

IMPACT OF EARLY MRI FOR ACUTE BACK PAIN

Patients are often eager to have an MRI because they feel that MRIs offer the most comprehensive analysis of their condition. However, providers and patients should be made aware that when an early MRI is not indicated, it provides no benefits, and worse outcomes are likely.¹



	Radiculopathy [‡]		Nonspecific LBP [§]	
	No MRI	Early MRI	No MRI	Early MRI
Duration of first disability episode post-MRI*	50 days	184 days	44.4 days	165 days
Total Medical Costs Post-MRI [†]	\$4,100	\$22,339	\$2,306	\$17,028

*Disability duration post MRI for the no MRI groups was defined as 16 days after the claim onset to the end of the first disability episode

†Medical costs post-MRI was calculated from 16 days post-onset to the end of the 2 year follow-up period

‡Radiculopathy—pain radiating from the spinal nerve; sciatic pain

§LBP—Low back pain

Early MRI Associated with Worse Outcomes

No Benefits

“If you take a hundred patients who are middle-aged who have no back problems, and you get an MRI of their back, a third of them are going to have abnormal MRIs.”

—Jeffrey Goldstein, MD, medical director of the Spine Service at the New York University Hospital for Joint Diseases²

KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH CITED

- “The early-MRI groups had prolonged disability and, on average, \$12,948 to \$13,816 higher medical costs per case than the no-MRI groups, regardless of radiculopathy status”¹
- Most low back pain symptoms will resolve with conservative measures in 4-6 weeks²
- Better option for a patient with acute low back pain includes conservative treatment such as physical therapy, bracing, medications, and time²
- If symptoms do not resolve in that given time then imaging or a surgical consult may be necessary^{1,2}

¹Webster, Barbara S. BSPT, PA-C; Bauer, Ann Z. MPH; Choi, YoonSun MA; Cifuentes, Manuel MD, MPH, ScD; Pransky, Glenn S. MD, MOccH. Iatrogenic Consequences of Early Magnetic Resonance Imaging in Acute, Work-Related, Disabling Low Back Pain Spine:15 October 2013 - Volume 38 - Issue 22 - p 1939–1946. doi: 10.1097/BRS.0b013e3182a42eb6.

²<http://www.health.com/health/condition-article/0,,20189797,00.html>

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