

CT: Spine Scan

How to prepare and what to expect

This handout explains how a CT scan of the spine works, how to prepare, what to expect, and how to get your results.

What is a CT spine scan?

A *computed tomography* (CT) scan uses a special X-ray machine to take detailed pictures of organs and tissues inside the body. CT spine scans take pictures of the spine, spinal cord, spinal canal, blood vessels, and other tissues.



How does it work?

During the scan, you will lie inside the CT machine. Many X-ray beams will be passed through your body as the X-ray tube revolves around you.

During your CT scan, you will lie on a table inside the CT machine.

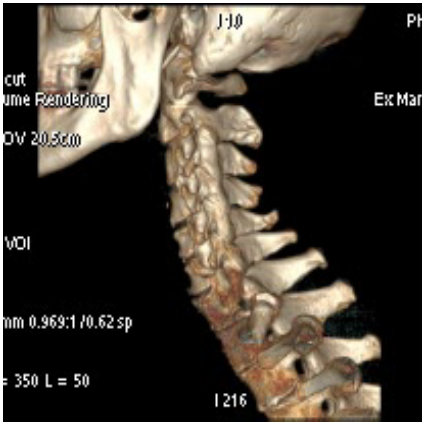
The machine will take images from many angles. These images form cross-section pictures (*slices*) of your spine. Your doctor will review the pictures on a computer.

Contrast

Some patients will receive *contrast* (X-ray dye) during their scan. Contrast makes tissues and blood vessels easier for your doctor to see in the images.

How should I prepare?

- Wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothes on the day of your scan.
- We may ask you to remove anything that contains metal, such as earrings, glasses, dentures, dental implants, bras, or zippers. Metal can affect the quality of the images.
- It is OK to eat a light meal before your CT scan. Drink plenty of fluids on the day of your scan.
- Take your prescribed medicines as usual.



A CT image of the spine

Before the Scan Begins

- **Women:** Tell your doctor or CT technologist if there is any chance you are pregnant.
- Tell the technologist if you have asthma, multiple myeloma, or any heart, kidney, or thyroid problems, or if you have diabetes, especially if you are taking Glucophage.
- If you will receive contrast:
 - We will place a small *intravenous* (IV) tube into your arm vein. This will be done before you enter the scanning room.
 - Before the injection, we will ask if you have ever had a serious reaction to contrast or any other medicine. Contrast contains iodine, which can cause a reaction if you are allergic to iodine.
 - If you have had an allergic reaction to contrast in the past, we will ask you to take medicine to prevent a reaction to the contrast before your scan.

Can a family member or friend stay with me during the scan?

- Because CT uses X-rays, you may not have a family member or friend in the CT room during the exam.
- For young patients, a parent may be able to stay in the room with their child to help reduce fear and provide comfort. The parent will need to wear a lead apron to limit exposure to the radiation used in the scan.

How is the CT scan done?

- You will lie on your back on a table. The CT technologist will help you get into position. Pillows will be used to help you stay in position during the scan.
- The technologist will then leave the room. You will be alone in the room during the scan, but the technologist can see, hear, and speak with you through an intercom at all times.
- You will lie still while the table moves into the center of the scanner. You will also need to hold still when the scans are being done. Holding still during the scan results in the best CT pictures.
- For the first few scans, the table will move quickly through the scanner. These first scans check the correct starting position. The table will move more slowly for the rest of the scans.
- If you are having contrast, it will be given to you through your IV at this time.

- When the scanning is done, you may be asked to wait a short time while the radiologist checks the images for quality. A few more scans will be done as needed.
- The scanning takes a very short time. A full spine scan, including set-up time, takes 5 to 30 minutes.

What will I feel during the scan?

- CT scans are painless.
- You may feel some discomfort from having to stay still.

If contrast is used:

- You may feel discomfort at the injection site.
- You may have a warm, flushed feeling when the contrast is injected. You may also have a metallic taste in your mouth. These reactions are normal. They should go away within 1 to 2 minutes.
- Once in a while, a patient will develop itching and hives for up to a few hours after the injection. This can be relieved with medicine. Tell us if this happens to you.
- If you start to feel light-headed or short of breath, tell us right away. You may be having an allergic reaction to the contrast. A doctor or nurse will be nearby during the scan to help you, if needed.

What should I do after the scan?

If you received contrast, it is important to drink a lot of fluids after your scan. This will help your kidneys flush the contrast from your body.

Who interprets the results and how do I get them?

A radiologist skilled in reading CT scans will review and interpret the CT images, and will send a detailed report to your provider who referred you for the scan. Your own provider will talk with you about the results of your scan.

You may also read your results on your eCare Results page. If you need copies of your images on disc, call 206.598.6206.

You and your provider will decide the next step, such as treatment for a problem, as needed.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

- UWMC Imaging Services: 206.598.6200
- UW Roosevelt Radiology: 206.598.6868
- Harborview Imaging Services: 206.744.3105