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Imaging tests for lower-back pain

You probably don't need an X-ray, CT scan, or MRI

X-rays, CT scans, and MRIs are called imaging tests because they take pictures, or images, of the inside of the body. You may think you need one of these tests to find out what is causing your back pain. But these tests usually don't help. Here's why:

The tests will not help you feel better faster.

Most people with lower-back pain feel better in about a month, whether or not they have an imaging test.

People who get an imaging test for their back pain do not get better faster. And sometimes they feel worse than people who took over-the-counter pain medicine and followed simple steps, like walking, to help their pain.

Imaging tests can also lead to surgery and other treatments that you do not need. In one study, people who had an MRI were much more likely to have surgery than people who did not have an MRI. But the surgery did not help them get better any faster.

Imaging tests have risks.

X-rays and CT scans use radiation. Radiation has harmful effects that can add up. It is best to avoid radiation when you can.





Imaging tests are expensive.

Imaging tests can cost hundreds, or even thousands, of dollars depending on the test and where you have it. Why waste money on tests when they don't help your pain? And if the tests lead to surgery, the costs can be much higher.

When are imaging tests a good idea?

In some cases you may need an imaging test right away. Talk to your doctor if you have back pain with any of the following symptoms:

- Weight loss that you cannot explain
- Fever over 102° F
- Loss of control of your bowel or bladder
- Loss of feeling or strength in your legs
- Problems with your reflexes
- A history of cancer

These symptoms can be signs of nerve damage or a serious problem such as cancer or an infection in the spine.

If you do not have any of these symptoms, we recommend waiting a few weeks. Before you have a test, try the self-care steps in the blue box on the right.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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Advice from Consumer Reports

How to treat lower-back pain

Many people get over lower-back pain in just a few weeks by following these self-care steps:

Stay active. Walking is a good way to ease lower-back pain. If you stay in bed, it can take longer to get better. If you stay in bed more than a day or two, you can get stiff, weak, and even depressed. Get up and move.

Use heat. Heat relaxes your muscles. Try a heating pad, electric blanket, warm bath, or shower.

Sleep on your side or on your back. Lie on your side with a pillow between your knees. Or lie on your back with one or more pillows under your knees.

Find out about non-drug ways to treat back pain. If you still have pain after a few weeks, you may want to ask your doctor about other treatments for lower-back pain. Treatments include:

- Physical therapy
- Chiropractic care
- Acupuncture
- Gentle exercise, such as tai chi and yoga
- Massage
- Cognitive-behavioral therapy
- Mindfulness-based stress reduction
- Progressive muscle relaxation

Find out if your health insurance pays for any of these treatments.

Take over-the-counter medicines. To help relieve pain and reduce swelling, try pain relievers or medicines that reduce swelling (called anti-inflammatory medicines). Remember, generic medicines cost less than brand names, but work just as well.

- Ibuprofen (Advil and generic)
- Naproxen (Aleve and generic)

Talk to your doctor. If your pain is very bad, ask about prescription pain medicines. If they do not help within a few days, talk with your doctor again. Ask if the pain might be caused by a serious health problem.

Surgery is a last choice. Surgery usually does not help very much. It has risks, and it costs a lot. Think about having surgery only if other treatments do not help your pain.