

CT Advisory Questions & Answers

Q:

The media is reporting that patients received overexposures to radiation while undergoing CT scans. What is the Department doing about this incident?

A:

The Department recently became aware of incidents involving CT machines at a hospital in Southern California. In these incidents, a number of patients received overexposures to radiation while undergoing “brain perfusion scans.” Brain perfusion scans are commonly performed on patients thought to be at high risk for stroke. The Department is currently investigating the possible causes of these particular incidents, but at this time it is believed that these were isolated incidents.

Q:

My physician has written an order for me to have a CT scan. Should I be concerned?

A:

Follow the advice of your health care provider. If you have concerns, it is important that you discuss them with your physician. He or she can explain the need for the procedure, the medical benefits, and any associated risks. Also, please know that thousands of X-ray procedures are performed safely and responsibly in California every day.

Q:

I had a CT scan of my head. How much radiation was I exposed to? Isn't this the same type of procedure involved in this incident?

A:

The amount of radiation delivered to a patient during a medical procedure depends on a number of factors. For example, the CT machine settings are different for a scan of the head than they would be for a scan of the chest, or

of the abdomen. The patient's size is also an important consideration. Of course, there will be more radiation exposure if a particular procedure is performed more than one time, or if several different procedures are performed.

While it cannot be said with certainty exactly how much radiation exposure you received with your procedure, a properly performed, routine CT scan of the head delivers an average exposure of about 0.05 Gray (5 Rads). Other more specialized examinations, like the brain perfusion scans involved in these incidents, may expose patients to greater amounts of radiation. For this reason, it is very important to speak with your health care provider so that you can have a clear understanding of the medical benefits and risks associated with any imaging procedures that have been ordered.

If you have recently had a CT scan and have concerns, the Department recommends that you first contact your health care provider. Your provider has the record of your medical history. Reviewing that medical history, your provider should be able to appropriately advise you about procedures you may have had, and explain any risks associated with such procedures.

Q:

How many CT machines are there in California? Does the Department inspect them?

A:

There are approximately 1,100 CT machines in California. The Department inspects X-ray machines on regular schedules, using specialized equipment.