CT Scans of the Spine: What They Show and When They Are Used

One-page summary of the full Spinemathema guide. Scan the QR code for the full guide, with references and audio.

Key points

- A CT scan uses X-rays and a computer to build detailed pictures of the inside of the body. In the spine its main strength is showing bone.
- MRI is still the main scan for discs, nerves and the spinal cord. CT is usually added when the fine shape of the bone matters, or when MRI is not possible.
- Common reasons for a spinal CT include injuries, stress fractures of the pars, planning an operation and checking whether a fusion has healed.
- The scan itself usually takes 10 to 20 minutes and you can normally go home straight afterwards.
- CT involves more radiation than a plain X-ray, so it is only requested when the result is likely to help with your care. NICE advises that scans should not be routinely offered for low back pain, with or without sciatica, outside specialist settings.

Call 999 or go to A&E now if you have back pain or sciatica with:

- Numbness or tingling around your bottom, genitals or inner thighs
- New difficulty passing urine, or not feeling when your bladder is full
- New leaking of urine, or loss of bowel control
- New loss of sexual sensation or function
- Pain, numbness or weakness in both legs, or leg weakness getting worse quickly

These can be signs of cauda equina syndrome. Do not wait for an appointment.

Not sure how urgent it is? Call NHS 111. More warning signs: spinemathema.com/warning-signs

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General information only, not personal medical advice.
If you are worried about your symptoms, contact your GP, NHS 111, or in an emergency call 999.

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