

Full-body MRIs are the latest celebrity-endorsed health craze. Will they save your life?

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Students put headphones on a subject during a MRI test in the Biomedical Imaging Center in the Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering Complex. A Northeastern professor says latest trend of celebrity full body MRIs is another instance of unnecessary use by worried well. Credit: Ruby Wallau/Northeastern University

Step aside, \$3,500 Cartier watches and \$12,000 Birkin bags. The latest status symbol may be full-body MRI scans, touted by celebrities such as Kim Kardashian and designer Zac Posen.

The scans don't come cheap and are not covered by insurance for healthy people. Prenuvo, which Kardashian and Posen used, charges \$2,499 for a full-body scan. At another company, Ezra, it costs \$1,950 for a full-body scan and \$2,350 for the "plus" package.

For Northeastern professor Gary J. Young, the use of full-body MRIs among the healthy rich and famous looks like another example of runaway screenings he documented [in a 2021 study](#).

"For people of average risk, the likelihood of detecting anything of any serious concern is very, very low. It's not a good way for us to use our scarce resources for [health](#) care," says Young, director of Northeastern's Center for Health Policy and Healthcare Research and professor of strategic management and health care systems. "We have to think about it at a population level and individual level."

Insurers and [health professionals](#) are largely on the same page when it comes to full-body MRI screens, he says.

"It's not something that public health advocates and policymakers have ever seriously considered because the cost per saved life would be extremely high for people of average risk," he says. "This isn't a situation where public health advocates are at odds with health plan executives. Here, they're aligned."

Doctors already overprescribe MRIs

Young's study shows that doctors are often pressured to prescribe unnecessary MRI procedures in order to funnel money to hospitals,

thereby escalating the costs of [health care](#).

"We know that MRIs should not be used for people who present initially with lower-back pain or shoulder pain or knee pain because the MRI is really not going to produce any information that is valuable," Young says.

"People with low back pain should first engage in a period of exercise and physical therapy. We overuse the MRI as it is and we overuse diagnostic imaging as it is," he says. "Certainly, in the case of whole body scans, it just doesn't make any sense."

If you're willing to pay out of pocket

But what about individuals who have the means to pay out of pocket, or who are willing to go on payment plans easily found on the imaging companies' websites?

Prenuvo says its full-body MRIs screen for [solid tumors](#), spinal cord abnormalities and degeneration, [fatty liver disease](#), multiple sclerosis and other conditions to which patients would want to be alerted.

"You have to recognize that while MRIs do not expose people to any radiation, there would likely have to be follow-up tests," Young says.

"An MRI would raise certain red flags. You might need other types of tests like a CT scan that does expose a person to radiation. Or you may require other invasive procedures that actually could expose you to some very substantial risks, not to mention worry and concern when, in many cases, they turn out to be benign situations."

For a person in average good health, "the risks and concerns are the negatives that greatly outweigh the positives," Young says. "In some

cases, it may save someone's life."

The Maria Menounos case

One of the most attention-getting reports of MRI screening saving a life was television presenter Maria Menounos' announcement this spring that she had been treated successfully for stage 2 [pancreatic cancer](#) after a screening by Prenuvo found a mass on her pancreas.

[According to the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network](#), Menounos had a rare form of pancreatic neuroendocrine cancer that is less aggressive than more common ductal adenocarcinoma but still deadly, with a five-year survival rate of 53%.

Menounos, who was pregnant at the time of her diagnosis and has since given birth, did not describe herself as one of the "worried well" in a [People magazine article](#).

She was in excruciating pain that couldn't be explained by other forms of testing, and had in recent years been treated for a benign brain tumor and, more recently still, been diagnosed with type 1 diabetes.

But for people in average good health, could full body MRI reports lead to a sense of false security?

When Posen, an American fashion designer, posted [a photo of himself](#) sitting on the MRI bed after getting a Prenuvo screening a few weeks ago, his Instagram caption read: "I am happy to report I am 'all healthy' and thankful for a fantastic experience."

Health care experts have raised the concern that people who get good reports on full-body MRIs may be less inclined to listen to their own body signals, which can be "a very important indicator of health issues,"

Young says.

Getting a full-body scan doesn't mean something may not pop up in the next few years, and there are no guidelines on how often to get one, he says.

"But, again, the overriding consideration is that if you do full-body scans on people of average risk, the likelihood of detecting any issues is very, very low," he says.

With the development of genetic markers for people at risk of certain diseases, MRIs may become more valuable in the future, Young says.

"But we really have to define those population subgroups carefully," he says.

"Body-scan MRIs have been debated or discussed going back quite a few years. This is not really all that new," he says. "It pops into the collective consciousness of people every once in a while when there's been some media coverage of it."

Provided by Northeastern University

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