

Why the doctor may not order a CT scan for kidney stones

When you came into the emergency department (ED), you had symptoms that prompted the staff to check you for kidney stones, including:

- Severe, sudden pain in your upper abdomen or back
- Nausea
- Vomiting



The emergency physician or nurse might have tested your urine to check for signs of kidney stones and infection. The staff may also have done a blood test to make sure your kidneys are working well. For most people, those are the only tests needed to diagnose kidney stones, along with a health history.

If you've never had kidney stones before, your doctor might order a CT scan. This test uses X-rays to take pictures inside your body. The scan is done to check for other health problems, such as gall bladder disease or appendicitis.

If you get kidney stones again, you may need another CT scan if you are over age 50. You may also need one if your doctor isn't sure you have kidney stones. Otherwise, the urine and blood tests should be enough.

Most kidney stones pass on their own within a week or two. If they don't, see a doctor about removing them. Even then, you probably won't need a CT scan. An ultrasound uses sound waves to check the size and location of the stones. And it's safe.

The danger of too many CT scans

When they're needed, CT scans are very helpful. And the risk from a single scan is very small.

But CT scans expose you to a strong dose of radiation. In some cases, it's the same as having about 200 chest X-rays. Your body can often repair the damage CT scans cause to your tissue—but not always. And when it doesn't, the damage could lead to cancer. The more times you're exposed, the greater your risk of cancer.

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