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Do you have lower-back pain?

Getting expensive tests probably won't help your back feel better any faster.

Most people with lower-back pain will feel better in about a month. This is the case even without having an imaging test, like an X-ray, CT scan, or MRI. If you have lower-back pain, try treating your pain first. Some tips are on the other side.

You may think you need an imaging test. They take pictures of the inside of your body. But they won't help you feel better any faster.

Imaging tests are not always the best choice

- **X-rays and CT scans are risky.** They use radiation that can harm your body. Avoid radiation when you can.
- **Tests are expensive.** Imaging tests can cost hundreds or thousands of dollars. The cost will depend on the actual test and where you have it done. Your insurance may not pay for any of it. This is a lot of money to spend on a test that might not help your pain. And if the tests lead to surgery, the costs can be much higher.
- **They won't make you feel better faster.** And they might lead to an unneeded treatment like surgery—which may be risky and not help your original problem.





Ask your doctor: Do I need an imaging test?

Lower-back pain can sometimes mean you have a serious problem. Talk with your doctor if you have back pain and any of these things:

- **Weight loss that you cannot explain**
- **A fever over 102° F**
- **Trouble controlling when you go to the bathroom**
- **Lost feeling or strength in your legs**
- **A history of cancer**

If you don't have any of these symptoms with your back pain, wait a few weeks before having a test. Remember, there are simple ways to treat your lower-back pain at home.

This report is for you to use when talking with your health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment.

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Advice from Consumer Reports

Simple ways to treat your lower-back pain

Many people feel better in a few weeks by following these simple steps:

- **Walk more and move.** Walking is a good way to ease lower-back pain. If you stay in bed more than a day or two, you can get stiff, weak, and depressed.
- **Use heat to relax your muscles.** Try a heating pad, electric blanket, warm bath, or shower.
- **Take non-prescription pain medicines.** They can help relieve pain. Try Tylenol, Advil or Aleve—or better yet, get the generic versions of those and save money.
- **Sleep on your side or back.** Put a pillow under or between your knees.
- **Ask your doctor about prescription pain medicines.** If they do not help within a few days, ask if the pain might be caused by a more serious health problem.
- **Look for other ways to treat back pain.** Ask your doctor about other treatments. Physical therapy, acupuncture, chiropractic care, or massage can help. Your health insurance may help pay for some of these treatments.
- **Surgery should be your last choice.** Surgery usually does not help very much. It has risks, and it costs a lot. Think about surgery only if other treatments do not help your lower-back pain.