



## Full Body Scans

CT scans (Computed Tomography) are also known as CAT scans (Computed Axial Tomography). These studies do subject the body to radiation and produce 3 dimensional images of organs and other body structures that are not seen on standard x-rays. In the past CAT scans were prescribed by physicians to study specific body areas to aid in the diagnosis of symptoms and to provide an objective basis for treatment.

In our work we use CAT scans to study the cervical spine, lumbar spine, pelvis and sometimes long bones. These studies are still extremely valuable and are of course, in other areas of medicine applied to the brain and many internal organs.

In Orthopaedic Surgery and Neurosurgery a CAT scan of the lumbar spine combined with contrast producing a lumbar myelogram and post myelogram CT is used very frequently in the diagnosis of lumbar disc protrusion and helps tremendously in the decision to operate or not in a particular situation.

A few years ago some physicians began to use CT scans to scan the entire body in people who have no symptoms.

There is no scientific information yet which supports full body scans done on certain age groups every 3 - 5 years.

These body scans are called EBT imaging, which stands for Electron Beam Tomography, which is a variant of a CT scan. These scanners are reported to produce images 10 times faster than traditional CT scanners and require less than 1/5 of the radiation exposure to the patient.

Full body scans usually include the chest, abdomen, and pelvis.

Other studies, which are done independently are coronary scans looking for calcium buildup within the heart and arterial system and what is termed a virtual colonoscopy to detect cancerous polyps in the lower bowel.

## Scans are not cheap

Most health insurance plans will not cover these body scans because in most cases they are done on healthy people without symptoms and the insurance carriers do not believe there is sufficient scientific evidence to show that they are effective. The cost to the patient typically would be heart scan \$525, body scan \$850, virtual colonoscopy \$750.

## False Security

Physicians who are critics of body scans feel that they produce a false sense of security in patients because many people who have significant health risks such as hypertension, elevated cholesterol levels, or abnormal heart rhythms will never be detected by the studies, obviously. They need a thorough history and physical examination by their physician.

The American Cancer Society and the American College of Radiology do not recommend whole body scans because they do not feel that research has demonstrated that the benefits outweigh the costs. The FDA has called the scans controversial because the long term risk from exposure to radiation has not been studied.

## False Positives

Body scan may detect imperfections in the body that may never become serious health risks.



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Aging arteries for example often accumulate some plaque, but this is virtually normal. Scans may cause people to worry unnecessarily and pursue invasive unnecessary tests to follow up on what is found with the body scan.

Some radiologists who have studied the problem feel that full body scans may not be as accurate in diagnosing disease as conventional CT scans. Conventional CT scans often use oral or injected contrast materials that bring out further details in body areas. Full body scans do not use contrast. As an example, to find a kidney tumor on an unenhanced CT body scan would be extremely difficult.

The proponents of full body scans say that if something suspicious is seen they would have the patient come back for a special test with contrast.

Some opponents of body scans feel that money could be much better spent on mammograms, pap smears, and periodic physical examinations. Furthermore if patients would quit smoking, eat more healthfully and exercise regularly their health would be enhanced tremendously.

Proponents of full body scans call them the 21st century physical and the ultimate preventative tool.



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