



Scans and Low Back Pain

National guidelines on the management of low back pain state that if you have had back pain for less than 12 weeks, x-rays and MRI scans are not recommended. There are some exceptions to this, and if your healthcare professional has particular concerns, imaging may be requested earlier. Even when back pain does persist for more than a few months, scans are often still unhelpful and don't change management in the majority of people with back pain.

Reasons to avoid scans for back pain if they are not necessary:

- Back pain is very common and the majority of people will get better with conservative treatment and imaging will not be necessary.
- Research has shown that similar findings are seen on scans of people with and without back pain and these may be unrelated to your pain. Imaging studies have identified that 68% of adults aged 40 will have disc degeneration and 50% will have a disc bulge. This increases to 80% of 50 year olds having disc degeneration. These incidental findings may lead to unnecessary further tests or interventions and can cause unnecessary worry and anxiety and make you fearful of moving your back normally.
- Having a scan of your back does not improve your pain or speed up your recovery
- A scan does not tell you what treatment or exercises will help your back pain

Reasons you may need a scan:

- A serious underlying condition is suspected
- Severe or increasing weakness in specific muscles of your leg or foot
- Your health care professional suspects you have nerve compression causing pain, weakness and sensation changes, which is not improving with treatment such as advice and exercises and is severe enough to consider surgery. Surgery would be to improve the leg pain. It does not usually change the back pain.

References:

Brinjikji,W. Systematic Literature Review of Imaging Features of Spinal Degeneration in Asymptomatic Populations. 2015. AJNR AmJ Neuroradiol 36, 811-16

www.NoEBackpainProgramme.nhs.uk

<https://mybackpain.org.au/library/back-pain-information/scans-eg-xrays-for-back-pain-are-they-useful>