

## Spine MRI and Spine CT Test Request Tip Sheet

### With/Without Contrast CT, MRI

- Studies should NOT be ordered simultaneously as dual studies (i.e., with and without contrast). Radiation exposure is doubled and both views are rarely necessary.
- Order the study considered best for a specific clinical scenario. The second study should be done ONLY if the first study doesn't provide adequate information.

### Spine MRI and Spine CT

- An MRI is almost always preferred over a CT scan. If ordering a CT, CLEARLY document why an MRI isn't appropriate.

In cases of back pain without "red flags," six weeks of multi-modality supervised conservative therapy (without significant symptom improvement) must be completed before an imaging study can be approved.

- Clear documentation of all elements of conservative therapy is required, including details and dates of the physical therapy, home exercise program, or chiropractic care.
- Reproducible neurological deficits must be documented in the clinical notes following a thorough neurological physical examination.

### Radiation Exposure

Spine MRI: 0 mSv

Spine CT: 6.5 mSv



***Radiation exposure should be limited whenever possible.***

***With and without contrast doubles the radiation dose.***

We follow Choosing Wisely recommendations for low back pain as shown below.

### Choosing Wisely Recommendations

*As part of Choosing Wisely, each participating specialty society has created lists of "Things Physicians and Patients Should Question" that provide specific, evidence-based recommendations that physicians and patients should discuss to help make wise decisions about the most appropriate care based on their individual situations. The items below represent the recommendations associated with spine CT and MRI.*

- **Don't do imaging for low back pain within the first six weeks unless red flags are present.** (*American Academy of Family Physicians*)
- **Don't obtain imaging studies in patients with non-specific low back pain.** (*American College of Physicians*)
- **Avoid imaging studies (MRI, CT, or X-rays) for acute low back pain without specific indications.** (*American Society of Anesthesiologists - Pain Medicine*)
- **Don't recommend advanced imaging (e.g., MRI) of the spine within the first six weeks in patients with non-specific acute low back pain in the absence of red flags.** (*North American Spine Society*)

Choosing Wisely® is an initiative of the ABIM Foundation to help physicians and patients engage in conversations about the overuse of tests and procedures and support physician efforts to help patients make smart and effective care choices. Recognizing the importance of physicians and patients working together, leading specialty societies, along with *Consumer Reports*, have joined Choosing Wisely to help improve the quality and safety of health care in America.