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The evidence used in the preparation of this leaflet is available on request. Please email: patient.information@salisbury.nhs.uk if you would like a reference list.

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DXA Scan (page 1 of 2)

What is a DXA scan?

DXA stands for Dual X-ray Adsorptiometry.

A DXA scan is a special low dose X-ray procedure which measures the density of your bones. Specifically, it looks at the bone mineral density, or BMD, and compares your reading with a database of normal BMD to see if you are high, low or normal.



Why do I need a DXA scan?

Your doctor has asked that you have a DXA scan because he wants to know if you have a higher risk of fractures due to reduced strength in your bones. A low bone mineral density means that the bone is weaker than it should be.

What are the benefits of the scan?

The benefit of having a scan to determine your bone mineral density is that any problems can be picked up and treated. A person who does not know about a low BMD could fracture a bone more easily. By advising you about diet or medication your BMD could be improved or stabilized and fracture risk would be reduced.

What are the risks or side effects?

Very low levels of X-rays are used in a modern DXA scanner. At these low doses it is impossible to attribute any health risk to a DXA scan. There are no side effects from the DXA but if you are to have a nuclear medicine scan before your DXA appointment you should let us know so that we can decide if the DXA should be re-arranged. This is because the DXA readings can be affected by the residue from a nuclear medicine scan and the results may not be accurate.

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Is there any special preparation for the scan?

No, you can eat and drink normally before your scan and take any usual medication.

What happens during the appointment?

The scan takes place in a light and airy room. The room is not darkened. The DXA scan is not noisy and you do not have to lie in a tunnel.

A practitioner from the X-ray department will conduct the scan and will be present with you throughout your appointment. You can ask any questions you wish and can talk to the practitioner whilst the scan is going on.

For the scan you will be asked to lie on a long hospital couch. The DXA scanner arm is about 18" (46cm) wide and is positioned over your lower back and hip area. Your chest and face are not covered. You do not have to take your clothes off but it would be helpful if you wear loose fitting garments. Ideally the clothes you wear should not have zips or metal fastenings. However, do not worry if your clothes do have zips as they can be pulled down to knee level when you are on the bed, and a blanket will be placed over your waist and hip area. Once on the table you may be asked to hold an awkward position for a short time while the arm of the machine passes over your body taking measurements. It is important that you stay as still as possible during the procedure to ensure a clear, useful image.

How long does the scan take?

Your total appointment time is 20 minutes. The scan will take approximately 10 minutes to perform.

Are there any restrictions afterwards?

There are no restrictions after you have had a DXA scan. You can go home or to work as normal.

When will I get my results?

The scan readings will be checked by a Clinical Scientist and then sent to your GP or consultant in about 48 hours. If you do not already have an appointment to see whoever referred you for the scan you should make an appointment to be seen again after this time.