

What's a Picture Worth ?

(This article is about an interesting radiological phenomenon known as 'incidentalomas'. They are findings that look like something serious but have nothing to do with the cause of a patient's problems. They are said to be incidental and are of no consequence. The readers should know that not everything we see on an X-ray means something, other than the fact that we are all aging humans.)

If you have pain in your low back and hips , should you get an Xray?
Or should your doctor order a CT scan? Or send you for an MRI?

Well, yes and no. It depends on what your condition is.

Each type of imaging – Xray, CT, MRI – has its strengths and weaknesses. And , even with the most clear and detailed pictures, what we see often correlates very poorly with the location and type of symptoms a person is experiencing. This is especially true for the most common findings of degenerative changes to the discs and joints of the low back - ie. osteoarthritis.

Dr. Robert Lambert , a radiologist from Alberta, gave a presentation to health care providers in the Yukon a few years ago as part of the Workers' Compensation Board's efforts to educate professionals who deal with people who have back pain. He provided some keen insights on the value of imaging – and a clear perspective to some of the controversies and misconceptions around taking pictures of low backs.

Dr. Lambert raised the issue of differences between Canadian and American guidelines on Xraying low backs - apparently you are three times more likely to get an Xray if you live in the US. In his opinion, this constitutes overutilization and would drive costs up with little , if any, demonstrable benefit.

That said, he was clear that Xrays do play a very useful role in identifying certain serious conditions. If there is any suspicion of a fracture or a tumour or an infection , an Xray is a valuable tool. Fewer than one in ten cases of low back pain are because of a disease state and a simple Xray can be the first step to a clear diagnosis. So, if your health care provider recommends getting an Xray , it can rule out the presence of an ominous pathology. However, it can and often does show abnormalities which can look quite significant but actually are irrelevant , not amenable to any intervention and do not match up with the symptoms a person is experiencing.

To illustrate this, Dr. Lambert described a pilot project at Edmonton's University Hospital. In setting up their MRI system they first needed to establish baselines and understand how to properly image normal backs - the healthy backs of people who had never had any trouble. More than one hundred people of all ages , none with a history of low back pain , took part and the pictures were quite shocking to the researchers.

They saw bulged discs and thinned discs and degenerated joints and bone spurs which were causing no symptoms whatsoever. In fact, this asymptomatic control group were more likely to have a visible disc bulge than the low back pain sufferers they later examined!

They also found that the incidence of disc bulges and degeneration in general increases with age. As many as 80% of people over 60 have them, and they are of little or no consequence. The location of the bulges and bone spurs can be completely unrelated to any symptoms that people are experiencing. Compared to plain old Xray, CT scans (with high levels of radiation exposure) and MRI's (very expensive) show these common degenerative changes in exquisite detail - but are generally no more helpful in decisions about what to do. (The best reason to do any kind of imaging or testing is if the results will change what is done for treatment.)

So if you've had pictures taken that show degenerated discs or joints or osteoarthritis, it is very likely you have good days and bad days with your back. Xrays would look exactly the same on both those days. It is not so much about how it looks. It's about how it is working.

It is important that joints be free to move. Muscles need to be strong and flexible. When they are working right, you're feeling good and doing more. See your Doctor of Chiropractic for care that will help keep you moving and working – and feeling – better!

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