

Do you need an MRI?

A MRI is helpful at diagnosing many common orthopedic problems. However, an MRI may not always be necessary, and may not be helpful in some situations.

There are several reasons why your doctor may not order an MRI.

- **An MRI is not always the most accurate test**
The sensitivity of an MRI in diagnosing an ACL tear is about 90%; that means that 10% of ACL tears will not be seen on MRI. The sensitivity of an experienced orthopedic surgeon finding an ACL tear on physical examination is also about 90%. MRI is usually not helpful where the diagnosis is readily apparent. This is especially true if arthroscopic surgery is anticipated regardless of the result of an MRI.
- **An MRI may not be helpful at all**
MRIs are not helpful for some conditions, such as advanced arthritis of the knee or hip. These conditions are much better illustrated on regular X-rays. MRI is not helpful in patients over the age of 55. Degenerative changes in this age group lead to a high percentage of false positive MRIs.
- **An MRI is often not the first step**
Treatment begins with simple steps in an effort to solve the problem with as little disruption as possible. As treatment progresses, so does the diagnostic investigation. Ordering unnecessary tests early in treatment can cause more trouble and confusion, and may even delay the right treatment.
- **An MRI is only a diagnostic tool, not a treatment**
An MRI gives some people peace of mind, but will do nothing to change the symptoms of your condition. Many people say "I need an MRI because it still hurts." Keep in mind, the problem *does not change* because an MRI is done.

This is not meant in any way to discourage the use of MRIs or minimize the utility of an MRI. These are incredibly useful tests to be done ***in the right situation***. If you think you need an MRI, ask your doctor. He or she should be able to explain to you why you do, or don't, need an MRI.

Reference:

[Do You Need An MRI?](#) By Jonathan Cluett, M.D., About.com 2007

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