

Choosing Wisely®

An initiative of the ABIM Foundation



Chiropractic spinal care for lower-back pain

Know which tests and treatments can help

Licensed chiropractors adjust the body to improve alignment, ease pain, and restore movement in the spine or joints.

This is called spinal adjustment. Recent research shows that it can work as well to relieve pain and discomfort as drugs and surgery, and it is also safer.

The chiropractor gives the patient exercises to help improve alignment (posture) and prevent injury. He or she also promotes healthy behaviors such as quitting smoking and maintaining a healthy weight.

Chiropractors offer a variety of tests and treatments. The American Chiropractic Association urges patients to talk with their healthcare provider to make sure they are getting the tests and treatments they need.

Most people with lower-back pain don't need imaging tests.

X-rays and other imaging tests usually don't help your doctor diagnose and treat back pain.



In fact, back pain usually goes away on its own in a matter of weeks.

These tests also:

- Use radiation, which can build up over time and increase your risk of cancer.
- May lead to unnecessary treatments, such as opioid pain-killers or surgery. These can increase your risks and costs.

When imaging tests might help.

In some cases, chiropractors need to use imaging to make sure their adjustments will not harm you. For example, it may be important to check for a problem, such as a fracture or osteoporosis. A history of cancer may also justify imaging.

You usually don't need follow-up tests to check your progress. A physical exam is a better way to check your progress. However, a follow-up test may be helpful if you get worse or have new symptoms.

Avoid passive therapies unless you have them along with other treatments.

Passive physical therapies—such as heat, cold, electrical stimulation, and ultrasound—may give you brief relief from pain and discomfort. They may help you relax during spinal manipulation or before a physical activity like walking, biking, or swimming.

But these therapies do not help you prevent long-term problems. Don't use them on their own.

Avoid regular use of lumbar supports or braces.

When you use these devices, your back and abdominal muscles do not work as hard. If you rely on the devices, these muscles can become weaker. This is bad because you need to strengthen these muscles to relieve lower-back pain.

A device may help in the first few days of severe pain or during certain activities, such as gardening.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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