

Low back pain – do you need a scan?

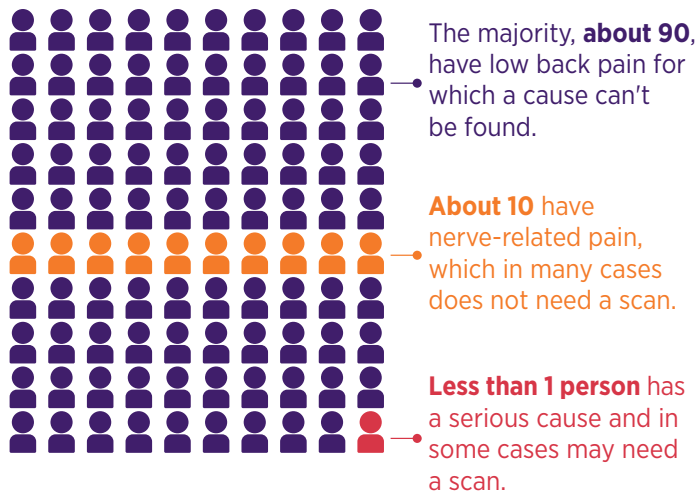
Low back pain is very common, hurts a lot and can really limit your daily activities. Many people believe that if they are in pain they need a scan (an X-ray, CT or CAT scan or MRI scan) to find the cause, but actually this isn't true. This factsheet explains why.

Pain doesn't mean damage

For most people the cause of their low back pain isn't clear, but evidence shows that serious causes are very rare.¹

The pain is unpleasant and can be distressing, but in most cases, it will get better in 4–6 weeks.^{2,3}

Among 100 people who have low back pain:



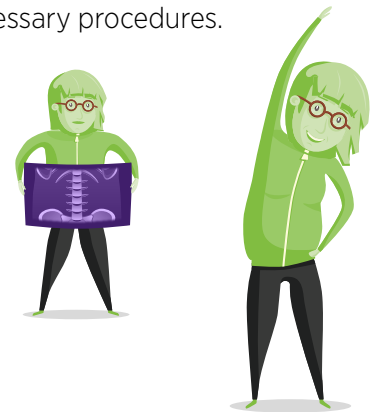
Scans rarely change treatment

A scan is unlikely to find the reason for your pain or change how it is treated.

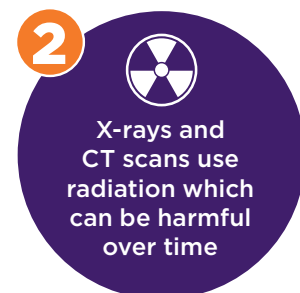
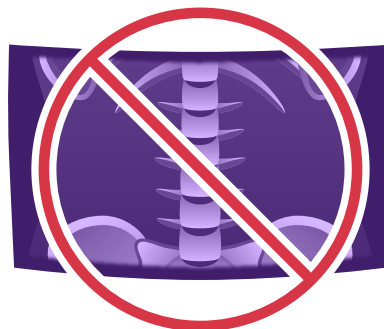
Almost all types of low back pain are treated the same way to begin with. So even if a scan could show the cause of your pain, it's unlikely to change how you manage it. Sometimes, scans can even be harmful.

As we age our bodies change - our hair goes grey and our skin gets wrinkles. Although a scan may show age-related changes in your spine, these are unlikely to be causing your pain.

However, knowing about these changes may cause you worry and lead to unnecessary procedures.



Other reasons not to have a scan^{2,3,4,5}



Turn over to find out what you can do to manage your low back pain.

What can I do now for my low back pain?



Don't stay in bed.⁶

Get back to your usual physical activities (including work) as soon as you can.⁷



Staying active reduces pain and time off work, and speeds up your recovery.^{6,8} Any exercise you enjoy is good for you.



Introduce activity gradually. It may hurt at first, but this doesn't mean you are causing harm. Medicines may help reduce pain so that you can be more active.



It's natural to feel worried, frustrated, or sometimes angry.

The more you worry about your pain, the worse it can get. Acknowledge your feelings and seek support.



Develop a personalised action plan. You can do this on your own or with a health professional.



Track your progress – record the level of your pain and how it affects your ability to do your usual activities.

What if your doctor recommends a scan?

Your GP or physiotherapist will do a thorough physical examination. Occasionally, they may decide you need a scan. If your GP or physiotherapist discusses sending you for a scan, ask these questions:

- ▶ How will this scan change how I manage my back pain?
- ▶ What are the risks?
- ▶ Are there simpler, safer options?
- ▶ What happens if I don't do anything?
- ▶ What are the costs?
- ▶ Can I choose where to go for my scan?

Further information

- ▶ Find out more about managing your back pain at NPS MedicineWise www.nps.org.au/low-back-pain
- ▶ Learn more about questions to ask your doctor at Choosing Wisely www.choosingwisely.org.au/home
- ▶ Create an action plan with the Arthritis Australia back pain website www.mybackpain.org.au
- ▶ For information on managing chronic pain visit MindSpot <https://mindspot.org.au/chronic-pain>



References available online at: nps.org.au/lbp-refs

nps.org.au

Level 7/418A Elizabeth Street Surry Hills NSW 2010
PO Box 1147 Strawberry Hills NSW 2012

☎ 02 8217 8700 ✉ 02 9211 7578 📧 info@nps.org.au

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