



DO I NEED AN MRI?

MRI SCANS AND BACK PAIN

- An MRI is usually not recommended within the first six weeks of experiencing back pain.
- Findings shown on an MRI scan are often not the cause of back pain.
- Research shows that about 30% of pain-free people in their thirties and forties have a disc herniation on their MRI scan.
- Many healthy adults have a finding called “degenerative disc disease”. This becomes more common as we age, and is not really a “disease”. There are many such common findings that can sound scary, but are actually normal for your age. In other words, they often are simply “gray hair of the spine”.

WHEN MIGHT I NEED AN MRI?

- Continued back pain and/or radiating leg pain after 4 to 6 weeks of physical treatments and exercise therapy, if the pain is severe enough to warrant possible injections or referral to a spine surgeon.
- If the back pain is accompanied by generalized symptoms (such as loss of appetite, unexplained weight loss, fever, chills, shakes, or severe pain when at rest).
- Constant back pain that is not changed by body position. (No position makes it better or worse).
- For patients who may have spinal stenosis and are considering a steroid injection or referral to a spine surgeon.
- For patients who have not done well after having back surgery, especially if the pain does not improve after 4 to 6 weeks.

WHEN MIGHT I NEED AN MRI IMMEDIATELY?

The only times an MRI scan is typically recommended immediately are when someone:

- Has lost the ability to go to the bathroom or to control urine.
- Has progressively worsening weakness in the legs due to nerve damage.
- Is thought to have a spine infection.

All of these things are **rare!**

When MRI scans are done unnecessarily, they can prolong your recovery due to the common misinterpretation of normal findings, which often leads to needless testing and possibly unnecessary treatments that have risks and costs to you.