

# Seeing Lower Back Pain Clearly

**Choosing  
Wisely  
Manitoba**



**Do you really need an MRI (or X-ray or CT scan)  
to speed up your recovery from lower back pain?**

## They don't help you get better faster

Muscle strains are the most common cause of lower back pain. Although the pain can be excruciating, the cause likely isn't serious. Though you may want to try everything possible to relieve the pain, research shows that diagnostic imaging procedures do not help you get better faster. Most people with lower back pain feel better in about a month whether they have an imaging test or not.

## They can pose risks

On the other hand, having tests and procedures you don't need can lead to more unnecessary tests and in some cases even unnecessary surgery.

Openly and honestly discussing your symptoms, medical history and worries with your doctor is the best way to determine the right course of treatment for you.

## When do imaging tests make sense?

Your doctor is providing the best care by not ordering unneeded tests. For lower back pain, MRI and other imaging tests are most often not the right choice.



If pain continues and you have any of the following conditions, symptoms or medical history, call your doctor right away so he or she can reassess your care.

## What you can do

- Apply Heat or Cold: use what feels best to you.
- Stay Active.
- Sleep Comfortably: on your side with the support of a pillow between your legs.

## Serious conditions, symptoms and medical history

- Signs of severe or worsening nerve damage, including numbness, tingling, pricking sensations or muscle weakness
- A serious existing condition such as cancer or a spinal infection
- History of cancer
- Unexplained weight loss
- Fever
- Recent infection
- Loss of bowel or bladder control
- Abnormal reflexes or loss of muscle power or feeling in the legs

If you don't have the symptoms, conditions or medical history listed above, you probably don't need an MRI - at least not right away. Try the self-care measures listed on the front and let your doctor know of any changes or if pain lasts for more than a month.



This information is based on recommendations from the Canadian Association of Radiologists. It is not a substitute for medical advice.

Choosing Wisely Manitoba is an initiative to improve health outcomes, patient and provider experiences and health system efficiencies and sustainability through the appropriate use of medical treatments and diagnostic testing.

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