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Should You Get a Cardiac Calcium Scan?

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Understanding someone's heart health needs requires using a mix of tools, says [Jasrai Gill, M.D.](#), an interventional cardiologist at [Southern Ocean Medical Center](#). Common tests to help understand heart health include cardiac stress tests and PET scans, he says. But an additional tool used in conjunction with these other tests is the cardiac calcium scan.

How Does a Calcium Scan Work?

Cardiac calcium scans are painless imaging procedures called CT or CAT scans. Some scanning procedures also include an electrocardiogram (ECG). Cardiac calcium scans take about 10 minutes to complete. They are outpatient procedures that do not use contrast dyes. An electron beam detects and measures the amount of calcium in the heart's arteries.

The results of the scan are given as a score. The more calcium that is present and evidence of artery thickening, the higher the score. A higher score indicates a greater likelihood of developing heart disease or having a heart attack or stroke. For example, a score of zero means no calcium is seen in the heart; a score greater than 300 is a sign of severe disease and heart attack risk.

The body needs calcium to remain healthy, but calcium in the heart's arteries can be an indicator that plaque is building up in coronary arteries and causing narrowing or blockages, which can increase the risk of heart attack or stroke.

Calcium scans can be more effective at identifying plaque build-up than compared to a stress test in some instances. For example, if all of a person's arteries are blocked, a stress test's measurement would look the same across the board and not show a concern.

Who Should Get a Calcium Scan?

Cardiac scans may **not** benefit everyone, including:

- People with few or no risk factors for heart disease

- People who have already been identified as having high-risk factors (elevated cholesterol levels, high blood pressure, diabetes and smoking, for example)
- People already diagnosed with heart disease
- People who have had a heart attack, stroke, bypass surgery or stents

Those who fall somewhere in the middle—who may have some risk factors, such as a family history of heart disease—may benefit most from calcium scans. In these patients, calcium scans, in conjunction with a detailed medical history and functional tests like cardiac stress tests and PET scans, can be beneficial, says Dr. Gill.

What Are the Benefits of Calcium Scans?

“These tests help us understand if we need to be more aggressive with our approach either via cardiac catheterization or medical therapy—and if medical therapy, how aggressive we should be with medical therapy,” Dr. Gill says.

Calcium scans provide additional information for physicians and patients to use to make better personal care decisions, which is ultimately beneficial for long-term health, well-being and patient costs.

Are There Risks?

Because these scans are noninvasive and use a low dose of radiation, risks are low. However, due to radiation exposure, the National Institutes of Health’s National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute recommends that if you are or think you could be pregnant, you should talk to your doctor to see if it’s more prudent to wait.

Next Steps & Resources

- Meet our clinical contributor: [Jasrai Gill, M.D.](#)
- To make an appointment with Dr. Gill or a doctor near you, call [800-822-8905](tel:800-822-8905) or [visit our website](#).
- To determine if a calcium scan would be beneficial for you, talk to your doctor and [schedule a calcium scan](#) at a location near you.
- [Can wearable tech help with heart health?](#)

- [Heart-healthy labels: Are these foods really good for your heart?](#)

Sources:

*American College of Cardiology
National Institutes of Health*

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