

Contrast Reaction

What You Need to Know

This handout explains what to do when you have a contrast reaction and what to do if you are scheduled for an imaging scan that requires contrast in the future.



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this handout.*

Your Contrast Reaction

Today you received: ☐ Iodinated (CT) contrast ☐ Gadolinium (MRI) contrast

You had an allergic reaction that was: ☐ Mild ☐ Moderate ☐ Severe

What is contrast?

Contrast is a special dye used during imaging scans to make certain parts of your body show up more clearly. Depending on the body part being scanned, it is given as an injection into a vein in your arm (IV), as a drink (oral), or through an enema into your rectum. Contrast is also called contrast dye, contrast agent, or contrast media.



You may feel sick if you have a contrast reaction — know the signs and when to get help.

What is a contrast reaction?

A *contrast reaction* is an allergic reaction to contrast. If you have had a contrast reaction, it's very important to take special steps to prevent it from happening again. To learn more, read the section "What if I need a scan with contrast in the future?"

Once you have had a contrast reaction, you have a higher risk of having a more severe allergic reaction the next time you get contrast. Without taking the right precautions, it could result in a more serious reaction, or even death.

What are the symptoms of a contrast reaction?

Mild allergic reactions to contrast include:

- Fewer than 12 hives (itchy red bumps on your skin)
- Itchy or scratchy throat
- Nasal congestion, sneezing
- Red, itchy, or swollen eyes

Moderate allergic reactions to contrast include:

- More than 12 hives
- Feeling short of breath
- Wheezing, trouble breathing
- Facial swelling
- Tight feeling in your throat, even if you can breathe normally

Severe allergic reactions to contrast include:

- *Anaphylaxis*. This is an allergic reaction that can be life-threatening and may require an epinephrine injection, medicines into your vein (IV), a breathing tube (intubation), or a hospital stay. Symptoms of this severe reaction include:
 - Low blood pressure (*hypotension*)
 - Fast heart rate (*tachycardia*)
 - Wheezing with shortness of breath
 - Swelling in your throat and airway that makes it hard to breathe

What to expect after a contrast reaction

Most symptoms of contrast reactions go away within a few hours without treatment. If you have a severe reaction such as anaphylaxis, this could happen again even after you start feeling better.

When to get help

Call 911 if you experience:

- Swelling of the eyes, lips, tongue, mouth, or throat
- Hoarse voice
- Trouble breathing or swallowing

Call your clinic or after-hours clinic **immediately** if you have any of the following:

- Increased number of hives
- Rash or itching that gets worse

What if I need a scan with contrast in the future?

- Talk with your health care provider or care team if you've had a contrast reaction. They may prescribe a steroid medication (called premedication) for you to take before your scan to help reduce the risk of having another contrast reaction.
- When you arrive for the scan, tell the technologist (the person doing your scan) you have had a contrast reaction in the past. The technologist will talk with the radiologist about what to do next.

- If you've had a severe reaction to contrast, you should **not** get contrast again unless your doctors decide that the benefits of giving the contrast outweigh the risk of a severe reaction. If you have a history of severe reaction to contrast and need contrast again, you will get your scan in the hospital so you can be monitored closely.

Will premedication prevent a contrast reaction?

Most people (88% or 88 out of every 100) who take premedication do not have another allergic reaction to contrast. A small number of people (2% or 2 out of every 100) will have a *breakthrough reaction* (an allergic reaction that occurs after taking premedication), and the reaction is usually the same as or less than the original reaction.

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