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# Why do I even need this test? A Diagnostic Imaging and Informed Consent Consumer Resource

## Why should I read this?

This information is for people who want to find out more about why they have been asked to have a diagnostic test and what it could involve – so that they can make an informed choice about it.

## What is Diagnostic Imaging?

Diagnostic imaging means taking pictures, or images, of a person's body to help identify a medical condition. Diagnostic Imaging can also be used to observe an injury, screening for diseases and pregnancies, or monitoring a disease to see what state it is at and to look for changes over time.

This is done in several ways:

- Radiography (X-ray)
- Ultrasound
- Computed Tomography (CT)
- Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)
- Nuclear medicine imaging
- Positron Emission Tomography (PET) and
- Bone densitometry.

Some diagnostic tests use radiation to make the images. The doses of radiation are generally very small but the risks must be balanced against the benefits of having the test.

Diagnostic images are usually obtained by a medical imaging technologist known as a Radiographer. Diagnostic Imaging is commonly referred to as a 'diagnostic test'. Diagnostic images are analysed by specialist doctors- Radiologists and Nuclear Medicine Physicians- who are trained to advise your doctor on appropriate imaging tests and to interpret what your diagnostic image means. They write reports to assist your doctor or specialist identify any problems and manage them.

## What is informed consent?

Informed consent is an agreement or process where you are provided with all the relevant information to support your agreement (or not) to a diagnostic test. This means that you will know that you have given informed consent to a test if:

- a doctor or specialist has informed you about all your options,
- you are aware of all the benefits and any risks associated with the test and
- your doctor or specialist supports you in making a decision about your care.

Informed consent also includes informed financial consent which means you understand how much a test is going to cost you.



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**A good way to assist you to manage your health** is to take notes on your discussion with your doctor or specialist so you can think about it some more. It might be useful to invite a friend or relative to come with you when you visit the doctor or specialist; they can help you take notes, and also provide a check on what you were told.

**If you are pregnant** or think you may be pregnant it is vital that you share this information. Tell the doctor or specialist referring you for the diagnostic imaging test and staff at the facility where you are having the test, because some tests can affect your unborn baby. Your referring doctor or specialist will refer you for a test if it is safe to do so.

When it comes to **radiation dose**, not all imaging tests are the same. Some diagnostic tests, like ultrasound and MRI, do not use x-rays or radiation. Tests that use x-rays (like standard x-ray or computed tomography) or radioactive materials (nuclear medicine) vary widely in radiation dosage. The dose depends on the type of test and the part of the body being examined.

Source: [radiologyinfo.org](http://radiologyinfo.org)

## Why do I need information and informed consent?

To make sure any diagnostic test you have is in your best interests. This information ensures you are aware of what will happen to you, why you are having the test and why the test is necessary. Informed consent also ensures that you understand the benefits and risks of having or not having a test and the things you need to do to make the test useful.

## How can I use this resource?

**Consumers** – to assist you to get the information you need when a diagnostic test is recommended.

**Health professionals** – to assist you in helping consumers understand information about a diagnostic test and enabling them to give their knowledge based informed consent

## When should I ask for more information?

Whenever you want to know something!

Good information is particularly important at **four points**:

### 1. When your doctor or specialist talks about having a diagnostic imaging test

*This is the best time to ask about why you need the test, how the result might (and might not) help you and if there are any other options to having a test*

#### Why do I need this test?

Your doctor or specialist should clearly explain the reasons why you need the test and what information the test will provide. Ask how having the test will assist in improving your health outcomes. If you are unsure, ask for more information about why you need the test and what the test will tell you and your doctor or specialist.

#### How soon should I have the test?

Ask how urgent the test is. Ask what could happen if the test does not happen straight away.

#### Will I need more tests?

Ask if the test is all that is needed or whether there is a chance you will need more tests.

#### How will the test help me?

Ask about how you can expect the test to make your health better or assist in understanding more about your health.

#### What are the risks to me?

Ask if there are any possible adverse effects from the test. Ask about the risks of misdiagnosis. Make sure the doctor or specialist knows all your medicines (all supplementary, complementary and other medicines as well, not just the ones the doctor or specialist has prescribed) and whether you have ever had any harmful effects from medicines or tests. If you have particular health conditions or you are pregnant, make sure you raise this with your doctor or specialist.

#### Do I have to do the test – or could I just wait and see what happens?

Ask about the risks and benefits of delaying or not having the test.

#### Is there any option that does not involve exposure to radiation?

In particular, ask about the radiation associated with the recommended test, and how significant this is compared to everyday exposure. Ask if there is any alternative test available that does not involve radiation exposure. Ask about the risks and benefits of any alternatives that are suggested.

Information obtained at the point where your doctor or specialist proposes a test can ensure you make an informed decision about having a test.

**You have the right to refuse a test** or seek a second opinion. You can also ask for more time and information before you make your decision and discuss your options with your doctor or specialist.

It is important to ensure that you understand the risks of delaying or refusing any test.

Some diagnostic tests, **like an abdominal CT scan**, might require that you fast 2–4 hours before your test. You also may have to drink a large quantity of ‘oral contrast’, a fluid that will show up on the scan and make it easier to see your body parts. Some diagnostic tests, such as a CT scan, MRI etc. may also require intravenous injections of contrast agents. Ultrasound tests may also require a period of fasting or drinking water and not using the restroom until after the test.

As with many medical tests, **you may need to expose the area being examined, or undress and wear a hospital gown**. Ask if this is likely to happen for the test you are having. If you are uncomfortable with this, discuss it with the staff where the test is being carried out. If you have cultural issues with being tested by a member of the opposite sex, ask if you can be seen by someone of the same sex when you make the booking. Some scans also require you to leave all removable metallic objects outside the scanning room. This includes removable hearing aids, dentures and other prosthetic devices.

### Who can do the test and why?

Ask your doctor or specialist if they can recommend a particular facility, and also ask why they recommend that facility. You can make your own decision on where to go for the test based on your preferences and requirements, but you should ensure that you discuss this with your doctor or specialist.

### How much will this cost me?

Ask about the costs to you of taking the test. Ask the doctor or specialist if the test is covered by Medicare. Ask about whether you can use a public or private service to have the test and what the cost would be for each option.

### How should I prepare for the test?

Ask your doctor or specialist what you need to do to prepare for the test. This is very important- some tests require you to follow particular instructions and if you have not followed these you will have to return for the test at another time.

Also ask if having the test will prevent you from driving or will require any additional precautions afterwards. For example, if you have been given a sedative as part of the test, it will be unsafe to drive a car or take public transport, and you will be advised to have someone with you for 24 hours afterwards. In these cases it is also unsafe to operate machinery for the rest of the day.

### What happens after the test?

Ask how you will get the results and how you can find out what they mean. Ask if and when you should see the doctor or specialist to discuss the results. Ask what different treatment options you may have to consider based on the test results.

## 2. When you make the appointment to have the test

*This is the best time to ask about the test itself, what will happen, how you prepare for the test, what it will cost, and how you will get the results. While you might have already asked some of these questions of your doctor or specialist, it is important to get confirmation from the Diagnostic Imaging (DI) provider.*

### Do I need to do anything to get ready for the test?

Ask about any food or fluid restrictions and rules about smoking and medications.

### What should I expect before, during and after the test?

Ask how long the test will take and how long you are likely to be at the testing facility. Ask if you will need to stay there for observation following the test. If they say yes, ask for how long. Ask what you should wear and if you should leave valuables at home.

### Will there be effects after the test?

Ask if you will be sedated and whether you can drive safely/get home by yourself after the test – or if you should bring along someone to help you after the test. Ask if there are any other effects that you need to be aware of.

### How much will the test cost me?

Ask for details about how much the test will cost. Find out how much it is going to cost you up front and if you will be able to receive any reimbursement.

### Can I be bulk billed?

Some practices bulk bill for diagnostic tests. If the facility does not provide this option, you can ask who does and how to contact them.

### **Most tests ordered by general practitioners are covered, at least in part, by Medicare.**

Tests requested by specialists and other physicians are not always eligible for a Medicare rebate.

Check – before you have the test – exactly what you will be paying.

For more information on diagnostic imaging fees visit MBS Online at <http://www.health.gov.au/mbsonline/>

While Medicare covers lots of test costs, there can be an **extra 'gap' cost** that you have to pay. And there are some tests that Medicare does not cover. Check before you agree to the test if you want to be sure.

If you are having an invasive diagnostic test, **once you sign a consent form** it is understood that you have given your formal, legal agreement to have the test named on the form – unless you revoke (take back) your consent before you have the test. You can ask for a copy of the consent form – the people doing the test keep the original as a legal record that you agreed to the test.

### **What costs will I have to pay myself?**

Ask if there will be any costs that you will incur over and above the cost of the test. Public practices don't charge a gap payment but some private practices do, so check as extra costs can be high.

### **Are there any payment plans available?**

If the cost of the tests will cause you financial hardship or financial stress, ask if they allow payment by instalments or if they have other ways to support patients who are on limited or fixed incomes.

### **Are there any additional costs?**

Ask about travel, parking and any other costs. Ask if there is public transport nearby the practice.

Most states offer some form of patient travel and accommodation assistance schemes to help with travel related out of pocket costs for consumers in need. Radiation Oncology provides a good comparison of patient travel assistance schemes across Australia which can be accessed at: <http://www.radiationoncology.com.au/rural-and-regional-access/attachment-xxx-comparison-of-patient-travel-assistance-schemes-across-australia/>

## **3. Just before you have the test**

*This is a good time to ensure you have had all your questions answered and made sure whether anything might go wrong*

### **Is there any medical condition that could prevent me from undergoing the test?**

Ask if there is any information about your health that is significant to the test. For example, it is not recommended that pregnant women have tests that would expose them to radiation without specific precautions being taken.

### **What are the risks of having the test?**

Before you have the test, ask for information about reactions you may have to certain dyes, equipment and other materials like gloves and tape used in the test. Ask what will be done in the event of a harmful reaction.

### **Have I understood and signed a consent form?**

Low risk and non-invasive test like an ultrasound or an x-ray examination do not require a formal written consent. But if you are having an invasive procedure, you may be asked to read and sign a form to give your consent to have the test.

Make sure you understand everything on the form and have had all your questions answered, including how much you will have to pay for the test, before you sign it.

#### 4. Just after the test

*This is a good time to confirm anything you need to be careful about because of having the test, how you can give feedback on your experience – and confirm when and how you will get the results.*

##### **How can I give feedback on my experience?**

If you want, you can ask about how you can provide feedback on the test and the procedures. Giving feedback about the whole diagnostic imaging process can help provide better services and can also show appreciation of good service.

##### **Can I just get on with life as normal?**

If your test involved dietary and other restrictions, ask when you should be able to eat and drink as normal and do regular activities again. Ask if there are any instructions you need to follow and for how long.

##### **What happens if I have any reaction to the test?**

It is also important to ask who you can contact if you need to discuss the test or any adverse reactions. Ask if there are any issues that you need to act on quickly.

##### **How and when will I get the results?**

Ask about how long you will have to wait for the results, and whether they will be sent to you or the referring doctor or specialist. Ask if you can get access to online results.

*For more useful information visit <https://ourhealth.org.au/find-your-way/you-and-health-system/useful-information/understanding-my-tests>*

*This resource has been developed as part of the Diagnostic Imaging and Informed Consent Project. This project has been funded by the Department of Health as part of the Commonwealth Government's Diagnostic Imaging Quality Program.*

## More Information and resources

### Inside Radiology

InsideRadiology website has been developed by the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists to provide consumers (patients, carers, potential users of radiology) and referrers (general practitioners, specialists and other health professionals) with accurate, up to date information about radiology tests and interventions that is easy to use and understand. The website can be accessed at <http://www.insideradiology.com.au>

### Diagnostic Imaging Pathways

Diagnostic Imaging Pathways is an online clinical decision support tool and educational resource for diagnostic imaging that is freely available to all consumers and health professionals.

Diagnostic Imaging Pathways can be accessed at

<http://www.imagingpathways.health.wa.gov.au/index.php/consumer-info>

### Information on Medicare Benefits

Consumers can search for particular Medicare items on the MBS Online website, either by entering the MBS item number or through a keyword search. This is easy when you know what the MBS item number is (e.g. MBS item number 23 for a standard GP consultation), or what the name of the service or test is (e.g. endoscopic laser therapy).

This task is more challenging for consumers who want to find out about the Medicare services and benefits available for the treatment of a particular condition (e.g. a particular chronic condition).

The MBS Online website search functionality is currently designed to search for particular items, rather than the overall treatment of general conditions or for particular groups.

More information on the MBS and other frequently asked questions can be found at

<https://www.chf.org.au/pdfs/fac/fac-freq-asked-questions-MBS.pdf>

### Information on Medicare for Diagnostic Imaging

This document provides details on each professional service which is associated with diagnostic imaging and has been allocated a unique item number. Located with the item number and description for each service is the Schedule fee and Medicare benefit, together with a reference to an explanatory note relating to the item. The document can be accessed at [http://www.health.gov.au/internet/mbsonline/publishing.nsf/Content/700EAE8E8BC5D5FECA257A0F0017617F1\\$File/201207-Cat%205.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/mbsonline/publishing.nsf/Content/700EAE8E8BC5D5FECA257A0F0017617F1$File/201207-Cat%205.pdf)

### Information on Radiation exposure levels

Cancer Council WA has developed a resource to guide diagnostic imaging in general practice. The resource, 'Towards Appropriate Use of Diagnostic Imaging: A Guide for Medical Practitioners and their Patients' aims to provide information and support to patients and general practitioners when discussing diagnostic imaging tests. The resource also has information on typical effective doses from diagnostic imaging tests and exposure through various radiographic examinations.

The resource can be accessed at <http://www.cancerwa.asn.au/resources/2011-05-23-towards-appropriate-use-of-diagnostic-imaging-GP-guide.pdf>

### Choosing Wisely

Choosing Wisely is an American website which contains information aimed at recognising the importance of physician and patient conversations to improve care and eliminate unnecessary tests and procedures. It can be accessed at <http://www.choosingwisely.org/doctor-patient-lists/>



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