

## Cardiac Imaging – When You Need it and When You Don't

If you have chest pain or other symptoms of heart disease, electrocardiograms (ECGs) or tests that stress your heart can be lifesaving and help guide treatment. So can other forms of cardiac imaging. The same is true if you have a history of heart disease or are at very high risk of it.

But in other cases, especially in healthy people without chest pain, you should be cautious about the tests. Here's why.

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### The tests aren't always necessary.

- If you have symptoms of heart disease or are at high risk of it, ECGs, imaging stress tests and other cardiac tests can help determine your risk of having a heart attack and help you and your doctor make treatment decisions. But those tests may not be useful if you are at low risk, especially if you don't have symptoms.

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### They can pose risks.

- These tests are usually very safe, and imaging stress tests can be done with little or no radiation. But if your risk of having a heart problem is low, the tests can produce a false-positive result that could cause anxiety and lead to more tests that do pose some risks. Those include CT scans or angiograms, which expose you to additional radiation. While the risk from any one scan is uncertain, risks from radiation are cumulative, so it's best to avoid unnecessary exposure.
- Inappropriate testing can also lead to overtreatment with drugs or procedures such as angioplasty and stenting, a procedure that can relieve symptoms but may not reduce the risk of heart attack or death—and causes serious complications in 1 to 2 percent of patients.

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### They can be expensive.

- Money spent on unnecessary tests is money wasted. So they should be used only when they will help you and your doctor treat and manage your disease.

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### When You Should Get Cardiac Imaging

An imaging stress test should be ordered if you have symptoms of heart disease—such as chest pain, shortness of breath, irregular heart beats, or palpitations—but can't exercise. They can also make sense if you first have an ECG with some abnormalities that prevent an accurate interpretation during an exercise stress test. In addition, they may also be good for high-risk people without symptoms, such as those with diabetes.

You may also need cardiac imaging if you are having surgery and you have certain conditions, such as heart valve disease, heart failure, diabetes or kidney disease.

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### Talk With Your Doctor

If you do not have symptoms of heart disease, talk to your doctor about ways to protect your heart. Many things affect your risk: your age, sex, cholesterol level, blood pressure, if you smoke and if you have diabetes. Knowing your risks, and working to lower them, can make a big difference. If you do have a number of these risk factors, ask your doctor about taking low-dose aspirin.

Learn more about the recommendations at [www.ownyourhealthwa.org/partners/choosingwisely](http://www.ownyourhealthwa.org/partners/choosingwisely) or <https://www.wsma.org/choosing-wisely>.

Visit [www.wacommunitycheckup.org](http://www.wacommunitycheckup.org), click “compare scores,” select “medical groups” or “clinics,” click “heart disease” to learn how local doctors compare on providing recommended treatment for heart disease.