

## Family Medicine Clerkship Plain Language Summary

**Title:** Will taking a picture help doctors treat your low back pain?

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### **Plain Language Summary:**

Low back pain is a common problem. There are many different reasons that people have low back pain. Muscle strain and spasm commonly cause low back pain. Most back pain will go away on its own over a period of weeks or months. It can be improved with over the counter medicine and physical therapy. More dangerous causes of back pain involve damage to the spinal cord and the nerves leaving it. This type of back pain may require surgery to fix.

MRI or CT scans can help show what is causing a person's back pain. These scans can help your doctor be more confident in the cause of your pain. They can also help your surgeon plan out a surgery if one is needed. There are some drawbacks to these scans too. They can show false findings that may lead your doctor down the wrong path to diagnosis. They are also very expensive. MRIs can cost up to \$10,000. CT scans are slightly less expensive, but also have the risk of radiation exposure.



Doctors in the UK did a research study to determine if the benefits of using MRI and CT scans were good enough to justify their cost and risks. They compared two groups of people with low back pain. Everyone in the first group got an MRI or CT scan right away. Patients in the second group got an MRI or CT scan a few months after their back pain started and only if they needed surgery. At the end of the study, the researchers found that using MRI or CT scans did not change how they treated back pain. Although the patients who got scans right away had slightly less back pain after two years, the cost of their care was much higher.

Most low back pain will get better in weeks to months without surgery. Using the pictures from MRI and CT scans can help doctors determine the exact cause of a person's back pain. But they are very expensive. Getting an MRI or CT scan right away will not greatly improve a person's back pain. It is more cost effective to wait until an MRI or CT scan is absolutely necessary, usually before surgery.

### **Additional Resources:**

Medline Plus:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/backpain.html>

WebMD:

<http://www.webmd.com/back-pain/tc/low-back-pain-cause>

NINDS:

[http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/backpain/detail\\_backpain.htm](http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/backpain/detail_backpain.htm)

**Key Words:**

Low back pain, MRI, CT

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