

What if something suspicious is seen during my scans?

Abnormalities can show up on scans taken for research during the scanning process. Most of these are no cause for concern. But, if the radiographer does happen to notice a potentially serious abnormality while taking the scan, they will refer the scans after your visit to a specialist doctor (radiologist) for review. If the radiologist agrees that the abnormality is potentially serious (regardless of whether or not it might be treatable), we will write to you and your GP, usually within a few weeks of your visit. We would consider something to be potentially serious if your scans suggested the possibility of a condition which, if confirmed, could have a major effect on how your body functions or on your quality of life, or could be life-threatening.

For example, we would tell you and your GP if we saw an abnormality on one of your scans that looked as though it could be a malignant tumour or another similarly serious condition, such as a large swelling of the aorta (the main artery of the body).

On the other hand, we would not tell you if we saw typical appearances of gallstones, a simple cyst or scarring (e.g. on the lung) as these abnormalities are common in healthy people and not considered serious. We would also not tell you about something that is clearly related to a health condition that you have already told us about.

Finally, we would not tell you about a potentially serious abnormality if it was identified at a later date by researchers analysing the scans. From our experience so far, about two out of every hundred people taking part in this visit (2%) will have an abnormality that a radiologist agrees is potentially serious and which we will write to you and your GP about. About one in three of these people will turn out to have something serious that they may not have been aware of before, while two out of every three of these people will turn out to have something non-serious.

This happens because something that looks suspicious on one of our research scans can turn out to be something like a benign cyst, an artefact (or technical glitch) of the scanning process, or something that you or your GP already know about (but we don't).

It is important to understand that we will not notice all potentially serious abnormalities. For this reason, if you do not receive any feedback from us about a potentially serious abnormality, you should not regard this as reassurance about your health. It should not stop you from seeing your doctor about any health concerns that you might have.

Please see the information leaflet for further information about the types of potentially serious abnormalities that we will tell you and your GP about. We are carefully monitoring our processes for reporting potentially serious abnormalities. The technicians doing the scanning have ongoing training about the abnormalities that they notice.

Your GP may refer you to specialists for further investigation and treatment. Some abnormalities found on scans might never have been noticed (especially if they never caused you any problems). Other abnormalities might have come to light weeks, months or even years later.

Finding abnormalities on scans can lead to an earlier diagnosis, which can be helpful for some conditions. But sometimes it can lead to unnecessary anxiety, investigations and treatments. Some diagnoses could affect your ability to drive, work or get travel, health or life insurance.

You can only take part in the imaging study if you agree that we can tell both you and your GP if we notice a potentially serious abnormality on one of your scans. If you feel that the anxiety of being told about an abnormality, or the disruption to your life caused by further investigations, is likely to outweigh any benefit to you, it might be better not to take part in the imaging study.