

Do you need a CT scan for a head injury?

If you go to the emergency department (ED) for a head injury, your doctor should take your health history and do a physical exam. These can help the doctor decide if you need a Computerized Tomography (CT) scan. This uses X-rays to take pictures of your insides.

Here are some reasons you may need a CT scan for a head injury.

Signs of a major injury. You may need a CT scan if you have signs of a major head injury. These include:

- A very bad headache that starts suddenly
- A head injury that your doctor can see or feel
- Changes in mental state or alertness
- Throwing up again and again



These signs may mean that you have a skull fracture or bleeding in the brain. Bleeding in the brain is serious.

Blood thinners. Even if you have a minor head injury, you may need a CT scan if you take blood thinners. These include warfarin (Coumadin), rivaroxaban (Xarelto), and clopidogrel (Plavix). That's because blood thinners make you more likely to bleed from minor injuries.

Signs of stroke. You may also need a CT scan if you have signs of stroke. For instance, you may suddenly feel dizzy. Your face, arm, or leg may be weak or numb, especially on one side of your body. Or you may have trouble talking or seeing.

Otherwise, you likely don't need a CT scan—even if you briefly passed out.

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. A single scan may give you as much radiation as 200 chest X-rays. This harms your tissues.

Your body can often repair this damage—but not always. And when it doesn't, the damage could lead to cancer. The more CT scans you get, the greater your risk of cancer.

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