

MRI: Spine Scan

How to prepare and what to expect

This handout explains how an MRI scan of the spine works, how to prepare, what to expect during the scan, and how to get your results.

What is an MRI scan?

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is a way to take pictures of your internal organs and tissues. It uses radio waves and a strong magnet to provide clear and detailed pictures. Even different types of tissue within the same organ are easily seen in an MRI picture. This scan will help your healthcare provider decide which treatment is best for your medical condition.

What is the spine?

The *spine* is also called the *backbone* or *spinal column*. It is the column of bones in the middle of your back. It is made up of 24 small bones (*vertebrae*) that are stacked on top of each other.

How does the scan work?

An MRI of the spine usually involves taking 4 or more sets of pictures. Each set will show a different section of your spine. It takes 2 to 15 minutes to take each set.

The pictures we take depend on your symptoms. We may take images of your:

- Neck (*cervical*) area
- Chest (*thoracic*) area
- Lower (*lumbar*) spine

For Your Safety

Health Review

We need to know about certain **health conditions** before giving you an MRI scan. Please tell us if you:



An MRI image of the spine.

- Have any problems with your liver or kidneys, or need a liver or kidney transplant
- Are on dialysis
- Have allergies to any drugs or *contrast* (X-ray dye)
- Have had any surgeries

Screening for Metal

If you have any metal on or in your body, an MRI can harm you.

The strong MRI magnet will pull on any *ferromagnetic* object, such as iron and some other metals.

This is why we need to know if you have any metal in or on your body before we give you an MRI scan. Even small amounts of metal that will not harm your body can ruin the MRI image.

Please tell our staff if you have:

- Aneurysm clips, a heart pacemaker (or artificial heart valve), an implanted port, an infusion catheter (such as Port-o-cath, Lifeport, or Infusaport), an intrauterine device (IUD), any metal plates, clips, pins, screws, or surgical staples, a prosthetic hip, or any implanted metal object in your body
 - Most times, surgical staples, clips, plates, pins, and screws are not a risk during MRI if they have been in place for more than 4 to 6 weeks. If needed, we may do an X-ray to check for metal.
- Tattoos or permanent eyeliner
- Medicine patches
- A bullet or shrapnel in your body
- Ever worked with metal

How do I prepare?

- Please talk with your referring provider if you have any concerns about managing pain or anxiety during your MRI scan.
- *Women:* Tell your provider if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, or if there is any chance you could be pregnant.

On the Day of Your Scan

- **Remove anything that might contain metal.** This includes:
 - Makeup and nail polish
 - Hairpins

- Jewelry
- Glasses, hearing aids, and any removable dental work
- You must change into a hospital gown before your scan. We will give you a gown when you arrive in the MRI department.
- If you have an insulin pump or a patch that delivers any type of drug, we will ask you to remove it.
- *Women:* Before the scan, tell the technologist if there is any chance you could be pregnant.

What happens during the scan?

- You will lie on your back on a sliding table. The MRI technologist will help you get into position and place cushions around you. These cushions will help you stay in position and help you feel comfortable.
- The technologist will slide the table inside the MRI unit and then leave the room to take the pictures.
- You will be able to talk with the technologist at any time through an intercom.
- The scan usually takes 15 to 45 minutes. We will ask you to hold very still as each picture is taken.
- Sometimes, an injection of contrast is used to make certain tissues or blood vessels easier to see. If you need the contrast:
 - Your doctor will talk with you about it before your scan.
 - *Women:* Tell your doctor if there is any chance you could be pregnant.
 - You will receive the injection about halfway through the scan.
 - It will be injected through a small needle and an *intravenous* (IV) line in your arm or hand vein.
- After the scan, you will be asked to wait until the pictures are checked for quality. We will take more pictures if needed.

What will I feel during the scan?

- MRI does not cause pain.
- Some patients may feel confined or uneasy (*claustrophobic*) when they are inside the MRI unit. Please tell the doctor who referred you for the MRI if you are claustrophobic. We may give you medicine to help you relax.

- You may notice a warm feeling in the area where the pictures are taken. This is normal. If it bothers you, please tell the technologist.
- You will hear loud tapping or knocking noises during the scan. We will provide earplugs and headphones with music to help block some of these sounds.
- If a contrast injection is needed, you may feel discomfort or coolness at the injection site.

Who interprets the results and how do I get them?

A radiologist skilled in MRI will review and interpret your MRI images. The radiologist will not talk with you about the results, but will send a report to your primary care or referring provider. Your own provider will give you the results.

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

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

Questions?

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

- UWMC - Montlake Imaging Services: 206.598.6200
- Harborview Imaging Services: 206.744.3105
- UWMC - Northwest Imaging Services: 206.668.2061