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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.





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. Staying in bed can make you 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.

Take over-the-counter medicines. To help relieve pain and reduce swelling, try over-the-counter pain medicines. Remember, generic medicines cost less than brand names, but work just as well.

- Generic ibuprofen (brand: Advil or Motrin IB)
- Generic naproxen (brand: Aleve)

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.

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.

Find out about other 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
- Yoga
- Massage
- Cognitive-behavioral therapy
- Progressive muscle relaxation

Check if your health insurance pays for any of these treatments.

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

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 health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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Back Pain Tests and Treatments

What you should consider beforehand

Back pain is a common reason to see a doctor. And there are many different tests and treatments for back pain. Some of them may not be right for you. That's why it is important to talk to your doctor.

Here are some things to consider before you have any tests or treatments.

IMAGING TESTS

You may not need them for back pain.

If you have back pain, your doctor may order an imaging test, such as an X-ray, CT scan, or MRI. You might not need these tests, unless you have had back pain that doesn't get better after a month or two.

Get a physical exam first.

Before you get an imaging test, your doctor should give you a physical exam and review your medical history. These can help your doctor know what to look for and what tests to order.

Check your insurance.

Some imaging tests are expensive. Your insurance may not cover the full cost. Ask your insurance company what they will cover before you get the test. If tests show "false alarms," you may need other, more costly, tests.

Some imaging tests use radiation.

X-rays and CT scans expose you to radiation. The more scans you get the more radiation you get. This increases the risk of cancer.



Usually, lower-back pain gets better on its own. Consider simple remedies to ease your pain before you decide to see a doctor.

ELECTROMYOGRAPHY (EMG)

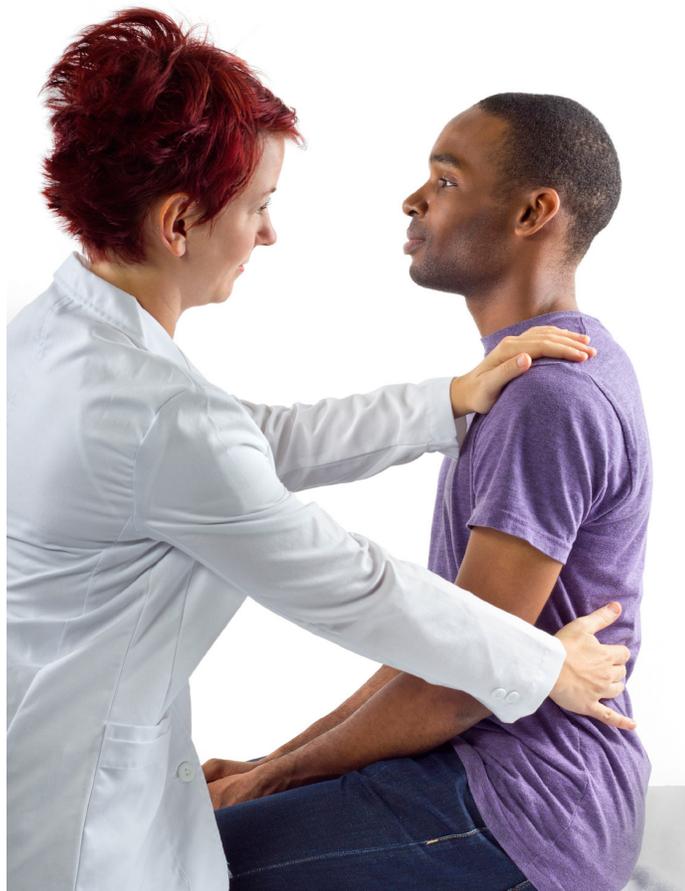
Consider EMG if you also have leg pain or sciatica symptoms.

EMG is a test that checks for damage to muscles and nerves. It uses a needle to measure electrical activity in a muscle.

If you have lower-back pain with leg pain or sciatica, this test can help your doctor be sure of what's wrong. Sciatica is pain that you feel going down the leg from your back. But if you don't have these other issues, the test is not likely to help. Also, you don't need the test if the doctor is sure of your diagnosis.

Do I need EMG if I have mid-back pain or neck pain?

- For mid-back pain: EMG tests won't help your doctor find the cause.
- For neck pain: An EMG will only help if you also have pain or weakness in your arm.



STEROID INJECTIONS

Think twice before you receive additional steroid injections.

People with back pain sometimes get a steroid shot in the spine. The shot can help reduce swelling and pain, especially if you have pain from a pinched nerve.

Your doctor may want to give you two steroid shots. But try to wait before getting a second shot. Wait to see if the first shot works. Then check in with your doctor. And consider other treatments also.

Multiple shots of steroids have risks.

- They raise your blood pressure.
- They raise your blood sugar levels.
- They make it easier for you to get sick.

Ask your doctor:

- Is a second shot likely to help?
- Is it better to try another treatment first?

BED REST FOR LOWER-BACK PAIN

Think twice before getting more than two days of bed rest.

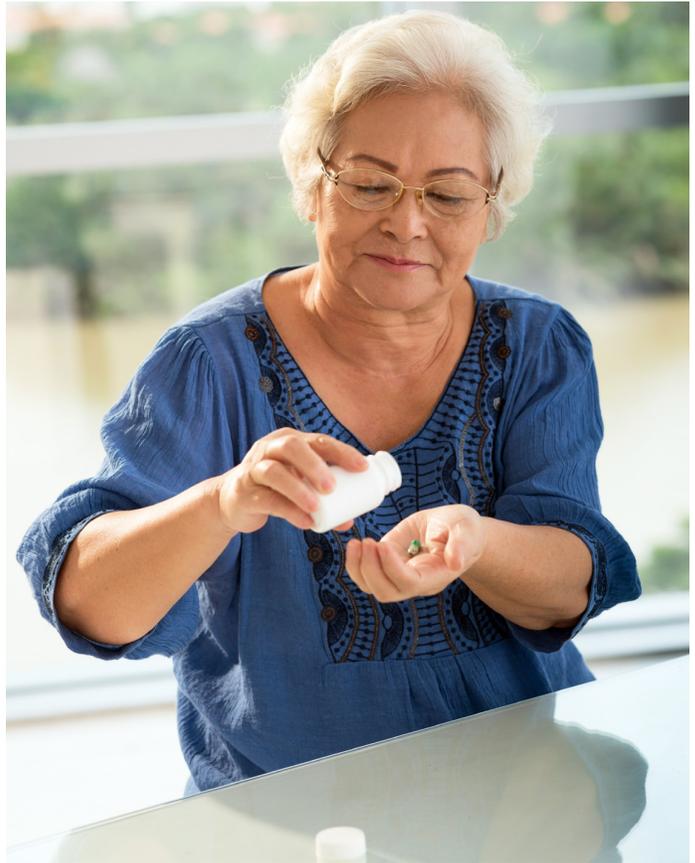
There is no good evidence that long periods of bed rest help lower-back pain. In fact, studies show that patients actually feel better faster if they are active.

Get an exam before getting more bed rest.

Before you get more than two days of bed rest, your doctor should evaluate you. An exam is especially important if you have serious symptoms, such as:

- Loss of bowel or bladder control
- Fever
- Numbness in your groin
- Weakness, falling, or the inability to walk
- Night-time pain
- New numbness, tingling, or sensory loss
- Unusual weight loss

If you don't have these symptoms, you probably won't need more than two days of bed rest.



PAIN KILLERS FOR LOWER-BACK PAIN

Try to avoid addictive pain killers.

Many patients ask for pain killers and many doctors prescribe them. Nearly a third of people suffering from back pain receive drugs that can be addictive, including:

- Oxycodone
- Acetaminophen/oxycodone
- Acetaminophen/hydrocodone

With drugs like these, you need more over time. The longer you use them, the more drugs you may need to relieve your pain. This raises your risk of addiction. It also can increase side effects.

Consider other treatments first.

Before prescribing one of these drugs, your doctor should do a thorough exam and try other treatments.

See the Advice section for tips on managing back pain at home. Studies show that over-the-counter (OTC) drugs can help back pain. See the Advice section for a list of OTC drugs.



Have a doctor examine you before you take more than two days of bed rest. Before considering prescription pain medicines, try other treatments at home.

Try this at home

Most Americans have lower-back pain at some point in their lives. Usually it gets better on its own. Before you rush to the doctor, try these simple remedies. They may ease your pain while you wait to see if your back gets better on its own.

Over-the-counter (OTC) pain medicine.

Start with an OTC pain medicine. Studies show that they really can help relieve pain. For back pain, try:

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol and generic).
- Ibuprofen (Advil and generic).
- Naproxen (Aleve and generic).

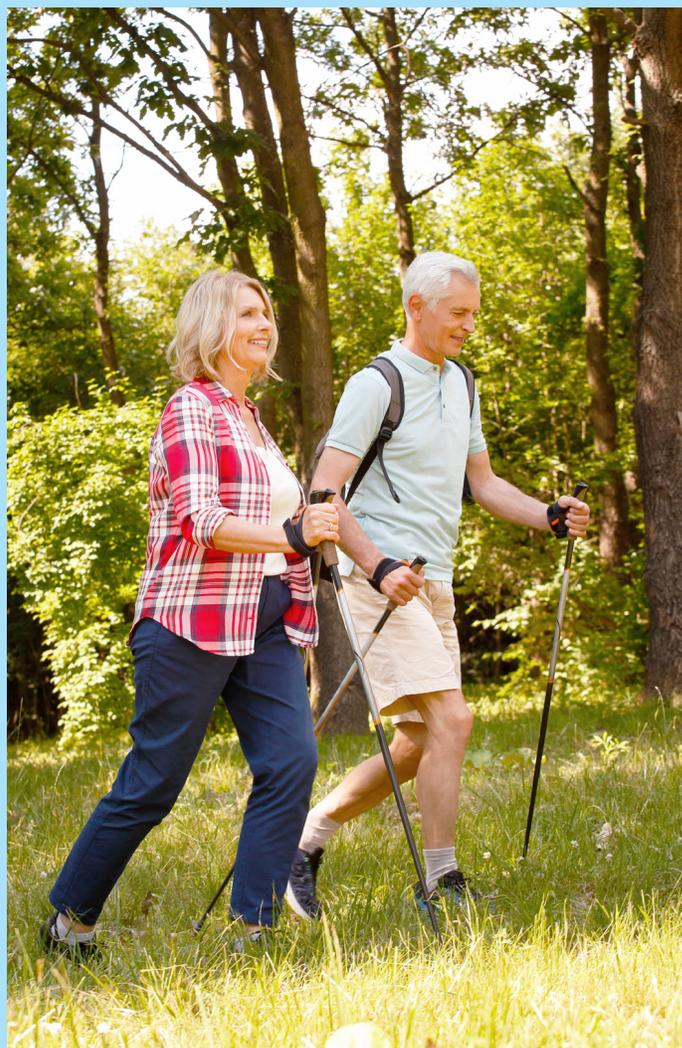
Take the medicine “around the clock” for a few days instead of waiting for the pain to get worse. This will keep the pain under control, but it is not for everyone. Check with your doctor first.

Keep moving. If you can, stay active. Gentle exercises like stretching and walking can help. Just don’t overdo it, and make sure you can do so safely. Once you’re feeling better, try to stay active. Regular activity can help prevent back pain.

Get a massage. There’s evidence that a massage can help ease back pain. But the relief may not last.

If the pain doesn’t go away.

Call your doctor if the pain lasts more than a couple of days. Call the doctor sooner if the pain is keeping you from daily tasks. An office visit might be all it takes to come up with the right treatment.



If you have other symptoms.

Seek care right away if you have other symptoms, such as:

- Fever
- A sudden change in bowel or bladder function
- Tingling, weakness, or loss of feeling in a leg
- Falling
- Inability to walk

Also seek care if you have been in an accident or have a past history of cancer.

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