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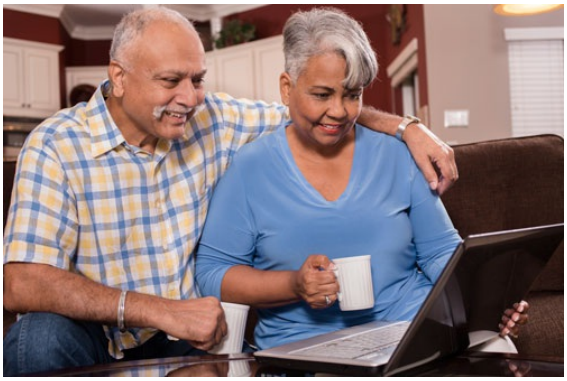
For patients

Scanxiety

What is scanxiety?



Scanxiety is a word that combines the words scan and anxiety. Patients started talking about “scanxiety” about a decade ago. It has since become a common term, especially on social media. The term started with cancer patients and is now more widely used by anyone with a condition that requires regular exams. Patients often use this term to discuss the stress and worry that accompanies a radiology appointment.

There are many factors that can cause scanxiety and/or make it worse, including:

- nervousness about the unknown aspects of the appointment (i.e., Where do I go? Will it hurt? Will I fit in the machine?)
- fear of hospitals or medical centers
- prior bad experience or poor outcome (“medical PTSD”)
- worries about what testing will show
- unclear communication from the healthcare team
- long waits for test results
- inability to understand the test results
- fear of how the results could change your life.

Not all patients experience scanxiety for all testing, but it is a common feeling for many. Patients can have scanxiety for any type of radiology test or procedure. It could happen for x-rays, CT scans, ultrasound, or MRIs, etc.

Scanxiety is an unwanted feeling that one patient described as “creeping into your mind whenever you have a scan coming up, and it doesn’t leave until you understand what is going on with your body.” It is an overwhelming feeling that, for some patients, is even accompanied by feelings of panic and/or depression. Additionally, a patient’s family and/or any caregivers can also feel scanxiety even if the patient themselves isn’t as bothered.

When does scanxiety typically happen?

Patients can experience scanxiety leading up to radiology tests, during the testing, and while waiting for and dealing with results. Cancer patients, for example, often have testing at regular intervals based on their type of cancer and stage of treatment. This can lead to a regular cycle of scanxiety. Unfortunately, scanxiety does not necessarily disappear with improvement of a patient’s health. It is normal for patients undergoing disease surveillance scans to be afraid of their cancer returning or their disease progressing.

How can I best prevent or cope with scanxiety?

Luckily, there are many things that can help ease scanxiety. Here are a few ideas:

- Find a healthcare team that communicates well, creates a friendly and comfortable environment for all patients and makes you feel empowered as a patient.

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- Ask your healthcare team any questions you have before your appointment.
- Visit pages on *RadiologyInfo.org* that detail your test or condition so that you'll know what to expect.
- Talk to your PCP and/or a counselor about your scanxiety and its severity. They might recommend a relaxation technique or even medication that could be helpful.
- Find your best relaxation technique and use it. Many patients try things like listening to music, journaling, or meditation.
- Don't be afraid to ask or call your referring doctor or the radiologist if you need more information or if you need to better understand your results.
- Make your own radiology dictionary. Write down the terms you don't understand from your radiology reports and keep their definitions handy for future reports.
- Attitude is everything. A great way to deal with scanxiety and the fear of bad news is to keep testing in perspective. Each new piece of information offers you and your doctor the opportunity to make the best decision for you and your family.

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