



Having an X-ray

This leaflet tells you about having an X-ray. It tells you what is involved and what the possible risks are.

What is an X-ray?

Your doctor has requested an X-ray to help diagnose and treat you more effectively. The most common types of X-rays are of the bones and joints, chest, teeth and abdomen (tummy). The X-ray machine directs a beam of X-rays through the part of the body being examined. The X-rays are recorded on an 'imaging plate', which produces a digital image of the structures that the X-rays have passed through. This image appears on a computer screen and can be viewed by staff in the X-ray department and other areas of the hospital.

Before your X-ray

For most X-rays, no special preparation is needed, but you may be asked to change into a hospital gown. You may also be asked to remove some items of jewellery. It is important that the area being x-rayed is clear of any objects that could be seen on the image (eg zips or buttons from clothing). For example, if you are coming for a chest X-ray, you may be asked to change into a hospital gown and to remove any necklaces you are wearing, but you would not need to remove your watch.

Female patients who are pregnant, or think they might be, should tell the radiographer before the X-ray. If you have had a similar X-ray recently you should also tell us.

What happens during the X-ray?

The radiographer will call you into the X-ray room and explain what they are going to do. You will either stand, sit, or lie down for your X-ray, depending on the part of the body being examined. The radiographer will make you as comfortable as possible but will need to position you accurately for the X-ray. You will need to keep as still as possible while the X-ray is being taken and you may be asked to hold your breath for a few seconds. The radiographer will stand behind a glass screen while the X-ray is taken but they will be able to see and hear you at all times.

An X-ray does not hurt – you will not feel or see anything although the X-ray machine does make some noise. After the X-ray has been taken you may be asked to wait for a short time so that the radiographer can check that they have all the information that they need. Further X-rays may be needed in different positions. Your X-ray examination will usually take no more than 5-10 minutes. There are no immediate after effects from an X-ray and you will be able to return to your normal daily activities.

When will I get the results?

You will not normally get the results of the X-ray at the time of the examination. A radiologist (a doctor who is specially trained to interpret X-ray images) will issue a report on the findings, usually within 2 days. If your GP sent you for your X-ray, he or she will receive a paper copy of this report through the post, usually within 7 days. If you have been sent by Accident & Emergency or OutPatients, the doctor that referred you will be able to look at your X-ray on the same day.

Are there any risks?

All X-ray examinations involve exposure to ionising radiation in varying amounts. We are all exposed to radiation naturally ('background radiation'). The use of radiation is strictly controlled and is kept to the minimum required, but this will vary depending on the area being X-rayed. For example, it takes more radiation to X-ray your lower back than it does to X-ray your hand. The extra radiation from an X-ray examination is equivalent to what you would receive from the environment (background radiation) over a period of between a few days and a few months.

Having an X-ray (continued)

This represents a fraction of our lifetime dose from natural radiation. Bear in mind that a 4 hour airline flight exposes you to the same amount of radiation from cosmic rays as a chest X-ray.

However, there is a very small risk that exposure to radiation may increase the chance of cancer occurring many years or decades later. You should remember that we all have a 1 in 3 chance of developing cancer at some time in our lives and the additional risk associated with having an X-ray is minimal. Despite this risk, it is important to remember that the risk of missing a serious problem by not having the X-ray done could be much greater.

What if I have any concerns or questions about my X-ray?

If you have any questions about your X-ray, please ask a member of staff. We will do everything we can to make your visit as pleasant as possible.