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WHEN IS IT TIME FOR AN MRI?

By Craig C. Banks, DC, CCSP®

No one enjoys being in pain. Aside from the obvious discomfort to your body, it's inconvenient. Pain often means that trips to your physician or therapist may be forthcoming, taking valuable time out of your already busy schedule. Sometimes, in order to avoid that visit, you might be asking friends, family and coworkers if they have experienced similar pain. With few exceptions, you'll almost always find someone who swears that they have had the same problem that you do. Next, some level of advice follows. With social media usage at an all-time high, amidst your many replies in the quest for answers, you'll probably hear the suggestion, "You should get an MRI." That offer may sound initially compelling, but your next thought is a.) "Do I really need one?" and b.) "How do I get one?"

After over eleven years in clinical chiropractic practice, I've ordered hundreds of MRIs and looked at thousands of results.

The diagnostic value to a properly ordered MRI is quite significant. However, MRIs are not always appropriate to order for every ache or pain. Many times, other less expensive diagnostic testing, imaging or even simply a focused exam by a qualified professional can give you the answer you are seeking. I'd like to explain a bit more about the MRI test itself, and reasons why and when your doctor would resort to ordering one.

An MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) is a test using strong magnetic fields, which gives your doctor a series of pictures that more accurately show a specific part of the body. Only a physician can order an MRI and you can't get one just because you want one. Unlike an x-ray, a MRI shows significant detail of the soft tissue and fluids instead of primarily just bone. Typically, the doctor is looking for a soft tissue or bone pathology that either can't show up on an x-ray or won't show up clearly enough on

one. An MRI is typically a very safe test, because unlike x-rays, CAT scans and PET scans, it doesn't emit any ionizing radiation. There are still precautions, such as implants or metal in the body or eye. Also, when the MRI is used with a specific dye called contrast, allergy or kidney issues may be of concern.

In my practice, I commonly order MRI tests looking for tendon, cartilage or ligament tears. Other times, I am looking for a spinal disc herniation. Less frequently, I will use an MRI to determine if there is a problem in the brain or spinal cord, AKA the central nervous system. The results of the test will determine a few things for me. First and foremost, I want to know if my previous assessment was accurate or if I need to change the diagnosis and thus the treatment. Secondly, if my diagnosis was correct, the test can tell me just how severe the problem is and an approximate time line on how long it may take my patient to get better. Next, I want to know that I am indeed the correct person to treat the problem. If the MRI shows that my patient may need a surgery or other intervention, I can more quickly refer the patient to the right provider with their test results in hand. Lastly, I may use an MRI to determine how the original problem has progressed after my treatment has been performed.

Those are the "whys" of ordering an MRI. The more complex question is typically the "when" to order one. Pain alone is not an indication for an MRI. Regardless of how bad you are hurting, other criteria will be crucial in

determining if this is the right test for you. Your doctor will determine how long the pain has been there, if it is traveling down arms or legs, if nerves are involved, or if the problem is rapidly getting worse. It is also necessary to know what other tests and treatments have been done. Did the other treatments help? How long have you been getting those treatments? Not only will your doctor need to know the answers to these questions, but your insurance will also want to know before they approve payment for an MRI. Again, it is a more expensive test that has been overused by some doctors. Therefore, the generally accepted rationale is that other attempts at conservative treatment have been made for a reasonable amount of time before ordering. Treatments may include activity modification, home exercise, chiropractic care, physical therapy and OTC medication. If there is not worsening nerve involvement, about six weeks of this conservative care is expected before the MRI is ordered. However, if at any time, the risk of permanency or significant nerve damage arises, your doctor can bypass these criteria.

In clinical practice, MRI is an extremely valuable tool. I have been able to treat my patients more efficiently and effectively as a direct result of the findings from MRIs. Remember though, just because your long lost cousin on Facebook says you need one, it's always the best idea to check with your doctor as to whether or not actually do.