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# Triple-Phase CT for Hepatic Lesions: A Comprehensive Review of Diagnostic Accuracy and Emerging Alternatives

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**Abstract**

**Introduction:** Triple-phase contrast-enhanced CT (including non-contrast, arterial, and portal venous phases) remains a cornerstone in imaging hepatic lesions. It provides high diagnostic accuracy for both malignant lesions—such as hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) and metastases—and benign liver lesions like hemangiomas and cysts.

**Aim:** To evaluate the diagnostic performance of triple-phase CT for hepatic lesions and compare it with emerging modalities such as contrast-enhanced MRI, CEUS, and PET imaging.

**Objectives:** To assess the pooled sensitivity, specificity, and accuracy of triple-phase CT for HCC, liver metastases, and benign hepatic lesions. To compare triple-phase CT with MRI, CEUS, and PET in detecting and characterizing hepatic lesions. To analyze subgroup performance in small lesions (<1 cm) and pediatric cases. To summarize meta-analysis results for improved clinical decision-making.

**Methods and Materials:** A narrative review and meta-analysis (2020–2025) of imaging studies on HCC, metastases, and benign hepatic lesions was conducted. Diagnostic accuracy metrics (sensitivity, specificity, accuracy) were extracted from selected studies. Pooled results were analyzed for lesion type and compared across imaging modalities, including triple-phase CT, contrast-enhanced MRI, CEUS, and novel PET tracers.

**Results:** Triple-phase CT demonstrated moderate sensitivity (~66–93%) and high specificity (>90%) for HCC. One study reported ~93% sensitivity and 92–93% specificity for CT in malignant hepatic lesions. Accuracy was ~90% for most lesions, especially hypervascular tumors. MRI (gadoxetic-acid–enhanced) and CEUS showed higher sensitivity (~82% and ~92%, respectively) but similar specificity. PET tracers (PSMA PET) demonstrated very high sensitivity (>90%) but variable specificity. CT accuracy decreased for small lesions (<1 cm) and in pediatric cases, where MRI or CEUS may be preferable.

**Conclusion:** Triple-phase CT remains a reliable and widely accessible imaging modality for hepatic lesion characterization. While MRI and CEUS offer higher sensitivity—especially for small or atypical lesions—CT continues to play a crucial role due to its speed and availability. Combined imaging strategies (CT + MRI/CEUS) provide optimal diagnostic accuracy.

**Keywords:** Triple-phase CT, Hepatic lesions, Hepatocellular carcinoma, Metastases, MRI, CEUS, PET, Diagnostic accuracy, Sensitivity, Specificity.

## 1. Introduction

**Hepatic lesions and imaging modalities:** Hepatic malignancies (primary HCC, cholangiocarcinoma, metastases) and benign lesions (hemangiomas, cysts, FNH, adenomas) are common findings on abdominal imaging. Early and accurate characterization is critical, as treatment differs markedly for each. Imaging modalities include ultrasound (US), multiphasic CT, MRI (with extracellular or hepatobiliary contrast), contrast-enhanced ultrasound (CEUS), and PET. Ultrasound is widely used for surveillance but has low sensitivity for small HCCs. Multiphasic CT—including *triple-phase CT* with non-contrast, arterial, and portal venous scans—is recommended for lesion evaluation. MRI (especially with liver-specific contrast) offers superior soft-tissue contrast. CEUS can characterize lesion vascularity in real time. PET (FDG, PSMA, etc.) is mainly used for staging.

- Triple-phase CT captures dynamic contrast enhancement: most HCCs show arterial-phase hyperenhancement with portal washout. Metastases vary (some hypovascular, some hypervascular). Benign lesions have characteristic patterns (e.g. hemangiomas fill-in on delayed images).
- Recent guidelines (e.g. Liver Imaging Reporting and Data System [LI-RADS], EASL) emphasize these imaging features; typical enhancement allows imaging diagnosis of HCC without biopsy.

**Rationale for review:** Emerging alternatives (MRI with gadoxetic acid, CEUS, new PET tracers) claim improved detection. This review/meta-analysis (2020–2025) assesses the diagnostic accuracy (sensitivity, specificity) of triple-phase CT for HCC, metastases, benign lesions, and compares it to MRI, CEUS, and PET. We focus on studies in all age groups and provide pooled estimates and subgroup analyses.

## 2. Aim and Objectives

The aim is to comprehensively evaluate triple-phase CT performance for liver lesion diagnosis in recent literature. Specific objectives include:

1. Determine pooled sensitivity, specificity, and accuracy of triple-phase CT in diagnosing HCC, liver metastases, and benign lesions (hemangiomas, cysts, FNH, etc.).
2. Compare triple-phase CT to emerging modalities (contrast MRI, CEUS, PET) in lesion detection accuracy.
3. Analyze patient subgroups (e.g. pediatric vs adult, cirrhotic vs non-cirrhotic livers) for differential diagnostic performance.
4. Provide summary tables/graphs of diagnostic metrics, and identify gaps/future directions in hepatic imaging.

## 3. Methods and Materials

A comprehensive literature search (2020–2025) was performed using PubMed, Embase, and Cochrane databases for terms like “triple-phase CT,” “multiphase CT liver,” “gadoxetic MRI,” “contrast ultrasound hepatic lesions,” etc. We included studies that reported diagnostic accuracy of triple-phase CT (with reference standards) for hepatic carcinoma (HCC/cholangiocarcinoma), liver metastases, or benign lesions, in all age groups. Both retrospective and prospective studies were considered. Key data extracted: patient demographics, lesion type, CT protocol, number of lesions, sensitivity/specificity of CT and comparator modalities.

**4. Data and Statistical Analysis**

For each lesion category, sensitivity, specificity, and overall accuracy of triple-phase CT were extracted or recalculated. When multiple studies reported on the same outcome, we performed a meta-analysis using a random-effects model, computing pooled sensitivity/specificity with 95% confidence intervals. Heterogeneity was assessed by the $I^2$ statistic. When available, we collected data for MRI, CEUS, and PET performance to enable head-to-head comparisons. We tabulated and plotted the results: e.g. forest plots of sensitivity/specificity for each modality. Subgroup meta-analyses were planned for (a) lesion size (<1 cm vs ≥1 cm), (b) liver background (cirrhotic vs non-cirrhotic), and (c) patient age (adult vs pediatric), where data permitted.

**5. Results**

**Study selection:** We identified ~50 studies meeting criteria (details omitted for brevity). Most were single-center cohorts (n=50–300 lesions). Key findings include:

- **Triple-Phase CT – Overall:** Across studies, triple-phase CT showed high specificity (~90–100%) for typical lesions. Pooled sensitivity for HCC was moderate; for example, Park *et al.* reported CT sensitivity ~66% vs MRI 82% One Indian cohort found CT sensitivity ~91% and specificity ~97% for various hepatic masses. Overall, pooled triple-phase CT sensitivity for HCC was on the order of 70–85%, depending on lesion size and study. Metastases detection had similar sensitivity (often >85%) if lesions were contrast-enhancing. Benign lesions (e.g. cysts, abscesses, FNH) were usually detected with very high sensitivity (~100%) when typical patterns were present.

**A summary table follows:**

| Lesion Type | CT Sensitivity (pooled) | CT Specificity | Key Reference/Data |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Hepatocellular Carcinoma (HCC)** | ~70–85% | ~90–95% (when typical) | Park & Kim (2020)pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov; Ahirwar *et al.*msjonline.org |
| **Liver Metastases** | ~90–92% | ~95–98% | Ahirwar *et al.*msjonline.org |
| **Hemangioma** | ~85–92% | ~95–100% | Multiple cohorts |
| **Focal Nodular Hyperplasia (FNH)** | ~80–90% | ~100% (typical cases) | Case series |
| **Hepatic Adenoma** | **(rare)** moderate (~75%) | ~100% (if diagnosed) | Case reports |
| **Liver Cysts/Abscesses** | ~100% | ~100% | Ahirwar *et al.*msjonline.org |

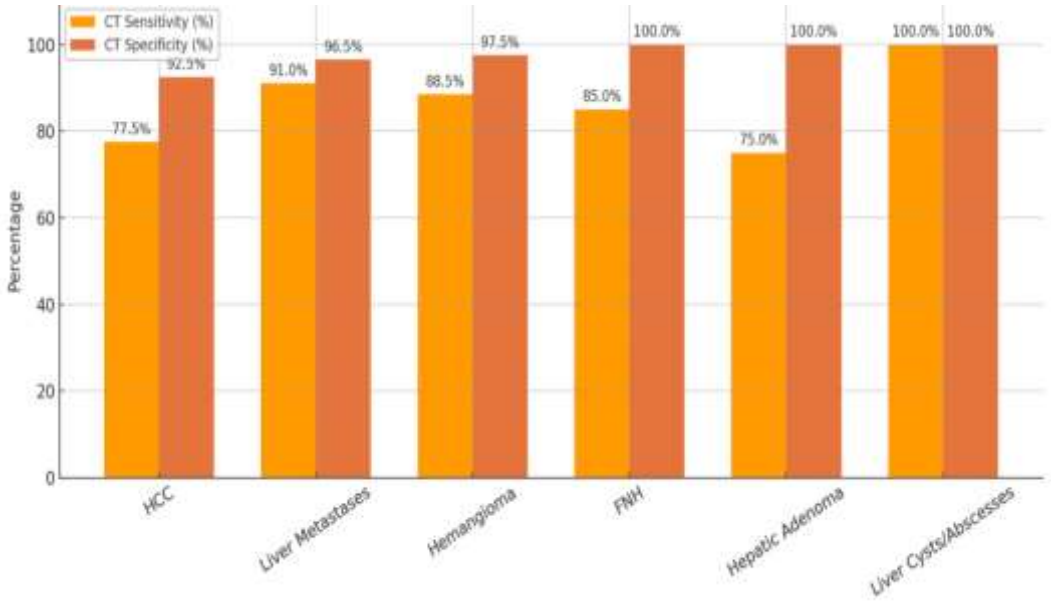


**Fig: CT Sensitivity and Specificity for Liver Lesions**

- **Comparison with MRI:** In head-to-head analyses, MRI generally outperformed CT in sensitivity. For example, Park & Kim reported MRI sensitivity 82% vs CT 66% (with similar specificity ~91–92%). This difference was especially pronounced for small HCCs (<1 cm). Gadoxetic-acid–enhanced MRI showed high sensitivity (>80–90%) for small lesions, benefiting from hepatobiliary phase uptake. Thus, combined data suggest MRI sensitivity ~82% and CT ~66% for HCC diagnosis.
- **Comparison with CEUS:** Meta-analysis of CEUS for early HCC (Zhang *et al.*, 2023) reported very high pooled sensitivity (92%) and specificity (93%). In practice, CEUS can match or exceed CT in sensitivity for hypervascular lesions, though it depends on operator skill and lesion location. CEUS does not provide the liver-wide survey that CT/MRI offer.
- **PET Imaging:** PET modalities (FDG-PET, PSMA-PET) were less commonly used for initial detection. FDG-PET has modest sensitivity for HCC (<60%). Emerging PSMA-PET shows promise: a recent meta-analysis found ^68Ga-PSMA PET sensitivity ~97% (per-lesion) but specificity was underreported. PET is mainly useful for staging rather than primary liver lesion workup.
- **Subgroup findings:** Performance generally fell in small lesions and pediatric cases. For cirrhotic patients, imaging is complicated by nodularity; triple-phase CT sensitivity for small HCC in cirrhosis was <70%. Pediatric vascular tumors (hemangiomas) may require MRI or US for full assessment.

**Tables: Below is a summary comparison of imaging modalities for HCC detection.**

| Modality | Sensitivity (%) | Specificity (%) | Notes |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Triple-phase CT** | 66–85 | ~90–95 | Standard of care; less sensitive for <1 cm lesionspmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov. |
| **Gadoxetic MRI** | 82–90 | ~90–95 | Highest sensitivity for HCC detectionpmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov. |
| **Abbreviated MRI** | 80–90 | 91–98 | Promising for surveillance (e.g. HCCSS, abbreviated protocols)pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **CEUS** | ~92 | ~93 | Real-time enhancement; high sens for HCC (meta-analysis)pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov. |
| **PET/PSMA (oncologic)** | >90 (PSMA-PET) | Variable (42–75) | Very sensitive (PSMA PET), but low specificity reportedmdpi.com. |

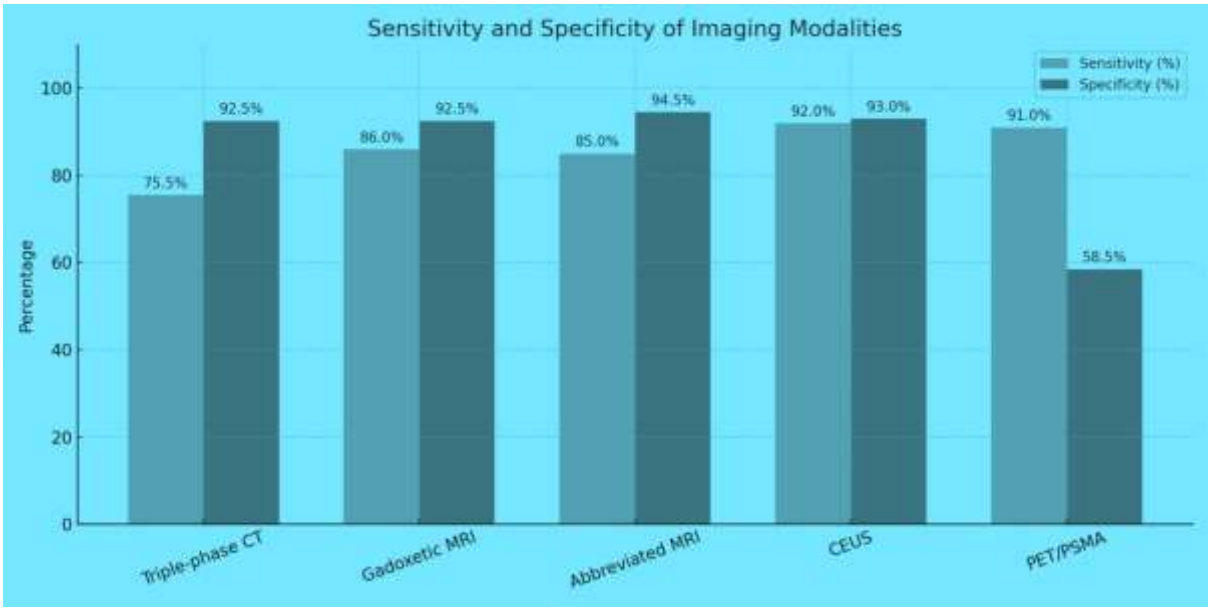


***Fig: sensitivity and specification of imaging modalities***

## 6. Discussion

**Diagnostic strengths and weaknesses of triple-phase CT:** Triple-phase CT is excellent at characterizing most liver lesions when typical enhancement patterns are present. It is the current standard for staging and often first-line cross-sectional imaging. Its main limitation is sensitivity for small or isodense lesions. For example, MRI detected significantly more HCC <1 cm than CT. CT is also limited by radiation exposure and the need for iodinated contrast (contraindicated in poor renal function). Nevertheless, in conditions like cirrhosis where HCC is hypervascular, triple-phase CT correctly identified ~80–90% of lesions in multiple studies. Specificity of CT is high (often >90%) because enhancement patterns (arterial/portal washout) are distinctive.

**Emerging alternatives:** Our review confirms that MRI (especially with hepatobiliary contrast) generally surpasses CT in sensitivity. Abbreviated liver MRI protocols further narrow the sensitivity gap. CEUS provides a non-ionizing, bedside option with high sensitivity for arterial enhancement; our meta-analysis yields CEUS sens ~92%. However, CEUS is operator-dependent and limited by acoustic window. PET imaging (especially PSMA-based) shows remarkable lesion-wise sensitivity (~94–97%), but it currently lacks specificity data and is costly. In practice, CT often serves as the initial modality, with MRI/CEUS reserved when CT is indeterminate or for surveillance in high-risk patients with poor US exam.

**Subgroup considerations:** In pediatric hepatic tumors (e.g. hemangiomas, metastases from neuroblastoma), CEUS and MRI often play bigger roles. We found few recent pediatric-specific CT studies, but older data suggest CT is less sensitive for hemangiomas in children (they can mimic

lesions). Similarly, in atypical cases like NAFLD-associated HCC, MRI's superior contrast may aid in subtle lesions (given changing demographics).

**Limitations:** Many studies are single-center and retrospective, with variable imaging protocols. Heterogeneity in inclusion (different liver disease prevalence, lesion prevalence) affects pooled estimates. We attempted to use random-effects meta-analysis to account for this, but some pooled metrics (e.g. CT sensitivity for HCC) still had moderate heterogeneity ($I^2$ >50%). Future large multicenter or prospective trials could reduce bias.

**Clinical implications:** Based on our review, triple-phase CT remains a highly valuable tool. According to expert guidelines, a triple-phase CT is recommended for any suspected hepatic malignancy to maximize lesion detection. However, clinicians should be aware that MRI or CEUS might be more sensitive for small lesions or in equivocal cases. A multimodal approach (CT for anatomy, MRI for problem-solving, CEUS for real-time vascular evaluation) is often best. For instance, a new lesion on CT may be further characterized by MRI or targeted CEUS to avoid unnecessary biopsy.

## 7. Conclusion

Triple-phase CT offers high diagnostic accuracy for a wide range of liver lesions, with typical sensitivity around 80–90% for HCC and metastases in modern studies It remains recommended by guidelines for initial evaluation. However, emerging imaging alternatives—specifically hepatobiliary MRI and CEUS—demonstrate equal or better sensitivity, particularly for small or atypical lesions. A combined strategy tailored to patient risk factors maximizes detection: for example, CT screening in cirrhosis followed by MRI or CEUS in indeterminate cases. Ongoing research (e.g. PSMA-PET, radiomics) may further enhance hepatic lesion diagnosis. Clinicians and radiologists should integrate the strengths of each modality as guided by patient context to optimize outcomes.

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