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Are CT Scans the Hidden Cancer Risk No One Warned You About?

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | April 25, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- CT scans are projected to cause about 103,000 future cancer cases from just one year's worth of imaging; the scans expose patients to ionizing radiation that damages DNA and increases cancer risk
- Abdomen and pelvis CT scans pose the highest risk, contributing to 5% of all cancer diagnoses, which is comparable to risks from obesity and alcohol consumption
- Children face greater vulnerability to radiation damage, while radiation effects accumulate over time with each scan, often taking four to 11 years before related cancers develop
- Historical evidence suggests radiation safety standards were manipulated to favor industry interests; further, some imaging centers expose patients to 50 times more radiation than others
- Patients can protect themselves by asking if scans will change treatment plans, requesting MRI or ultrasound alternatives, and documenting radiation exposure when CT is necessary

Each year, millions of Americans undergo computed tomography (CT) scans without realizing the hidden risks tied to this common medical procedure. While CT imaging plays a large role in modern diagnostics, it also exposes you to a type of radiation that

quietly damages your cells and builds up over time. Unlike everyday background exposure, the ionizing radiation from medical scans directly injures DNA, setting the stage for cancer years or even decades later.

Few people are warned about how even a single scan adds to your lifetime cancer risk, or that safer alternatives often exist. What's even less known is how early safety claims around medical radiation were shaped by corporate interests, not unbiased science. As you'll soon see, historical evidence reveals a long-standing pattern of minimizing the true dangers to protect profits over patients.

If you want to take smarter control of your health, it's important to understand the real risks behind CT imaging, and how to protect yourself. Let's walk through the latest research that finally brings these dangers into clear view.

Data Reveals CT Scans Are a Driver of Future Cancer Cases

Research published in JAMA Internal Medicine sought to measure how many future cancer cases would be triggered by current CT scan usage in the U.S.[1] About 93 million CT scans are performed annually in the U.S. Researchers wanted to move beyond vague assumptions and create a clear estimate of the future health burden tied to this increasingly common diagnostic tool.

- **Adults were the biggest population impacted, but children faced the highest risk per scan —** The study estimated that about 61.5 million patients received CT scans in 2023, with 95.8% of those being adults.

  While children's bodies are more vulnerable to **DNA damage** from radiation, adults contributed the largest share of expected future cancers simply because they underwent far more imaging overall. This means that no matter your age, every CT scan you undergo builds up your lifetime cancer risk in a measurable way.

- **Certain types of scans caused more future cancers than others —** Among all imaging categories, abdomen and pelvis CT scans were responsible for the largest share of projected new cancers, accounting for 37,500 out of 103,000 expected cases.

  Chest CT scans ranked second. Not surprisingly, these are areas packed with radiation-sensitive organs like the colon, lungs, bladder, and reproductive organs. Full-body scans also contributed a disproportionate number of future cancer cases compared to the percentage of scans performed.

- **The overall risk was large enough to rival obesity and alcohol as cancer causes —** The researchers calculated that CT scans could account for 5% of all new cancer diagnoses if current practices continue. To put that into perspective, obesity is estimated to cause 7.6% of cancers, while chronic alcohol use causes about 5.4%.

  These numbers make clear that medical imaging decisions are not trivial and deserve the same scrutiny as diet and lifestyle choices when it comes to cancer prevention.

- **Lung cancer was the most common cancer linked to CT scans —** Of the projected radiation-induced cases, lung cancer topped the list, with about 22,400 new cases expected over time.

  Colon cancer came next, followed by leukemia and bladder cancer. For women, breast cancer was also a significant concern, especially following imaging that involved the chest or abdomen. The data showed that while the per-scan risk was higher for children, adults aged 50 to 69 bore the highest absolute burden because of their frequent use of CT technology.

How Radiation Damages Your Cells Over Time

Ionizing radiation from CT scans causes direct breaks in your DNA strands, as well as more subtle mutations that disrupt cellular repair processes. Damaged cells are more likely to turn cancerous later, even decades after the initial exposure. Because radiation effects are cumulative, every additional CT scan builds onto whatever existing DNA damage already exists.

- **Cellular sensitivity varied depending on body part and patient age —** The study showed that certain organs absorbed much higher radiation doses during specific types of scans. For example, children under 1 year of age who received a head CT absorbed brain doses much higher than adults, making them even more vulnerable to future brain cancers or leukemia.

  Meanwhile, adult colon tissue during abdominal CT scans was heavily exposed, helping explain the spike in future colon cancer projections.

- **Damage from CT radiation tends to silently accumulate for years —** CT-related cancers do not develop immediately. According to the research, solid tumors linked to radiation often take anywhere from four to 11 years to emerge, and leukemia from radiation exposure typically appears within two to four years. This slow timeline makes it hard for individuals to realize that an imaging scan years ago could have seeded future disease.

- **The cumulative effect of repeated scans is the hidden danger most people overlook —** One isolated CT scan increases your lifetime cancer risk a little, but multiple scans stack together, raising that risk significantly over time. This is why it's important to treat each imaging decision carefully. You are not simply weighing the benefits of finding a diagnosis today — you're also adding to your body's cumulative burden of DNA damage for the future.

Radiation Safety Standards Were Built on Industry Fraud

According to bioenergetic researcher Georgi Dinkov, historical evidence shows that the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) manipulated radiation risk data to favor corporate interests.[2] Panel members altered findings to downplay the risks of ionizing radiation, making CT scans and other imaging technologies seem far safer than they actually are.[3] This manipulation opened the floodgates for unchecked growth in the use of radiation-heavy scans like CT.

- **Radiation risks were deliberately minimized to boost CT equipment sales —** The investigation linked the NAS' actions directly to helping General Electric, the leading manufacturer of CT machines at the time.[4]

  By promoting the false idea that small doses of radiation posed little to no cancer risk, the NAS helped GE sell more equipment worldwide. This fraud turned out to be extremely costly, as millions of individuals unknowingly accumulated dangerous radiation exposures that experts now recognize contribute heavily to cancer rates.

- **Modern evidence proves every radiation dose carries real risks —** The dangers of ionizing radiation are cumulative, meaning every single scan adds to your lifetime risk of developing cancer. Even exposures separated by years or decades build upon previous damage. This directly challenges the “threshold theory” many doctors were taught, which wrongly assumed that only very high doses of radiation were dangerous.

- **The true impact of radiation exposure could be much larger than estimated —** While the JAMA Internal Medicine study found CT scans alone could account for 5% of cancer diagnoses, the article highlighted that total exposure to all forms of medical imaging could be responsible for as much as 30% to 40% of new cancer cases each year.[5]

  This includes not only CT scans but also PET scans, frequent X-rays, and other common medical imaging tests that involve ionizing radiation.

- **Specific types of imaging deliver far different radiation doses —** The article emphasized how radiation exposure varies wildly between facilities and scan types. For example, one imaging center could expose you to 50 times more radiation for the same CT scan compared to another center.

- **Industry deception delayed public awareness of the true risks —** Because of the early scientific fraud exposed by this article, millions of patients trusted medical advice that was based on false safety claims. This history of deception underscores why you need to now advocate for yourself before agreeing to medical imaging that uses radiation. Your long-term health depends on knowing the risks and demanding safer alternatives whenever possible.

Simple Ways to Protect Yourself from Unnecessary Radiation Exposure

You have more control than you realize when it comes to minimizing your risk from CT scans and other radiation-based imaging. If you're facing a health concern and your doctor recommends a scan, think carefully about what you truly need and whether a safer option is available. Every CT scan carries a real, measurable cancer risk that adds up over your lifetime, even if the scan seems routine at the time. Here's how to protect your long-term health:

1. **Always ask if the result will change how your care is managed —** If you're being sent for a CT scan, speak up and ask, "Will this scan change the way you treat me?" If the answer is no, then you're exposing yourself to serious risks without any real benefit. Imaging should always have a purpose that clearly impacts your next steps, not just be ordered out of habit.

2. **Request an MRI or ultrasound whenever possible —** MRI and ultrasound don't expose you to ionizing radiation. If you're dealing with gallstones, kidney stones, or certain types of abdominal pain, ultrasound is often just as effective without any

radiation risk. For brain or spine issues like stroke or tumor monitoring, MRI is a safer alternative. I recommend making it a personal rule to ask for these options first unless a CT is absolutely necessary.

3. **If you need to have a CT, demand documentation of the dose and consider dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) —** If you do need a CT scan, ask for the radiation dose to be documented and get a copy for your personal records. Also consider DMSO, a naturally occurring substance that helps prevent the damage radiation does to cells and heal existing radiation injuries.

4. **Refuse unnecessary multiphase scans —** Some CT scans involve taking multiple images of the same area during different phases, which dramatically increases radiation exposure. Always ask if a single-phase scan will answer the medical question. Unless absolutely necessary, refuse multiphase scans to lower your lifetime risk.

5. **Avoid CT unless it's an emergency or no safer alternative exists —** If you're a generally healthy adult facing a non-urgent issue, resist the pressure to have a CT scan without clear, documented justification. Prioritize imaging methods that help you without adding invisible long-term harm to your body.

Your health decisions today shape your future more than you realize. Knowing the right questions to ask and steps to take could spare you from a cancer diagnosis years down the road. Always remember, you are your own best advocate.

FAQs About CT Scans

Q: How much does a CT scan increase your lifetime cancer risk?

A: CT scans expose your body to a high dose of ionizing radiation, about 70 times more than a chest X-ray. Every scan you receive adds to your cumulative lifetime cancer risk. Research published in JAMA Internal Medicine found that CT scans are

projected to cause about 103,000 future cancer cases from just one year's worth of imaging.

Q: Which types of CT scans carry the greatest cancer risks?

A: Abdomen and pelvis CT scans were identified as the biggest contributors to future cancer diagnoses. These scans expose sensitive organs like your colon, bladder, and reproductive tissues to high radiation doses, making them more dangerous than other types of imaging.

Q: What are safer alternatives to CT scans?

A: Whenever possible, request an MRI or ultrasound instead of a CT. These imaging methods do not use ionizing radiation. Ultrasound is especially effective for gallstones, appendicitis, and kidney stones, while MRI works well for brain and spine imaging without the radiation risks.

Q: Why were the dangers of CT scans hidden for so long?

A: Evidence shows that the NAS misrepresented radiation data to benefit companies like General Electric, which made CT machines. This scientific fraud made radiation risks seem much lower than they really are, leading to widespread overuse of CT scans and millions of unnecessary radiation exposures.

Q: What steps can I take to protect myself from unnecessary radiation?

A: Always ask if a CT scan will change your care, request radiation dose documentation, keep a personal log of your exposures, refuse multiphase scans unless absolutely necessary, and explore safer imaging options like MRI or

ultrasound whenever possible. Your long-term health depends on making informed imaging choices.

Sources and References

- [1] JAMA Internal Medicine April 14, 2025
- [2, 4, 5] To Extract Knowledge from Matter April 17, 2025
- [3] Archives of Toxicology January 20, 2015