

Procedure Information: Bone Density Scan (DXA)

What is a Bone Density Scan (DXA)?

A Bone Densitometry is a low dose examination x-ray that determines if you have osteoporosis. This procedure can detect bone loss and help your doctor determine the course of treatment that you need.

The DXA machine sends a beam of low dose x-rays with a high energy peak and a low energy peak through the bones. One energy peak is absorbed by the bones and the other is absorbed by the soft tissue. To determine the bone mineral density of a patient, the soft tissue is subtracted from the total. The bone density measurements are configured into a report and then are interpreted by a radiologist, who will send a signed report to the ordering physician.

When is a Bone Density Scan (DXA) ordered?

A bone densitometry test may be recommended if you are post menopausal, have had a fracture, have been on long term steroid use or have hyperparathyroidism. This is a scheduled exam that requires an order from a physician.

Patient Preparation

Do not take your calcium supplement the day of the study, prior to the bone density exam. Wear comfortable clothing to the exam, preferably with no buttons, snaps, buckles or zippers. All items should be removed from pockets that are in the area being scanned. It is very important to bring a list of the medications you are taking, insurance cards, a photo ID and a doctor's order with you to your appointment.

If you have recently had an exam that you had to ingest barium or had a contrast injection you may have to wait 10-14 days before having your DXA scan.

Report 15 minutes before your scheduled appointment time.

What happens during a Bone Density Scan (DXA) procedure?

A registered radiographer, certified by the International Society for Clinical Densitometry, will take you to an exam room, verify your identity (name and birth date) and obtain medical history for the radiologist. A routine bone density exam is a scan of your lower back and both hips. A scan of your forearm may also be performed if requested by your doctor. In some instances, a Lateral Vertebral Assessment (LVA) may be done, which screens for vertebral fractures. You may be asked to remove your clothing from the waist down and put on a hospital pants if your clothing contains metal. The radiographer will then position you on the examination table on your back with your feet internally rotated. The scan will last approximately 5-10 minutes and will require you to hold still for the length of the scan.

Length of procedure

Bone Densitometry procedures usually are completed within 30 minutes. This will include registration, filling out a medical history sheet and the bone density test itself.

What are the risks?

You will be exposed to a low dose of radiation during the exam. No complications are expected with a DXA procedure. Women should let their doctor know if there is any chance of pregnancy before they schedule their bone density scan.