

MRI SCAN FOR BACK PAIN

A procedure at risk of being overused, as indicated by the: Italian Society of Medical Radiology – Italian College of General Practice and Primary Care

The exam is regularly prescribed at the first signs of back pain or sciatica (pain radiating down the leg), often in the absence of physical and medical treatment to alleviate the pain.

If no serious neurological or systemic symptoms are present (see below), the lumbosacral MRI should not be routinely recommended for cases of acute or chronic low back pain and sciatica. Instead, it should only be considered when symptoms persist after at least 6 weeks of physical and medical therapy.

If there are no problems, it should also not be repeated at intervals of less than 24 months. If there are no warning signs indicating damage or bone marrow compression, taking into consideration a patient's medical history and/or an objective examination, the use of an MRI and other diagnostic image techniques (X-ray, tomography, CAT) is not recommended for at least the first 6 weeks. This is because:

- ▶ it doesn't change the therapeutic approach;
- ▶ it may bring to light other disturbances that wouldn't have given rise to any problems, leading to further unnecessary examinations and surgical operations;
- ▶ the use of radiographies and CAT scans expose one to ionising radiation;
- ▶ it represents an elevated cost to the

community.

LET'S UNDERSTAND WHY

The MRI, X-ray and tomography are defined as "diagnostic image" techniques because they produce images of inside our body. They may be indispensable for some illnesses, but are not appropriate as a first choice for pain or sciatica when there are no particular warning signs.

Here is why:

- ▶ studies have shown that the majority of



people with back pain or sciatica improve in the span of a month, whether or not they have had an MRI, x-ray or tomography;

- ▶ people who undergo these tests do not improve faster;
- ▶ these exams may lead to surgical operations or other invasive treatments that are not necessary;
- ▶ a radiograph exposes the body to ionizing radiation, which is best avoided when not necessary.

WHEN AN X-RAY MAY BE ADVISABLE

In a small number of cases, pain may be due to serious and specific causes (infections, osteoporosis, fractures, structural problems, inflammatory problems, types of cancer in the worst scenario). It is for this reason that the doctor should pay attention to one or more red flags that would lead to further investigation.

Among these are:

- ▶ unexplainable weight loss;
- ▶ sharp pain during the night;
- ▶ having suffered violent trauma;
- ▶ persistent fever;
- ▶ difficulty urinating and faecal incontinence;
- ▶ neurological deficit (weakness, tingling and similar);
- ▶ having developed a tumour in the past.

To learn more: "A schiena dritta", Test Salute 106, October 2013 (in Italian) available on www.altroconsumo.it in "magazine archive".

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BACK PAIN: ADVICE FROM ALTROCONSUMO



▶ Stay active and engage in daily physical activity. Go bike-riding, walk, work in the garden or carry out domestic chores. Speak to your doctor to find the most appropriate sport for you (swimming, gymnastics, yoga, pilates, running...).

▶ If necessary, discuss with your doctor the possibility of taking a pain reliever to ease the pain, even though this on its own will not resolve the problem.

▶ If the pain is not excessive, try to exercise to keep the body in motion. Absolute immobility, even during an episode, is highly inadvisable.

▶ Pay attention to weight and possible extra kilos. Increased weight on the back worsens the situation.

▶ Quit smoking.

▶ Don't lift objects that are too heavy and learn to bend down in an appropriate way, bending at the knees and not placing too much stress on the back.

▶ Choose the most helpful approach for your needs, combining physical exercise and cognitive programs. A holistic approach to the body needs to be taken in order to tackle back pain.