

CT: Abdominal Scan

How to prepare and what to expect

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

What is a CT scan of the abdomen?

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



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

How does the CT scan work?

During the scan, you will lie on a table inside the CT machine. The 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 review these images on a computer screen.

For your CT scan, 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. Some patients receive the contrast by mouth or as an *enema* (injected into the rectum).

How should I prepare?

- It is OK to eat a light meal before your CT scan. Drink plenty of fluids on the day of your scan.
- Wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothing on the day of your scan.
- Keep taking your regular medicines prescribed by your doctor.



A CT image of the abdomen.

Before the Scan Begins

- **Women:** If there is a 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 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.

If You Will Receive Contrast

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 had a reaction to contrast in the past, 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 health 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?

- Because CT uses X-rays, 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 reduce fear and provide comfort. The parent will need to wear a lead apron to protect them from radiation exposure.

What can I expect during the scan?

- The CT technologist will help you get into position on the CT table. The technologist will use pillows to help you stay in 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 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 make sure we have the right starting position. During the rest of the scans, the table moves more slowly through the scanner.
- If you are having IV contrast, it will be given to you at this time.
- An abdominal CT scan usually takes 5 to 30 minutes. When the scan is over, we may ask you to wait while we check the images to find out if more scans are needed.

What will I feel during the scan?

CT scanning does not cause any pain. You may feel some discomfort from having to hold still during the scan.

If you receive **IV contrast** for your scan:

- 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.
- If you take liquid 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, 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 had contrast for the scan, drink a lot 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 CT images. The radiologist will not talk with you about the results. The radiologist will send a 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