



## Magnetic Resonance Cholangiopancreatography (MRCP)

Magnetic resonance cholangiopancreatography or MRCP uses a powerful magnetic field, radio waves and a computer to evaluate the liver, gallbladder, bile ducts, pancreas and pancreatic duct for disease. It is noninvasive and does not use ionizing radiation.

Tell your doctor about any health problems, recent surgeries or allergies and whether there's a possibility you are pregnant. The magnetic field is not harmful, but it may cause some medical devices to malfunction. Most orthopedic implants pose no risk, but you should always tell the technologist if you have any devices or metal in your body. Guidelines about eating and drinking before your exam vary between facilities. Unless you are told otherwise, take your regular medications as usual. Leave jewelry at home and wear loose, comfortable clothing. You may be asked to wear a gown. If you have claustrophobia or anxiety, you may want to ask your doctor for a mild sedative prior to the exam.



### What is Magnetic Resonance Cholangiopancreatography (MRCP)?

Magnetic resonance cholangiopancreatography (MRCP) is a special type of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) exam that produces detailed images of the hepatobiliary and pancreatic systems, including the liver, gallbladder, bile ducts, pancreas and pancreatic duct.

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is a noninvasive medical test that physicians use to diagnose medical conditions.

MRI uses a powerful magnetic field, radio frequency pulses and a computer to produce detailed pictures of organs, soft tissues, bone and virtually all other internal body structures. MRI does not use ionizing radiation (x-rays).

Detailed MR images allow physicians to evaluate various parts of the body and determine the presence of certain diseases. The images can then be examined on a computer monitor, transmitted electronically,

printed or copied to a CD or uploaded to a digital cloud server.

## What are some common uses of the procedure?

Physicians use MRCP to:

- examine diseases of the liver, gallbladder, bile ducts, pancreas and pancreatic duct. These may include tumors, stones, inflammation or infection.
- evaluate patients with pancreatitis to detect the underlying cause. In patients with pancreatitis, an MRCP may be performed using a medication called Secretin to assess for long term scarring and to determine the amount of healthy pancreatic function and secretions.
- help to diagnose unexplained abdominal pain.
- provide a less invasive alternative to endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP). ERCP is a diagnostic procedure that combines endoscopy, which uses an illuminated optical instrument to examine inside the body, with iodinated contrast injection and x-ray images.

## How should I prepare?

You may be asked to wear a gown during the exam or you may be allowed to wear your own clothing if it is loose-fitting and has no metal fasteners.

Guidelines about eating and drinking before an MRI exam vary at different facilities. Usually, you will be instructed not to eat or drink anything for several hours before your procedure.

Because your procedure may require use of contrast material that is swallowed or injected into your bloodstream, the radiologist or technologist may ask if you have allergies of any kind, including allergies to food or drugs, hay fever, hives or allergic asthma. However, the contrast material used for an MRI exam is based on gadolinium and does not contain iodine. A gadolinium contrast agent is less likely to cause an allergic reaction compared to the iodinated contrast agents used in CT scanning.

The radiologist should also know if you have any serious health problems and what surgeries you have undergone. Some conditions, such as kidney disease, may prevent you from having an MRI with contrast material.

Women should always inform their physician or technologist if there is any possibility that they are pregnant. MRI has been used for scanning patients since the 1980s with no reports of any ill effects on pregnant women or their unborn babies. However, because the unborn baby will be in a strong magnetic field, pregnant women should not have this exam in the first three to four months of pregnancy unless the potential benefit from the MRI exam is assumed to outweigh the potential risks. Pregnant women should not receive injections of gadolinium contrast material except when absolutely necessary for medical treatment. See the MRI Safety page for more information about pregnancy and MRI.

If you have claustrophobia (fear of enclosed spaces) or anxiety, you may want to ask your physician for a prescription for a mild sedative prior to your scheduled examination.

Jewelry and other accessories should be left at home, if possible, or removed prior to the MRI scan. Because they can interfere with the magnetic field of the MRI unit, metal and electronic items are not allowed in the exam room. In addition to affecting the MRI images, these objects can become projectiles within the MRI scanner room and may cause you and/or others nearby harm. These items include:

- jewelry, watches, credit cards and hearing aids, all of which can be damaged
- pins, hairpins, metal zippers and similar metallic items, which can distort MRI images
- removable dental work
- pens, pocket knives and eyeglasses
- body piercings

In most cases, an MRI exam is safe for patients with metal implants, except for a few types. People with the following implants cannot be scanned and should not enter the MRI scanning area:

- cochlear (ear) implant
- some types of clips used for brain aneurysms
- some types of metal coils placed within blood vessels
- nearly all cardiac defibrillators and pacemakers

You should tell the technologist if you have medical or electronic devices in your body. These objects may interfere with the exam or potentially pose a risk, depending on their nature and the strength of the MRI magnet. Many implanted devices will have a pamphlet explaining the MRI risks for that particular device. If you have the pamphlet, it is useful to bring that to the attention of the scheduler before the exam and bring it to your exam in case the radiologist or technologist has any questions. Some implanted devices require a short period of time after placement (usually six weeks) before being safe for MRI examinations. Examples include but are not limited to:

- artificial heart valves
- implanted drug infusion ports
- artificial limbs or metallic joint prostheses
- implanted nerve stimulators
- metal pins, screws, plates, stents or surgical staples

If there is any question of their presence, an x-ray may be taken to detect and identify any metal objects. In general, metal objects used in orthopedic surgery pose no risk during MRI. However, a recently placed artificial joint may require the use of another imaging procedure.

Patients who might have metal objects in certain parts of their bodies may also require an x-ray prior to an MRI. You should notify the technologist or radiologist of any shrapnel, bullets, or other pieces of metal that may be present in your body due to prior accidents. Foreign bodies near and especially lodged in the eyes are particularly important because they may move during the scan, possibly causing blindness. Dyes used in tattoos may contain iron and could heat up during an MRI scan, but this is rare. Tooth fillings and braces usually are not affected by the magnetic field, but they may distort images of the facial area or brain, so you should let the radiologist know about them.

Your child may need to be sedated in order to hold still adequately during the procedure. If this is the case, you will be given instructions for your child about not eating or drinking several hours prior to sedation and the examination. For the safety of your child during the sedation, it is important that you

fully understand and follow any instructions that have been given. After the procedure there will be a recovery period from the sedation. Your child will be discharged when the nurses and physicians believe he/she is sufficiently awake to be safely sent home.

## What does the equipment look like?

The traditional MRI unit is a large cylinder-shaped tube surrounded by a circular magnet. You will lie on a moveable examination table that slides into the center of the magnet.

Some MRI units, called short-bore systems, are designed so that the magnet does not completely surround you. Some newer MRI machines have a larger diameter bore which can be more comfortable for larger size patients or patients with claustrophobia. Other MRI machines are open on the sides (open MRI). Open units are especially helpful for examining larger patients or those with claustrophobia. Newer open MRI units provide very high quality images for many types of exams. Older open MRI units may not provide this same image quality. Certain types of exams cannot be performed using open MRI. For more information, consult your radiologist.

The computer workstation that processes the imaging information is located in a separate room from the scanner.

## How does the procedure work?

Unlike conventional x-ray examinations and computed tomography (CT) scans, MRI does not utilize ionizing radiation. Instead, radiofrequency pulses re-align hydrogen atoms that naturally exist within the body while you are in the scanner without causing any chemical changes in the tissues. As the hydrogen atoms return to their usual alignment, they emit different amounts of energy that vary according to the type of body tissue from which they come. The MR scanner captures this energy and creates a picture of the tissues scanned based on this information.

The magnetic field is produced by passing an electric current through wire coils in most MRI units. Other coils, located in the machine and in some cases, placed around the part of the body being imaged, send and receive radio waves, producing signals that are detected by the coils. The electric current does not come in contact with the patient.

A computer then processes the signals and generates a series of images, each of which shows a thin slice of the body. The images can then be studied from different angles by the interpreting radiologist.

Frequently, the differentiation of abnormal (diseased) tissue from normal tissues is better with MRI than with other imaging modalities such as x-ray, CT and ultrasound.

## How is the procedure performed?

MRI examinations may be performed on outpatients or inpatients.

You will be positioned on the moveable examination table. Straps and bolsters may be used to help you stay still and maintain the correct position during imaging.

Devices that contain coils capable of sending and receiving radio waves may be placed around or adjacent to the area of the body being studied.

If a contrast material will be used in the MRI exam, a physician, nurse or technologist will insert an intravenous (IV) catheter, also known as an IV line, into a vein in your hand or arm. A saline solution may be used to inject the contrast material. The solution will drip through the IV to prevent blockage of the IV catheter until the contrast material is injected.

You will be placed into the magnet of the MRI unit and the radiologist and technologist will perform the examination while working at a computer outside of the room.

If a contrast material is used during the examination, it will be injected into the intravenous line (IV) after an initial series of scans. Additional series of images will be taken during or following the injection.

The actual MRCP exam takes approximately 10-15 minutes, but it is often performed with a standard MRI of the abdomen, which may last approximately 30 minutes and involves the use of contrast material. In this case, the entire examination is usually completed within 45 minutes.

## What will I experience during and after the procedure?

Most MRI exams are painless. However, some patients find it uncomfortable to remain still during MR imaging. Others experience a sense of being closed-in (claustrophobia) while in the MRI scanner. Therefore, sedation can be arranged for those patients who anticipate anxiety, but fewer than one in 20 require medication.

If contrast material is used, there may be brief discomfort during initial placement of the intravenous catheter line. The oral contrast used at some institutions may have an unpleasant taste and cause temporary fullness, but most patients usually tolerate it well.

It is normal for the area of your body being imaged to feel slightly warm, but if it bothers you, notify the radiologist or technologist. It is important that you remain perfectly still while the images are being obtained, which is typically only a few seconds to a few minutes at a time. You will know when images are being recorded because you will hear and feel loud tapping or thumping sounds when the coils that generate the radiofrequency pulses are activated. Some centers provide earplugs, while others use headphones to reduce the intensity of the sounds made by the MRI machine. You may be able to relax between imaging sequences, but will be asked to maintain your position without movement as much as possible.

You will usually be alone in the exam room during the MRI procedure. However, the technologist will be able to see, hear and speak with you at all times using a two-way intercom. Many MRI centers allow a friend or parent to stay in the room as long as they are also screened for safety in the magnetic environment.

Children will be given appropriately sized earplugs or headphones during the exam. MRI scanners are

air-conditioned and well-lit. Music may be played through the headphones to help you pass the time.

In some cases, intravenous injection of contrast material may be administered before the images are obtained. The intravenous needle may cause you some discomfort when it is inserted and you may experience some bruising. There is also a very small chance of irritation of your skin at the site of the IV tube insertion. Some patients may sense a temporary metallic taste in their mouth after the contrast injection.

If you do not require sedation, no recovery period is necessary. You may resume your usual activities and normal diet immediately after the exam. On very rare occasions, a few patients experience side effects from the contrast material, including nausea, headache and pain at the site of injection. Similarly, patients are very rarely allergic to the contrast material and experience hives, itchy eyes or other reactions. If you experience allergic symptoms, notify the technologist. A radiologist or other physician will be available for immediate assistance.

## Who interprets the results and how do I get them?

A radiologist, a physician specifically trained to supervise and interpret radiology examinations, will analyze the images and send a signed report to your primary care or referring physician, who will share the results with you.

## What are the benefits vs. risks?

### Benefits

- MRI is a noninvasive imaging technique that does not involve exposure to ionizing radiation.
- MRI can provide detailed images of the soft-tissue structures of the body—such as the heart, liver, pancreas and many other organs. This detail makes MRI an invaluable tool in early diagnosis and evaluation of cancer.
- MRI has proven valuable in diagnosing a broad range of conditions, including heart and vascular disease, stroke, and joint and musculoskeletal disorders.
- MRI can help physicians evaluate both the structure of an organ and how it is working.
- MRI enables the discovery of abnormalities that might be obscured by bone with other imaging methods.
- The contrast material used in MRI exams is less likely to produce an allergic reaction than the iodine-based contrast materials used for conventional x-rays and CT scanning.
- MRCP can produce images comparable to those obtained by a more invasive exam called endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP) without its associated risks including pancreatitis, or inflammation of the pancreas, perforation of pancreatic and bile ducts and bowel, and the risks for intravenous sedation required for ERCP.

### Risks

- The MRI examination poses almost no risk to the average patient when appropriate safety

guidelines are followed.

- If sedation is used, there are risks of excessive sedation. However, the technologist or nurse will monitor your vital signs to minimize this risk.
- Although the strong magnetic field is not harmful in itself, implanted medical devices that contain metal may malfunction or cause problems during an MRI exam.
- Nephrogenic systemic fibrosis is currently a recognized, but rare, complication of MRI believed to be caused by the injection of high doses of gadolinium-based contrast material in patients with very poor kidney function. Careful assessment of kidney function before considering a contrast injection minimizes the risk of this very rare complication.
- There is a very slight risk of an allergic reaction if contrast material is injected. Such reactions are usually mild and easily controlled by medication. If you experience allergic symptoms, a radiologist or other physician will be available for immediate assistance.
- Reaction to the oral contrast given at some institutions for MRCP is very rare. Also, the oral contrast used at some institutions may have an unpleasant taste and cause temporary fullness, but most patients usually tolerate it well.
- Manufacturers of intravenous contrast indicate mothers should not breastfeed their babies for 24-48 hours after contrast medium is given. However, both the American College of Radiology (ACR) and the European Society of Urogenital Radiology note that the available data suggest that it is safe to continue breastfeeding after receiving intravenous contrast. For further information please consult the ACR Manual on Contrast Media and its references.

## What are the limitations of MRCP?

High-quality images are assured only if you are able to remain perfectly still and follow breath-holding instructions while the images are being recorded. If you are anxious, confused or in severe pain, you may find it difficult to lie still during imaging.

A person who is very large may not fit into the opening of certain types of MRI machines.

The presence of an implant or other metallic object sometimes makes it difficult to obtain clear images due to streak artifacts from the metallic objects. Patient movement can have the same effect.

A very irregular heartbeat may affect the quality of images obtained using techniques that time the imaging based on the electrical activity of the heart, such as electrocardiography (EKG).

MRI generally is not recommended for patients who have been acutely injured; however, this decision is based on clinical judgment. This is because traction devices and many types of life support equipment may distort the MR images and as a result, must be kept away from the area to be imaged. Furthermore, the examination takes longer than other imaging modalities (typically x-ray and CT) and the results may not be immediately available, as is often necessary in trauma situations.

Although there is no reason to believe that magnetic resonance imaging harms the fetus, pregnant women usually are advised not to have an MRI exam during the first trimester unless medically necessary.

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