



Airport Security Scanning

National security has become a top priority since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. From armed guards to advanced screening devices, airports are a prime example of increased security measures in the U.S. The intense scanning of luggage and the newest technology to scan passengers are raising concern about radiation exposure from these security measures.

The cabinet x-ray system, used to scan luggage, is an enclosed system that uses shielding to keep radiation from exiting the walls of the unit. There is a strict standard on the amount of radiation that a cabinet x-ray system is allowed to emit. In addition, the standard also requires safety features that include warning lights, warning labels, and locks.

The human x-ray scanner, called the backscatter system, is a scanning device that gives a security value matched only by a strip search. The risk from the backscatter x-ray is low, and increases the chance of catching a threat to airport security.

Do not confuse the backscatter system with metal detectors. Metal detectors do not use ionizing radiation.

Who is protecting you

Transportation Security Administration (TSA)

TSA monitors the x-ray screening machines that examine carry-on luggage. Additionally, TSA trains screeners how to perform their job efficiently while minimizing everyone's exposure to radiation from the machines.

U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

The FDA has responsibility for assuring manufacturers produce x-ray systems that do not pose a radiation safety hazard. Safety regulation is divided between FDA and state regulatory agencies with the FDA typically regulating the manufacture. FDA requires that all machines are properly calibrated and maintained.

The States

Safety regulation is divided between FDA and state regulatory agencies with the states regulating the use of the products.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

EPA issues general radiation guidance to other federal agencies that establish appropriate safety limits.

What you can do to protect yourself

The risk from the backscatter x-ray is low and increases the chance of identifying a threat to airport security. If you have concerns about x-ray screening, you can request a pat down search instead.

Resources

You can explore this radiation source further through the resources at the following URL:
<http://www.epa.gov/radtown/security-scan.html#resources>

We provide these resources on-line rather than here so we can keep the links up-to-date.