

WHAT IS A MRI OF THE SPINE?

A spine MRI is a safe and painless test that uses a magnetic field and radio waves to produce detailed pictures of the spine (the bones, disks, and other structures). An MRI sometimes is performed to assess the anatomy of the spine, to help plan surgery on the spine, or to monitor changes in the spine after an operation. It can assess the disks to see whether they are bulging, ruptured, or pressing on the spinal cord or nerves. The scan is useful in evaluating symptoms such as pain, leg pain, numbness, tingling or weakness, or problems with bladder and bowel control. It can also help to diagnose tumors, bleeding, swelling, developmental or structural abnormalities, and infections or inflammatory conditions in the vertebrae or surrounding tissues.

HOW IT WORKS

Your physician may order the MRI with or without a contrast agent depending on your diagnosis. If contrast material is used, it will be injected through an intravenous line (IV). The contrast material most commonly used for an MRI exam is called gadolinium. Because gadolinium does not contain iodine, it can be used safely in patients with contrast allergies.

Please be advised of the following information before receiving any contrast agent. If you are diabetic please consult your physician as to any special instructions concerning your diabetes prior to the test. If you are age 40 or older or a diabetic; you will need labs drawn prior to your contrasted exam. Please consult your physician in regards to these labs. Please inform the technologist if you are pregnant as contrasted exams are not performed during pregnancy.

WHAT TO EXPECT

For this exam, you will be asked to lie down on the scanning table, feet-first with arms at your side. Coils (special devices to improve image quality) will be placed around the region of your body being scanned. The scanning table will slide your whole body into the magnet. During the scan you will not feel anything, but will hear intermittent humming, thumping, clicking and knocking sounds. Earplugs or headphones will be provided to help mask the noise. You must be still during the exam, because movement causes blurred images. You may be told to hold your breath for short periods of time.

The scan takes approximately 45 minutes. The technologist will give you discharge instructions after the completion of the test.

HOW TO PREPARE

Follow these guidelines:

- You may follow your regular daily routine and take food and medications as usual.
- Please bring your current home medications or a list of your medications with you the day of the test.
- You may be asked to remove some or all of your clothes and to change into a hospital gown.
- You will be required to remove all objects that are not compatible with the MRI scanner.

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 which may be present in your body due to accidents. Foreign bodies near the eyes are particularly important. Plain film x-ray clearance will be done for any question of metal foreign bodies to your eyes.

If you have claustrophobia (fear of enclosed spaces) or anxiety you can be sedated for your exam. Please remember that you must have a driver with you at your appointment time in order to receive sedation. All of our medications for sedation are given by mouth. We are only staffed to sedate until 3:00 p.m. Monday thru Friday. If your appointment is scheduled after 3:00 p.m. you will need to ask your physician for a prescription for a mild sedative. All sedation requires a driver.

RESULTS

A radiologist will review your images and send a report to your doctor who ordered the test in 48 hours. You'll get a call from your doctor's office to discuss the results and next steps. To check your results in our secure, online patient portal, My UNC Chart, visit www.myuncchart.org.