

# What to Expect from a CT Scan

## WHAT IS A CT SCAN?

A computerized tomography (CT) scan is a special x-ray study that takes pictures of the inside of your body. A narrow x-ray beam moves around a section of your body. A picture is taken quickly and fed into a computer. The images it produces are "cross-sectional" -- patterned much like slices of bread. A series of these pictures is made to focus on the body part(s) your doctor needs to see.

## WHY IS A CT SCAN PERFORMED?

The CT scan is used to evaluate symptoms related to many parts of your body. The pictures are very detailed and accurate. Often the x-ray doctor will compare your CT results with other x-ray studies, especially when looking at a specific organ in the body such as the brain, liver, kidney, or pancreas. Together, these studies give your doctor important information that may help in your diagnosis and treatment.

## WHAT ABOUT RADIATION EXPOSURE?

You receive no more radiation from a CT scan than you do from any standard x-ray. Yet the benefits of the information received from your CT scan may be ten times greater than that of a standard x-ray. Please let someone know if you may be pregnant; x-rays may be hazardous to the unborn child.

## HOW DO I GET READY FOR MY CT SCAN?

We recommend that you have only a "light" meal before your scheduled scan. No other special preparation is needed. You may want to take your pain medicine if you have trouble lying flat for an extended length of time. You may want to bring a book or magazine to read or handwork to do while you are waiting.

If you take Glucophage<sup>®</sup> for diabetes, tell your doctors and nurses. Do not take it 48 hours before the study or 48 hours after the study.

## WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE CT DEPARTMENT?

The x-ray doctor (radiologist) or technologist will explain more about your CT scan. You will be asked a series of questions regarding your medical history. Some of these questions may include:

- when was your last menstrual period?
- have you ever had a reaction to x-ray contrast material?

❶ do you have any allergies?

❷ do you have any pre-existing medical conditions (asthma, heart disease, diabetes, renal disease, etc.)?

You will be asked to sign a consent form.

If you are having a **CT scan of the abdomen or pelvis (or both)**, you will be asked to drink at least two cups of a clear contrast material (x-ray dye) before your scan. You may need to wait at least an hour for the digestion of the oral contrast. The contrast material has iodine, which produces sharper pictures. It makes parts of your gastrointestinal tract (stomach, small intestine, colon) more visible. When the technologist is ready to start your CT scan, you will be given one or two more cups to drink, and you may be asked to lie on your back with your arms resting behind your head. Occasionally when a pelvic CT scan is ordered, a contrast enema is given while you are on the scanner table. The enema increases the visibility of the lower colon and rectum.

Depending on what part of your body is to be studied, you may be asked to undress, put on a hospital gown, and remove jewelry, dentures, eyeglasses, or any other objects that might interfere with the x-ray.

If you are having a **CT scan of your spine** after a myelogram, you will not have to drink contrast. The contrast injected during the myelogram will make the spine show up clearly on the CT scans.

If you are having a **CT scan of the head**, your arms will be by your side, and your head will be placed in a cradle in the center of the scanner. Small straps may be put across your chin and forehead to remind you not to move.

The table will move a little toward a large doughnut-shaped opening. You will hear the mechanical sound of the scanner as pictures are taken. No moving parts will touch you. There is no discomfort. As each scan is taken, you will be asked to hold your breath. You must remain very still while the scan is being done. If you move, we may need to take more pictures.

The x-ray staff will be behind a glass wall while pictures are being taken. They can see and hear you. Please let them know if you are uncomfortable. We want to make you as comfortable as possible.

Many people who have CT scans will have two sets of pictures taken. The second set will be taken after x-ray contrast material is injected into your bloodstream through a vein in your arm. This injection may cause you to feel warm in the face and to have a metal taste in your mouth. This is normal and only lasts a few seconds.

This type of scan is called **CT with infusion**. Some people will have only this type of scan done and skip the first set of pictures. The x-ray doctor or technologist will discuss this with you. You will be asked to sign a consent form before this part of the scan is done.

## WHAT DO I DO AFTER MY CT SCAN?

After your CT scan you can return to your normal activities. The contrast material is clear. It will pass with your urine but will not change the color of the urine. Ask your doctor if you should drink extra liquids after the exam.

## HOW LONG DOES THE EXAM TAKE?

The procedure usually takes between 30 and 90 minutes, but since delays and repeats are common, you should allow several hours. Please understand that you may have to wait a few minutes during your scan while the computer pictures are being examined. It is important that the pictures contain all necessary information before you are moved from the table.

For children, sometimes we need to give a mild sedative to help them remain still and calm. In these instances, the child may stay in the x-ray department until the sedative has worn off.

---

The information on this Website is provided for general informational purposes only and **SHOULD NOT** be relied upon as a substitute for sound professional medical advice, evaluation or care from your physician or other qualified healthcare provider. If you have a medical problem or a health-related question, consult your physician or call Health On-Call at 336-716-2255 or 1-800-446-2255.

Copyright: Wake Forest University School of Medicine / Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center  
Division of Radiologic Sciences  
All rights reserved.  
Medical Center Boulevard  
Winston-Salem, NC 27157  
(336) 716-5053