

CT: Abdominal Scan

How to prepare and what to expect

This handout explains how a CT abdominal scan works, how to prepare for it, how it is done, what to expect during the scan, and how to get your results.

What is a CT abdominal scan?

CT stands for *computed tomography*. A CT abdominal scan uses a special X-ray machine to take detailed pictures of the inside of your belly. CT scans show many types of tissues and organs, such as the liver, spleen, pancreas, kidneys, *gastrointestinal* (digestive) tract, colon, and rectum.

How does the scan work?

You will lie on a table inside the CT machine for the scan. An X-ray tube will revolve around you.

Many X-ray beams will be passed through your body, creating cross-section images (*slices*) of the area. Your doctor will view these images on a computer screen.



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

Contrast

You may be given *contrast* (X-ray dye). As the contrast moves through your blood vessels and your internal organs, it makes these tissues easier for your doctor to see in the images.

Contrast may be given through an *intravenous* (IV) tube in your vein, by mouth, or as an *enema* (injected into the rectum).

How should I prepare?

- Keep taking your prescribed medicines as usual.
- *Women:* Tell your provider if you are pregnant.

On the Day of Your Scan

- It is OK to eat a light meal before your scan.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothing.



A CT image of the abdomen.

Before the Scan Begins

- *Women:* If there is any chance you may be pregnant, tell the CT technologist **before** the scan begins.
- Some items can affect the CT images. We may ask you to remove:
 - Any clothing with zippers or snaps
 - Hairpins, jewelry, glasses, hearing aids, and removable dental work

If You Will Receive Contrast

If you will have IV contrast for your scan:

- We will place an IV tube into your arm vein. This will be done before you enter the scanning room.
- Before your scan, the CT technologist will ask you if you:
 - Are allergic to any medicines or iodine. Many types of contrast contain iodine. If you have ever had a reaction to contrast, we will ask you to take medicine before your scan to prevent a contrast reaction.
 - Have asthma, diabetes, a heart problem, multiple myeloma, or kidney disease. These conditions may increase your risk of having a reaction to the contrast. For example, kidney disease makes it harder for your body to remove the contrast from your bloodstream.

If you are having a CT scan of the *gastrointestinal* (digestive) tract, we will give you liquid contrast. You will either take this liquid by mouth or receive it as an enema. If you will take the contrast by mouth, you will drink 1 liter of contrast 1 hour before your scan begins.

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

- CT scans use X-rays. Because of this, you may not have a family member or friend in the CT room during the scan.
- If a child is having this scan, a parent may stay in the room with their child to help ease fear and give comfort. The parent must wear a lead apron to protect them from radiation exposure.

What can I expect during the scan?

- The technologist will help you get into position on the CT table. We will place pillows to help you hold the correct position during the scan. The table will move into the CT scanner.

- The technologist will then leave the room. You will be alone in the room during the scan. The technologist can see, hear, and speak with you through an intercom at all times.
- You must lie still while the table moves into the center of the scanner. You must also 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 make sure we have the right starting position. For the rest of the scans, the table moves more slowly.
- If you are having IV contrast, it will be given to you at this time.
- A CT abdominal scan usually takes 5 to 30 minutes. When the scan is over, we may ask you to wait while we check the images. If needed, we may take more scans.

What will I feel during the scan?

- CT scans do not cause pain. You may feel some discomfort from having to hold still during the scan.
- If you receive **IV contrast** for your scan:
 - You may feel warm or flushed when the contrast is injected. You may also have a metallic taste in your mouth. These reactions are normal. They should ease within 1 to 2 minutes.
 - If you take the contrast by mouth, you may find the taste mildly unpleasant.
 - We may give you the contrast by enema if the scan includes your colon.
 - Once in a while, a patient gets itching and hives for up to a few hours after receiving contrast. Tell us if this happens to you and we will give you medicine to treat the symptoms.
 - If you start to feel light-headed or short of breath during the scan, 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, if needed.

What should I do after the scan?

If you had contrast for the scan, drink lots of fluids to 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 your images. The radiologist will not talk with you about the results. The radiologist will send a report to the 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 MyChart 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 - Montlake Imaging Services: 206.598.6200
- UW Roosevelt Radiology: 206.598.6868
- Harborview Imaging Services: 206.744.3105
- UWMC - Northwest Imaging Services CT: 206.668.2061