

Deciding About an MRI for Low Back Pain

Deciding about magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) for low back pain: Overview

What is an MRI?

An MRI is a test that uses a magnetic field and pulses of radio wave energy to make pictures of your spine. MRI stands for "magnetic resonance imaging."

For this test, your body is placed inside a special machine that contains a strong magnet.

In some cases, a contrast material is used during the MRI scan. This means that you have a chemical injected into your bloodstream, through a vein (IV). The chemical makes certain areas show up better on the MRI pictures.

What are key points about this decision?

- An MRI is not a standard test for finding the cause of low back pain. A physical exam that includes questions about your medical history is enough to diagnose and treat most cases.
- Since most low back pain gets better on its own, it is often best to wait and see if you get better with time.
- You may need an MRI right away if your doctor suspects that disease or nerve damage is causing your pain.
- MRIs are expensive. Health insurance may cover only part of the cost.

Why might you choose an MRI?

- You have had low back pain for at least 6 weeks, and home treatment (pain relievers, exercise, and heat or ice) has not helped.
- You are not worried about the cost of an MRI.
- You are willing to have surgery if the MRI shows a problem that can be fixed with surgery.

Why might you choose not to have an MRI?

- A physical exam that includes questions about your medical history is all that is needed to diagnose most cases of low back pain.
- An MRI can be done later if treatment is not working.
- You are not willing to have surgery even if an MRI showed a problem that surgery could fix.

Your decision

Thinking about the facts and your feelings can help you make a decision that is right for you. Be sure you understand the benefits and risks of your options, and think about what else you need to do before you make the decision.

Where can you learn more?

Go to <https://www.healthwise.net/PatientEd>

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