
Communicating CT Risks to Patients

In a research letter published in JAMA Internal Medicine, Tanner J. Caverly, M.D., of the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, Aurora, and colleagues report the findings of a survey of patients undergoing outpatient computed tomography (CT) at the Denver Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

271 patients completed the survey, which examined the frequency of discussions about risk with patients before the procedure and how those discussions informed patients about potential harms. Patients were also asked about their preference for more information and knowledge of potential harms.

Most respondents (62 percent) believed that the final decision to have a CT was mainly the physicians'. About 35 percent of the respondents said they discussed the potential risks of the test with their health care professional. Only 17% reported all the following before the CT scan: having a shared final decision, discussing the potential benefits, and discussing the potential risks with their healthcare provider.

"We believe it is problematic when the potential harms of CT are not adequately conveyed," the study concludes. "Ignoring downsides can lead to imbalanced decision making in favour of over-use." They suggest it is time to begin testing risk communication methods and putting these methods into routine clinical practice.

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