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Make better decisions confidently

NEWSLETTER

Imagine you are a medical provider who encounters a patient complaining of low back pain after a minor injury while moving a box one week prior. How should you treat the patient?

- A. Order an X-ray to check for fractures
- B. Order an MRI to look for radiculopathy
- C. Order an EMG to rule out nerve damage
- D. Refer the patient to pain management
- E. None of the above

The answer is E. Why? Because in the absence of a major traumatic event (for example, a fall with severe pain, or a car accident requiring an ER trip), studies show that low back pain improves within a few weeks of onset. Because of this, insurance providers have made policies that guide providers when choosing when to prescribe imaging. Blue Cross Blue Shield for example, follows Healthcare Effectiveness Data and Information Set (HEDIS) guidelines regarding low back pain, which states that providers should not order any imaging for lower back pain, including X-ray, until at least 29 days post onset of symptoms (1).

In fact, studies show that early imaging in low back pain can actually lead to prolonged recovery time, increased medical spending, and increased risk of surgical procedures (2). Furthermore, many findings on advanced imaging such as disc herniations or bulges, spinal stenosis, and facet arthropathy, are all commonly found on imaging studies of patients who are not experiencing low back pain (2).

For the patient above, the course of treatment should include conservative therapy only, such as physical therapy. If the pain persists after 29 days, even after rest and conservative treatment, then imaging can be considered. We know that this guideline is not always followed, leaving claims professionals to sort out the messy medical details on imaging and leaving more questions than answers. For example, “does this patient’s disc bulge affect the nerve root? Is it an old pathology or is it related to the accident?” are common questions our A4D radiologists are asked that we are happy to answer. [Contact us](#) today to learn more about our review services and how a recent study showed that A4D saves clients an average of almost \$2,500 per claimant with imaging for low back pain.

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Sources:

1. <https://ww2.authentic4d.com/e/756213/2022-use-imaging-low-back-pain/7kmsz4/449232165?h=DMp9kSIWLBvyR7iN8mGIEyVXweUPAawaNL7OPGEot2Q>

2. <https://ww2.authentic4d.com/e/756213/cles-PMC6118107--report-reader/7kmsz7/449232165?h=DMp9kSIWLBvyR7iN8mGIEyVXweUPAawaNL7OPGEot2Q>

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