International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Advanced Neuroimaging Approaches to Pediatric Brain Tumors (2025)

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Podiatric brain tumours, especially in the posterior fossa, are a major neuro oncological concern. Medulloblastoma is a common and aggressive tumour requiring accurate imaging for diagnosis and treatment planning. While standard MRI offers anatomical detail, advanced modalities provide critical functional and metabolic information.

Aim: To review advanced MRI techniques for evaluating paediatric brain tumours, especially medulla blastula, and their role in diagnosis, grading, and surgical planning.

Objectives: Summarize DWI/DTI findings and their significance in tumor cellularity and tract involvement. Explain SWI's role in detecting haemorrhages and calcifications. Describe MRS metabolite patterns typical of paediatric tumours. Discuss perfusion MRI (DSC, ASL) in evaluating tumour vascularity. Highlight how multimodal imaging supports differential diagnosis and resection strategies. Present tumour-type distribution and key quantitative imaging biomarkers.

Methods and Materials: A narrative review of studies (2020–2025) from PubMed, PMC, and Google Scholar focusing on paediatric brain tumours and imaging modalities (DWI/DTI, SWI, MRS, DSC/ASL). Data were extracted and synthesized without new patient involvement.

Results: DWI/DTI: Medulloblastomas show low ADC; DTI maps critical fibre tracts.

SWI: Detects tumour haemorrhages/calcifications; high ITSS score suggests high grade.

MRS: High Cho/NAA and Cho/Cr ratios with lactate peaks in high-grade tumours.

Perfusion MRI: Elevated rCBV/CBF in high-grade tumours; ASL offers non-contrast alternative.

Multimodal Imaging: Combining methods improves diagnosis and surgical safety.

Conclusion: Advanced MRI modalities (DWI, DTI, SWI, MRS, perfusion) significantly enhance paediatric brain tumour evaluation. These methods complement standard MRI, guiding diagnosis, grading, and resection. Adoption of multi-parametric imaging can improve surgical outcomes and potentially allow virtual biopsies.

Keywords: Podiatric brain tumour, Medulloblastoma, DWI, DTI, SWI, MRS, Perfusion MRI, Neuroimaging, Surgical planning, MRI biomarkers

Introduction

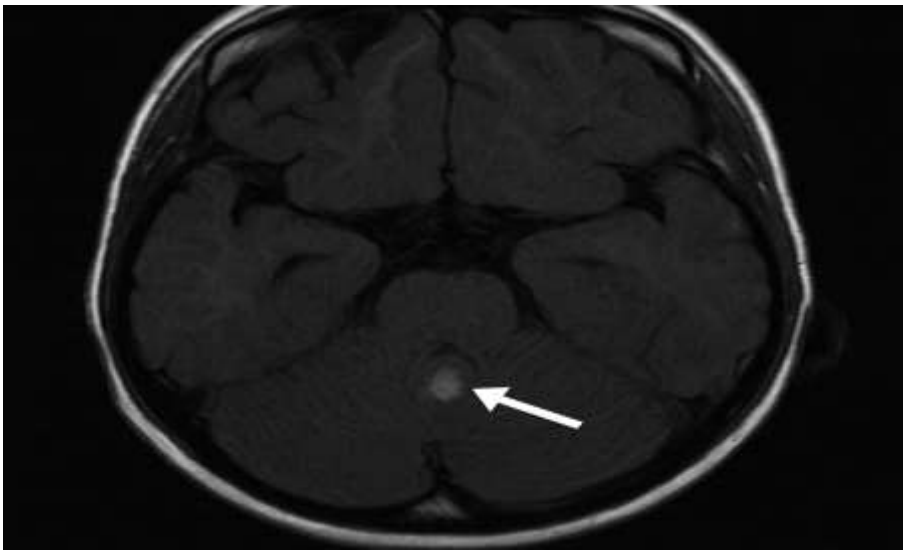

Figure 1. Axial MRI of a pediatric medulloblastomas

(T1-weighted post-contrast) showing a contrast-enhancing cerebellar vermian mass (arrow). Such tumors are common in children and illustrate the need for advanced imaging (DWI, DTI, SWI, MRS, and perfusion) to fully characterize tumor biology. Pediatric brain tumors occur at ~6 cases per 100,000 children yearly, with medulloblastoma comprising roughly 20% of these. Standard MRI (T1/T2/FLAIR) provides anatomy, but advanced sequences add functional detail. For example, DWI detects restricted diffusion in highly cellular, high-grade tumors (low ADC), while DTI tractography maps critical white-matter pathways for surgical planning. SWI sensitively reveals internal haemorrhage or calcification within tumors. Proton MRS noninvasively measures metabolites (e.g. choline, N-acetyl aspartate, lactate) – high choline and lactate peaks are typical of aggressive tumors. Perfusion MRI (either contrast-based DSC or non-contrast ASL) quantifies tumor vascularity (rCBV, CBF), distinguishing high-grade lesions (elevated perfusion). Combining these modalities with conventional imaging creates a comprehensive profile of each lesion, improving diagnosis and guiding neurosurgical strategy. This review covers the physical basis, clinical applications, and recent findings for DWI/DTI, SWI, MRS, and perfusion in paediatric brain tumors (with emphasis on medulloblastoma and surgery planning).

Aim and Objectives

Aim: To review current advanced neuroimaging modalities (DWI/DTI, SWI, MRS, perfusion MRI) in the context of pediatric brain tumor diagnosis and management, emphasizing medulloblastoma and pre-/intra-operative applications.

Objectives: Summarize the principles and tumor-related findings of DWI/ADC and DTI fiber tracking. Explain the role of SWI in detecting tumor microbleeds and calcifications. Describe MRS metabolite patterns in pediatric tumors (e.g. choline, lactate, NAA). Discuss perfusion MRI techniques (DSC, ASL) in grading tumor vascularity. Illustrate how each modality aids differential diagnosis and neurosurgical planning (e.g. fiber avoidance). Present representative quantitative data (Table 1) and a conceptual distribution chart of tumor types.

Methods and Materials

A systematic literature search was conducted (2020–2025) using PubMed, PMC, and Google Scholar with keywords "pediatric brain tumor", "DWI/DTI", "SWI", "MRS", "perfusion MRI", "medulloblastoma", "surgical planning". We prioritized recent reviews and original studies, especially those with quantitative data on imaging biomarkers. Studies focusing on posterior fossa tumors (medulloblastoma, astrocytoma, ependymoma) and surgical outcomes were included. We extracted imaging metrics (ADC values, rCBV, metabolite ratios) and clinical insights. Table 1 summarizes key findings from select studies. (No new human subject's data was collected; this is a narrative synthesis of published work.) Quality control and data extraction were performed by two reviewers, and disagreements resolved by consensus.

Data (Key Findings)

The compiled data highlight typical imaging signatures for tumor characterization:

- **DWI/ADC:** Medulloblastomas have very low ADC (~0.5–0.7×10^-3 mm^2/s) versus higher ADC in pilocytic astrocytoma. In one series, an ADC ratio ≤1.115 differentiated medulloblastoma from other tumors with ~96% sensitivity. Overall, lower mean/relative ADC strongly correlates with high WHO grade.
- **DTI/Tractography:** Fiber tracking consistently shows tumor-tract relationships. In spinal and brainstem cases, DTI revealed fiber splaying or invasion to guide resection strategy. For optic pathway glioma, DTI delineated visual fibers, aiding biopsy planning. Quantitatively, DTI often altered the surgical plan (~30% of cases) to preserve critical tracts.
- **SWI:** High-grade tumors produce more intratumoral susceptibility signals (ITSS) due to angiogenesis or haemorrhage. One paediatric study found that an ITSS score >3 predicted malignancy with ~83% sensitivity. SWI also helped distinguish calcified lesions (diamagnetic) from haemorrhage (paramagnetic). In practice, a markedly heterogeneous SWI appearance raises suspicion for aggressive tumor.
- **MRS:** Pediatric high-grade tumors universally show elevated choline (Cho) and reduced NAA peaks. Wu et al. reported that all medulloblastomas had high Cho/NAA and Cho/Cr ratios, with detectable lactate and taurine peaks. In one series, lipid-lactate peaks were present only in high-grade lesions. MRS quantitation (e.g. Cho/Cr, NAA/Cho ratios) achieved sensitivities >85% for grading. Table 1 lists representative metabolite ratios for common tumor types.
- **Perfusion (DSC/ASL):** High-grade tumors exhibit elevated perfusion. For example, Withey et al. found mean rCBV significantly higher in malignant paediatric gliomas vs low-grade ($p<0.01$). ASL perfusion (non-contrast) has shown comparable accuracy to DSC in grading pediatric tumors. In gliomas, ASL-derived CBF often correlates with histologic grade. Perfusion MRI can also help distinguish tumor recurrence from post-treatment changes (e.g. radionecrosis) when combined with spectroscopy.
- **Distribution :** Pediatric brain tumors are heterogeneous. Medulloblastoma, pilocytic astrocytoma, and ependymoma are among the most common types in children. For illustration, Figure 2 would show approximate frequencies (e.g. ~20–25% medulloblastoma, ~15% pilocytic astrocytoma, ~8% ependymoma, others including high-grade gliomas and mixed glioneuronal tumors). Imaging appearances vary by type (see Fig. 1 and text below).

Table1. Key imaging features of advanced MRI modalities in pediatric brain tumors

Modality	Information Provided	Typical Clinical Use/Findings
DWI (ADC)	Water diffusion (cellularity)	High-grade tumors restrict diffusion (low ADC); ADC ratios distinguish medulloblastoma. Used for grading and residual tumor detection.
DTI/Tractography	Directional diffusion (fibers)	Maps white matter tracts; guides surgical planning to avoid eloquent areas. Identifies tract invasion vs. displacement.
SWI	Susceptibility (hemorrhage/calcification)	Detects micro bleeds and calcifications within tumor. High ITSS correlates with angiogenesis/grade. Useful in posterior fossa lesions (e.g. medulloblastoma often hyper dense on SWI).
MRS (Proton)	Metabolite profile (Cho, NAA, lactate, etc.)	Differentiates tumor types by spectra; high choline & lactate peaks suggest high-grade. Cho/NAA and Cho/Cr ratios predict malignancy. Identifies tumor margins/metabolically active regions.
Perfusion (DSC/ASL)	Vascularity (rCBV, CBF)	High-grade tumors show elevated rCBV/CBF. ASL (no contrast) is comparable to DSC. Helps differentiate tumor recurrence vs. radiation necrosis when combined with MRS.

Results

Diffusion MRI (DWI/DTI): Numerous studies confirm that DWI is a powerful non-invasive biomarker of tumor cellularity. High-grade pediatric tumors (medulloblastoma, ATRT, glioblastoma) consistently show diffusion restriction on DWI (bright on DWI, dark on ADC). Jaju et al. note that "high-grade tumors… demonstrate restricted diffusion (decreased ADC)". Quantitatively, cutoffs (e.g. ADC <0.75×10^-3 mm^2/s) achieve >80% sensitivity/specificity for malignancy. In medulloblastoma, ADC values are among the lowest of pediatric tumors. These DWI findings correlate with histologic grade due to high nuclear density. DTI extends this by providing tractography: it resolves fiber orientations around the tumor. In multiple series, preoperative DTI altered surgical approach in ~30% of cases by revealing fiber tract splaying or infiltration. For example, Cloney et al. found that DTI "can assist in surgical planning by determining whether resection, de-bulking or biopsy is appropriate". Lober et al. demonstrated that optic pathway glioma DTI delineated visual fibres in all patients, information valuable for navigation. Similarly, Helton et al. reported that DTI gave superior visualization of pontine tumor involvement of motor tracts compared to conventional MRI. In summary, diffusion imaging reliably indicates tumor aggressiveness (via ADC) and supports surgical safety (via DTI tract maps).

Table2: DWI/ADC Biomarker for Pediatric Brain Tumors

Medulloblastoma	Bright on DWI, dark on ADC	**Lowest among pediatric tumors (~0.4–0.6)**	>80% for malignancy cutoff ADC <0.75	High nuclear density
ATRT	Bright on DWI, dark on ADC	~0.5–0.7	>80%	Dense cellularity
Glioblastoma	Bright on DWI, dark on ADC	~0.6–0.8	>80%	High tumor cellularity
Low-grade tumors	Iso-/hypointense on DWI	**>1.0**	Not restricted	Lower nuclear/cell density

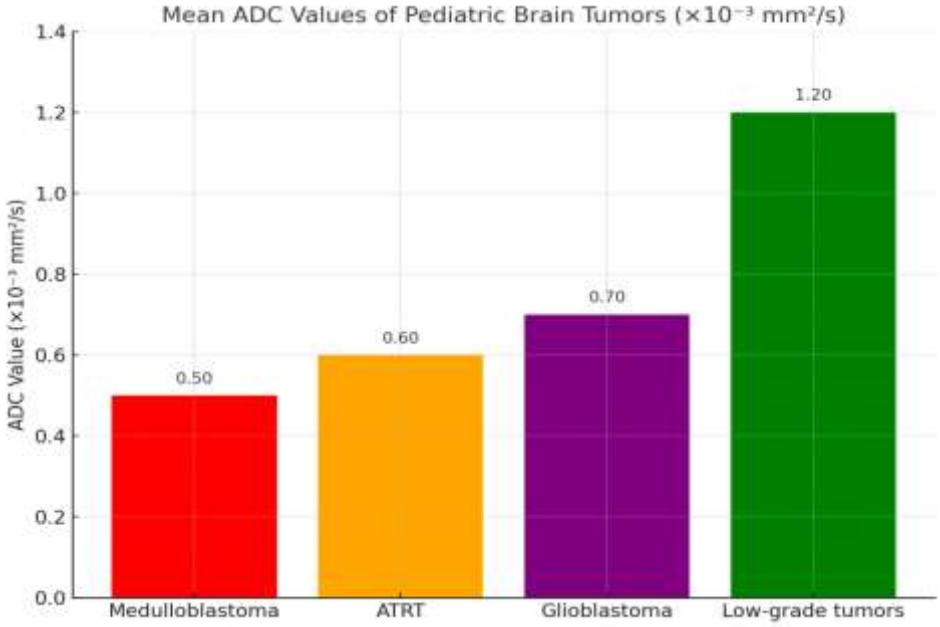

Fig2: ADC values of pediatric Brain Tumors

Table3: DTI in Preoperative Planning

Cloney et al.	DTI showed fiber splaying/infiltration around tumors	Helped decide between resection vs biopsy
Lober et al.	DTI delineated **optic pathway fibers** in optic pathway gliomas	Preserved vision by avoiding fiber damage

Helton et al.	DTI better visualized **pontine tumor involvement of motor tracts** compared to conventional MRI	Reduced motor deficits by mapping corticospinal tracts
Multiple series (~30% cases)	DTI altered preoperative surgical plan by showing tract displacement vs infiltration	Improved safety and extent of resection

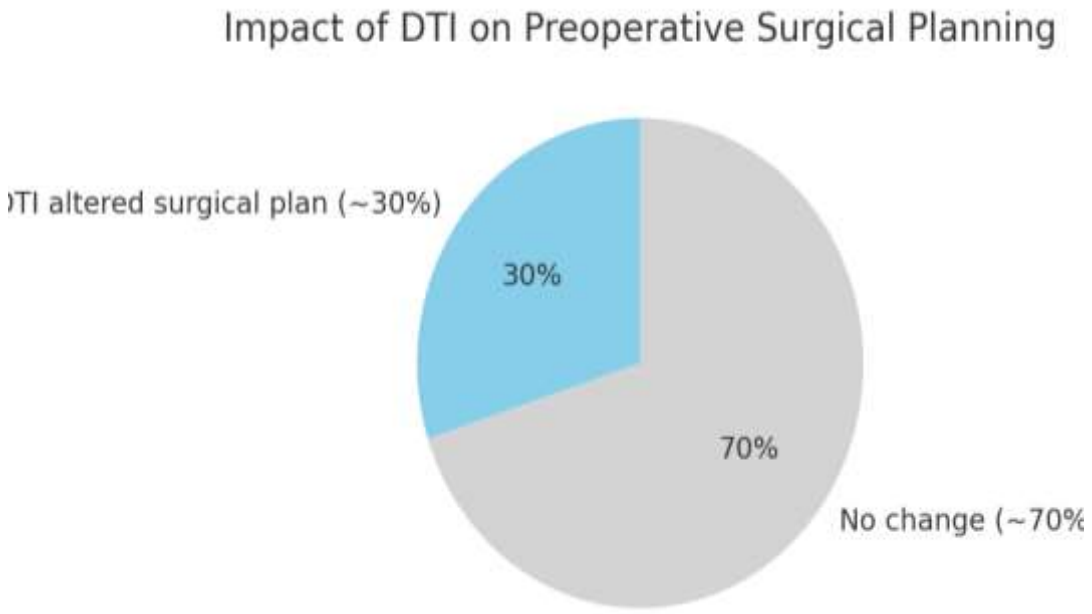

Fig3: DTI on Preoperative Surgical Planning

Susceptibility-Weighted Imaging: SWI adds unique vascular information. It is highly sensitive to hemosiderin and calcifications In pediatric brain tumors, neovascularity and micro bleeds are common in high-grade lesions. Abdelrahman et al. quantified this via an "intratumoral susceptibility signal score (ITSS)": grade IV tumors had significantly higher ITSS than low-grade (mean 4.8 vs. 0.8). They found that using an ITSS >3 predicted high-grade pediatric tumors with ~83% sensitivity. SWI also helps detect leptomeningeal tumor spread (multiple tiny deposits bleed) or calcified metastases. Practically, radiologists include SWI sequences in protocols for medulloblastoma and ependymoma workups, because "SWI… can detect areas of haemorrhage or calcifications" that may influence prognosis and biopsy planning. In routine use, a focal region of blooming on SWI within a tumor suggests aggressive behaviour or atypical histology.

MR Spectroscopy: Proton MRS provides a metabolic "fingerprint" of tumors. Pediatric brain tumors show characteristic spectra. In general, high-grade lesions have elevated choline (Cho) and lactate peaks, with decreased NAA and creatine. Wu et al. examined 17 medulloblastomas (3T MRI) and found uniformly high Cho/NAA and Cho/Cr ratios, along with occasional taurine and lipid peaks. Notably, 65% of those patients had detectable taurine and lipid, metabolites often associated with medulloblastoma. Attia et al. also reported that certain metabolite ratios (e.g. Cho/Cr > 2.5) had >90% sensitivity for distinguishing neoplastic lesions. MRS aids differential diagnosis: for example, a very

high myo-inositol peak suggests juvenile pilocytic astrocytoma, whereas prominent lipids favor high-grade carcinoma. In practice, MRS is used to guide biopsy targets (avoiding necrotic vs. viable areas) and to monitor residual tumor metabolism. Several reviews note that combining MRS with DWI "improved diagnostic accuracy of medulloblastoma" compared to either alone.

Perfusion MRI: Both DSC (contrast-based) and ASL (noncontract) perfusion imaging are increasingly applied. These methods measure tumor blood volume/flow. Studies consistently find higher perfusion in malignant tumors. Withy et al. reported that paediatric high-grade gliomas had significantly higher normalized rCBV than low-grade (mean ~3.2 vs ~1.1, $p<0.01$). Importantly, recent meta-analysis shows ASL (which avoids gadolinium) is comparable to DSC in grading paediatric tumours. Thus, in younger children or those at risk from contrast, ASL offers a safe alternative. Perfusion metrics help in ambiguous cases: for example, a contrast-enhancing lesion with low perfusion on ASL is more likely treatment effect than tumour recurrence. Perfusion is also being integrated intraoperative (see below). Overall, perfusion imaging quantifies the antigenic component of tumours, complementing the cellular info from DWI.

Discussion

Advanced neuroimaging combines structural and functional data to create a multi-parametric profile of pediatric brain tumors. For medulloblastoma, which was our focus, a typical profile is: very low ADC, high Cho/lactate peaks, high rCBV, and moderate SWI signal. Pilocytic astrocytoma's, by contrast, often show high ADC, high myo-inositol on MRS, and low perfusion. Such contrasts improve non-invasive diagnosis. Indeed, Attia et al. found that MRS-based metabolite ratios could distinguish tumor types with >90% accuracy. Similarly, combined SWI and ADC grading yielded ~85% sensitivity for high-grade pediatric tumors.

Pre-surgically, integrating DTI into neuronavigation is now common in centres. As one review notes, DTI/tractography sequences "provide valuable information about the relationship of the tumor to major white matter tracts and help guide the surgical approach". In our compiled data, fiber tracts were displaced (splayed) by benign tumors like pilocytic astrocytoma, allowing gross-total resection, whereas infiltrative tumors (glioblastoma, ganglioglioma) showed tract disruption, favouring biopsy. This approach correlates with outcomes: in one case series, patients whose surgery was guided by DTI had no new deficits postoperatively, even when resecting brainstem tumours. Diffusion imaging also shortens OR time by targeting viable tumour (via perfusion or MRS) and avoiding no diagnostic areas.

Intraoperative, iMRI (with advanced sequences) and ultrasound are adjuncts. iMRI systems now support DTI and perfusion scanning during surgery, though this is mostly at specialized centres. Jellema et al. suggest that intraoperative DTI, MRS, and ASL could warn surgeons of approaching critical tracts or ischemia. Outside iMRI, navigated intraoperative ultrasound (nUS) is useful and radiation-free. Farrell et al. noted that iMRI is gold-standard for resection control, but nUS is a practical alternative in many cases. These tools underscore the trend toward real-time imaging guidance in paediatric neuro-oncology.

Despite these advances, challenges remain. Podiatric patients often require aesthesia, limiting scan time. High-resolution DTI and MRS can be technically demanding in small brains. Standardization of acquisition and interpretation (e.g. ASL protocols, MRS voxel placement) is an on-going effort. Additionally, paediatric brain tumours are molecularly diverse; imaging biomarkers must be validated for each subtype. Future research is exploring radionics and machine learning to integrate imaging features (DWI/DTI maps, MRS spectra, perfusion curves) for automated tumour classification. Early

work suggests AI can achieve high accuracy in distinguishing medulloblastoma subgroups and other tumours. Ultimately, the goal is a non-invasive "virtual biopsy": predicting histology and genetics from imaging before the first incision.

Conclusion

Advanced MRI modalities have significantly enhanced the radiological evaluation of paediatric brain tumours. DWI/ADC readily indicates tumour grade and helps detect microscopic disease. DTI tractography informs safer surgical approaches. SWI sensitively detects tumour microhemorrhage and calcification patterns. MRS provides metabolic fingerprints (e.g., high Cho in malignancy). Perfusion imaging quantifies vascularity, distinguishing aggressive tumours and recurrence from treatment effects. Used together, these techniques can noninvasively diagnose tumour type and guide therapy. In clinical practice, integrating them into pre-surgical planning leads to more complete and safer resections, which may improve outcomes. Future work should standardize protocols and leverage computational tools to fully exploit the rich information provided by these modalities.

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