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Whole-body scans to screen for cancer: They don't help find cancer—and may do more harm than good

Whole-body scans are imaging tests. They take pictures of your entire body. Medical centers usually market them directly to consumers. The medical centers say that the scans help find cancer and other diseases early.

But these scans aren't very good at finding cancer in people without symptoms. And the scans have risks and costs. Here's what you need to know.

Whole-body scans are a poor screening tool.

No medical societies recommend whole-body scans. That's because there is no evidence that the scans are a good screening tool.

- Whole-body scans find cancer tumors in less than two percent of patients without symptoms. Some of these tumors would never cause a problem if left alone. They would disappear. Or they would grow too slowly to cause problems.
- Whole-body scans can miss signs of cancer. The tests that are recommended—like mammograms—would probably find these signs.
- A whole-body scan can give you a false sense of security. You may ignore real symptoms if they appear.



Whole-body scans use a lot of radiation.

The scans use two kinds of technology:

- CT (computed tomography) scan: Takes many X-ray pictures of the body.
- PET (positron emission tomography) scan: Radioactive material is injected into the body and collects in areas with cancer.

These scans use large amounts of radiation. This can increase your risk of cancer. If you have more tests, your risk increases.

When to say yes—and no—to imaging tests

These tests can help find cancers early:

Mammograms to look for breast cancer.

- Women ages 50 to 74 should have mammograms every two years.
- If you are age 40–49 or age 75 or older, talk to your doctor. Ask about your risks and whether you need the test.

Lung cancer screenings. This test is an annual low-dose CT scan. It is only recommended if you are age 55 to 77 and:

- You smoked a pack of cigarettes a day for 30 years or two packs a day for 15 years.
- And you currently smoke or stopped within the last 15 years.

You can usually skip these tests:

X-rays for back pain. Most lower-back pain goes away on its own within a month. An X-ray won't help you feel better faster. If your doctor thinks you might have a serious problem, an X-ray may be recommended.

Chest X-rays before surgery. You don't need this test unless you have signs of a heart or lung problem or the surgery involves the heart, lungs, or chest.

CT scans for headaches.

Usually your doctor diagnoses your problem based on your history and a physical exam. If you need a test, an MRI is usually better, and it doesn't use radiation.

Also, there are no federal radiation limits for CT scans (unlike other tests, such as mammograms). Therefore, it's hard to be sure how much radiation you're getting.

Get scans when and where you really need them.

Sometimes CT scans and other imaging tests are really necessary. For example, you may need a scan of the head after an injury. In these cases, your doctor thinks the benefits are greater than the risks.

When you have a scan on one body part, your risks are limited. There is protection for other parts—like the lead blanket that covers you during dental X-rays.

Whole-body scans can lead to unnecessary follow-up tests.

Often, whole-body scans show some things that do not look normal. Almost all of these are harmless. But in one study, about a third of patients were referred for more imaging tests.

For example, there may be a group of shadows on the picture. Many doctors will want to take another look. This can lead to more imaging tests and more radiation. It can lead to biopsies and surgery to find out if there is a problem. These tests can cause worry and extra costs.

Whole-body scans are costly.

Usually, insurance does not pay for whole-body scans. The scans may cost from \$500 to \$1,000. If you have follow-up tests, your costs can be much higher.

Are whole-body scans ever recommended?

Your doctor may order the test if you already have cancer, to see if it has spread.

The test may also be helpful in an emergency.

Doctors may use the test to help examine a major injury.

This report is for you to use when talking with your health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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