

# Low Back Pain & MRIs

Please ask us any questions you have about your diagnosis and treatment plan. We welcome feedback on how we can better assist you in reaching your goals in the treatment of low back pain.



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# WHAT IS MAGNETIC RESONANCE IMAGING (MRI) ?

**1. Must I have an MRI to diagnose my low back pain?**

**2. Will an MRI tell me what is causing my low back pain?**

**3. Do I need an MRI before starting physical therapy?**

**4. Are there risks to having an MRI?**

Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) is an advanced imaging technology that uses a powerful magnetic field and radio frequency pulses to create cross sectional images of the body. MRIs can show soft tissue and bone injuries that may not be visible on traditional x-ray.

**1. Answer: No.**

Most low back pain can be diagnosed by a focused history and physical examination. An MRI is needed only when a serious underlying condition is suspected, there are current progressive neurological symptoms or the results may change the management of your low back pain. If your provider determines an MRI is indicated for you, he or she will not hesitate to order one.

**2. Answer: No.**

More than 85% of people who present to primary care have low back pain that cannot reliably be attributed to a specific disease or spinal abnormality. Despite showing soft tissues and bony details not seen on x-ray, an MRI does not show the source of all pain. The vast majority of low back pain is best treated initially with self-care or therapy (spinal manipulation, physical therapy, medication, etc.). After failure to improve with a sufficient trial of self-care or therapy, an MRI may then be indicated to guide additional medical treatments.

**3. Answer: No.**

Therapy is safe and recommended for the treatment of low back pain. If your healthcare provider has initiated physical therapy, then he or she has already determined that it is safe and recommended. If your therapy is causing increased pain, alert your therapy team so adjustments can be made.

**4. Answer: Yes.**

There are a few risks to having an MRI. Some metal implants and shrapnel may be moved by the strong magnetic field. Additionally, MRI is generally avoided in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. Alert your provider if you have any metal in your body or if you are or might be pregnant. Your provider and the radiologist will decide if an MRI is safe.