

Risks of X-rays and CT scans in Pregnancy

Q. Can I have an X-ray or CT whilst pregnant?

There is always concern about potential harm to the unborn child from X-ray or CT Scan radiation. Sometimes, due to a particular medical concern, your doctor may feel an X-Ray is needed. The decision will be taken based on the balance of the risks of doing the X-ray and benefit of the information from the X-ray.

Q. What are the risks?

The risks to you and your unborn child are very small and the risk of not having the X-Ray could be much greater than the risk from the radiation. Birth defects, which are often believed to be the major concern, only occur with much higher dose exposure in early pregnancy i.e. the first three months. The main (but very small) risk of low dose radiation is childhood cancer. During the course of a normal pregnancy a baby is exposed to normal low dose environmental radiation. The first detectable risk of cancer occurs when the baby is exposed to a dose 20 times more than environmental radiation, such as from the sun. At this level of exposure your baby has a 1 in 500 chance of developing a childhood cancer.

Q. How many tests are safe?

The list below shows **how many of each test you need to have** for your baby to receive the potentially harmful dose (20 times more than environmental radiation).

Type of X-ray or scan	Quantity
X-ray of your pelvis	Between 5 and 30 tests.
X-ray of your lower spine	Between 3 and 20 tests.
V/Q Lung Scan	Approximately 5 or more tests
CT Scan of your head (with lead apron over abdomen)	Approximately 50 tests.
CT Scan of your chest (with lead apron over abdomen)	Between 3 and 6 tests.
CT Scan of your abdomen	Between 1 and 3 tests.

The main test posing a small risk to your baby is the CT Scan of the abdomen. This test, like all others, is only done if the risk to you or your baby is greater than not doing the diagnostic test. If you have any concerns or questions, or want more information, please ask your doctor.

Q. How can I minimise the risk?

On the day of the test make sure you tell the radiographer that you are pregnant. Your doctor may decide to cancel the test, postpone the test or modify it to reduce the amount of radiation. Or, depending on your medical needs, your doctor may well decide to proceed based on the small risks. In any case, you should discuss this with your doctor. If you have an X-ray you usually have your abdomen covered with a lead gown as this reduces the radiation dose to a negligible level. The dose received is higher if you are having X-rays of your abdominal area as you cannot wear the lead gown for these. Other tests that may be needed and which have a higher radiation dose are Lung Scans (V/Q Scans) and CT scans.

Q. What if I find out I am pregnant after an X-ray?

Do not panic if you have an X-ray or scan and later discover that you are pregnant. Remember the possibility of harm to you or your unborn child from an X-ray is small. If you have concerns you should always consult with your doctor or healthcare professional who will be able to offer advice.

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Always consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.

