Wernicke encephalopathy

SWI detects petechial hemorrhages in mammillary bodies in vivo

Figure 1 Susceptibility-weighted imaging (SWI) detects microbleeds in the mammillary bodies as a hallmark of Wernicke encephalopathy (WE)

Axial SWI of an alcoholic patient with ataxia, nystagmus, and disorientation due to acute WE shows 2 dark spots in the mammillary bodies, indicating microbleeds in this brain region.

In 1881, Carl Wernicke¹ described a “polioencephalopathia haemorrhagica superior” in 3 alcoholic patients with gray matter hemorrhages in the mammillary bodies.

Contrast enhancement in the mammillary bodies, an important imaging sign of Wernicke encephalopathy (WE), suggests a disrupted blood–brain barrier, which may be the cause for the microbleeds.

In a 58-year-old man with acute WE, brain magnetic resonance susceptibility-weighted imaging (SWI) revealed blood deposits in mammillary bodies, which were not evident on standard T2* images (figures 1 and 2). SWI may be a preferred sequence to detect the pathologic hallmark of WE in vivo and extends the MRI characteristics of this treatable condition.²

Elke Hattingen, MD, PhD, Aline Beyle, MD, Andreas Müller, MD, Thomas Klockgether, MD, PhD, Cornelia Kornblum, MD, PhD

From the University Hospital of Bonn (E.H., A.B., A.M., T.K., C.K.) and the German Center for Neurodegenerative Diseases (T.K.), Bonn, Germany.

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Coronal T1-weighted image after application of contrast agent shows a faint enhancement in the mammillary bodies.

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Correspondence to Dr. Hattingen: elke.hattingen@ukb.uni-bonn.de

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