FAQs ABOUT PET-CT SCANS

What is a PET-CT scan?
PET-CT combines two types of scans into one: a PET (positron emission tomography) scan shows the rate at which your body’s cells break down sugar and use it (also called metabolism), and a CT (computed tomography) scan shows your body’s organs, bones, and tissues in greater detail than regular x-rays. This PET-CT combination lets doctors get 3D images of the inside of your body using one scanner. When a CT scan is placed on top of a PET scan, doctors can find the exact area of abnormal cell activity. Most PET-CT scans call for an intravenous (IV) injection of a radiolabeled sugar (sugar that is mixed with a radioactive tracer), which will move through your body. This sugar will be metabolized or used by the cells and organs. Some cells and many diseases use sugar more than others, and a PET-CT scan can actually measure these differences.

How do I prepare for a PET-CT scan?
You will be given instructions for your procedure from your doctor’s office. PET-CT staff will also contact you within 1 business day before your scheduled appointment. They will go over the procedure with you and answer any questions or concerns you may have. You should let your doctor and PET-CT technologist know if you could be pregnant or if you are breastfeeding. Depending on the type of PET-CT study you are getting, you may be asked to not eat before the test.

What happens before the procedure?
You may be asked to change into a gown. An IV will be placed into your arm. You will get the radiolabeled sugar through the IV. Then you will sit quietly for 1 hour while it moves through your body. You will be asked to empty your bladder, and then you will be taken to the scanning room.

What happens during the procedure?
You will be asked to lie down on the scanner bed and keep as still as you can for the scan. Depending on the area the doctor wants to see, you may be asked to keep your arms over your head during the scan. You will then get an enhancing agent (a dye, also called contrast) through your IV. You may feel a brief sensation move up your arm. You also may get a warm, flushed feeling with a taste of salt or metal in your mouth or feel nauseated for a few minutes. This is normal, but you should tell the technologist about these or other reactions. You may also have shortness of breath, itching, or sneezing. If any of these happen, tell the technologist right away.

The scanner bed will move in toward the scanner opening for a short time to complete the CT part of the scan. Next, the PET scan will start. The bed will once again move, but not as quickly. The technologist will go into a room behind a glass window. The technologist can see you at all times during scanning and may give you more instructions. You will be able to talk to the technologist through an intercom during the scan. You should lie as quietly as you can. The scan is painless, and you should not feel anything. The entire scan will take about 30 minutes to an hour to finish, depending on the areas being imaged.

What happens after the procedure?
Most of the radiolabeled sugar will collect in your bladder. After the procedure, you should drink plenty of fluids to flush it out of your body. You may resume your normal diet.