

We Want You to Know About X-Rays

Will you be one of the 7 out of 10 Americans who will get a medical or dental x-ray picture this year? Most of the time that's fine because the x-ray will help your doctor find out what's wrong and decide how you should be treated. The information from diagnostic x-rays can even save your life.

But sometimes x-rays are taken when they're not medically needed. And even when there is a good medical reason for an x-ray, if proper care is not taken, the patient can get more radiation than necessary. Like many things, x-rays may do harm as well as good. X-rays may add slightly to the chance of getting cancer in later life. And if the sex organs are in or near the x-ray beam, changes could be produced in the reproductive cells. Those changes might be passed on and could cause harm in future children and grandchildren.

Because of the amount of radiation used in x-ray examinations is small, the chance that x-rays will cause these problems is very low. Still, it makes sense to avoid unnecessary risks, no matter how small. By avoiding x-rays that aren't medically needed, you avoid the risks, and you can also avoid unnecessary medical costs. You may now be asking, "How many x-ray exams are safe?" There's really no answer to this question. There is no number that is definitely safe, just as there is no number that is definitely dangerous. Every x-ray can involve some tiny risk. If the x-ray is needed to find out about a medical problem, then that small risk is certainly worth taking.

Here's what you can do:

ASK HOW IT WILL HELP to find out what's wrong. How will it help determine your treatment? Feel free to talk with your doctor; you have a right to understand why an x-ray is suggested.

DON'T REFUSE AN X-RAY if the doctor explains why it is medically needed. Remember, the risk of not having a needed x-ray is greater than the tiny risk from the radiation.

DON'T INSIST ON AN X-RAY. Sometimes doctors give in to people who ask for an x-ray, even if it isn't medically needed.

TELL THE DOCTOR IF YOU ARE, OR THINK YOU MIGHT BE PREGNANT before having an x-ray of your abdomen or lower back. Because the unborn baby is growing so quickly, it can be more easily affected by radiation than a grownup. If you need an abdominal x-ray during your pregnancy, remember that the chance of harm to the unborn baby is very tiny. But be sure to talk with your doctor.

KEEP UP ON NEW MAMMOGRAPHY INFORMATION. There is agreement that mammography (breast x-rays) is important in the fight against breast cancer. But scientific information is still growing on the proper role of mammography. Right now it is believed that women more likely to need mammography are those with symptoms, or those past menopause, or those with a personal or family history of breast cancer. Talk with your doctor about the value of breast x-rays in your particular case.

ASK IF A GONAD SHIELD CAN BE USED if you or your children are to have x-rays of the lower back, abdomen, or near the sex organs. A lead shield over the sex organs can keep x-rays from reaching your reproductive cells, thereby protecting future generations. Gonad shielding should be considered if the patient might have children in the future. But remember, a shield can't always be used, particularly over the female ovaries, because it may hide what the doctor needs to see on the x-ray.

KEEP AN X-RAY RECORD CARD. Cut out the X-Ray Record Card and keep it in your wallet. When an x-ray is taken, have the date, the type of exam, and where the x-ray is kept, filled out on the card. Then, if another doctor suggests an x-ray of the same part of your body, you can tell him or her about the previous x-ray. Sometimes the doctor can use the previous x-ray instead of taking a new one. Or, if a new x-ray is needed, the previous one might help show any change in your medical problem. Keep a record card for everyone in your family.

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