A brain aneurysm is a weak area in the wall of a blood vessel in the brain. It can burst and cause a stroke, and can even lead to death.

Doctors use imaging tests—like CT scans or MRIs—to screen for brain aneurysms. That may sound like a good idea. But the tests and follow-up can do more harm than good. Here’s why:

**Screening tests can lead to unneeded follow-up and treatment.**

Brain aneurysms are rare. So when doctors order imaging tests, they usually don’t find any aneurysms. That means patients are exposed to risks without any benefit.

Sometimes, a CT scan or MRI will show something on the image that is unclear. This can lead to more tests, which may add to your risks.

A CT scan or MRI might also find small “incidental aneurysms” that may never be a problem.
Imaging tests cost a lot and have risks. Depending on your insurance, a CT scan or MRI of the head can cost as much as $1,000. Follow-up testing or treatment can add a lot to the costs.

Also, CT scans expose you to radiation.

**When do you need screening tests for brain aneurysms?**

Screening tests can be a good idea if:

- You had a brain aneurysm in the past.
- You had a type of stroke called a subarachnoid hemorrhage. It’s caused when an aneurysm bursts and there’s bleeding between the brain and the tissue around it.
- You have two or more close relatives who have had aneurysms.
- You have other risks for aneurysms, such as these genetic conditions: Marfan syndrome, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome IV, or polycystic kidney disease.

You may need to be evaluated if you have symptoms of a burst aneurysm.

The main symptom is an unusual, sudden, severe headache. Often patients say it’s “the worst headache of my life.” Other symptoms may include:

- A stiff neck
- Pain in the face
- Seeing double
- Light sensitivity
- Vision loss
- Odd eye movements
- A seizure or change in speech or alertness