

Other Imaging – When You Need it and When You Don't

MRIs, CT scans and other forms of high-resolution imaging are great tools to assist doctors in diagnosing disease. The problem is that they are used too often, for too many reasons. For low back pain, uncomplicated headaches and sinusitis, these tests don't always make sense. Here's why.

The tests rarely help.

- Most people who seek medical help for headaches have migraines or tension-type headaches. These can be painful, and migraines sometimes come with disturbing symptoms, like visual changes. But all that's usually needed for doctors to diagnose these and other common headaches is a careful medical history and a neurological exam. Adding a CT scan or MRI rarely shows why a headache occurs or helps you manage its symptoms. And research shows that for people with a normal medical history and neurological exam, imaging tests are unlikely to reveal a more serious underlying problem.
- With low back pain and sinusitis, most people feel better in about a month whether they get an imaging test or not. In fact, those tests can lead to additional procedures that complicate recovery.

They can pose risks.

- One possible risk of high-resolution imaging is that they will show something that appears to be worrisome but actually isn't. For example, in some cases doctors might mistake a more prominent area of a person's brain for a tumor, or a twist in a blood vessel for a brain aneurysm. Those findings can cause anxiety, trigger follow-up tests, prompt referrals to specialists for expensive consultations and even trigger unnecessary treatment. And CT scans of the head can deliver a radiation dose the equivalent of 25 to 300 chest X-rays, according to a recent study. While the risk from any single exposure is uncertain, the harmful effects of radiation may be cumulative, so it's best to avoid it when you can.

They add needless expense.

- A standard brain CT scan and MRI cost a lot of money. This cost doesn't include charges for subsequent treatment prompted by uncertain results.

When You Should Get a CT Scan or an MRI

When are the tests warranted for headache? They might be considered if you get an abnormal result from a neurological exam or your doctor can't confidently diagnose your headache based on your



Presented by the Washington Health Alliance in partnership with the Washington State Medical Association.

symptoms and exam, or if your headaches change. If you are considering sinus surgery, you should probably get a CT scan, but otherwise, you don't need it. And for low back pain, it can be a good idea to get an imaging test right away if you have signs of severe or worsening nerve damage, or a serious underlying problem such as cancer or a spinal infection. Certain red flags can also make testing worthwhile, such as a history of cancer, unexplained weight loss, fever, recent infection, loss of bowel or bladder control, abnormal reflexes, or loss of muscle power or feeling in the legs. In other cases, you probably don't need an imaging test for at least several weeks after the onset of your back pain, and only after you've tried self-care measures.

Talk With Your Doctor

Most people don't need CT scans or MRIs if they have headaches, low back pain or sinusitis. But this still means you should talk to your doctor about your experience and stay on top of the self-care you can do to manage your pain. For headaches, this can mean finding a place with low light and resting, or taking OTC medications. For low back pain, this could mean applying heat and staying as active as you can as your back heals. For sinusitis, that can mean getting enough rest and gargling with a saline solution. Take some time to talk with your doctor about your symptoms and determine the right course of action for you.

Learn more about the recommendations at www.wacommunitycheckup.org/ownyourhealth/choosingwisely or <https://www.wsma.org/choosing-wisely>.

Visit www.wacommunitycheckup.org, click "compare scores," select "medical groups" or "clinics," click "appropriate use of care" and click "avoidance of X-ray, MRI and CT scan for low back pain" to see how local doctors are doing with providing recommended back pain care.