extending more than 20% on HRCT are associated with a higher mortality. Incipient lung changes like ground glass opacities are very subtle, cannot be visualised on chest radiography and do not lead to a quantifiable decrease in lung function parameters. They are, nonetheless, prone to progress, and their early detection might allow early access to treatment and, hopefully, a better outcome. Without question, early diagnosis of SSc-ILD is, due to the leading role of lung involvement in SSc-related mortality, a priority, and HRCT is the most sensitive method. However, just like the use of HRCT for early lung cancer detection, the use of annual HRCT as a screening method for ILD has to be considered carefully because of the cumulative radiation dose. It is assumed that patients might be especially exposed to the attributable risk for developing cancer after repetitive CT-generated ionising radiation.\(^5\) Based on the principle of As Low As Reasonably Achievable, all possible methods to reduce radiation dose by maintaining diagnostic image quality have to be applied.\(^15\) \(^16\) When compared with early lung cancer detection programmes, the use of low-dose or ultra-low-dose CT is limited as the current tube dose reduction leads to an increase in noise and makes the detection of subtle interstitial findings impossible. We therefore investigated a different method by reducing the number of CT slices per scan. Indeed, using our protocol, the radiation dose could be lowered down to 0.08 mSv, which is a meaningful dose reduction of 96.2%, to a level comparable with a conventional chest radiograph (0.05 mSv). This is an important advancement in the strategy to reduce radiation exposure, while at the same time improving early and sensitive detection of lung involvement in patients with SSc (see online supplementary text).

In a previous retrospective study,\(^9\) our group evaluated the use of such a protocol by retrogressively extracting the relevant slices from a whole-chest HRCT of patients with SSc. Different image series were evaluated. The best performance, with equal results to standard HRCT, was an image series with a baso–apical gradient, consistent with the mainly basally located parenchymal changes in ILD.\(^2\) Based on these results, the HRCT protocol used in the current study was designed. This protocol differs slightly from the one in the retrospective study due to technical and user-related reasons. As scans were acquired by CT technicians with different training levels and different experience, the protocol had to be easily usable, with minimal variables. Our results show that the majority of exams were classified as excellent and acceptable. The most frequently reported fault was related to the most basal slices, which were scanned either too low or slightly too high, the latter leading to false negative results.

Concerning the detection of ILD, the results showed a high accuracy and sensitivity of 93% and 88.3%, respectively, only slightly below the values from the retrospective study. False negative results were mainly due to small areas of ILD in the costodiaphragmatic angle, which is likely not clinically meaningful. There were few false positive results caused by misinterpretation of noise as ground glass opacities.

Visual assessment of the extent of fibrosis with the reduced HRCT protocol was good in extensive disease and satisfactory in minimal disease, in which case 17.3% of cases were missed, and 9.6% (reader 1) and 11.5% (reader 2) were overestimated.

This limitation can be overcome through alternative methods for the assessment of the extent of ILD. A well-described option is the use of CT densitometric parameters like skewness and kurtosis of the CT histograms of the lung tissue.\(^17\) These parameters have been validated by various authors for the whole-chest CT and correlate with spirometric lung function parameters.\(^17\)–\(^19\) Initial results from an ongoing study with the same population show that this method can be translated into our protocol and enables the quantification of the reduced HRCT. This would also be significant with regard to the implementation of such a protocol for follow-up exams, where smaller changes have to be expressed quantitatively.

Our study has the following limitations: HRCT protocols used different tube current–time product and convolution kernels for the standard whole-chest HRCT and the reduced HRCT between exams. As there was no effect on the detection of fibrosis, we did not exclude these cases from the analysis. The reason for the different kernels was that the kernels provided by the scanner were not identical for sequence and spiral

| Table 3 Estimated extent of ILD in standard HRCT and reduced HRCT scans |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Lung involvement in standard HRCT | No ILD Reader 1/2 | Minimal (<20%) Reader 1/2 | Extensive (>20%) Reader 1/2 | Indeterminate Reader 1/2 |
| Minimal (<20%) | n=9/9 | n=38/37* | n=5/6 | n=0/0 |
| n=52 | | | | |
| Extensive (>20%) | n=0/0 | n=3/0 | n=22/25* | n=0/0 |
| n=25 | | | | |

ILD was present in 77 patients in standard HRCT. *
* Correctly estimated extent in reduced HRCT compared with standard HRCT.
HRCT, high-resolution CT; ILD, interstitial lung disease.
mode. Another limitation is represented by the asymmetric distribution of slices according to the basal–apical gradient, with a wide gap of non-depicted lung in the mid and upper parts. To further improve estimation of the extent of lung involvement, some additional slices in these parts might be necessary. Furthermore, slight fibrotic changes at the level of the costodiaphragmatic sinus can be missed in the reduced HRCT protocol due to lack of coverage, although the clinical meaning of these subtle changes might be questionable. In addition, the primary focus being ILD, other potentially relevant findings can be missed (see online supplementary text), making the reduced HRCT protocol perhaps best for younger patients, less likely to have important incidental findings. Finally, future studies in clinical practice have to show whether the new HRCT protocol can replace conventional HRCT protocols or whether a combination of protocols, for example, by the use of reduced HRCT for screening and conventional HRCT for confirmation of potentially meaningful changes is more accurate.

In conclusion, our study shows that a dedicated, reduced HRCT protocol consisting of nine slices allocated according to a basal–apical gradient represents a robust and accurate method to reliably detect ILD in patients with SSc. With the considerable advantage of a low radiation dose, this study provides evidence that it can be implemented in daily clinical routine for early detection and screening of ILD.

Contributors TF designed the study, analysed HRCTs, interpreted and analysed the data and wrote the manuscript. AW analysed HRCTs, interpreted and analysed the data and wrote the manuscript. BM obtained clinical data, interpreted and analysed the data. OD designed the study, obtained clinical data, interpreted and analysed the data and wrote the manuscript. RD interpreted and analysed the data and wrote the manuscript. TDLN and SB analysed HRCTs and interpreted and analysed the data.

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Competing interests OD has/had consultancy relationship and/or has received research funding in the area of SSC and related conditions from Actelion, Pfizer, Ergonex, BMS, Sanofi-Aventis, United BioSource Corporation, Roche/Genentech, Medac, Biovitrum, Boehringer Ingelheim Pharma, Novartis, 4 D Science, Active Biotec, Bayer-Schering, Sinoxa, Serodapharm, EpIpharm, Biogen, Inveniva and GSK. The real or perceived potential conflicts listed above are accurately stated.

Patient consent Obtained.

Ethics approval The study was approved by the University Hospital Zurich Institutional Review Board.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

REFERENCES


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Supplementary text:

Screening for Interstitial Lung Disease in Systemic Sclerosis: Performance of High-resolution Computed Tomography with Limited Number of Slices - a Prospective Study

Thomas Frauenfelder¹, Anna Winklehner¹, Thi Dan Linh Nguyen¹, Rucsandra Dobrota²,³, Stephan Baumueller¹, Britta Maurer², Oliver Distler²

¹Institute of Diagnostic and Interventional Radiology, University Hospital Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland
²Division of Rheumatology, University Hospital Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland
³Department of Internal Medicine and Rheumatology, Dr.I.Cantacuzino Hospital, Bucharest, Romania

Correspondence and reprints request to:
Oliver Distler, MD, Division of Rheumatology, University Hospital Zurich, Gloriastr. 25, 8091 Zürich, Switzerland, Email: Oliver.Distler@usz.ch, Tel: ++41-44-255-2977
**Definition of ILD**

ILD was defined as present if at least one of the following findings was found: ground-glass opacities, sub-pleural reticulation with or without pleural irregularities, traction bronchiectasis and/or honeycombing. Scars and band-like changes typical for earlier infection were not considered as ILD. In our study protocol we also excluded cystic lesions other than honeycombing, although they can be associated with ILD, because there are only few case reports and no correlation between cystic lung changes and SSc.

**Limitations of the study**

As stated, the new protocol does not allow assessing lymph nodes comprehensively and cannot depict lung nodules outside the slices. If there is a clinical suspicion and a need to image lymphadenopathy or lung nodules, then a regular CT is mandatory. In this study, 10 patients had a lung nodule that needed a follow-up. All nodules were less than 6 mm in diameter. Based on the Fleischner Guidelines a follow-up exam was performed, and all nodules were stable [1]. Only 2 nodules where not seen on the reduced scan, while the other 8 nodules were detected in the reduced scan. 2 other cases had dystelectasis, which both were recognized also on reduced CT. Lymphadenopathy was present in 12 patients on standard CT. All cases of moderate lymphadenopathy (N=5, defined as 3 or more lymph nodes with short-axis exceeding 1 cm) were also visible in the reduced CT. Mild lymphadenopathy (N=7, defined as presence of 1 or 2 lymph nodes with short axis exceeding 1 cm) was detectable in 3/7 cases on the reduced CT.

Another limitation is the fact that only one reader reviewed the standard CT’s. To overcome the problem of possible misclassification due to reader issue, a training session was performed on non-study related cases to harmonize and optimize assessment and to reduce variability. This session ensured that all readers are using the same definition for ILD. Indeed,
the inter-reader agreement was very high after the training session (for detection of ILD: \( \kappa = 0.76 \); for extend of ILD: \( \kappa = 0.73 \)).

**CT and radiation risk**

The natural background dose is about 3 to 6 mSv depending on the level above sea and the Radon exposure. The CT brings an additional dose to this background dose. Notably, the background dose is disposed over a year over the entire body, giving the DNA time to repair, whereas the CT-dose is provided in 5 seconds and only over the chest.

In medical practice, it is important that the patients’ exposure to radiation is as low as possible. During the last years, focus has been set on the cumulative radiation dose, which is a highly relevant issue when discussing harm of CT-based screening, e.g. for lung cancer.

The radiation risk at high doses > 50 mSv is well established from atomic bomb data and an increasing number of clinical studies. We know that in the age group screened (> 50 years), the risk for lung cancer induction is higher than the risk of induction of any other cancer [2]. In the range between 5 and 50 mSv, only estimates can be made; usually a linear extrapolation to 0 is performed. Using this linear non-threshold theory, the life-time attributable cancer risk at age 60 and exposure to 1 mSv is calculated to be 1 in 20,000 [3-5].

Bach et al. [6] estimated that participants from the National Lung Screening Trial (NLST) received approximately 8 mSv per participant over 3 years. Estimates of harms from such radiation come from several official bodies and commissioned studies, based on dose extrapolations from atomic bombings and also many studies of medical imaging [2]. Using the NLST data, these models predict that approximately 1 cancer death may be caused by radiation from imaging per 2500 persons screened. Another paper by Brenner suggest that a single baseline CT screening examination for lung cancer using a low dose protocol would results in a fairly low risk (<0.06%) for radiation-induced lung cancer, and negligible risk for other cancer [7]. However, with annual screening the radiation exposure from annual CT lung
examinations could increase the number of additional tumors by approximately 1.8% [7]. With regard to potential additional diagnostic studies for follow-up McCunney et al. calculated that the radiation exposure from low-dose CT and follow-up procedures exceed life-time radiation exposure among nuclear power workers and atomic bomb survivors [8]. The CT-dose needed to depict subtle ILD changes is higher than for a node, as image noise needs to lower.

In conclusion, although all these numbers are based on calculations and assumptions, there are solid grounds for an increased risk of radiation-induced lung cancer in patients who undergo repeated CT examinations. Therefore, especially in the case of patients who require yearly CT follow-up, the relevance of reducing the radiation risk by a reduced CT scan as the one presented in our study might indeed outweigh the eventual risk of missing additional incidental findings.

References:

Lower-dose radiation scan for lung disease

People with systemic sclerosis may be able to have their lungs monitored for a complication of the condition using a scan that cuts their exposure to radiation.

INTRODUCTION
People with systemic sclerosis have an abnormal growth of connective tissue. This affects their skin, digestive tract, and other internal organs. It causes thickening of the skin and damage to blood vessels. For some people it causes damage to the lungs, called interstitial lung disease.

People with systemic sclerosis have their health checked regularly so that problems can be treated quickly as they arise. These checks usually include a CT scan of the chest to check for signs of interstitial lung disease. But regular screening with CT scans means regular exposure to radiation.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS HOPE TO FIND?
The researchers wanted to see whether a partial chest scan using a lower radiation dose worked as well as the standard scan.

CT scans take an image of a ‘slice’ through the lung. The standard ‘whole-chest’ scans take images of many slices, close together throughout the whole chest. The reduced dose scans used in the study took just nine slices spaced through the chest.

WHO WAS STUDIED?
The study included 205 patients being treated for systemic sclerosis at University Hospital, Zurich. All patients were having annual checks for progression of the condition.

HOW WAS THE STUDY CONDUCTED?
The patients all had both types of scan during their annual check-up. Two independent readers checked the images from the scans. The researchers looked to see whether the scans using lower-dose radiation picked up all the cases of interstitial lung disease that had been diagnosed by the whole-chest scans.

WHAT DOES THE NEW STUDY SAY?
The readers picked up 88 in every 100 cases of interstitial lung disease using the lower-dose radiation scans. This means that the lower-dose scans were able to pick up most cases of early disease.

The radiation dose from the lower-dose scans was much lower than the whole-chest scan dose.

HOW RELIABLE ARE THE FINDINGS?
It is likely that the results of the study are reliable. However, we don’t know whether people reading the scans in other hospitals, who might have been trained in a different way, might come to different conclusions.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME?
If you have systemic sclerosis, this might be a way to monitor you for early signs of lung disease while protecting you from much of the radiation dose of whole-chest scans. This is something you might want to discuss with your doctor.

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