



# Pulmonary Imaging Findings of Vasculitis

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## Abstract

**Purpose of Review** The purpose of this article is to review the various pulmonary imaging findings that may be present in patients with various types of vasculitis. The review will also go over the potential clinical significance of the various findings.

**Recent Findings** The majority of pulmonary findings related to vasculitis revolve around granulomatosis with polyangiitis (GPA) and eosinophilic granulomatosis with polyangiitis (EGPA). Additional etiologies are rare and mostly present as diffuse alveolar hemorrhage when small vessels are involved and aneurysms when medium and large vessels are involved.

**Summary** Pulmonary imaging findings related to vasculitis vary widely across etiologies. While many of these manifestations are rare, it is important to be familiar with them as they can cause severe complications.

**Keywords** Vasculitis · Pulmonary · Computed Tomography · Radiology · Imaging, ANCA-associated vasculitis · Antiglomerular basement membrane disease · Antiphospholipid syndrome · Behçet syndrome · Diffuse alveolar hemorrhage · Granulomatosis with polyangiitis (Wegener) · Microscopic polyangiitis · Takayasu arteritis

## Introduction

Cellular inflammation of the vessel walls, also called vasculitis, is a multisystem disease with a variety of causes. It is often difficult to diagnose and manage given signs and symptoms often overlap with infection, malignancy, connective tissue disease, and medication reactions. There are several types of vasculitis that involve the vessels of the lungs. Depending on the vessels involved and the underlying cause of the vasculitis, this can give various presentations on imaging. Understanding these common patterns on imaging can help in the diagnosis and classification of the different types of vasculitis.

Vasculitis can be classified by the size of vessel involved and the underlying etiology [1]. When vasculitis is classified by size, it is usually categorized as small, medium, or large vessel vasculitis. The different-sized vasculitides are further

categorized by etiology. In this review, we will go through each class of vasculitis and the pulmonary imaging manifestations that may present with each type.

## Small Vessel

Small vessel vasculitis affects capillaries, venules, and arterioles. Most commonly, they affect patients 50–69 years old but can occur in patients of all ages. Small vessel vasculitis can be divided into four major categories including idiopathic, immune complex-mediated vasculitis, vasculitis from underlying systemic disease, and vasculitis from underlying etiology such as infection or drug reaction. Small vessel vasculitis is more commonly associated with pulmonary findings which can vary depending on the underlying etiology.

## ANCA-Associated Vasculitis

Idiopathic causes of small vessel vasculitis are often associated with antineutrophil cytoplasmic antibodies (ANCA). These antibodies are often associated with response to microbicidal components used by neutrophils in host defense and cause significant proinflammatory effects with activation of neutrophils, monocytes, and endothelial cells. Idiopathic ANCA-associated small vessel vasculitis more frequently involves the lungs. The

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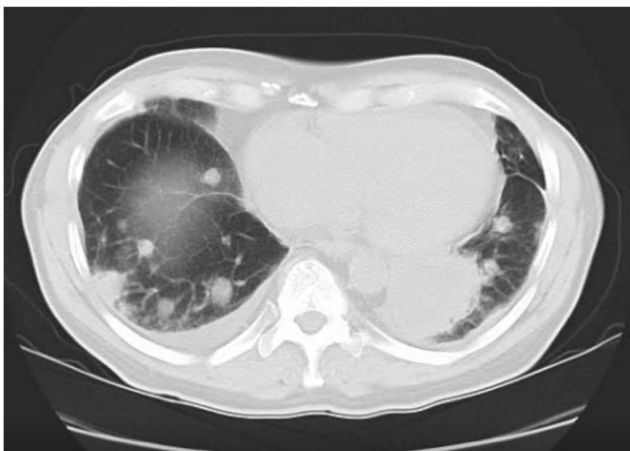
most common types include granulomatosis with polyangiitis (GPA), eosinophilic granulomatosis with polyangiitis (EGPA) also known as Churg-Strauss Syndrome, and microscopic polyangiitis. GPA and EGPA have associated necrotizing granulomatous inflammation. Microscopic polyangiitis has necrotizing inflammation without granulomatosis.

## Granulomatosis with Polyangiitis

GPA is the most common of ANCA-associated small vessel vasculitides. This type of vasculitis usually involves both the airways and the lung parenchyma. Renal involvement is common and can be present in up to 85% of cases [2].

On presentation, GPA is often acute causing sudden onset of shortness of breath. Classically GPA is associated with pulmonary nodules on imaging. Studies have shown that the most common finding on CT is multiple bilateral lung nodules [3] (Fig. 1). The presence of groundglass opacities around a nodule is common and represents associated alveolar hemorrhage. The nodules often cavitate with wall thickness thinning out as they resolve following treatment (Fig. 2). Cavitory lesions are associated with a higher rate of recurrence but no increased mortality [4].

Less commonly peribronchovascular consolidation is sometimes the dominant finding which can have a dramatic appearance (Fig. 3). Up to 8% of patients with GPA present with diffuse alveolar hemorrhage (DAH) [5]. DAH presents with multifocal groundglass opacities and consolidation usually without septal thickening (Fig. 4). Occasionally, GPA can evolve into another small vessel vasculitis such as microscopic polyangiitis (MPA) as a late manifestation of disease [6]. Bronchiectasis is an additional finding in patients with GPA and is usually associated with the presence of anti-MPO ANCA [7]. Occasionally, pneumothorax can occur and is associated with higher mortality when occurring in active disease [8].



**Fig. 1** Multiple bilateral pulmonary nodules in patient with GPA

Airway involvement often affects the trachea and lobar bronchi causing diffuse symmetrical thickening of the airway wall (Fig. 5). Patients also commonly demonstrate ENT involvement which can lead to septal perforation (Fig. 6). CT is usually the most common way to monitor the airways, but MRI is also a useful tool that can be used to monitor subglottic stenosis [9].

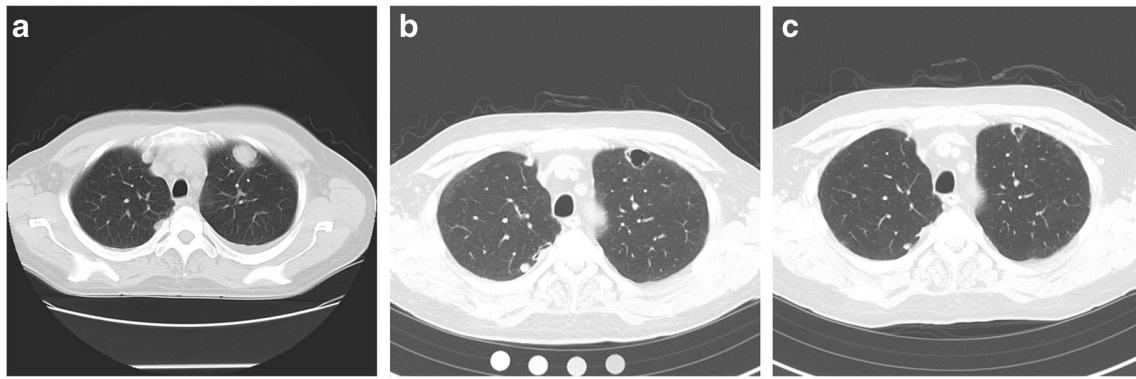
## Eosinophilic Granulomatosis with Polyangiitis

EGPA also known as Churg-Strauss Syndrome (CSS) is associated with asthma and hypereosinophilia. Kidney involvement is less common occurring in approximately 25% of patients. It usually presents in three phases: the prodromal phase which is primarily asthma and allergic rhinitis, the second phase of marked peripheral blood eosinophilia, and finally the life-threatening vasculitic phase [10].

The most common imaging findings are migratory peripheral predominant groundglass opacities [11] which often overlap with chronic eosinophilic pneumonia (Fig. 6). This more common pulmonary appearance is more related to eosinophilic infiltrates and less to do with underlying vasculitis. Pulmonary hemorrhage related to vasculitis occurs less compared with GPA and MPA. In addition to groundglass opacities, EGPA may also demonstrate bronchial wall thickening, bronchiectasis, and uncommonly pleural effusions. Interlobular septal thickening can also sometimes be seen which is thought to represent eosinophilic infiltrate or edema from cardiac involvement. Lymphadenopathy is also occasionally demonstrated [12]. DAH is more common with MPO-ANCA or ANCA-positive phenotypes occurring between 8 and 20% of ANCA-positive patients [13, 14]. Cardiac involvement is the leading cause of morbidity and mortality in patients with EGPA [15]. This often presents on cardiac MRI as patchy subendocardial late gadolinium enhancement with no definite vascular distribution (Figs. 7 and 8). Biopsy is usually only recommended if ANCA is negative as clinical and imaging findings are usually diagnostic when ANCA is positive.

## Microscopic Polyangiitis

MPA is a nongranulomatous and noneosinophilic small vessel vasculitis. It is usually associated with MPO-ANCA. MPA almost always has renal involvement. Pulmonary involvement presents as alveolar hemorrhage secondary to capillaritis. This presents as bilateral areas of ground-glass opacities and consolidation related to DAH. Pulmonary involvement is demonstrated in the minority of cases representing between 10 and 30% of total cases [16–20]. Pulmonary fibrosis is uncommon but can occur after the acute phase. It usually evolves from a mild reticular pattern to fibrosis with recurrent events. When present, fibrosis is usually associated with a higher mortality rate. Unlike GPA and EGPA, MPA does not have granulomatous inflammation. Onset of DAH in MPA is usually rapid and can be fatal if not promptly treated due to rapid



**Fig. 2** Evolution of pulmonary nodule in patient with GPA. The initial nodule demonstrated in the left upper lobe is solid (a). The nodule later evolves into a cavitary nodule (b) and subsequently decreases in size and wall thickness following treatment (c)

progression and blood loss. Approximately 25% have more insidious onset with patients often severely anemic due to more intermittent DAH. ENT involvement is seen in 31%, and unlike GPA, there is no associated nasal perforation [21]. Progressive obstructive airway disease can occasionally be seen in nonsmokers with MPA [22, 23].

### Immune Complex–Mediated Vasculitis

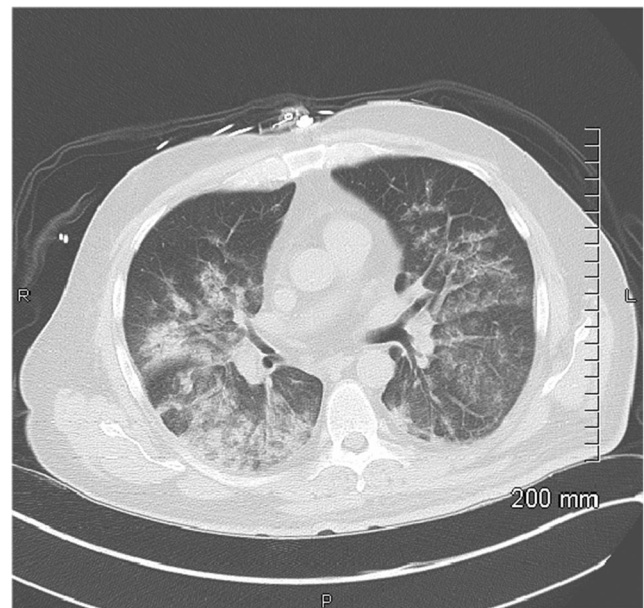
Immune complex–mediated vasculitides are usually not associated with ANCA. These include Goodpasture’s Syndrome, Henoch-Schonlein purpura, and Behcet’s disease. The predominant imaging finding involving the lung parenchyma is diffuse alveolar hemorrhage.



**Fig. 3** Extensive peribronchovascular consolidation in patient with GPA. There is also an area of cavitation in the left perihilar region

### Goodpasture’s Syndrome

Goodpasture’s Syndrome (GP) is a nonvascular disorder which is caused by immunoglobulin G (IgG) deposition. This deposition can lead to pulmonary renal syndrome with DAH (Fig. 9). The deposition is usually along the glomerular basement membrane which initially causes a mild vasculitis in the kidney. This can then lead to a secondary antibody-mediated nephritis [24, 25]. Eventually, this can lead to an associated pulmonary capillaritis and DAH [26–29]. Coexistence or successive development of Goodpasture syndrome and ANCA-associated vasculitis has been reported. A positive ANCA can be seen in up to one-third of patients with antglomerular basement membrane disease with half of these patients demonstrating DAH [30].



**Fig. 4** Example of diffuse alveolar hemorrhage. Often this presents as patchy areas of consolidation and groundglass opacities



**Fig. 5** Bronchial wall thickening of the right mainstem bronchus in patient with GPA

### Henoch-Schonlein Purpura

Henoch-Schonlein Purpura (HSP) is a small vessel vasculitis due to immune complexes with immunoglobulin A (IgA). It most commonly is in children 4–7 years old but can occur in adults. Although uncommon, DAH has been reported in children [31, 32] and adults [33–36]. IgA lining alveolar septal vessels throughout hemorrhagic area has been demonstrated [35].

### Behcet's Disease

Behcet's disease is a rare chronic multisystemic vasculitis usually in patients in their 20s or 30s. Pulmonary involvement can occur in up to 10% of cases [37]. Behcet's disease can involve small, medium, and large vessels with small vessel



**Fig. 6** Mucosal thickening in patient with GPA

involvement triggering DAH appearance (Fig. 10). Pulmonary arteries are the second most common site of involvement with the aorta being the most common. Vasculitis causes dilation of the medium and large vessel lumen due to destruction of the elastic fibers. Associated aneurysms are usually multiple and bilateral with associated thrombosis. The most common pulmonary parenchymal abnormalities are ill-defined areas of groundglass opacities usually from infarction, hemorrhage, or atelectasis [38, 39].

### Vasculitis Associated with Systemic Disease

Vasculitis can rarely be a manifestation of systemic autoimmune diseases usually presenting as DAH in the lungs. Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) most commonly presents with pleural effusions but can also present with DAH as the first manifestation in up to 20% of patients [40]. This DAH is most commonly bland hemorrhage; however, vasculitis-induced DAH can present in up to 5% of patients making it the most common autoimmune disease with vasculitis-induced DAH [40, 41]. Prognosis of SLE with DAH has markedly improved in recent years due to improved treatment [42].

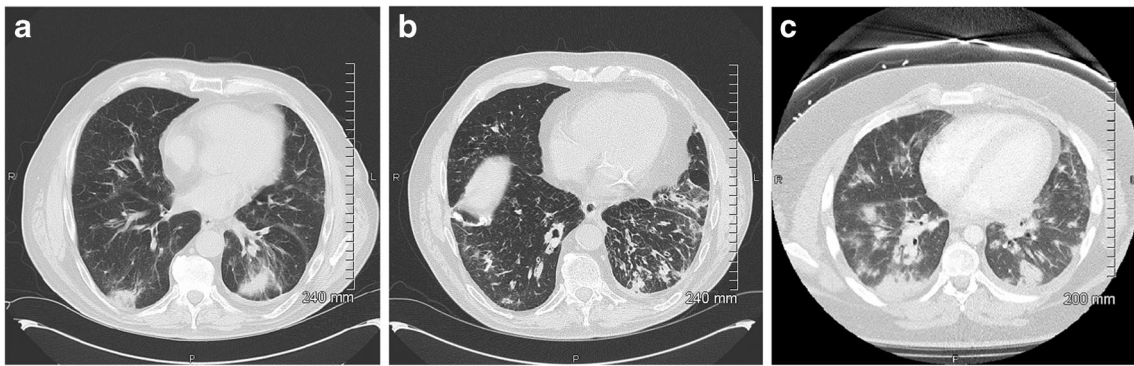
Scleroderma can rarely demonstrate DAH. The DAH may manifest as pulmonary-renal syndrome with small vessel vasculitis [43–45]. The underlying mechanism of DAH associated with scleroderma may be linked with p-ANCA [46] and more commonly MPO-ANCA [47, 48]. DAH has also been demonstrated in scleroderma patients with pulmonary pleuroparenchymal fibroelastosis (PPFE) although there is no clear link between these findings [49].

Additional systemic autoimmune disease has also shown DAH with capillaritis including mixed connective tissue disease [50], polymyositis [51], and rheumatoid arthritis [52].

### Vasculitis Associated with Probable Etiology

Vasculitis can also occur due to infection, paraneoplastic syndromes, and medications. These are often caused by cryoglobulinemia or aberrant antibody production. Rarely, this can induce DAH in the lungs. For example, hepatitis C and cytomegalovirus can cause a virus-related cryoglobulinemia that can then trigger DAH [53, 54]. Lymphoproliferative disease comprised usually of IgM monoclonal antibody can also cause DAH [55].

In drug-induced vasculitis, MPO titers are often elevated [56]. Hydralazine is the most common medication associated with drug-induced vasculitis followed by propylthiouracil (PTU). Additional medications most commonly associated with vasculitis include penicillamine, allopurinol, and sulfasalazine. Antibodies to elastase and lactoferrin are common with patients treated with hydralazine [57] while MPO-ANCA with



**Fig. 7** Several examples of EGPA demonstrating peripheral predominant areas of consolidation and groundglass opacities (a, c) as well as extensive bronchial wall thickening (b)

anielastase and/or antilactoferrin antibodies are characteristic of vasculitis associated with hydralazine or PTU [58]. Levamisole-induced vasculitis with DAH is demonstrated in Fig. 11.

## Medium Vessel

Medium vessel vasculitis primarily affects the arteries and arterioles. Pulmonary involvement is uncommon. Aneurysm is the primary finding of vascular involvement and opposed to DAH seen predominantly with small vessel vasculitides.

Polyarteritis nodosa (PAN) is a medium vessel vasculitis most commonly affecting the renal arteries. Occasionally, this

can present as a pulmonary artery aneurysm [59]. Pulmonary hemorrhage would be uncommon unless the aneurysm ruptured.

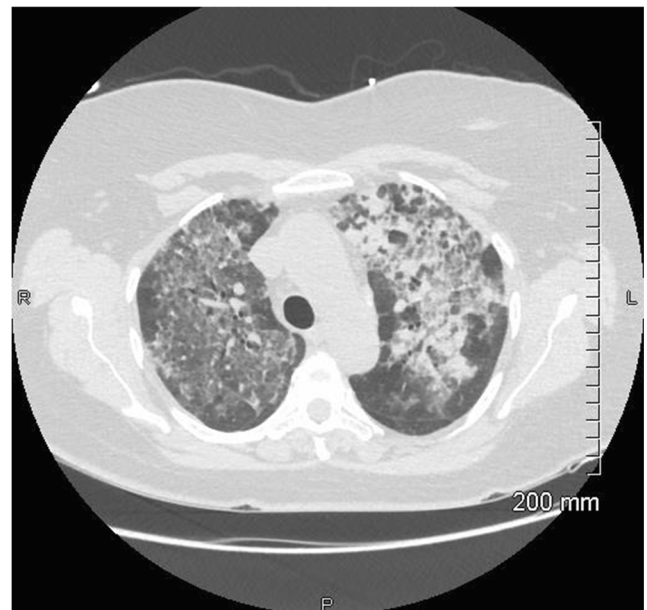
Kawasaki's disease is a medium vessel vasculitis primarily affecting children with the dominant pulmonary finding of aneurysms. Pulmonary involvement is rare [60] with only 1.8% of patients having predominantly pulmonary manifestations [61].

## Large Vessel

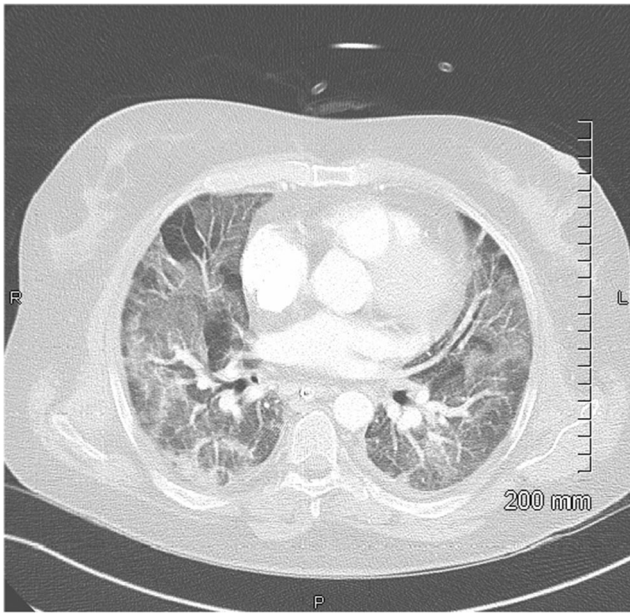
Large vessel vasculitis primarily affects the aorta, pulmonary artery, and proximal branches. These will primarily present as aneurysms or vessel wall thickening of the involved vessels (Fig. 12). There are two large cell vasculitis that represent the



**Fig. 8** Delayed contrast enhanced cardiac image of patient with EGPA demonstrating patchy subendocardial enhancement



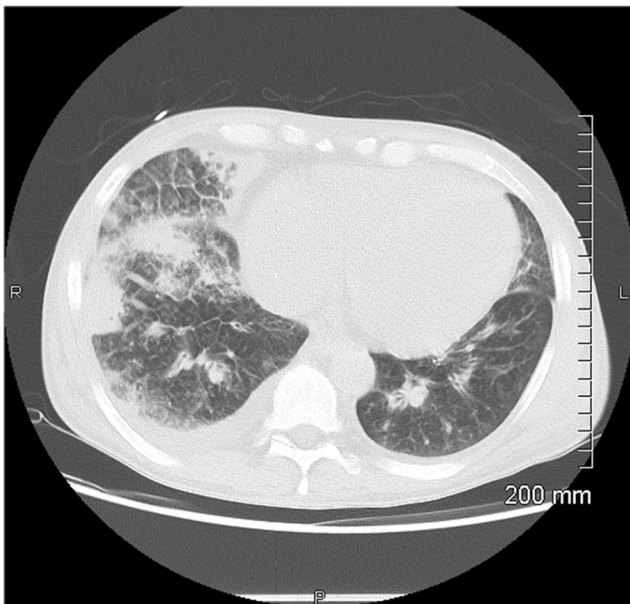
**Fig. 9** Patient with Goopasture's Syndrome demonstrating diffuse alveolar hemorrhage secondary to vasculitis



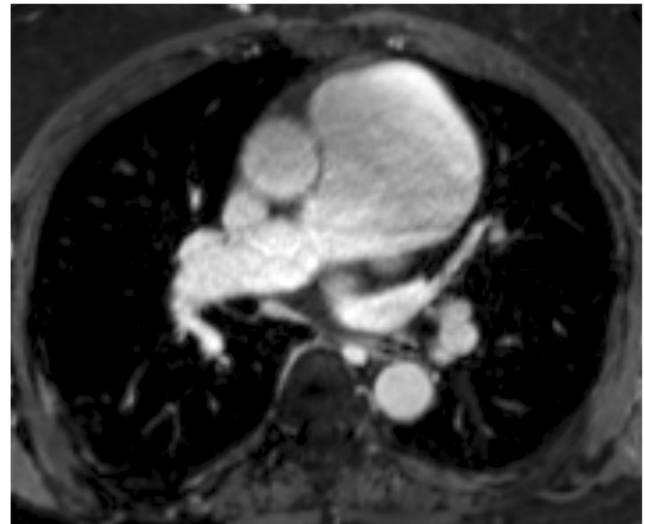
**Fig. 10** Patient with Bechet's syndrome demonstrating multifocal areas of groundglass opacities that are consistent with DAH

vast majority of cases. These include Takayasu's arteritis and giant cell arteritis (GCA).

Takayasu's arteritis is one of the large vessel vasculitides primarily affecting the aorta and its branches. Pulmonary artery involvement is uncommon occurring in less than 10% of patients. When present, pulmonary artery stenosis or occlusion can occur. Lung parenchymal involvement can also be present primarily consisting of subpleural wedge-shaped opacities. Pulmonary hypertension has also been shown to



**Fig. 11** Levamisole induced vasculitis causing multifocal areas of pulmonary hemorrhage and bronchial wall thickening



**Fig. 12** Pulmonary artery aneurysm in patient with giant cell arteritis

associate with pulmonary involvement characterized by a longer disease duration, more symptoms such as fever, chest pain, and hemoptysis, and an increased erythrocyte sedimentation rate [62]. In another study, pulmonary artery involvement had increased incidence of pulmonary hypertension (62% vs. 8%) and had a higher mortality rate [63].

GCA can also rarely involve the lung parenchyma primarily presenting with pulmonary nodules or a diffuse interstitial pattern [64]. PPF has also been shown to present in patients with GCA [65]. Additional examples of GCA-associated interstitial lung disease have also been reported [66].

## Conclusions

Pulmonary imaging findings related to vasculitis vary widely in frequency and presentation depending on the underlying etiology. While small vessel vasculitides most commonly present with diffuse alveolar hemorrhage, medium and large vessel vasculitides present with pulmonary artery aneurysms. GPA and EGPA are idiopathic vasculitides that most commonly present with pulmonary findings where other small vessel vasculitides demonstrate pulmonary involvement in the minority of cases. Medium and large vessel vasculitides rarely demonstrate pulmonary imaging findings.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors have no conflict of interest.

**Human and Animal Rights and Informed Consent** This article does not contain any studies with humans or animals performed by any of the authors.

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- Of importance
- Of major importance

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