Optical coherence tomography angiography (OCTA) is a noninvasive approach that can visualize blood vessels down to the capillary level. With the advent of high-speed OCT and efficient algorithms, practical OCTA of ocular circulation is now available to ophthalmologists. Clinical investigations that used OCTA have increased exponentially in the past few years. This review will cover the history of OCTA and survey its most important clinical applications. The salient problems in the interpretation and analysis of OCTA are described, and recent advances are highlighted.

Keywords: optical coherence tomography, optical coherence tomography angiography, angiography, retina
Optical coherence tomography angiography

While phase-based approaches have been successful, they required precise removal of background phase noise due to bulk tissue motion or from system instabilities. Within an OCT system, phase noise can arise from scanning mirrors or a swept-source laser.\textsuperscript{25,26} Although several methods exist to compensate for phase noise\textsuperscript{20,27,28} and improve system phase stability,\textsuperscript{20-32} an alternative is to use the variation in amplitude or intensity of the OCT signal to detect flow instead.

Optical coherence tomography angiography based on amplitude or intensity was initially described in 2005, when Barton et al.\textsuperscript{33} adapted laser speckle analysis for time-domain OCT. Speckle arises as a property of the interferometric nature of OCT, and speckle variation contains information regarding the motion of scatterers.\textsuperscript{34,35} Specifically, the speckle pattern stays relatively constant over time for static objects while the pattern changes for objects in motion. Mariampillai et al.\textsuperscript{36} extended the technique and presented speckle variance detection of microvasculature in a dorsal skinfold model using a swept-source OCT system in 2008. In their work, speckle variance was calculated as the variance of the OCT reflectance amplitude over three repeated B-scans at the same location. In optimizing the method, Mariampillai et al.\textsuperscript{37} noted in 2010 that the B-scan rates for repeat scans needed to be fast enough such that bulk motion between B-scans was less than the OCT beam waist radius.\textsuperscript{37} Although “speckle variance” has been historically associated with amplitude-based OCTA, fundamentally both amplitude and phase-based flow detection are based on variation in the speckle pattern and therefore provide largely equivalent information.\textsuperscript{38} In addition to speckle variance, another intensity-based OCTA approach was termed correlation mapping.\textsuperscript{39} In correlation mapping OCTA, cross-correlation of a grid on adjacent B-scans was performed to identify vasculature (weak correlation) versus static tissue (strong correlation).

Optical coherence tomography angiography of retinal microvasculature in the human eye using methods based on amplitude or intensity was demonstrated in 2012. Motaghianinezem et al.\textsuperscript{40} used logarithmic intensity variance and differential logarithmic intensity variance to capture the microvascular network near the fovea. In addition, Jia et al.\textsuperscript{41} developed an efficient signal processing algorithm called split-spectrum amplitude-decorrelation angiography (SSADA). Split-spectrum amplitude-decorrelation angiography sacrificed axial resolution by splitting the OCT signal into different spectral bands to increase the number of usable image frames without increasing scanning time or decreasing scan density. When spectral-splitted amplitude-decorrelation images were combined, the flow signal-to-noise ratio was increased (Fig. 1B).

As a quick summary of the different OCTA methods, we have simplified and classified the aforementioned as well as a few more recently developed methods in the Table. The methods are classified based on use of Doppler shift or speckle variance/decorrelation and whether they use full-spectrum or split-spectrum processing.

While each OCTA method can compensate for bulk tissue motion within a B-scan,\textsuperscript{20,27,28,41} saccadic eye motion between B-scans could disrupt vessel continuity and reduce the quality of the final angiogram. Different approaches have been explored to address this issue. Because motion in two consecutive scans will be different, registering multiple scans is a potential solution. Orthogonal registration of one x-priority and one y-priority scan has been demonstrated to reduce motion artifacts.\textsuperscript{37} Alternatively, incorporating eye tracking with the OCTA scan can minimize motion artifacts as well.\textsuperscript{48}
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PATHWAY TO CLINICAL USEABILITY

The interest in OCTA has grown dramatically in the past few years. This was aided by technology transfer of SSADA and an orthogonal registration approach to Optovue, Inc., who then worked quickly to implement and make OCTA available as a research tool to the wider ophthalmic community on their commercial, SD-OCT platform. These events spurred Carl Zeiss Meditec, Inc. to adapt OMAG for their eye-tracking enabled SD-OCT system as well as other OCT companies to incorporate OCTA in their systems. Interpretation of OCTA, however, relies heavily on software to improve ease of use and facilitate analysis of collected data (Fig. 2). Methods and approaches to segment retinal layers for en face display and generate multicolor composite angiograms, which combine flow information from several en face slabs or combine flow and structural data will be reviewed.

En Face Visualization of Segmented Tissue Slabs

While OCT started as a predominantly cross-sectional imaging modality, OCTA was clinically used as an en face imaging modality from the start. This was enabled by initial work establishing the en face approach.\(^{19–52}\) Optical coherence tomography angiography uses previously established techniques for automated segmentation of anatomic reference planes,\(^{53–55}\) such as the inner limiting membrane (ILM) and Bruch’s membrane (BM). Appropriate tissue layers or “slabs” can then be defined based on these references planes. En face presentation of these slabs can produce angiograms similar to FA or ICGA.

Accurate segmentation is important for clinical interpretation. In diseased eyes, pathologies such as drusen, intraretinal cysts, edema, or subretinal fluid can make automated segmentation less robust. Although significant improvements have been made,\(^{56–58}\) expert manual correction is sometimes necessary. Software that aids or reduces the workload required for manual correction of volumetric data is beneficial.\(^{58,59}\)

Color Coding of Vessel or Slab Depth

Color coding is a common method used to convey additional information. In OCTA, color could be used to convey depth relative to a simple reference plane.\(^{24}\) More often, color was used to represent flow in different segmented tissue slabs.\(^{18,60}\) This allowed for clear visualization of retinal circulation in the inner retinal slab (between ILM and the outer boundary of the outer plexiform layer [OPL]) and choroidal circulation in the choroidal slab (below BM) on one angiogram. This division could be further refined, with retinal circulation divided between two or more plexuses and choroidal circulation divided into the choriocapillaris and deeper choroid. Abnormal vessels could also be visualized this way, with choroidal neovascularization (CNV; Fig. 2) seen in the outer retinal slab (between the outer boundary of OPL and BM) and retinal neovascularization in the vitreous slab (above ILM).\(^{61,62}\) Furthermore, color coding can also be used to overlay flow information on structural OCT B-scans (Fig. 2).

CLINICAL APPLICATIONS

In OCTA, diseases manifest as the abnormal presence of flow (neovascularization), anomalous vessel geometry (dilated vessels, aneurysms), or the absence of flow (nonperfusion/capillary dropout). These three types of abnormalities exist in almost all retinal and choroidal vascular diseases. Therefore, OCTA is widely applicable even though it cannot detect dye leakage or staining, which are the primary abnormalities detected by FA. In traditional dye-based angiography, retinal, choroidal, and abnormal circulations are all flattened into one 2D image. In contrast, OCTA data is three-dimensional (3D) and can be visualized in finely divided tissue slabs, which aid in the detection of pathologies.

Beginning in the vitreous, retinal neovascularization protruding above the ILM has been visualized in cases of diabetic retinopathy.\(^{62,64,65}\) In the inner retina, retinal capillary dropout has been observed in diabetic retinopathy,\(^{62,64–66}\) artery occlusion,\(^{67,68}\) vein occlusion,\(^{67,69,70}\) and glaucoma.\(^{71}\) Enlarged foveal avascular zone has been described in diabetic retinopathy as well.\(^{72–74}\) Additionally, observations regarding anomalous vascular formations such as macular telangiectasia\(^{75–77}\) and microaneurysms in diabetic retinopathy\(^{64,66}\) have been reported. Visualization of the deep retinal capillary plexus has provided new information regarding impaired flow in diseases such as retinal arterial occlusion\(^{68}\) and paracentral acute middle maculopathy.\(^{78}\) More posteriorly is the outer retina between the outer nuclear layer and BM. This slab is used when assessing CNV.\(^{61,65,79–84}\) Neovascularization has also been described in polyposidal choroidal vasculopathy,\(^{85,86}\) pachychoroid neovascularopathy,\(^{87}\) and central serous retinopathy.\(^{88–90}\) Classification of CNV into type I, II, and/or III can be aided by use of composite structure and flow cross-sectional scans.\(^{61}\)

Below BM at the choriocapillaris or choroid, capillary dropout has been assessed in choroideremia\(^{93}\) and in areas of geographic atrophy in dry AMD.\(^{65,91,92}\) In most cases of neovascularization, the abnormal vessels can be seen at these deeper layers as well due to the projection artifact. Therefore, CNV can also be visualized in the choroidal slabs.

Within the optic nerve head, perfusion has been investigated in cases of glaucoma\(^{93}\) and multiple sclerosis.\(^{94}\)

In summary, clinical investigations of OCTA have already demonstrated its potential in a wide variety of retinal and optic nerve diseases.

ARTIFACTS

Although OCTA shows great promise, interpretation of OCTA must be done with knowledge of the possible image artifacts.\(^{95–97}\) Motion error and improper software correction...
can lead to vessel duplication, residual motion lines, and vessel discontinuity. Optical coherence tomography angiography also suffers from shadowgraphic flow projection artifacts (Fig. 2), which arise from fluctuating shadows cast by flowing blood that result in variation of the OCT signal in deeper layers. This is particularly apparent in angiograms of the outer retina. Inner retinal vessel projections on the highly reflective RPE in the outer retina produce false positive signal, which can interfere with CNV identification. Masking larger inner retinal vessels or all inner retinal vessels can help. The flow signal at areas with high or low OCT reflectance signal also need to be viewed with skepticism. Structures with high OCT reflectance such as hard exudate appear to amplify the signal from motion or projection artifact. On the other hand, the lack of flow signal may be a result of shadowing and low OCT reflectance instead of true nonperfusion. Phantom studies looking at the relationship between flow and OCT signal amplitude may prove insightful.

**QUANTIFICATION**

Objective quantification of flow information is of great interest with regards to disease diagnosis and management. Two
straightforward metrics that can be calculated from en face angiograms are flow index and vessel density. Flow index is calculated as the average flow signal (which is correlated with flow velocity) in a selected region, and vessel density is calculated as the percentage area occupied by vessels and microvasculature. Initial studies suggest that these metrics can have good repeatability and reproducibility.

To more directly assess capillary dropout and neovascularization, however, additional metrics have been investigated. Capillary dropout or nonperfusion area refers to significant area (larger than the normal gap between capillaries) devoid of flow signal that would normally be vascular. In the inner retina, detection of capillary dropout together with vessel density and/or flow index quantification has applications in diseases such as diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, and optic neuritis. In the choriocapillaris, assessing dropout would be important for AMD and other causes of CNV, the area of neovascularization is in the outer retina. Other qualitative and quantitative metrics to describe the morphology of the CNV are also being explored.

Quantitative metrics derived from OCTA have the potential to serve as new biomarkers of disease. However, well-designed validation studies and studies to determine repeatability and reproducibility are currently lacking. As OCTA research progresses, this will likely change. Although, validation studies may be difficult in cases where another noninvasive method is not available – for example, in the case of visualizing choriocapillaris.

**FIGURE 3.** A case of central serous chorioretinopathy (CSCR). (A) Early-phase FA showing leakage. (B) Late-phase FA showing staining. However, FA could not determine whether the leakage was due to CSCR or secondary CNV. (C) A 3 x 3-mm en face spectral OCTA of the boxed region in panel A. (D) Cross-sectional OCTA corresponding to the green line in panel C. Optical coherence tomography angiography revealed flow beneath the RPE consistent with type 1 CNV. Optical coherence tomography angiography was useful in making the decision to treat this patient with anti-VEGF.
DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Optical coherence tomography angiography is one of the most promising functional extensions of OCT. Despite its recent introduction, the potential clinical impact of OCTA can already be felt. A number of novel findings were made possible with OCTA. In AMD, OCTA could fully visualize CNV that are occult (poorly visualized) on FA. Interestingly, OCTA was able to identify a class of nonexudative CNV, which neither leak on FA nor exude retinal fluid on structural OCT.92,106,107 The natural history and proper management of this new type of CNV is under investigation. Optical coherence tomography angiography is also able to visualize the closure of branch CNV vessels after anti-VEGF injection and their reopening/remodeling over time. 108,109 Rebound of CNV vessel area can precede fluid reaccumulation 83 and may be helpful for guiding the timing of therapy. In central serous chorioretinopathy, OCTA can more reliably determine the presence of CNV, which can be difficult to assess with FA (Fig. 3). 89 This is useful in identifying those who would benefit from anti-VEGF therapy. In diabetic retinopathy, OCTA can visualize small retinal neovascularizations into the vitreous which may be confused as microaneurysms on FA.62 Optical coherence tomography angiography is uniquely capable of detecting capillary dropout in the different vascular plexuses in the inner retina, which may be useful in diagnostic or prognostic evaluation of diabetic retinopathy, vein/artery occlusion, and other ischemic diseases. Furthermore, the depth-resolved nature of OCTA improves visualization and localization of pathologic features. This has been particularly useful in diseases that were previously difficult to diagnose or classify using FA and ICGA. For example, in macular telangiectasia, retinal microvascular abnormalities and vascular anastomosis with subretinal neovascularization and choroidal circulation can now be visualized with OCTA.77,110

While OCTA has distinct advantages over FA and ICGA, it has its own set of limitations. Unlike FA, OCTA does not assess leakage. This is an advantage for OCTA during quantification as leakage can blur boundaries, but leakage gives additional information with regards to the integrity of the vasculature. Additionally, widefield FA is clinically available while widefield OCTA is limited to ultra-high-speed laboratory prototypes at the moment. Going forward, we expect to see continued advances in hardware and software, which should expand the field of view of OCTA. Because at least two repeat scans are required for motion contrast, OCTA will inherently require more time than simple structural scans. As a result, current system speeds restrict the field of view or alternatively limit the transverse sampling density. Faster systems based on swept-source OCT technology coupled with improved eye tracking48 or registration 48 is a potential solution. Montaging of multiple scans is also possible (Fig. 4) 24,111,112 As scans extend more peripherally, however, dynamic focusing 113 and increased imaging depth range114 are needed to compensate for the increased curvature of the retina.

This interest in faster systems has led to discussions of the differences between SD-OCTA and swept-source OCTA. Direct comparisons are, however, difficult due to differences in the speed, which affects the sensitivity of flow detection, and operating wavelengths, which affects light scattering and penetration as well as resolution, of typical systems. While these differences can contribute to differences in the resulting OCTA angiograms, they are not inherent to the technologies themselves. The only intrinsic different between these two Fourier-domain OCT implementations is that SD-OCT is more susceptible to interferometric fringe washout artifact,25 which is apparent only in large retinal vessels in the central optic nerve head.

The 3D nature of OCTA is both a blessing and a curse. The large 3D image cube needs to be segmented for detection and quantification of pathologies. And the clinician may need to scroll through many tissue layers to locate the pathology. Improvements in automated computer software for anatomic segmentation, pathology detection, and quantitation will make OCTA easier to use. In conjunction, there is a need for improved algorithms to reduce projection, shadow, and motion artifacts that often make OCTA difficult to interpret. This is an area of active research and rapid development. For example, advanced algorithms to remove shadowgraphic projection artifact115 can already resolve three distinct retinal plexuses in the macula (Fig. 5).
Because OCTA is economical, noninvasive, and does not even require the use of bright visible light, it can be used more frequently than traditional angiography, which requires intravenous dye injection. Thus, we expect that OCTA could be used for high-volume applications such as the routine screening of diabetic retinopathy and regular follow-up of AMD. With the technological improvements that can be foreseen in the near future, we believe OCTA will become an important part of standard eye care.

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