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Research Article

Keywords: multiple sclerosis, chronic active lesion, quantitative susceptibility mapping, disability, neurodegeneration

Posted Date: November 10th, 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-1041443/v1>

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Version of Record: A version of this preprint was published at Scientific Reports on March 15th, 2022. See the published version at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-08477-6>.

Disease correlates of rim lesions on quantitative susceptibility mapping in multiple sclerosis

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Running title: Rim lesions associate with disability

Title: 94 characters (with spaces)

Running head: 37 characters (with spaces)

Abstract: 244 words

Body of the manuscript: 4186

Number of figures: 4

Number of color figures: 4

Number of tables: 2

Abstract

Quantitative susceptibility mapping (QSM), an imaging technique sensitive to brain iron, has been used to detect paramagnetic rims of iron-laden active microglia and macrophages in a subset of multiple sclerosis (MS) lesions, known as rim+ lesions, and are consistent with chronic active lesions. Because of their potential impact on disease progression and tissue damage, investigating the influence of rim+ lesions on disability and neurodegeneration is critical to establish the impact of these lesions on the disease course. This study aimed to explore the relationship between chronic active rim+ lesions, identified as having a hyperintense rim on QSM, and both clinical disability and imaging measures of neurodegeneration in patients with MS. The patient cohort was composed of 159 relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis patients. The Expanded Disability Status Scale (EDSS) and *Brief International Cognitive Assessment for Multiple Sclerosis*, which includes both the Symbol Digit Modalities Test and California Verbal Learning Test-II, were used to assess clinical disability. Cortical thickness and thalamic volume were evaluated as imaging measures of neurodegeneration. A total of 4,469 MS lesions were identified, of which 171 QSM rim+ (3.8%) lesions were identified among 57 patients (35.8%). In a multivariate regression model, as the overall total lesion burden increased, patients with at least one rim+ lesion on QSM performed worse on both physical disability and cognitive assessments, specifically the Symbol Digit Modalities Test ($p=0.010$), California Verbal Learning Test-II ($p=0.030$), and EDSS ($p=0.001$). In a separate univariate regression model, controlling for age ($p<0.001$), having at least one rim+ lesion was related to more cortical thinning ($p=0.03$) in younger patients (<45 years). Lower thalamic volume was associated with older patients ($p=0.038$) and larger total lesion burden ($p<0.001$); however, the association did not remain significant with rim+ lesions ($p=0.10$). Our findings demonstrate a novel observation that

chronic active lesions, as identified on QSM, modify the impact of lesion burden on clinical disability in MS patients. These results support further exploration of rim+ lesions for therapeutic targeting in MS to reduce disability and subsequent neurodegeneration.

Keywords: multiple sclerosis, chronic active lesion, quantitative susceptibility mapping, disability, neurodegeneration

Abbreviations: multiple sclerosis (MS), relapsing-remitting (RR), Brief Visuospatial Memory Test-Revised (BVMT-R), California Verbal Learning Test-II (CVLT-II), expanded disability status score (EDSS), fluid-attenuated inversion recovery imaging (FLAIR), quantitative susceptibility mapping (QSM), Symbol Digit Modalities Test (SDMT)

Introduction

Innate immunity plays a pivotal role in the pathophysiology of multiple sclerosis (MS), and important cell types involved in this process are CNS resident monocytes (microglia) and blood-derived macrophages¹. Chronic CNS inflammation in the MS lesion is maintained, in part, with pro-inflammatory microglia and macrophages at the rim of chronic active or slowly expanding MS lesions, which are the site of ongoing demyelination and axonal damage². The continued expansion of chronic active lesions has been postulated to play an essential role in the pathogenesis of disease progression in MS³.

A significant proportion of microglia and macrophages found at the rim of chronic active MS lesions contain iron, distinguishing them from chronic inactive lesions where iron is essentially absent⁴⁻⁷. Gradient echo (GRE) MRI sequences are sensitive to iron⁸ and have been used to explore iron dynamics in the brain⁹. Detection of a paramagnetic rim in a subset of chronic lesions has generated significant interest, and numerous *in vivo* and histopathological validation studies have confirmed that the rim is representative of iron-laden inflammatory cells^{4-6,10}. These studies have provided further evidence that chronic active lesions can occur throughout the disease course, including within patients with preclinical disease^{11,12}, and can be associated with clinical disability¹³. Quantitative susceptibility mapping (QSM)¹⁴ is an effective post-processing technique for GRE data that directly maps the various sources of susceptibility by solving the field-to-source inversion problem¹⁵ and providing quantification and localization of brain iron¹⁶⁻¹⁹. Lesions with a hyperintense rim (rim+) on QSM have increased inflammation on PK11195-PET, with histopathological and *in vitro* studies confirming a rim of inflammatory cells and more tissue damage on myelin water fraction imaging^{15,20,21}. The quantitative nature of QSM provides a unique opportunity to capture time-dependent changes of rim lesions, as their

susceptibility remains high even after years of initial detection and slowly decays over time^{10,22-24}.

The association between chronic active MS lesions and disability has been studied utilizing various GRE imaging methods, which have ultimately suggested a negative impact of these lesions on disease course^{13,25,26}. The goal of this study was to expand upon earlier studies and assess the association of rim+ lesions, as detected on QSM, with clinical disability, global measures of structural tissue damage, and their interactions in a large cohort of remitting (RR) MS patients. To assess the impact on clinical disability, we explored the relationship between chronic rim+ lesions on both cognitive function and standard measures of neurological disability. Gray matter atrophy, as an MRI measure of neurodegeneration, occurs early and has the strongest association with long-term clinical disability²⁷⁻²⁹; thus, in a secondary analysis, we further explored the impact of rim+ lesions on measures of cortical and thalamic integrity. The ultimate goal of this study was to demonstrate that chronic active MS lesions, as identified by QSM, are associated with the pathogenesis of MS.

Results

Patient cohort

This was a cross-sectional study composed of 159 patients with RRMS. The cohort included 115 females and 44 males aged (mean \pm SD) 42.17 ± 10.25 years (yrs), current treatment duration of 3.47 ± 3.97 yrs, disease duration of 10.74 ± 7.51 yrs and median Expanded Disability Status Scale of 1.0 (IQR=2). The proportion of cognitive impairment found among the entire patient cohort was relatively low and observed to be the following: 22.01% on SDMT, 10.06% on CVLT-II, and 25.79% on BVMT-R.

QSM rim+ lesions

The median number of FLAIR lesions identified was 20 (IQR=33.5) and only 5.7% of patients had evidence of Gd enhancing lesions (20 lesions). We identified 171 (3.8%) lesions that were classified as rim+ (Fig. 1) and none of the rim+ lesions were enhancing with Gd. The B-test agreement between the two main raters was high (B-statistics= 95.49%). The number of QSM rim+ lesions per patient ranged from zero to a maximum of 17 (Median=0, IQR =1). One hundred and two patients (64.2%) did not have any rim+ lesions. Of the fifty-seven patients (35.8%) with at least one rim+ lesion, the median number of rim+ lesions per patient was 2 (IQR=3). Table 1 presents the clinical and MRI characteristics among patients without rim+ lesions as compared to those with at least one rim+ lesion.

Association of QSM rim lesions and disability

Figure 2 compares the sample distributions of cognitive scores of patients with and without rim + lesions. The distributions of SDMT, CVLT-II, and BVMT-R have a similar spread for both groups of patients; however, each sample mean is consistently higher for patients without rim+ lesions. Figure 2 also shows that more patients without rim+ lesions have higher SDMT, CVLT-II, and BVMT-R scores, as the right tails of the plots correspond to scores exclusively from patients without rim+ lesions. The distribution of EDSS also indicates that the majority of patients without rim+ lesions have lower EDSS scores. Given these results, we hypothesized that, on average, patients without rim + lesions have lower disability mean scores than patients with at least one rim+ lesion. To test this hypothesis, we use a multivariate regression model approach and obtained the corresponding multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and subsequent Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tables for each clinical score.

Table 2 summarizes the p-values obtained from the MANOVA and ANOVA tables. Our aim was to investigate the effect of possible interactions between the number of rim+ lesions (0 versus at least 1) and other patient level covariates on disability scores. The only statistically significant interaction was that between rim+ lesions and total lesion volume on FLAIR imaging on disability outcome measures ($p=0.006$). Furthermore, the number of rim+ lesions and log-TLV were also significant ($p=0.010$ and $p<0.001$, respectively). Other statistically significant patient-level covariates were current treatment duration, age and gender with p-values of 0.012, <0.001 , and 0.038, respectively. The MANOVA p-values above indicate that at least one disability measure (SDMT, CVLT, BVMT-R, and EDSS) was associated with the presence of rim+ lesions. Individual analysis of variance tables for each score confirmed that the interaction effect between log-TLV and number of rim+ lesions (0 versus at least 1) was statistically significant for SDMT ($\hat{\beta} = -4.11$, $p = 0.010$), CVLT-II ($\hat{\beta} = -2.68$, $p = 0.030$), and EDSS ($\hat{\beta} = 0.70$, $p=0.001$). That is, as the overall total lesion burden increases, patients with at least one rim+ lesion on quantitative susceptibility mapping have, on average, lower SDMT and CVLT-II mean scores. As TLV increases, EDSS mean scores for patients with at least one rim+ lesions are higher than for patients without rim+ lesions.

Figure 3 displays a graphical representation of model-based cognitive and EDSS mean difference estimates between patients with zero rim+ lesions versus at least one rim+ lesion and their 95% confidence intervals. These results highlight the impact of increasing TLV and the presence of only one rim+ lesion. As TLV increases, the difference between mean SDMT (and CVLT-II) scores between patients without rim+ lesion and at least one rim+ lesion becomes significant and shown with 95% confidence intervals that do not include zero. This implies that for our cohort, patients without rim+ lesions have statistically significant higher mean SDMT

and CVLT-II scores than patients with at least one rim+ lesion as TLV increases. Similarly, mean EDSS increased faster for patients with at least one rim+ lesion. There was no significant difference in performance found between groups for BVMT-R.

Association of QSM rim lesions and gray matter damage

In this secondary analysis, we modeled the association between cortical thinning and having a rim+ lesion ($\hat{\beta} = -0.139$, $p = 0.03$, 95% CI (-0.2639, -0.0145)) while controlling for other covariates. The final model also included age ($\hat{\beta} = -0.003$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI (-0.0046, -0.0014)) and the interaction between age and number of rim+ lesions ($\hat{\beta} = 0.0021$, $p = 0.05$, 95% CI (0.0001, 0.0049)); importantly, TLV was not found to be associated with cortical thickness ($p > 0.10$). Figure 4 demonstrates the results of the model. The separation of confidence intervals shows the impact of rim+ lesions on cortical thickness as patient age increases. Patients who are 45 years old and younger with no rim+ lesions have higher cortical thickness than those of similar age with at least one rim+ lesion; however, this difference is not maintained for older patients (ages 46 to 61 years) as the estimated slope of the model for patients with at least one rim+ lesion is -0.0009 in comparison to -0.0030, the slope of the line for patients with zero rim+ lesions. For both patient cohorts, cortical thickness decreased with increasing age. In a separate model, lower thalamic volume was associated with older patients ($p = 0.038$) and larger total lesion burden ($p < 0.001$); however, the association did not remain significant with rim+ lesions ($p > 0.10$) after controlling for age ($\hat{\beta} = -0.00013$, $p = 0.004$), gender ($\hat{\beta} = -0.00032$, $p = 0.0318$), and TLV ($\hat{\beta} = -0.00026$, $p < 0.001$).

Discussion

In this study, we demonstrated a meaningful impact of having at least one QSM rim+ lesion on both the clinical and imaging outcomes. Our study not only supports the capacity of QSM as an imaging tool to detect lesions with a rim of iron-laden microglia and macrophages^{15,20,21} but also demonstrated that the magnitude of the effect of overall lesion volume on disability depends on whether or not rim+ lesions are present.

A multivariate model was selected to assess the relationship between rim+ lesions and disability, given that this approach can account for the correlation between multivariate clinical scores for an individual patient's covariates. We found a significant joint effect of TLV and the presence of rim+ lesions on clinical scores. This novel observation highlights the importance of appropriately considering the combined joint effect of chronic active lesions and total lesions on clinical outcomes. In this study, we demonstrated that in patients with at least one rim+ lesion, as the overall FLAIR lesion burden increases, both cognition and EDSS worsen, reflective of the linear relationship of the two imaging variables. Recently, the relationship between chronic active MS lesions and performance on EDSS and processing speed, as measured by the SDMT, was explored utilizing phase imaging¹³; however, this study has essential differences. Our work expands upon these findings by incorporating the relationship with overall lesion volume and including additional domains of cognition, such as verbal and visuospatial memory as measured by the CVLT-II and BVMT-R, respectively. Through the use of QSM, we were able to identify the impact of one or more chronic active MS lesions on disability, while in the study of Absinta et al., the impact of phase rim lesions on disability was associated with four or more phase rim lesions¹³. Technical differences between the two imaging methods should be considered^{18,19} and warrants a thorough evaluation to determine which imaging approach most accurately identifies this subset of chronic lesions. Importantly, taken together, these two large cohort studies

demonstrate that the presence of rim+ lesions associate with a more aggressive phenotype of the disease. Future studies should be dedicated to understanding why these lesions are found in only a subset of patients.

Only a minority of our patients would be classified as cognitively impaired, and given this, as well as the fact that age was already accounted for in statistical models, we chose to keep the raw cognitive scores for the analysis. Our findings suggest that the relationship between total lesion burden, chronic active lesions, and cognition may be especially relevant for early, pre-clinical cognitive changes in MS. Such a subtle, early decline in processing speed and memory is functionally impactful, particularly for young patients who are likely to have significant social and occupational responsibilities. Our results may be informative in identifying patients that might benefit the most from early cognitive interventions. Although no association was found regarding the relationship between rim+ lesions and BVMT-R, a decreased performance was found as TLV increased. Attributing cognitive dysfunction to white matter lesion characteristics, mainly lesion volume, has yielded variable results in past studies³⁰, likely related to the dominant role of cortical pathology³¹ or the lack of consideration of the white matter lesion's impact on the brain's overall connectivity network. In fact, our recent study revealed that, while cortical/subcortical pathology indeed was strongly predictive of cognitive outcomes, adding information about the topological impact of white matter lesions on the brain's connectivity network may improve accuracy³². Therefore, even our positive results regarding SDMT and CVLT-II should be interpreted with caution. In addition, *BICAMS* is a limited battery of cognitive assessments and is not meant to be a comprehensive neuropsychological evaluation³³.

In a secondary analysis, we explored the influence of having at least one rim+ lesion on measures of gray matter integrity, intending to demonstrate an association of chronic active MS

lesions with global neurodegeneration. A lower thalamic volume has been previously associated with having higher numbers of chronic active lesions, as measured by phase imaging¹³; although patients with QSM rim lesions had a smaller thalamic volume in the current study, the difference failed to reach significance in the regression model. Our results identified a strong influence of total lesion burden on thalamic volume, suggesting that diffuse damage to white matter connections may have a stronger influence on thalamic damage³⁴. Nevertheless, our study is unique in showing the strong association with cortical gray matter. Interestingly, overall lesion volume was not associated with this outcome, but as expected, age was a significant covariate, and its influence on cortical gray matter dominated over the effect of having a rim+ lesion at older ages. Once again, these results suggest that the presence of chronic active lesions may represent those patients with a more aggressive phenotype. Larger studies with control populations are required to fully explore the influence of rim+ lesions on measures of tissue loss.

Chronic active MS lesions have traditionally been associated with progressive disease, which is based upon post-mortem histopathological studies³. However, given the bias toward progressive patients within these studies, it is unclear how prevalent chronic active lesions are in earlier stages of the disease. Studies utilizing phase imaging have demonstrated that over 50% of patients have at least one phase rim+ lesion in relapsing disease and represent approximately one-third of the lesions³⁵. In our study, rim+ lesions represent a minority of chronic lesions (3.8%), and only 35.9% of patients had a rim+ lesion; again, this discrepancy may relate to differences between phase and QSM. Although other studies have similarly found that QSM rim+ lesions represent a minority of white matter lesions (9-20%)^{15,20,25}, the amount of rim+ lesions in this patient cohort is relatively low. Importantly, when focusing on RR patients only, Harrison et al. found that only 6% of lesions demonstrated a hyperintense rim on QSM;

suggesting that studies of earlier MS may reflect a lower prevalence of QSM rim+ lesions. Thus, the variability rim+ lesion detection may be related to differences among the cohorts and/or a lack of a specific criterion for identifying a hyperintense rim. Similar to other paramagnetic rim studies, QSM rim+ lesions are characterized visually; thus, variability in this definition among groups of readers is likely a contributing factor. Reviewers for this study were clearly conservative in their definition but importantly, demonstrated a strong agreement.

There were limitations to this study. The clinical cohort consisted of RRMS patients with a relatively low disease duration and disease burden. To obtain a more comprehensive picture of the impact of QSM rim+ lesions on cognition and physical disability, it is possible that a more impaired population, such as one with a large representation of progressive patients, may be more informative. Furthermore, our study was observational and only association statements can be drawn. In addition, our current slice thickness of 3 mm could limit detection of small rim+ lesions and underestimate the true prevalence; however, our sequence provides high in-plane resolution for improved excellent axial visualization and can be acquired within 4 minutes, making this a clinically feasible sequence. As we move forward, larger, multi-center studies should standardize the most accurate imaging approach and rim lesion definition. Regardless of our low rim+ lesion number, our results still indicated that the presence of these lesions was associated with lower scores on disability and more cortical gray matter loss.

In conclusion, our study demonstrates the significant association of chronic active lesions on both clinical and imaging features of disability and highlights the relevance of identifying these lesions at each stage of the disease. Furthermore, our work promotes the use of QSM to identify chronic active lesions and as a tool to understand their role in clinical progression. Future work will include longitudinal studies building upon our findings to establish the role of

rim+ lesions as a prognostic biomarker in MS and to further explore the quantitative aspects of QSM to assess response to novel therapeutic approaches targeting the innate immune response in the CNS³⁶.

Methods

Patient cohort

This was a cross-sectional study of 159 patients with RRMS meeting the 2010 McDonald criteria³⁷, age ≥ 18 years, and already participants within our research repository that were recruited (and re consented) to have an annual cognitive evaluation at the time of their annual MRI for a total of five years. The current study is the baseline analysis of this longitudinal study. For this cohort, cognitive and neurological assessments were completed within an average of 14 ± 21 days of their annual MRI scan. Progressive MS phenotypes were excluded from this study in an attempt to provide novel insight into the prevalence of chronic active lesions at earlier stages of the disease. Cognitive function was evaluated utilizing *The Brief International Cognitive Assessment for Multiple Sclerosis* (BICAMS), which is composed of three assessments: Symbol Digit Modalities Test (SDMT), California Verbal Learning Test-II (CVLT-II) Immediate Recall (Total of Trials 1-5), and Brief Visuospatial Memory Test-Revised (BVMT-R) Immediate Recall (Total of Trials 1-3)³³. SDMT assesses processing speed, CVLT-II measures verbal learning and short-term memory, and BVMT-R examines visuospatial learning and short-term memory. A lower score for each cognitive assessment is associated with a lower cognitive performance. Expanded Disability Status Score (EDSS) was utilized to measure neurological dysfunction, with a higher EDSS score indicating increased disability. The study was approved by an ethical standards committee on human experimentation at Weill Cornell Medicine, and written informed

consent, which provides permission to store and analyze clinical and MRI data, was obtained from all patients according to the Declaration of Helsinki. The following clinical data were also collected for all patients: gender, age, disease duration from initial symptom, duration on current disease-modifying treatments (DMT), and disease subtype.

MRI protocol and image processing

Imaging was performed on a 3T Magnetom Skyra scanner (Siemens Medical Solutions USA, Malvern, PA) using a product twenty-channel head/neck coil. The MRI protocol consisted of sagittal 3D T1-weighted (T1w) sequence for anatomical structure, 2D T2-weighted (T2w) fast spin echo, and 3D T2w fluid attenuated inversion recovery (FLAIR) sequences for lesion detection, gadolinium-enhanced 3D T1w sequence for acute lesion identification, and axial 3D multi-echo GRE sequence for QSM. Detailed description of the imaging protocol: 1) 3D sagittal T1w MPRAGE: Repetition Time (TR)/Echo Time (TE)/Inversion Time (TI) = 2300/2.3/900 ms, flip angle (FA) = 8°, GRAPPA parallel imaging factor (R) = 2, voxel size = 1.0 × 1.0 × 1.0 mm³; 2) 2D axial T2-weighted (T2w) turbo spin echo: TR/TE = 5840/93 ms, FA = 90°, turbo factor = 18, R = 2, number of signal averages (NSA) = 2, voxel size = 0.5 × 0.5 × 3 mm³; 3) 3D sagittal fat-saturated T2w fluid attenuated inversion recovery (FLAIR) SPACE: TR/TE/TI = 8500/391/2500 ms, FA = 90°, turbo factor = 278, R = 4, voxel size = 1.0 × 1.0 × 1.0 mm³; 4) axial 3D multi-echo GRE sequence for QSM: axial field of view (FOV) = 24 cm, TR/TE1/ΔTE = 48.0/6.3/4.1 ms, number of TEs = 10, FA = 15°, R = 2, voxel size = 0.75 x 0.93 x 3 mm³, scan time = 4.2 min. QSM was reconstructed from complex GRE images using a fully automated Morphology Enabled Dipole Inversion algorithm zero-referenced to the ventricular cerebrospinal fluid (MEDI+0)³⁸.

Brain tissue segmentation

FreeSurfer³⁹ was utilized for the segmentation of white matter (WM) and gray matter (GM) on T1w images. The GM segmentation masks were checked and lesion in-painting completed to prevent misclassification due to T1-hypointensities associated with lesions⁴⁰.

Cortical thickness was computed using FreeSurfer, available through the website (<http://www.surfer.nmr.mgh.harvard.edu/>). All the surface reconstruction results were generated using the fully automated processing pipeline. For each point on the gray/white surface, the shortest distance to the pial surface is first computed. Next, for each point on the pial surface, the shortest distance to the gray/white surface is found, and the cortical thickness at that location is set to the average of these two values⁴¹.

FreeSurfer software was used to obtain thalamic volumes for all subjects. Thalamic segmentations are based on the assignment of neuroanatomical labels to each voxel in an MR image based on the probabilistic information automatically estimated from a manually labeled training set. The methods of the automated volumetric approach have been described in detail previously⁴². Since structures may scale with the general head size, an automated method was used to normalize thalamic volume to the overall intracranial volume⁴³.

Lesion segmentation and QSM rim identification

MS lesions were segmented on FLAIR images by an automated lesion growth algorithm as implemented in the LST toolbox version 3.0.0 (www.statisticalmodelling.de/lst.html), followed by manual editing and creation of individual lesion labels on the FLAIR sequence. Defining individual lesions can be difficult; therefore, T1 and T2 images were referenced, as needed, during the editing process to best define individual lesion boundaries. The automated lesion labels were extended or erased to match the original lesion signal. The edited lesion mask on FLAIR was then co-registered to QSM.

Chronic active lesions with paramagnetic rims were identified by two trained independent raters on QSM, one of whom is a neuroradiologist, and another trained independent rater then reviewed and resolved the discrepant lesions. Each reviewer was trained on the identification of rim lesions on QSM by an imaging data specialist (SG) with years of experience with QSM lesion analysis. As part of their training, the reviewers identified sample rim lesions and then compared their identifications to each other and a specialist in order to ensure consistency and accuracy. As represented in Figure 1, a lesion on FLAIR imaging was labeled as rim+ based on the presence of a hyperintense rim, relative to the lesion core, on QSM imaging. Lesions having a partial or complete rim were considered to be rim+.

Within the current study, the two initial independent raters only disagreed on the classification of 159 lesions yielding an initial agreement of 95.9% (Bangdiwala's B-statistics= 95.49%). The third reviewer resolved the differences between the two initial raters, yielding Cohen's Kappa coefficients of 70.6% and 85.8% with raters one and two, respectively⁴⁴. The Fleiss coefficient for all three raters was equal to 71%.

Statistical analysis

Two-sided p-values were computed using the Welch two-sample t-test or Mann-Whitney test for continuous symmetric variables to compare patients with and without rim lesions (Table 1). A chi-square test was used to compare categorical variables between patient groups. A multivariate regression model was implemented to test the association between clinical scores (SDMT, CVLT-II, BVMT-R, and EDSS) as a response vector and the number of rim+ lesions per patient while adjusting for total FLAIR lesion volume (TLV). In addition, the model accounts for other patient-level covariates such as gender, age, disease duration, and duration of current treatment, as well as covariate interactions (see online supplemental file for a full description of the model).

The combined assessment of cognitive function and EDSS was implemented to evaluate disability more comprehensively. The model is defined as multivariate⁴⁵ because it measures the association between four response variables (SDMT, CVLT-II, BVMT-R, and EDSS) and covariates of interest. A multivariate regression model allows us to quantify the relationship between all four disability scores as response variables and multiple patient-level covariates in one framework, thus providing more powerful tests of significance as compared to running four independent univariate models⁴⁶. Model assumptions were checked, and variable transformations were analyzed using descriptive plots and summary tables to improve linearity and normality. The only variable transformation included for modeling purposes were $\log(TLV.flair)$ and $\log(EDSS + 0.1)$; however, model-based mean estimates (SDMT, CVLT-II, BVMT-R, and EDSS) were reported using their original scale. For cognitive measures, we report descriptively the percentage of our sample who fell in the clinically impaired range based on published normative data⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹; however, we used raw scores rather than age-normed scores for statistical analyses because age was already included in our models as a covariate.

Two univariate regression models were also implemented to test the association between both cortical thickness and thalamic volume and the number of rim+ lesions at the patient level, while controlling for gender, age, disease duration, duration of current treatment, and TLV. All final models were selected using a stepwise backward procedure with a 0.10 significance level. Inferences are based on a 5% significant level. Furthermore, model-based means were computed along with their 95% confidence intervals. Statistical analysis was performed using R: A language and environment for statistical computing R Core Team (2020).

Acknowledgment

The research conducted in this study would not be possible without the patients at the Judith Jaffe Multiple Sclerosis Center. We would also like to acknowledge Sneha Pandya and Dr. Weiyuan Huang for their advisement with the analysis and Dr. Timothy Vartanian for his review of the manuscript. This study was supported by the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS)/National Institutes of Health (NIH) R01NS104283 and by grant number UL1 TR 002384 from the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS) of the NIH. Sponsors did not have a role in the study design, in the collection, analysis, interpretation of data, in the writing of the report, or in the decision to submit the article for publication.

Potential conflicts of interest

Dr. Wang owns equity of Medimagemetric LLC. Dr. Gauthier reported receiving grants from Genentech, Sanofi-Genzyme, and Mallinckrodt outside the submitted work. No other disclosures were reported.

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Author Contributions

MM was involved in acquisition and analysis of the data, conception and design of the study and drafting a significant portion of the manuscript or figures. SHR was involved in conception and design of the study, analysis of data and drafting a significant portion of the manuscript or figures. CT, LZ, NZ, OB were involved in acquisition and analysis of data. AJ and JC were involved in analysis of the data and editing the manuscript. UWK, NN, JSP, YW, ES, AK were involved in conception and design of the study and editing the manuscript. TDN was involved in the acquisition and analysis of data and editing the manuscript. SAG has overseen conception and design of the study, acquisition and analysis of data and drafting a significant portion of the manuscript or figures.

Figure 1: Examples of QSM rim+ lesions. Panels A and B represent slices of imaging for two separate patients. Within each panel, FLAIR is located on the left, and the corresponding slice of QSM is located on the right. In both panels A and B, the lesion on FLAIR is located within an orange circle, while the corresponding lesion on QSM is located within a blue circle. These examples represent lesions with a complete rim on QSM.

Figure 2: Distribution of disability scores comparing patients with zero (0: red) rim+ lesions versus patients with at least one rim+ lesion (1+: blue). Dash lines represent the mean for each group. Patients with at least one rim+ lesion performed worse on average SDMT [A], CVLT-II [B], BVMT-R [C] and EDSS [D].

Figure 3: Association of rim+ lesions with disability measures after accounting for clinical and imaging covariates. Patients with both higher total lesion volume on FLAIR and at least one rim+ lesion performed worse on SDMT [A], CVLT-II [B], and EDSS [D] as demonstrated by 95% confidence intervals of the difference of mean disability scores between patients with zero rim+ lesions minus patients with at least one rim+ lesion. The 95% confidence intervals of the means are model-based estimates. The final model included current treatment duration, age, gender, total lesion volume on FLAIR, and the number of rim+ lesions (statistically significant covariates).

Figure 4: Association between cortical thickness (CT) and age classified by rim+ lesions. 95% confidence intervals for model-based means are represented after adjusting for patient covariates. The final model included age and number of rim+ lesions (statistically significant covariates).

Characteristics	Patients with zero rim+ lesions (n=102)	Patients with at least one rim+ lesion (n=57)	p-value
Female, n (%)	76 (74.51)	39 (68.42)	0.523
Disease Duration, mean (SD)	11.02 (8.05)	10.24 (7.37)	0.528
Age, mean (SD)	41.96 (17.58)	42.54 (10.14)	0.731
Current Treatment Duration, mean (SD)	3.80 (4.28)	2.88 (3.32)	0.131
Cognitive Score, mean (SD)			
SDMT	58.31 (11.14)	52.70 (11.78)	0.004
CVLT-II	54.34 (8.42)	50.86 (11.95)	0.028
BVMT-R	25.27 (5.93)	22.88 (7.57)	0.032
Cognitive Impairment, n (%)			
SDMT	15 (14.71)	20 (35.09)	0.005
CVLT-II	6 (5.88)	10 (17.54)	0.038
BVMT-R	21 (20.59)	20 (35.09)	0.069
EDSS, median (IQR)	0.5 (2)	1.50 (2.5)	0.025
MRI Measures			
Cortical Thickness (mm), mean (SD)	2.53 (0.09)	2.48 (0.09)	0.002
Thalamic Volume, mean (SD)	0.0093 (0.0009)	0.0089 (0.0008)	0.0051
No. Lesions on FLAIR, median (IQR)	13 (20)	34 (31)	<0.001
Lesion Volume on FLAIR (mm³), mean (SD)	3127.72 (4619.32)	10296.04 (10412.46)	<0.001

Table 1. Clinical and MRI characteristics of all patients. Abbreviations include expanded disability status score (EDSS), symbol digit modality test (SDMT), California verbal learning test-II (CVLT-II), and brief visuospatial memory test-revised (BVMT-R). Thalamic volume is unitless (normalized to head size).

	MANOVA	ANOVA for each Cognitive Score			
		SDMT	CVLT-II	BVMT-R	EDSS
(Intercept)	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.386
Current Treatment Duration	0.012	0.389	0.137	0.513	0.009
Age	<0.001	<0.001	0.030	<0.001	<0.001
Gender	0.038	0.508	0.003	0.592	0.841
No. RIM (0 rim+ versus 1+ rim+ lesion)	0.010	0.011	0.050	0.157	0.001
logT2wFLAIR.lesion.volume	<0.001	<0.001	0.294	0.002	0.607
No. RIM * logT2wFLAIR.lesion.volume	0.006	0.010	0.030	0.165	0.001

Table 2. Summary of p-values from the Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) table and subsequent Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tables for each score. The final multivariate model for SDMT, CVLT-II, BVMT-R, and EDSS as vectors of response variables included current Treatment Duration, Age, Gender, No. RIM of+ lesions, log T2wFLAIR lesion volume, and the interaction term No. RIM * logT2wFLAIR.lesion.volume as covariates. This report gives the p-values associated with the MANOVA Pillai test and the approximated F-statistics for each score (ANOVA)

Figures

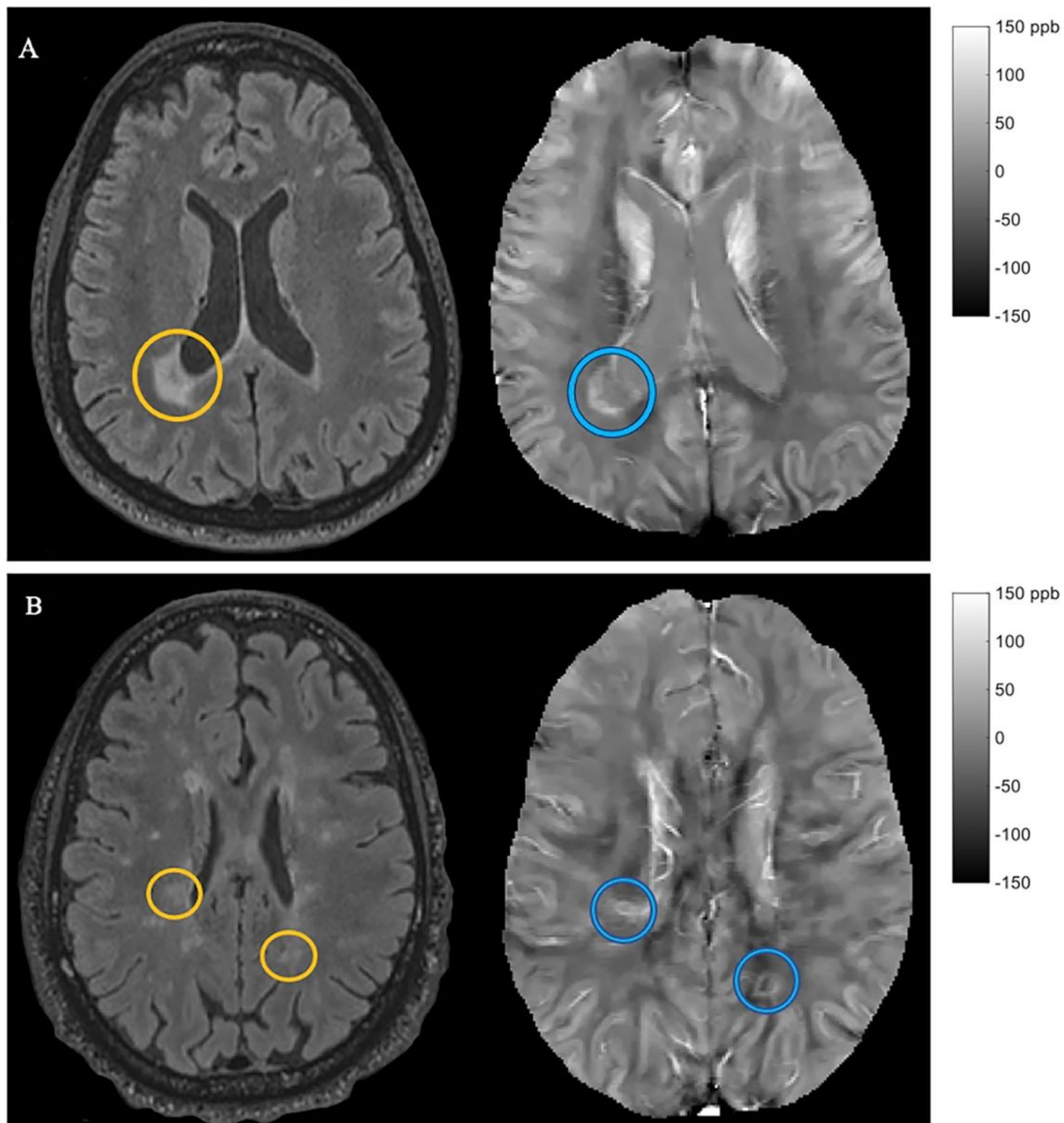


Figure 1

Examples of QSM rim+ lesions. Panels A and B represent slices of imaging for two separate patients. Within each panel, FLAIR is located on the left, and the corresponding slice of QSM is located on the right. In both panels A and B, the lesion on FLAIR is located within an orange circle, while the corresponding

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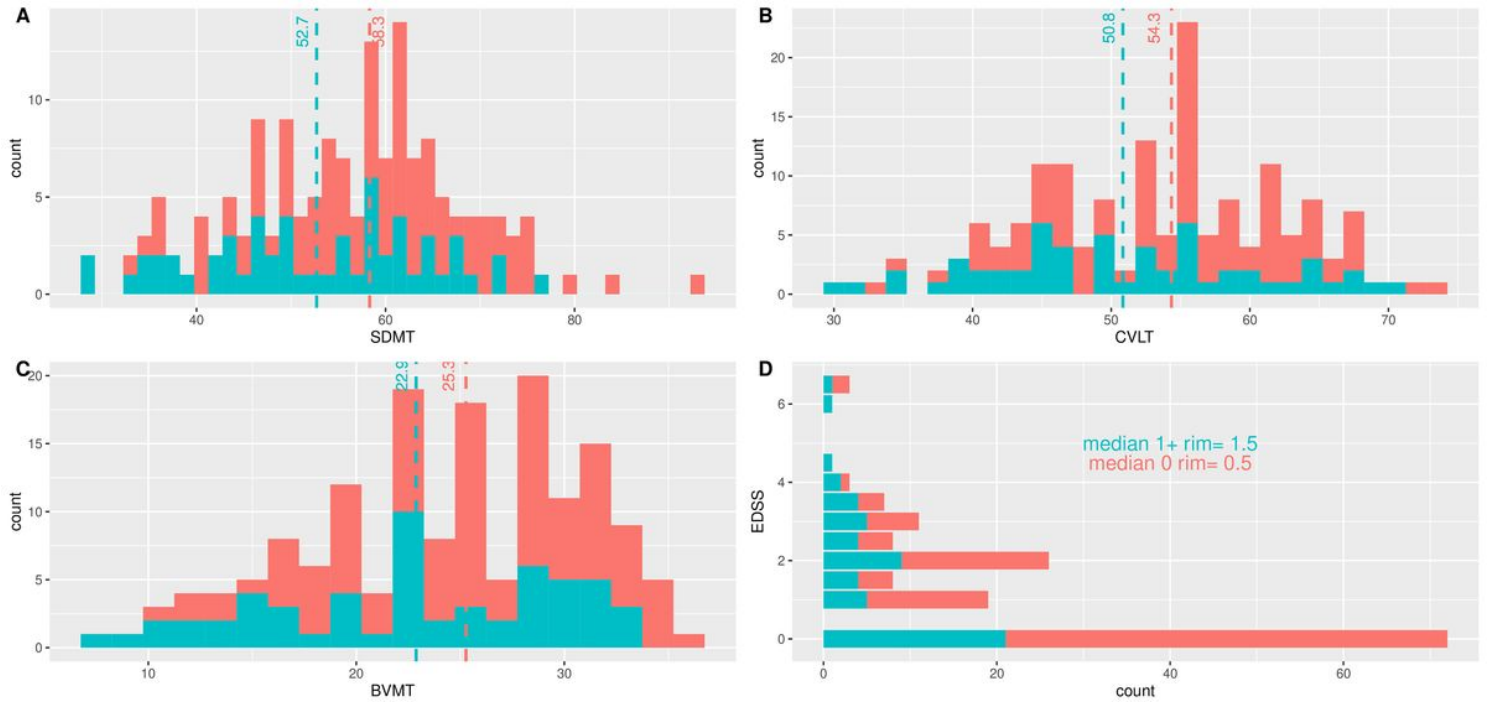


Figure 2

Distribution of disability scores comparing patients with zero (0: red) rim+ lesions versus patients with at least one rim+ lesion (1+: blue). Dash lines represent the mean for each group. Patients with at least one rim+ lesion performed worse on average SDMT [A], CVLT-II [B], BVMT-R [C] and EDSS [D].

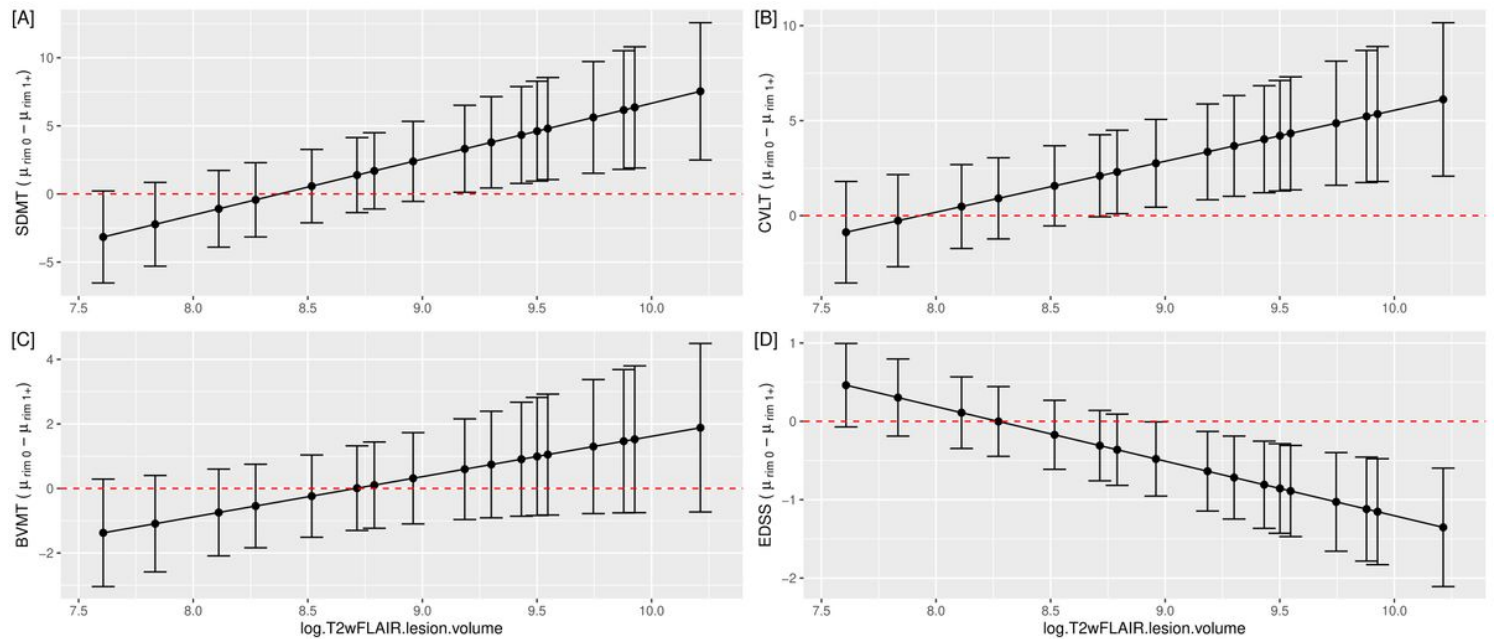


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Association of rim+ lesions with disability measures after accounting for clinical and imaging covariates. Patients with both higher total lesion volume on FLAIR and at least one rim+ lesion performed worse on SDMT [A], CVLT-II [B], and EDSS [D] as demonstrated by 95% confidence intervals of the difference of mean disability scores between patients with zero rim+ lesions minus patients with at least one rim+ lesion. The 95% confidence intervals of the means are model-based estimates. The final model included current treatment duration, age, gender, total lesion volume on FLAIR, and the number of rim+ lesions (statistically significant covariates).

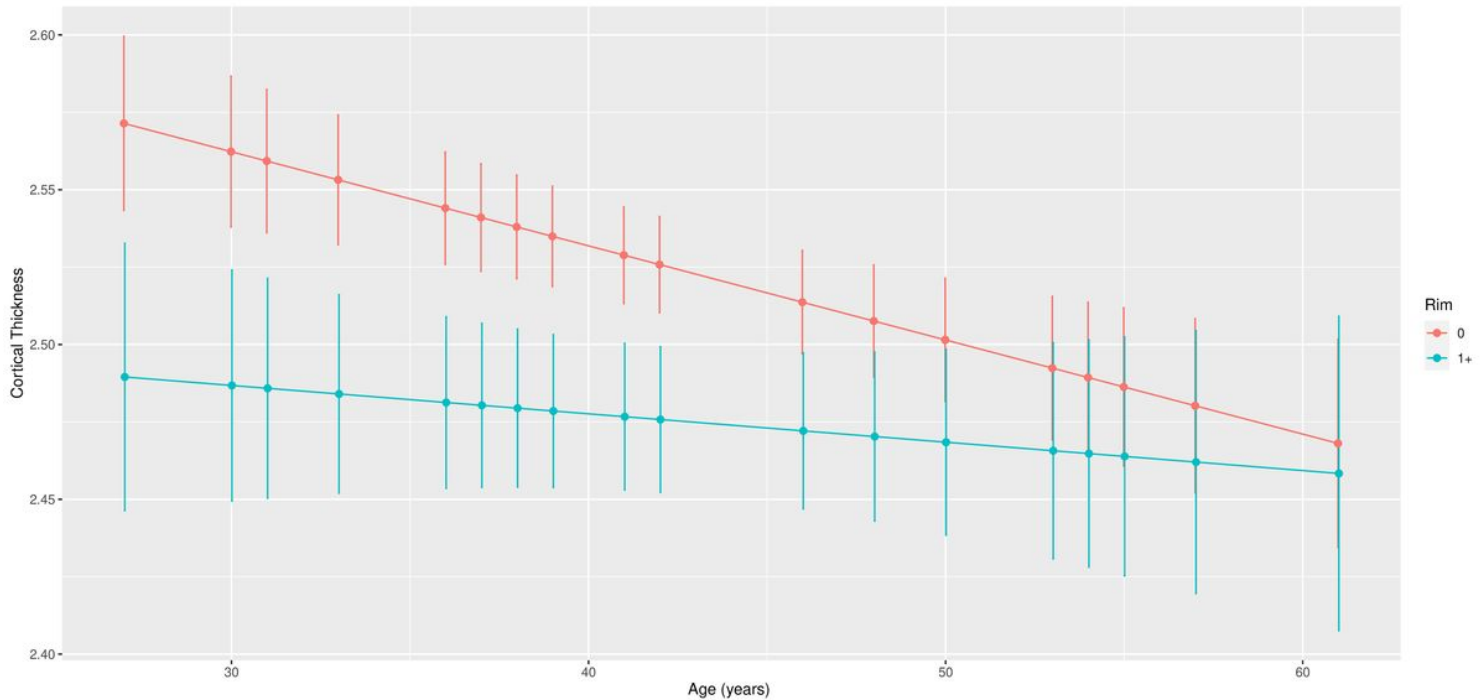


Figure 4

Association between cortical thickness (CT) and age classified by rim+ lesions. 95% confidence intervals for model-based means are represented after adjusting for patient covariates. The final model included age and number of rim+ lesions (statistically significant covariates).

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