



BACK PAIN - IMAGING TESTS

The exact cause of your acute low back pain may be difficult to identify but in most cases it is related to things like muscle strain rather than conditions like nerve or bone damage, infection or cancer. Talk to your health professional about how to manage your low back pain.

THE PROBLEM

Getting an X-ray, CT scan or MRI may seem like a good idea. But back pain usually subsides in about a month, with or without testing. For example, one study found that back pain sufferers who had an MRI in the first month were eight times more likely to have surgery, but didn't recover faster.

THE RISKS

X-rays and CT scans expose you to radiation, which can increase cancer risk. CT scans and X-rays of the lower back are especially worrisome for men and women of childbearing age, because they can expose testicles and ovaries to substantial radiation. Finally, the tests often reveal abnormalities that are unrelated to the pain, but can prompt needless worry and lead to unnecessary follow-up tests and treatment, sometimes even including surgery.

WHEN TO CONSIDER THE TESTS

X-ray and CT scans often make sense if you have nerve damage, or signs of a serious underlying condition such as cancer or a spinal infection. "Red flags" that can alert your health professional that imaging may be worthwhile include a history of cancer, unexplained weight loss, recent infection, loss of bowel or bladder control, abnormal reflexes, or loss of muscle power or feeling in the legs.

ASK THESE QUESTIONS:

Do I really need to have this test, treatment or procedure?

The answer should be direct and simple. Tests should help you and your health professional decide how to treat your problem, and treatments and procedures should help you live a longer, healthier life.

What are the risks (of having or not having it)?

Discuss the risks as well as the chance of inaccurate results or findings that will never cause symptoms, but may require further testing. Weigh the potential complications against possible benefits and the symptoms of the condition itself.

Are there simpler safer options?

Sometimes lifestyle changes will provide all the relief you need.

What happens if I do nothing?

Ask your health professional if your condition might worsen—or get better—if you don't have the test or treatment now.

There may be tests, treatments and procedures you think you need, but you don't. Let's think again. Engage in a conversation with your health professional today.

Adapted from Choosing Wisely Canada (2014), Common tests, treatments and procedures you may think you need. Let's think again.

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