Improving communication of bone density scans

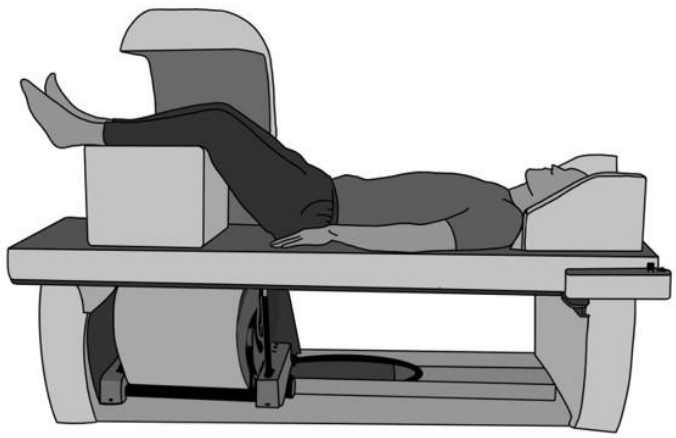
Overview

People who have a bone density scan (also called 'DXA' scan) and health professionals often do not understand the purpose of the scan, or how to interpret and communicate the scan results

The INDEX study worked with patients and members of the public, health professionals, and the Royal Osteoporosis Society, to agree on recommendations to improve understanding of, and communication about, DXA scans

You may find these recommendations helpful if you refer people to have a DXA scan, such as a general practitioner or a secondary care professional

The INDEX recommendations informed the Royal Osteoporosis Society's 2025 *guidelines for the provision of a clinical bone densitometry service*



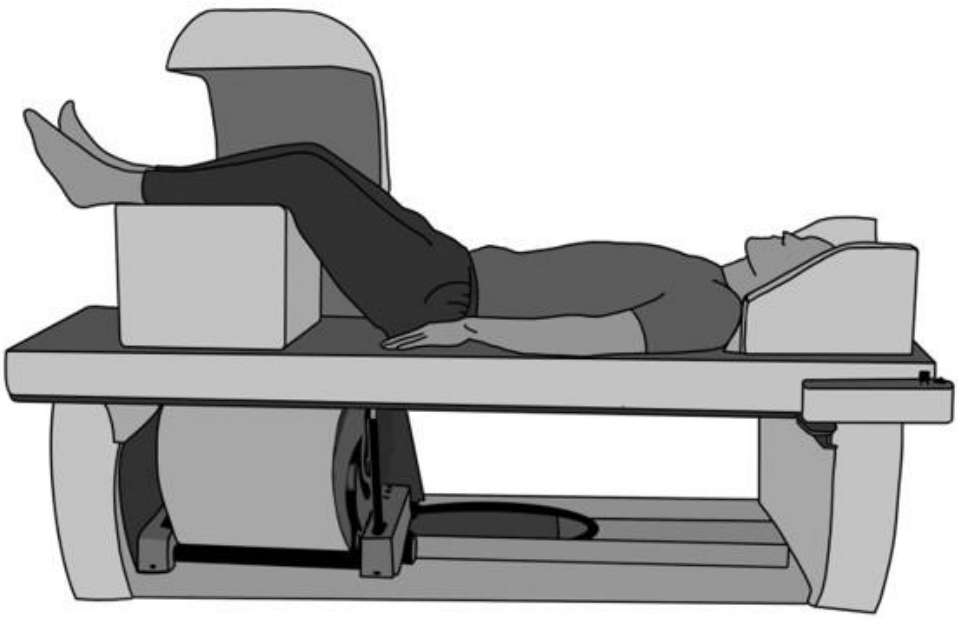
Recommendation	Rationale
UNDERTAKE TRAINING	
Undertake training about how to understand and communicate scan results.	*Raised as a need by public contributors and health professionals because:* • *Uncertainties with DXA impacted healthcare professional confidence in interpretation and communication of results* • *Some patients did not trust that healthcare professionals understood DXA results, particularly GPs due to having knowledge in such varied conditions*
DELIVERING DXA SCAN RESULTS	
Offer patients an opportunity to discuss their results using a method that suits their preference (telephone, face-to-face appointment) to encourage inclusion and equity.	*The majority of patients express preferences for verbal consultations due to having spoken explanation of their results. Public contributors express that opportunities for face-to-face consultations are important for equity because some people may have challenges with remote forms of consultation*
Give all patients the same options for receiving results regardless of the nature of result (osteoporosis, osteopenia or normal).	*Often, patients with normal or osteopenic results are given minimal results information (often no result, or a text) due to no actions needed. However, they still had unmet information needs and wanted to know more.*
Offer all patients a copy of their result which includes signposting to further information.	*Majority of patients prefer to receive a copy of their scan result (paper or app). Important to offer patients choice as preference for amount of details varies*
COMMUNICATING DXA SCAN RESULTS	
When communicating results, emphasize that bone mineral density is only part of person's fracture risk and it needs to be considered in context of other fracture risk factors.	*Patients report lack of understanding of the meaning of bone density scan results.*
Check patient understanding when giving information about bone density scan referrals and/or results.	*Recommended practice in healthcare communication and raised as important omission in care by public contributors.*
When communicating results, use 'low bone density' in preference to 'osteopenia' as it is not a diagnosis or clinically meaningful in isolation.	*Patients and healthcare professionals feel that osteopenia requires explanation and therefore the term alone was insufficient.*
When communicating results, avoid language which might be perceived as frightening and associated with avoidance behaviour, e.g. 'very high/high fracture risk'.	*Public contributors thought that 'high/very high risk' was alarming. Fear is associated with avoidance behaviour which may adversely affect treatment uptake, psychological and social functioning.*

Further information

These recommendations guided the Royal Osteoporosis Society *'Guidelines for the provision of a clinical bone densitometry service'* available on the Royal Osteoporosis Society DXA Quality Toolkit.

Evidence based resources produced as part of the INDEX study are available here:

www.erohub.co.uk



More information about the INDEX study can found:
Kettle C, Manning F, Henderson B, Griffin J, Knapp K, Butterworth J, Jinks C, Bullock L, Paskins, Z. Optimising patient and health professional understanding and communication of bone density scans: A qualitative and group consensus study.

Royal Osteoporosis Society
Better bone health for everybody

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