More Data, More Questions: No Simple Answer About Which Children Should Undergo Screening Neuroimaging for Clinically Occult Abusive Head Trauma

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Abusive head trauma (AHT) is the leading cause of fatal child physical abuse. Victims may initially present with clinically occult AHT without overt signs of head trauma or with only subtle, nonspecific symptoms, which can make timely recognition of AHT challenging. Research has shown missed opportunities for early detection of AHT in the medical setting are common and can lead to repeated injury. Neuroimaging is needed to diagnose clinically occult AHT but is not without risk. Researchers have worked to understand the yield of neuroimaging in detection of clinically occult AHT and to identify risk factors, yet findings have varied widely across studies. Identifying which children undergoing physical abuse evaluations are at highest risk of clinically occult AHT is key to development of evidence-based imaging decision support tools for clinicians. Here we discuss the recent literature, identify potential reasons for variation across studies, and offer opportunities for future research.

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