

Tackling the Top-Five: Imaging in First Six Week of Low-Back Pain

WHAT

- X-rays, computed tomography (CT), and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) should be avoided during first six weeks of low-back pain, unless a specific clinical warning sign is present (eg, recent diagnosis of cancer or trauma).
- Low back pain is one of the most common causes of disability in the country—more than 80 percent of Americans will experience low back pain in their lifetime.



WHY

- Imaging within the first six weeks rarely if ever changes the course of treatment.
- Imaging often exposes patients radiation, which is a non-negligible and rarely-discussed risk.
- Imaging can detect clinically insignificant abnormalities (“incidentalomas”) that lead to extra imaging (and more radiation), more tests, and unnecessary procedures.
- Imaging can delay evidence-based treatment, such as physical therapy.
- Imaging the low back within the first 6 weeks of onset has a high “waste-index” (commonly used wastefully when used).

BURDEN

- In 2014, about 1.6 million avoidable imaging services provided and about \$500 million in wasted spending.
- The downstream and cascading costs of incidental findings are unknown.
- Additionally, overprescribing of opioids for low back pain contributes to the worsening of the opioid epidemic.

How to measure:

- [Specifications for claims-based analyses](#) to measure wasteful utilization and spending in-house, based on previous studies to measure Top Five.
- [The Milliman MedInsight Health Waste Calculator](#)

Choosing Wisely Clinical Evidence and Guidelines:

- [North American Spine Society](#)
- [American Academy of Family Physicians](#)
- [American Chiropractic Association](#)
- [American Academy of Physical Medicine](#)

- [Neurological Surgeons](#)
- [And more](#)

Reading list:

- [Patient information](#) from Choosing Wisely

Barriers to action and counterpoints:

- Patients believe that imaging will help physicians understand the problem and provide more effective treatment.
- Physician practice patterns are often sticky, and “exnovation” is complex and takes a long time, especially when the alternative is to either do nothing or more active treatments such as physical therapy.
- Imaging services generate revenue for providers.

Case studies, external resources, and model language:

- Integrated Healthcare Association
 - [General information on imaging for non-specific low back pain](#)
 - [Resources for payers and purchasers](#)
- [RFI language to discuss low-value care with your TPA or carrier.](#)