

Imaging Tests for Low Back Pain

To learn what may be causing your back pain, your doctor will ask questions about your health, your symptoms, and your activities, and will also do a physical exam. But what about X-rays or an MRI?

Unless you've had at least 6 weeks of pain, and treatment isn't helping, imaging tests—like X-rays, CT scans, or MRIs—usually aren't recommended.

Early imaging tests often are not helpful for two reasons.

Reason number 1: Most back pain is caused by strained muscles and ligaments. Strained muscles and ligaments don't show up well on imaging tests.

Reason number 2: Imaging tests do show disc or bone problems. But these things might not be what's causing your pain. Lots of people have these and never feel any pain from them. But the good news is that you don't need early imaging tests to feel better.

There are a few things you can do that seem to work for most people: Stay active. But avoid positions and activities that may make your back pain worse.

Take over-the-counter pain relievers when you need them.

You can also try heat or ice, whichever feels better.

Most back pain gets better within 4 to 6 weeks.

But for some people, the pain lasts longer.

Remember, by working with a doctor and trying different treatments, most people do find relief.