Artificial Intelligence in Pulmonary Medicine: From Diagnostic Imaging to Predictive Analytics in Clinical Practice-Applications, Challenges, and Future Directions

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1306000144

Received: 05 June 2026; Accepted: 10 June 2026; Published: 27 June 2026

ABSTRACT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has increasingly transitioned from theoretical research to practical clinical applications in pulmonary medicine. Its integration into respiratory healthcare has been driven largely by advances in machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL), particularly in medical imaging and predictive modeling. AI systems have demonstrated strong performance in detecting lung cancer, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), while also enabling risk stratification and outcome prediction using multimodal clinical data [1,2].

However, despite promising diagnostic accuracy reported in controlled studies, real-world clinical translation remains limited. A growing body of recent literature highlights concerns regarding dataset bias, external validation failure, poor generalizability and lack of interpretability, which significantly restrict clinical adoption [6]. Furthermore, comparative studies between major architectures such as CheXNet-style convolutional models and end-to-end CT-based lung cancer systems (e.g., Ardila et al.) suggest that performance superiority in research settings does not always translate into real-world robustness [3,4].

This review critically evaluates current AI applications in pulmonary medicine, compares key methodological approaches, discusses implementation barriers, and highlights future directions including explainable AI, federated learning, and multimodal clinical intelligence systems.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Pulmonary Medicine, Deep Learning, Chest Imaging, Predictive Analytics, Clinical Implementation, Radiology AI

INTRODUCTION

Respiratory diseases continue to impose a significant global health burden, contributing to millions of deaths annually. Conditions such as lung cancer, COPD, asthma, tuberculosis, and interstitial lung diseases are not only highly prevalent but also clinically heterogeneous, making diagnosis and management complex and resource intensive [1].

Traditional diagnostic pathways in pulmonary medicine rely heavily on imaging interpretation, spirometry analysis, and clinician experience. However, inter-observer variability in radiology and pulmonary function interpretation remains a persistent limitation, often leading to diagnostic delays or inconsistencies in patient management.

Artificial Intelligence has emerged as a potential solution to these challenges by enabling automated pattern recognition across large-scale clinical datasets. Early enthusiasm around AI in healthcare was driven by strong

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue VI June 2026

performance benchmarks in controlled datasets, particularly in imaging tasks [2]. However, more recent studies have increasingly questioned whether these high benchmark accuracies reflect real-world clinical performance or are partially influenced by dataset bias and overfitting.

Importantly, AI in pulmonary medicine should not be viewed as a replacement for clinical expertise. Instead, it is increasingly conceptualized as a decision-support system that enhances diagnostic precision, improves workflow efficiency, and supports personalized medicine approaches [1].

METHODOLOGY

For this review, a structured search of the available literature was conducted to identify studies examining the role of artificial intelligence in pulmonary medicine. Relevant articles were retrieved from PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search focused on publications from 2018 to 2025 to capture recent developments in machine learning and deep learning applications within respiratory healthcare.

Keywords used during the search included artificial intelligence, machine learning, deep learning, pulmonary medicine, respiratory diseases, lung cancer, tuberculosis, pneumonia, COPD, chest imaging, and predictive analytics. Additional articles were identified through manual screening of reference lists from relevant publications.

Studies were considered eligible if they reported the application of AI techniques in the diagnosis, prediction, or management of respiratory diseases. Editorials, conference abstracts without full-text availability, duplicate records, and studies unrelated to pulmonary medicine were excluded. The selected literature was reviewed and synthesized with particular attention to diagnostic imaging, predictive analytics, implementation challenges, and emerging future directions. The review followed a narrative synthesis approach.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CRITICAL SYNTHESIS

Early landmark contributions such as CheXNet demonstrated that convolutional neural networks could achieve radiologist-level performance in pneumonia detection using large chest X-ray datasets [4]. This study significantly influenced subsequent research in medical imaging AI. However, later independent analyses revealed that performance variability increases substantially when such models are tested on external datasets, suggesting limited generalizability beyond curated training environments.

In contrast, Ardila et al. developed a 3D deep learning system for lung cancer prediction using low-dose CT scans, representing a more clinically integrated end-to-end screening approach [3]. Unlike CheXNet, which is primarily classification-based, the Ardila model incorporates longitudinal imaging context and patient-level prediction, making it structurally more aligned with real-world lung cancer screening workflows.

Comparative evaluation of these two approaches reveals an important methodological divergence:

- CheXNet-type models excel in single-image classification tasks
- CT-based 3D models (Ardila et al.) perform better in longitudinal risk prediction

However, recent systematic reviews (2024–2025) suggest that despite architectural sophistication, both approaches suffer from similar limitations, particularly dataset dependency and lack of multi-institutional validation [7,9].

Recent literature (2021–2025) has shifted focus from model development to clinical translation challenges. Studies emphasize that most AI models in pulmonary imaging are trained on limited, retrospective datasets and rarely undergo prospective clinical validation [7]. This creates a significant gap between experimental performance and real-world applicability.

Furthermore, explainability has emerged as a central concern. While attention maps and saliency techniques are frequently used, they often provide only superficial interpretability, which may not be sufficient for clinical decision-making [8].

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue VI June 2026

Applications of AI in Pulmonary Medicine

Diagnostic Imaging

AI applications in chest imaging remain the most extensively studied domain. Deep learning systems have shown strong performance in detecting pneumonia, tuberculosis, pneumothorax, and lung nodules [5].

However, a critical limitation is that most systems are trained on publicly available datasets such as ChestX-ray14, which may not represent real-world patient diversity. This introduces spectrum bias, where model performance is artificially inflated under controlled test conditions.

In lung cancer detection, CT-based AI systems demonstrate higher robustness compared to X-ray-based models, primarily due to richer spatial information. Nevertheless, external validation studies indicate a significant drop in performance when models are deployed in different hospital settings [9].

Comparative Insight: CheXNet vs Ardila Model

CheXNet and Ardila's system represent two fundamentally different paradigms:

- CheXNet focuses on 2D radiograph classification
- Ardila model uses 3D volumetric CT prediction

While CheXNet achieved strong benchmark results in pneumonia detection [4], it is limited by its single-view imaging dependency. In contrast, Ardila's model integrates temporal and volumetric data, making it more clinically aligned for lung cancer screening [3].

However, real-world deployment studies suggest that even CT-based models face challenges in calibration, particularly when applied across different scanner types and imaging protocols.

This comparison highlights a key insight: model complexity does not guarantee clinical reliability.

Pulmonary Function Testing and Clinical Data AI

AI-assisted spirometry interpretation has shown moderate success in classifying obstructive and restrictive lung diseases. However, its clinical adoption remains limited due to variability in test quality and patient effort dependency.

Unlike imaging AI, pulmonary function AI lacks large standardized datasets, which restricts model training and external validation.

Predictive Analytics

Predictive modeling in COPD exacerbation, hospital readmission, and mortality risk has gained momentum in recent years. These models integrate electronic health records, vitals, and laboratory parameters [2]. However, a recurring limitation is temporal instability, where model performance degrades over time due to changing clinical practices and population shifts. This phenomenon is often underreported in original publications.

Table 1. Current Applications of Artificial Intelligence in Pulmonary Medicine

Clinical Area	AI Application	Potential Benefits
Lung Cancer	Nodule detection and malignancy prediction	Early diagnosis and improved survival
Tuberculosis	Automated chest X-ray screening	Faster and cost-effective screening

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue VI June 2026

Pneumonia	Radiographic image analysis	Improved diagnostic accuracy
COPD	Exacerbation prediction	Reduced hospital admissions
Asthma	Risk assessment and treatment optimization	Personalized disease management
Interstitial Lung Disease	Fibrosis quantification and classification	Better disease monitoring
Sleep Disorders	Sleep apnea detection	Enhanced diagnostic efficiency
Telemedicine	Remote patient monitoring	Early detection of deterioration

Challenges in Clinical Implementation

Data Bias, Dataset Heterogeneity and Generalizability

One of the most significant barriers to clinical adoption of AI in pulmonary medicine is limited generalizability across healthcare settings. Many models are developed using retrospective datasets collected from a small number of institutions, resulting in training populations that may not adequately represent real-world demographic and clinical diversity.

Dataset heterogeneity remains a major challenge. Variations in imaging equipment, acquisition protocols, disease prevalence, and patient characteristics can substantially affect model performance when algorithms are deployed outside their original training environment. Furthermore, inconsistencies in expert annotations may introduce labeling errors that propagate through the learning process and reduce model reliability.

Another important concern is class imbalance, where common diseases are overrepresented relative to rare conditions. This can lead to biased predictions and reduced sensitivity for clinically important but infrequent pathologies. Overfitting further compounds these issues, as models may learn dataset-specific patterns rather than clinically meaningful features. Consequently, performance often declines during external validation studies, highlighting the need for multicenter datasets, standardized annotation protocols, and prospective clinical evaluation.

Table 2. Comparative Summary of Representative AI Models in Pulmonary Medicine

Clinical Area	**AI Application**	**Potential Benefits**
Lung Cancer	Nodule detection and malignancy prediction	Early diagnosis and improved survival
Tuberculosis	Automated chest X-ray screening	Faster and cost-effective screening
Pneumonia	Radiographic image analysis	Improved diagnostic accuracy
COPD	Exacerbation prediction	Reduced hospital admissions
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Overfitting and Reproducibility Crisis

Recent literature highlights a reproducibility gap in medical AI research. Models that perform exceptionally well in published studies often fail when independently replicated on new datasets. This raises concerns about overfitting and selective reporting in published studies.

Explainability Gap

Although explainable AI techniques exist, most are not clinically actionable. Radiologists and pulmonologists require justification aligned with medical reasoning, not just visual heatmaps.

Clinical Workflow Integration

Even high-performing models fail to achieve adoption when not integrated into hospital systems. AI tools often remain research prototypes rather than embedded clinical systems.

Future Directions

Future AI development in pulmonary medicine is shifting toward multimodal and clinically grounded systems. Instead of relying solely on imaging, next-generation models are expected to integrate:

- Radiology data
- Genomics
- Electronic health records
- Wearable sensor data

Federated learning is emerging as a promising solution to address data privacy concerns while enabling multi-institutional training. Explainable AI is also expected to evolve from visualization-based interpretation toward clinically meaningful reasoning systems. Importantly, future research must prioritize prospective clinical trials rather than retrospective benchmark performance, which currently dominates the field.

Table 3. Key Challenges and Possible Solutions

Challenge	**Impact**	**Potential Solution**
Limited Data Quality	Reduced model performance	Standardized data collection
Algorithm Bias	Healthcare disparities	Diverse multicenter datasets
Lack of Explainability	Reduced clinician trust	Explainable AI (XAI) models
Privacy Concerns	Risk of data breaches	Secure data governance
Regulatory Uncertainty	Delayed adoption	Clear regulatory frameworks
Workflow Integration	Operational inefficiency	EHR-integrated AI systems

CONCLUSION

Artificial Intelligence has demonstrated substantial potential in pulmonary medicine, particularly in imaging-based diagnostics and predictive analytics. However, the current evidence suggests a clear gap between experimental performance and real-world clinical utility. Comparative analysis of major AI systems such as

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue VI June 2026

CheXNet and Ardila's CT-based model reveals that while technical performance is impressive, clinical robustness remains inconsistent across institutions.

The future of AI in pulmonary medicine will depend not only on algorithmic advancement but also on clinical validation, transparency, and system-level integration. Without addressing these foundational issues, AI will remain a powerful research tool with limited clinical translation.

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