According to the American College of Physicians (ACP), health care professionals should use a patient’s history and physical examination to determine whether low back pain is due to strain on bones, muscles and ligaments (that is, on the musculoskeletal system) or due to a serious underlying condition.

**Most Patients with Low Back Pain Do Not Need an X-ray**

Doctors should not order X-ray, computerized tomography (CT) scan or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) unless they suspect a serious cause of low back pain. These types of imaging procedures are typically reserved for patients who are candidates for invasive interventions. Not only do routine imaging tests have no benefit for musculoskeletal low back pain, but they can even be harmful. Unnecessary imaging can:

- Expose patients to unnecessary radiation
- Result in misdiagnoses
- Lead to unnecessary procedures
- Result in unnecessary costs

Musculoskeletal low back pain can be quite painful; however, it usually improves or goes away after a few days to a month. Your health care provider can help you understand the normal course of low back pain as well as:

- The importance of remaining active
- Self-care options, such as heating pads, exercise and other non-drug treatments
- Medications for pain and inflammation

In 2011, the American College of Physicians published a full report called “Diagnostic Imaging for Low Pain Back: Advice for High-Value Health Care from the American College of Physicians.” The report focuses on radiology guidelines and low back pain—and has helpful information for patients.

To read the “Summaries for Patients,” click here: Guidelines document

To watch the video news release from the *Annals of Internal Medicine* about radiology guidelines and low back pain, click here: Guidelines video

**SOURCE:**