



Low Back Pain: A Guide for Essential Imaging

Recommendation:

“Imaging is not recommended for low back pain unless red flags are present.”¹

The BC Patient Safety & Quality Council has put together these Essential Imaging Conversation Guides for Care Providers to support and guide conversations with patients based on the *BC Guidelines for Appropriate Imaging*.¹

Unless there are considerable concerns, people with low back pain who receive imaging fair no better than those who don't, and results do not affect management or the rate of recovery. However, patients who are not aware of these recommendations may request imaging. Here are some messages to inform and guide your conversations with patients requesting low back pain imaging.¹



Provide Information²

If imaging is not indicated, inform patients that:

- Acute low back pain usually resolves within six weeks.
- CT, MRI and X-rays for uncomplicated low back pain do not help patients get better faster and may expose them to unnecessary risks.
- Low back pain is very common and is often caused by back strain. It usually resolves within weeks without medical treatment.
- Patients should visit their health care provider if the pain is getting worse or if they have new symptoms.
- Low back pain can be treated with heat, acetaminophen, NSAIDs and the gradual return to usual activities.
- Exercise may decrease low back pain symptoms and reduce recurrence.



Provide Advice²

- Address any fear of activity and return to work and normal activities.
- If exercise is persistently making the pain worse, recommend physiotherapy to the patient.
- Provide expected timelines for recovery and clear communication, which can improve patient satisfaction and support recovery.
- Suggest that the patient read the *Conversation Guide for Patients – Low Back Pain*.

Start the Conversation!

Learn more and find additional clinical resources at [BCPSQC.ca/imaging](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/practitioner-professional-resources/bc-guidelines/diagnostics-imaging).

¹BC Guidelines. Appropriate Imaging for Common Situations in Primary and Emergency Care. 2020. Diagnostic Imaging. Available from: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/practitioner-professional-resources/bc-guidelines/diagnostics-imaging>

²Choosing Wisely Canada. Imaging tests for lower back pain. When you need them and when you don't. [Internet pamphlet]. Toronto Canada; 2017. [cited 2020 March 10]. Available from: <https://choosingwiselycanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Low-Back-Pain-EN.pdf>