

14. Are scans always needed when you have pain?

Michael, 50, woke up one morning with sharp pain in his lower back after cleaning the garage. He had not fallen or lifted anything heavy, but the pain felt worrying. *"Maybe I slipped a disc"*, he thought. After a few days, it still hurt, especially when sitting, and he decided to see his doctor.

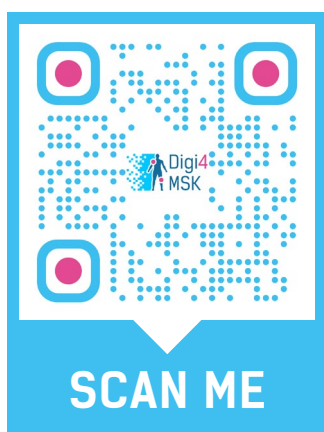
During the visit, Michael asked directly for an MRI. *"I just want to see what's wrong"*, he said. The doctor listened carefully and explained that, in most cases, scans do not change how back pain is treated—especially when there are no warning signs like fever, numbness, or unexplained weakness. *"But what if it's something serious?"*, Michael insisted.

To reassure him, the doctor described how many people without pain have similar scan results—disc bulges, wear and tear, or age-related changes. *"They sound worrying"*, she said, *"but they're often normal findings, like wrinkles on the inside"*. She suggested waiting a few weeks while he stayed active and monitored his symptoms.

At first, Michael felt uneasy. If the pain was real, how could the scan not help? Yet, as the days passed, the pain began to fade. He realized that understanding what scans can and cannot show was part of making sense of his condition—not ignoring it.

A month later, he felt much better without ever needing imaging. The relief came not from a picture, but from clearer information.

Are scans always needed when you have pain?



Skills you can build by watching the video:

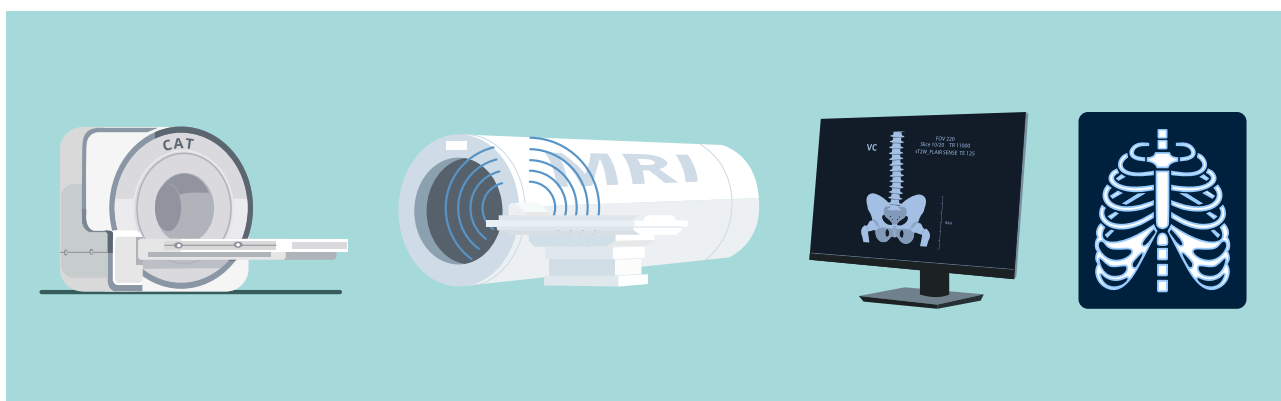
- Learning how to decide when a scan is truly useful and when it may not change treatment.
- Understanding that common scan results, like "disc degeneration" or "wear and tear," can appear even in people without pain.
- Recognizing the importance of discussing options with your healthcare professional before requesting tests.
- Feeling more confident to question and interpret medical information so it makes sense for your situation.

YouTube link: <https://youtu.be/xZj04gty-VM>

14.1. Why might an MRI or X-ray not be needed right away?

1. **“Normal” findings are common, even without pain:** Did you know that many things seen on scans, like disc bulges in your back or degenerative changes, are actually found in lots of people who have **no pain at all**? For example, studies show that by age 50, about 8 out of 10 people without back pain still have some age-related changes on an MRI. This means those findings are often just normal signs of aging, not the cause of your pain.
2. **Scans do not speed up recovery for most common pain:** For recent back or neck pain that does not have serious signs or that severely impacts your life, getting a scan early on does not make you recover any faster, but it does increase the risk of slowing your progress back to normal activities such as work.
3. **Unnecessary scans can lead to unnecessary steps:** Sometimes a scan will identify something like a disc bulge, which is a normal finding, even in people without pain. Unfortunately, such normal findings on a scan can sometimes lead to more tests, specialist visits, injections, or even surgeries that you do not really need. This adds to your frustration, and medical bills, without actually helping your pain.
4. **Seeing a scan can make you worry more:** Sometimes, seeing a scan with common and harmless findings can actually make you feel more worried or anxious about your body. This extra worry can actually make your pain feel worse.

Are scans always needed when you have pain?



14.2. What might your doctor tell you (and why might they not order a scan)?

Imagine you are talking to your doctor about new back pain. Here is what they might say and why:

"I understand why you're thinking about an MRI, as many people do. It's natural to want to 'see' what's going on inside. However, for your kind of back pain, which just started and doesn't have any serious warning signs, we do not recommend a scan."

The main reason is that for most common pains like yours, the pain will disappear in a few weeks. Also, scans often show things that are common even in people who have no pain. So, seeing something like that on a scan might just make you worry more, even if it's not truly causing your current pain."

My goal is to help you get better safely and effectively, and for now, that means focusing on staying active and using simple pain relief, rather than jumping straight to a scan that might cause more worry than help."

We'll keep things under review, and if anything changes, we can revisit whether a scan would be helpful."

Takeaway messages:

If you have an episode of back or neck pain, you do not always need a scan as a rule of thumb. **If you are in doubt, you should consult your doctor, who will know how to reassure you or when to send you to a scan.**