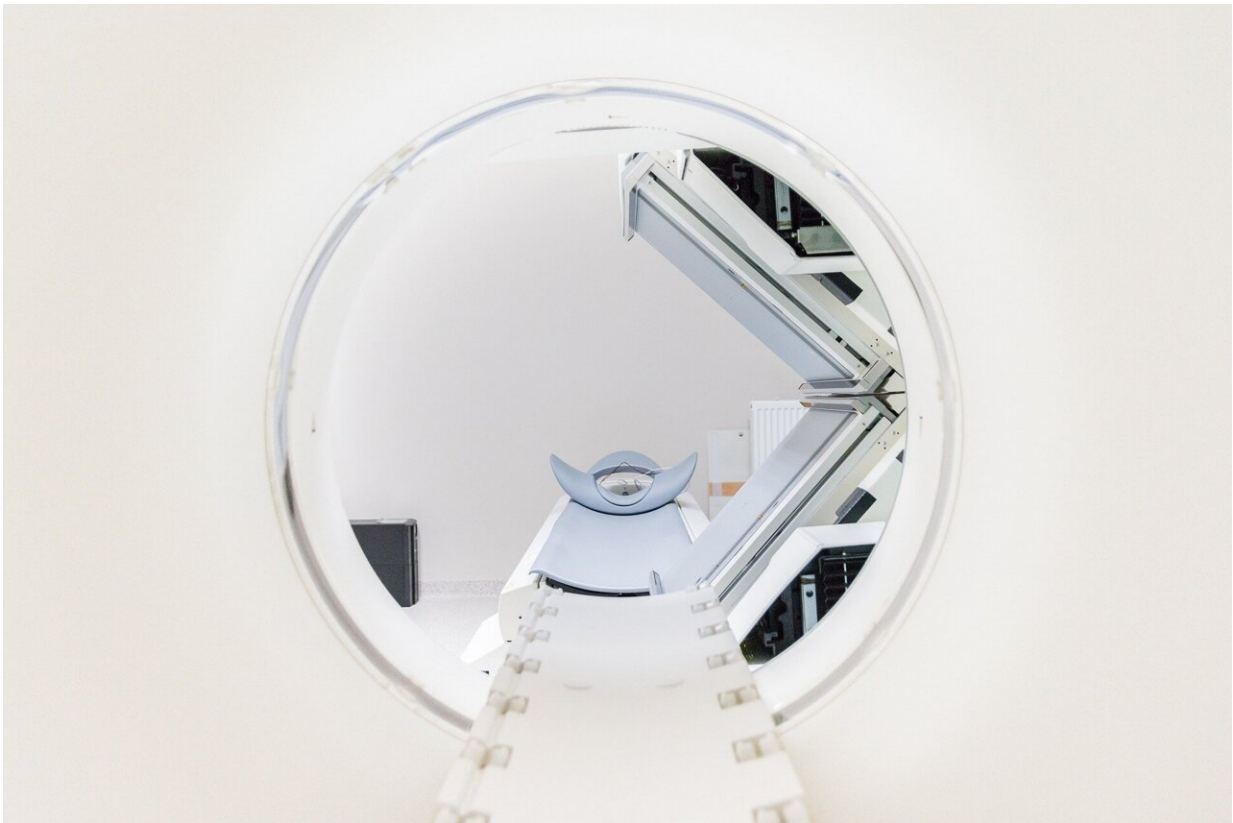


# Celebrities are getting \$2,000 MRI scans to learn about their health. Should you?

July 15 2024, by Matthew Perrone

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What if there was a way to peer into your body and spot early signs of cancer and other life-threatening ailments before they became serious?

That's the pitch from a new cluster of companies selling [high-tech scans](#) to healthy people interested in learning more about their wellness.

These whole-body MRI scans aren't cheap. Startup companies like Prenuvo charge between \$1,000 to \$2,500 for various scanning options, none of which are currently covered by insurance.

Proponents say consumer-driven medical scans are the next logical step in preventive medicine. The industry has received a big publicity push from celebrities and influencers like Kim Kardashian, who posted about her Prenuvo scan last year.

But many [medical experts](#) say the companies are selling expensive, unproven technology that may cause extra worries and unnecessary treatment, while driving up costs for the U.S. health system.

Here's what to know before considering a scan:

## **What is an MRI?**

MRI stands for [magnetic resonance](#) imaging. It's a type of medical scan that uses magnetic fields to produce detailed images of organs, bones and other structures inside the body. Unlike many other types of scans, MRIs don't use radiation.

Doctors will order an MRI to help diagnose cancer, brain injuries, damaged [blood vessels](#) and other medical conditions. Full-body scans can take an hour or more, with patients lying motionless inside a cylindrical tube.

Medical societies only recommend routine, full-body scans for certain high-risk groups, such as people who have a heightened genetic risk of cancer.

"MRIs are great for what they're typically used for," said Dr. Ernest Hawk, a vice president at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center. "But now you're moving them much earlier into an average risk population and that's where you can run into these questions that haven't been answered."

## **Why are people paying for them now?**

Companies like Penuvo say their scans can help identify more than 500 medical conditions that can go undetected at a typical doctor's visit.

The company charges \$999 to scan the torso, \$1,799 for the head and torso or \$2,499 for the entire body. Several other companies offer similar services and pricing.

Penuvo's chief medical officer, Dr. Daniel Durand, says customers can decide for themselves if the price is worth it.

"We're trying to give people the opportunity to be more proactive about their health," Durand said.

Along with the scans and a reader-friendly summary of the results, customers can consult with a nurse or physician employed by Penuvo to talk about next steps.

The company says it doesn't pay for endorsements but will sometimes "provide a complimentary scan for an unbiased review."

## **What are the potential downsides of MRI screening services?**

Many radiologists say the likelihood of finding a serious problem, such

as a cancerous tumor or brain aneurysm, in someone with no symptoms is very low. Instead, scans are likely to flag growths that are usually harmless. Definitively ruling out a problem could require additional tests, appointments and even surgeries.

"You're going to end up finding a lot of incidental things," said Dr. Mina Makary, a radiologist at Ohio State Wexner Medical Center. "That's going to create more psychological stress or trauma for the patient, including additional costs for tests and procedures that may have risks."

Experts also worry that people who undergo MRI scans may start skipping other routine exams, such as mammograms.

"You've gone through a scan and it didn't find anything so you say 'Gee, I don't need to do the other routine things my doctor recommends that have been proven to extend life," said Hawk.

## **What do medical authorities say?**

The American College of Radiology does not recommend MRI screening in people without symptoms, stating that there is "no documented evidence" the technique is "cost-efficient or effective in prolonging life."

The Food and Drug Administration has not approved any MRI machines for preventive screening, but doctors are free to use the devices however they choose.

There are examples of imaging practices that were once considered experimental but have subsequently become standard practice. Penuvo executives say their approach could follow a similar path.

"The evidence will evolve over time but patients don't necessarily want

to wait 30 years to be in a position to benefit from it," said Prenuvo's Durand.

## **When will we know if MRI screening helps people live longer?**

The studies needed to show such a benefit would have to be very large and long, tracking a diverse population for years, according to experts.

Prenuvo recently announced plans to screen 100,000 people and study their health over time. The study isn't expected to wrap up until 2034 or later.

Most people enrolling in Prenuvo's study are expected to pay a \$2,200 fee. But eventually academic or government studies could offer individuals a chance to participate in such research without paying out-of-pocket.

"This is a great area in which to participate in a research study that might provide the information you're seeking, while also helping answer whether this is beneficial or not," Hawk said. "But doing so outside of a study makes no sense."

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