



Imaging techniques for ocular neoplasia

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ABSTRACT

Background: Novel ocular imaging modalities have greatly impacted the diagnosis and management of different types of ocular neoplasia. In this narrative review, we summarize the practical features of popular and novel imaging modalities for ocular tumors.

Methods: Four databases, including PubMed/MEDLINE, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar, were searched from January 1, 2000 to August 31, 2022. Articles reporting different imaging modalities for diagnosing or monitoring treatment responses of ocular tumors were extracted using various combinations of the following keywords: ocular neoplasia, positron emission tomography or PET, single-photon emission computed tomography or SPECT, optical coherence tomography or OCT, OCT angiography or OCTA, computed tomography or CT, ultrasonography or US, ultrasound biomicroscopy or UBM, and magnetic resonance imaging or MRI.

Results: Various ocular imaging modalities had different accuracies as adjunctive tools for detecting or managing ocular tumors. Anterior ultra-high-resolution optical coherence tomography (OCT) could be used to evaluate images with < 5- μ m resolution. OCT angiography provided deeper insight into retinal vascular changes associated with the malignant transformation of choroidal melanoma. OCT in children altered the diagnosis of suspicious retinoblastoma in 3% of the cases and treatment plan in 11% of the cases. While positron-emission tomography (PET)/computed tomography (CT) allowed the detection of metastatic lesions of choroidal melanoma by full-body scanning, single-photon emission CT was more sensitive compared to PET in detecting choroidal melanoma. Ultrasound biomicroscopy, with an accuracy exceeding 92.5%, could detect retinal calcification in lesions measuring 2 – 3 mm. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) had better contrast compared to ultrasound biomicroscopy and higher sensitivity compared to CT in detecting post-laminar optic nerve invasion. However, MRI had a lower spatial resolution compared to OCT. Further development of imaging modalities and their application in drug development would improve the treatment of ocular tumors.

Conclusions: Although diagnosing ocular tumors depend on clinical characteristics, innovations in ocular imaging have enabled early diagnosis and timely, appropriate management of ocular neoplasia, which are conducive to favorable visual outcomes and increased life expectancy. Further systematic reviews and meta-analyses of primary studies focusing on a specific imaging modality in ocular neoplasia could precisely determine the diagnostic accuracy of each imaging modality to better guide eye practitioners with efficient diagnostic or therapeutic approaches for these sight- or life-threatening entities. Imaging modalities may play a major role in drug development in the future.

KEYWORDS

neoplasia, eye neoplasm, positron emission tomography, PET scan, SPECT CT, CT SPECT scan, optical coherence tomography, ultrasonographic imaging, magnetic resonance images

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INTRODUCTION

Ocular tumors can be melanocytic, lymphoid, leukemic, fibrotic, epithelial, and lipomatous [1-5]. Recently, 3540 new cases and 350 deaths from ocular and orbital cancers have been reported in the United States [6].

Age differences exist across the types and risk factors for ocular neoplasia. Children are predisposed to retinoblastoma (RB) and rhabdomyosarcoma, while adults can develop uveal melanoma (UM) and ocular lymphoma [7, 8]. Risk factors associated with RB include genetic or individual predispositions [7, 9]. Risk factors associated with UM include congenital eye melanocytosis, light eye color, white ethnicity, and exposure to ultraviolet rays [10-12].

Understanding intraocular tumors and their ocular complications are factors determining their response to treatment and practical management [13-15]. Appropriate diagnostic tools are essential for the early detection and management of ocular cancer. Although biopsy with histological examination is the gold standard for confirming a tumor, advanced noninvasive imaging techniques have equal reliability in diagnosing ocular tumors [7, 8].

Recent advances in ocular imaging have greatly influenced the diagnosis and treatment of both anterior and posterior segment eye diseases [16, 17]. In addition to pre-treatment diagnosis [18], imaging modalities are vital for post-treatment monitoring of ocular tumors and evaluation of response to chemotherapy management [19, 20]. Moreover, novel ocular imaging approaches may help the development of appropriate treatment modalities for intraocular tumors [21].

In this narrative review, we summarize novel imaging modalities commonly used for diagnosing or managing ocular tumors (Figure 1), including choroidal melanoma, RB, and anterior and posterior segment tumors, or for drug development, based on the literature published since 2000. We summarize the clinical presentation of the most common ocular tumors diagnosed using different imaging modalities and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each modality. In addition, we briefly explain various pharmacokinetic studies on eye tissues using imaging modalities to elucidate its potential use in drug development.

METHODS

The literature was searched from the official home pages of PubMed/MEDLINE, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar from January 1, 2000 to August 31, 2022 using various combinations of the following keywords: ocular neoplasia, positron emission tomography or PET, single-photon emission computed tomography or SPECT, optical coherence tomography or OCT, optical coherence tomography angiography or OCTA, computed tomography or CT, ultrasonography or US, ultrasound biomicroscopy or UBM, and magnetic resonance imaging or MRI. The eligibility criterion was detection or management of ocular tumors using the imaging modality with high accuracy. After reviewing the title, abstract, and full text, articles that met the eligibility criteria were evaluated by two independent reviewers (A.A. and Z.H.), and disagreements were resolved in consultation with a third reviewer (R.J.). Studies on nontumoral eye lesions were excluded. Finally, relevant articles on imaging modalities for detecting or managing ocular neoplasia were selected, and their full text was reviewed.

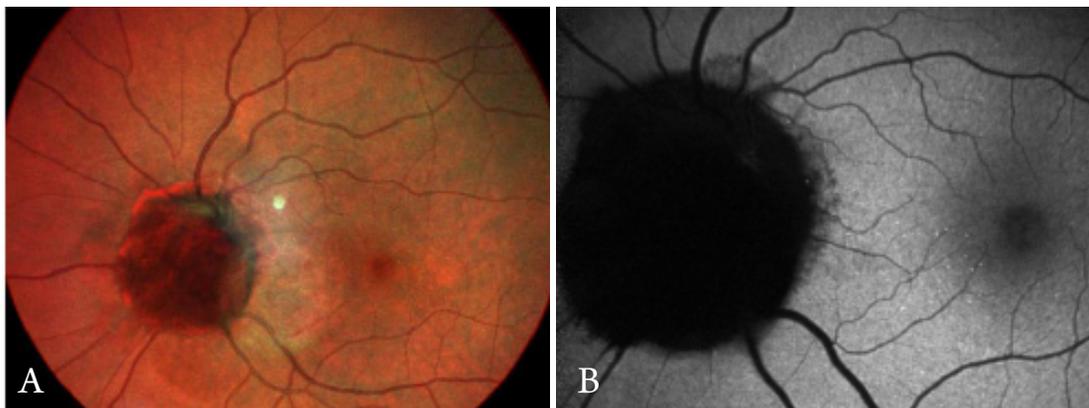


Figure 1. (A) Color fundus photograph (Topcon TRC50LX, Topcon, Tokyo, Japan) showing left eye optic disc melanocytoma as a highly pigmented black-brownish lesion involving most of the optic disc and adjacent retina. (B) The fundus autofluorescence (Heidelberg Engineering, Heidelberg, Germany) shows hypofluorescence of the lesion corresponding to the pigmented mass and adjacent retina.

RESULTS

The initial search yielded 136 articles, of which relevant articles were selected, and their practical points were summarized. RB in children and UM in adults were the most common intraocular malignant tumors [22-24]. On histological assessment, RB had calcification in over 95% of cases [22], and ocular calcification in children younger than 3 years indicated RB. Approximately 5% of all melanomas in adults were UMs, and 5% of UMs were located in the iris [23, 24].

Another common adult tumor was ocular lymphoma, often associated with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. It was found inside the eye, orbit, and adnexa. Orbital lymphoma was the most common orbital cancer in adults, and 5% of the patients with lymphoma were at risk for secondary orbital lymphoma [25].

Table 1 summarizes the available imaging modalities as adjunctive tools for the assessment of ocular tumors along with their advantages and disadvantages. The imaging modalities are discussed in detail below.

DISCUSSION

Positron emission tomography (PET)

PET uses the high glucose uptake in tumor cells to retrieve information about the location, size, and shape of the tumor and thereby distinguish between cancerous and normal structures. A radioactive form of glucose, such as fluoro-2-deoxyglucose-18 (FDG), is injected intravenously and accumulates in the tumoral tissue [26, 27]. PET is then performed to obtain detailed information about tumor cells [26]. PET alone is sensitive for the detection of metastatic lesions in orbital squamous cell carcinoma [26].

However, the sensitivity of PET is inferior to that of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) in detecting metastatic liver lesions in newly diagnosed UM [36]. FDG-based glucose metabolism is not sensitive for the diagnosis of choroidal melanoma or liver metastases from UM [26, 37, 38]. FDG absorption with false-positive results for nonmalignant cell detection has been reported. Inflammatory, infectious, or traumatic processes can cause false-positive results [39]. However, the importance of PET/computed tomography (CT) in staging pediatric cancers, such as rhabdomyosarcoma, has been reported [40]. PET can be used for staging choroidal melanoma based on the glucose uptake. CT can reduce the false-positive rate [41], and combined CT and PET improves the diagnostic accuracy [40, 41].

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of various imaging modalities used for ocular tumors

Imaging Modality	Advantage	Disadvantage
PET-CT Scan	It offers the possibility of scanning the whole body to diagnose metastatic lesions and diagnosis of medium to large UMs [26].	The amount of glucose uptake is unknown for tumors, and tumors with a low metabolic rate cannot be diagnosed. Radiopharmaceuticals are used, thereby increasing the risk of secondary cancer [27].
SPECT	It is more sensitive compared to PET in diagnosing UMs [28].	Its diagnostic accuracy depends on timely imaging, and it is recommended to be performed after 48 h of an intravenous ¹²³ I-IMP injection. In addition, radiopharmaceuticals are used, thereby increasing the risk of secondary cancer [29].
AS-OCT	It is suitable to diagnose tumors of the anterior segment of the eye and is a safe diagnostic tool without using radiopharmaceuticals [30].	It is unsuitable for pigmented tumors because of a less penetrating power and for tumors of the posterior segment of the eye. It fails to detect metastatic lesions, unlike PET or SPECT [31].
UBM	It has a superior ability for penetration compared to AS-OCT in diagnosing anterior segment tumors, and diagnosing RB in the fetus is affordable, efficient, and available [32].	It cannot provide epithelial detail as seen on UHR-OCT or confocal microscopy [33].
MRI	It is a radiation-free imaging modality and promising in diagnosing fetal RB. It is better for soft tissue imaging compared to CT and ultrasound. It has a wide application in the diagnosis of RB and UM, particularly metastatic ones [34].	The image of calcified tissue is poor compared to CT. Motion artifact affects image resolution. It is expensive and difficult to access [35].

Abbreviation: PET-CT Scan, positron emission tomography-computed tomography; UM, uveal melanoma; SPECT, single photon emission computed tomography; ¹²³I-IMP, N-isopropyl-p-[¹²³I]iodoamphetamine; AS-OCT, anterior segment optical coherence tomography; UBM, ultrasound biomicroscopy; RB, retinoblastoma; UHR-OCT, ultrahigh-resolution OCT; MRI, magnetic resonance imaging.

Reddy et al. [42] showed that both PET/CT scanners could detect medium and large tumors. Finger et al. [43] proposed PET/CT as a noninvasive marker for metastatic choroidal melanoma. Calcagni et al. [44] showed that differences in glucose metabolism could be used to distinguish between different types of low- and high-risk UM cancer cells. In a study by McConnell et al. [45], PET/CT showed 100% sensitivity for the diagnosis of choroidal melanoma with loss of chromosome number 3. This is a useful screening tool with low false-positive results to detect liver metastasis in patients with UM [41].

In addition, radiopharmaceuticals used in PET induce a risk of radiation-induced tumors. Huang et al. [27] reported that the risk of cancer development after PET/CT decreased as the age at exposure increased. Children with RB gene mutations are susceptible to secondary neoplasia due to exposure to ionizing radiation; therefore, PET/CT is not recommended in children [46].

Single-photon emission CT (SPECT)

SPECT is the three-dimensional (3D) counterpart of planar radioisotope imaging that uses radionuclides and records the emission of gamma rays from different angles with a nuclear camera [28, 29]. Goto et al. [28] described the use of N-isopropyl-*p*-[¹²³I]iodoamphetamine (¹²³I-IMP) for diagnosing UM with atypical clinical manifestations. The basic principle of this technique is the positive correlation between the accumulation of ¹²³I-IMP and the amount of melanin [28].

In a comparative study of PET and SPECT for diagnosing malignant UM, Abe et al. [29] found that SPECT was more sensitive 24 h after intravenous ¹²³I-IMP administration and that imaging after the intravenous ¹²³I-IMP injection was effective for differentiating malignant melanoma from non-malignant nevus only 48 h after the injection. Yamazaki et al. [47] showed that SPECT images integrated with CT images, which is a standardized uptake value method evaluated at a 6-h time point, can predict ¹²³I-IMP uptake at a 24-h time point and is more predictive for detecting choroidal melanoma compared to the conventional count-based uptake index method [47].

In a meta-analysis, Liu et al. [48] compared ¹⁸F-fluoride PET/CT and technetium-99-methylene diphosphonate bone scan (BS) in detecting bone metastases and found that the sensitivity was higher when the results were equivocally positive for BS (sensitivity, 96%; specificity, 93%), but the specificity was higher when equivocal results were reported as negative for BS (specificity, 95%; sensitivity, 93%) [48].

Optical coherence tomography (OCT)

OCT was developed based on optical coherence interference to measure the frequency of the returning beams from the eye and compare it with the reference light. The time and spectral domains are two types of OCT with high resolutions [30, 49]. Ultra-high-resolution (UHR) OCT is an advanced OCT technique that reveals abnormal features of ocular neoplasia [30, 50, 51]. High-resolution enhanced-depth OCT is a promising modality for the precise measurement of posteriorly located choroidal nevi [52].

Ocular neoplasia, such as surface squamous, conjunctival lesions (pigmented and non-pigmented), choroidal nevi, epithelioma, melanocytoma (Figure 1), and other forms of ocular neoplasia, can be diagnosed using OCT [30, 50-52]. Pavlin et al. [32] reported that OCT could help evaluate anterior segment tumors, particularly small hypopigmented iris tumors, with large infiltrating iris hypopigmented tumors not being imaged as well as small ones. A retrospective study by Bianciotto et al. [50] reported that OCT is only suitable for treating hypopigmented tumors. OCT can detect 18- μ m lesions of high quality [50].

Nanji et al. [31] reported 71 patients with ocular surface squamous neoplasia (OSSN), lymphoma, and pigmented conjunctival lesions diagnosed using UHR-OCT with high accuracy. In addition, UHR-OCT is a useful method for differentiating thick tumoral lesions and squamous hyperactivity of the ocular surface from other ocular surface lesions, such as keratoconjunctivitis, pterygium, and Salzmann's nodular degeneration [53-55]. Intraoperative UHR-OCT aids in better visualization of tumor margins and guides surgical approaches for these lesions [56].

Lozanco Garcia et al. [57] reported that UHR-OCT has a 100% sensitivity and specificity for diagnosing OSSN from pterygium, with a cutoff point of 141 μ m for epithelial thickness. Subclinical disease detected on UHR-OCT in patients with a definite clinical resolution of OSSN can help clinicians prevent disease progression or recurrence [58]. Hyperreflective bands in subepithelial lesions on UHR-OCT are related to paracellular infiltration based on histopathology and confirmed as conjunctival lymphoma [59]. The ability of UHR-OCT to image conjunctival lymphoma lesions can be restricted by the substantial thickness of the lesion, leading to lower structural details in deeper subepithelial tissues [60].

Recently, OCT angiography (OCTA) has revealed distinctive vascular patterns in OSSN lesions. The density of blood vessels in the body of OSSN tumors is higher than that in the underlying conjunctiva and subepithelial

tissue [61]. In a study by Brouwer et al. [62], anterior-segment OCTA showed tortuous vascular patterns in conjunctival melanoma differing from the vascular patterns seen in primary acquired melanosis (PAM) of the conjunctiva and normal conjunctiva; conjunctival nevi also have internal cystic structures relative to PAM lesions and conjunctival melanoma [62].

OCTA is used to profile the vasculature of the retina or optic disc [61], and its measurements can be helpful for the early detection of radiation retinopathy or optic neuropathy after brachytherapy in the eyes with UM through quantitative biomarkers [63]. OCTA can measure ischemia-related retinal quantitative capillary changes related to the visual acuity and radiation dose, and the development of radiation-induced retinal toxicity related to radiation may be predicted with this approach in the future [63, 64].

Ultrasound biomicroscopy (UBM)

Ultrasound waves with different frequencies were used in UBM. A major limitation of UBM is the use of the liquid immersion technique, which may not be possible in all patients [16]. Ultrasound waves are superior to light waves and enable better visualization of ocular tumors with a transition through large and highly pigmented tumors [34]. It is a useful modality to detect ocular tumors and their locations [32] and calcification with an accuracy exceeding 92.5% [65].

Ultrasonography (US) can be used for screening and predicting RB in fetus and for amniocentesis [66, 67]. In one study, US was used at 33 weeks of pregnancy to detect RB in the macular region of one eye [68]. It is easier and more cost-effective for diagnosing fetal RB compared to MRI [32] (Table 1). In addition, invasive tumors present as blunting of the anterior chamber, invasive tissue in the anterior chamber angle, ciliary body, or thickness of uvea on UBM 50 MHz [69, 70]. Meel et al. [33] found that latent intraocular invasion of OSSN could be diagnosed with UBM in patients with risk factors, such as nodular or ulcerative tumor morphology, tumor thickness of > 5 mm in height, or history of immunosuppressant use or surgical intervention [33, 69].

UBM is necessary for non-specific clinical manifestations of UM [71]. UM is a neoplasm that develops from the choroidal melanocytes, ciliary body, and iris in 90%, 7%, and 3% of the cases, respectively [72]. Molecular abnormalities and mutations have been identified in UM [73]. A choroidal nevus can progress to melanoma with age, which is a major problem in Europe and the United States because of population aging [74].

Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)

Radiation-free MRI uses powerful static magnets for imaging. Various components of MRI have made it the surrogate gold-standard modality to evaluate the orbit and brain in RB after the gold-standard modality histopathology [75]. Studies have identified different aspects of RB and UM diagnoses using MRI. Schueler et al. [76] showed the use of high-resolution MRI for RB with hyperintense and hypointense signals in T1- and T2-weighted images relative to the vitreous, respectively; however, they had limited value in visualizing the prelaminar and postlaminar optic nerves. MRI has a weak ability to detect calcification caused by RB compared to CT; calcium appears hypointense on MRI [76].

Lemke et al. [77] showed a sensitivity of 91.7% and specificity of 88.9% for detecting a specific amount of intraocular calcification with MRI. However, small motion artifacts may impair the quality of the MRI image; even advanced MRI technology, such as UHR trans-3D turbo spin echo T2-weighted MRI, is prone to motion artifacts despite noise removal [78]. Therefore, various strategies have been developed to overcome the effects of eye movement on MRI [79, 80].

Bilateral posterior pole lesions can be identified at 35 weeks of pregnancy with MRI image resolution without affecting fetal movement [81]. The contrast resolution of MRI is better than that of UBM, and MRI has a higher sensitivity than CT for detecting post-laminar invasion in the optic nerve of eyes with RB [82]. MRI shows a sensitivity of 95% in the diagnosis of post-laminar invasion [82].

MRI enables the diagnosis of UM and can help with treatment planning using proton radiation. Daftari et al. [35] investigated the possible use of T2-weighted rapid rotation 3D MRI images in treatment planning for intraocular malignancy and found that MRI was excellent for demonstrating intraocular tumor volumes and provided additional information regarding the tumor shape. Direct MRI volumetric measurements showed a high degree of accuracy for tumor volume in patients with UM [35]. Optic nerve sheath meningioma (ONSM) is a rare, benign tumor of the optic nerve. MRI is preferred for diagnosing ONSM [83]. Despite the presence of pneumosinus dilatans, optic canal enlargement, and nerve sheath calcification of ONSM on CT, MRI is considered the gold-standard diagnostic modality [84].

Although MRI has a lower spatial resolution compared to OCT, it allows for simultaneous ocular and orbital imaging [85]. It is highly accurate in diagnosing metastatic liver lesions in the early detection of UM.

It helps formulate an appropriate treatment plan and provides information about the anatomical relationships of the tumor before brachytherapy, proton-beam therapy, and stereotactic radiotherapy [86]. With continuous advancements in MRI technology, radiofrequency coil design, and further optimization of MR sequences, MRI could become a superior imaging approach for diagnosing UM [87] or ocular tumors.

Imaging technology in drug development

Ophthalmic CT or MRI with tumor volume measurements is an example of assessing the effectiveness of newly developed chemotherapeutic drugs used to treat ocular tumors [88, 89]. Similarly, imaging-based biomarkers can provide areas of greater immunization, safety, and molecular efficacy of medicine. Bergstrom et al. [88] proposed PET as a potential tool for determining the pharmacokinetics and release of new molecules during drug production. By using a radioactive ligand, changes in the receptor can be easily detected on PET to determine the pharmacokinetics of the new drug [89]. FDG-PET is used to monitor FDG uptake before and after bevacizumab treatment of rectal tumors [90].

Conventional pharmacokinetic techniques for analyzing the ocular distribution of drugs are invasive and rely on animal models. Human studies are generally performed concurrently with ocular surgery, such as vitrectomy [91], which can be alternatives to overcome these shortcomings. Successfully using micro-dialysis in determining the intratumoral pharmacokinetics of chemotherapy drugs, such as carboplatin and 5-fluorouracil, in RB has been reported [92]. Fernandez-Ferreiro et al. [93] used a PET/CT scanner to determine the clearance of three radiopharmaceutical molecules in the vitreous. A recent study demonstrated the use of PET as a potential noninvasive tool for conducting pharmacokinetic studies on ophthalmic drugs. SPECT/CT has also been used as a noninvasive tool for monitoring ocular drug distribution [94].

In another study on the binding of melanin to labeled ^{125}I -IMP, the distribution and elimination of this molecule in albino and pigmented rats were studied using SPECT/CT as a tool for non-invasive control of drug pharmacokinetics [95]. Dynamic contrast-enhanced MRI has been used to study the spatial and temporal distributions of drugs and the uniformity and permeability of the blood-retinal barrier [96-98]. Despite advantages of MRI in the development of ophthalmic drug delivery, it has limitations compared to conventional pharmacokinetics, including low sensitivity, selective monitoring using radiopharmaceutical contrast, different relaxation times of protons in tissues, such as vitreous or aqueous humor, and high cost [99]. Studies are required to confirm the efficacy of integrating different imaging modalities to understand the kinetics, dynamics, and development of ocular drugs for managing vision-threatening tumors.

In this narrative review, we outlined the trend in innovations in ocular imaging techniques over the past two decades that has enabled early diagnosis and timely management of ocular neoplasias to achieve favorable visual outcomes and increase life expectancy. However, this review is limited by the lack of a comprehensive literature search, and some influential articles might have been overlooked. In addition, we presented an overview of various ocular imaging modalities but failed to examine the detailed practical points or diagnostic accuracy of each modality. Further systematic reviews and meta-analyses of primary studies focusing on a specific imaging modality in ocular neoplasia could precisely determine the diagnostic accuracy of each imaging modality to better guide eye practitioners toward efficient diagnostic or therapeutic approaches in these sight or life-threatening entities. Finally, despite significant advances in imaging techniques, they are considered adjunctive tools for detecting or managing ocular tumors and cannot substitute thorough clinical examinations or careful regular follow-ups. For both anterior- and posterior-segment tumors, the importance of regular anterior-segment slit-photo or fundus photography for monitoring and documenting baseline features and tumor progression cannot be overstated.

CONCLUSIONS

Various ocular tumors can be accurately detected using various imaging modalities. The advantages and disadvantages of imaging modalities should be considered based on the nature of the tumor. Although MRI is expensive, it is safe and has a wider scope for diagnosing various types of ocular tumors. OCT and US are superior to other techniques, particularly for diagnosing anterior-segment tumors. Despite caution regarding the radiation risk and higher cost associated with using PET/CT and SPECT, these are useful for whole-body scanning to detect metastatic lesions. In multipurpose diagnoses using different approaches, the advantages and disadvantages of each modality can be neutralized and show better diagnostic possibilities compared to a single imaging method. Imaging modalities may play a major role in drug development in the future. Further development of imaging modalities with higher resolution would solve the current challenges in ocular tumor detection, and their application in drug development would improve the treatment of ocular tumors.

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