



Asking questions about imaging tests

X-rays, CT scans, and MRIs are called imaging tests because they take pictures, or images, of the inside of your body.

They are used to guide diagnosis and treatment of many different medical conditions. But some uses of these tests have been identified—by medical societies participating in the *Choosing Wisely*® campaign—as ones that you should question if they are offered, because sometimes they are not needed.

Here are three common situations where that might be the case:

① CHEST X-RAYS BEFORE SURGERY

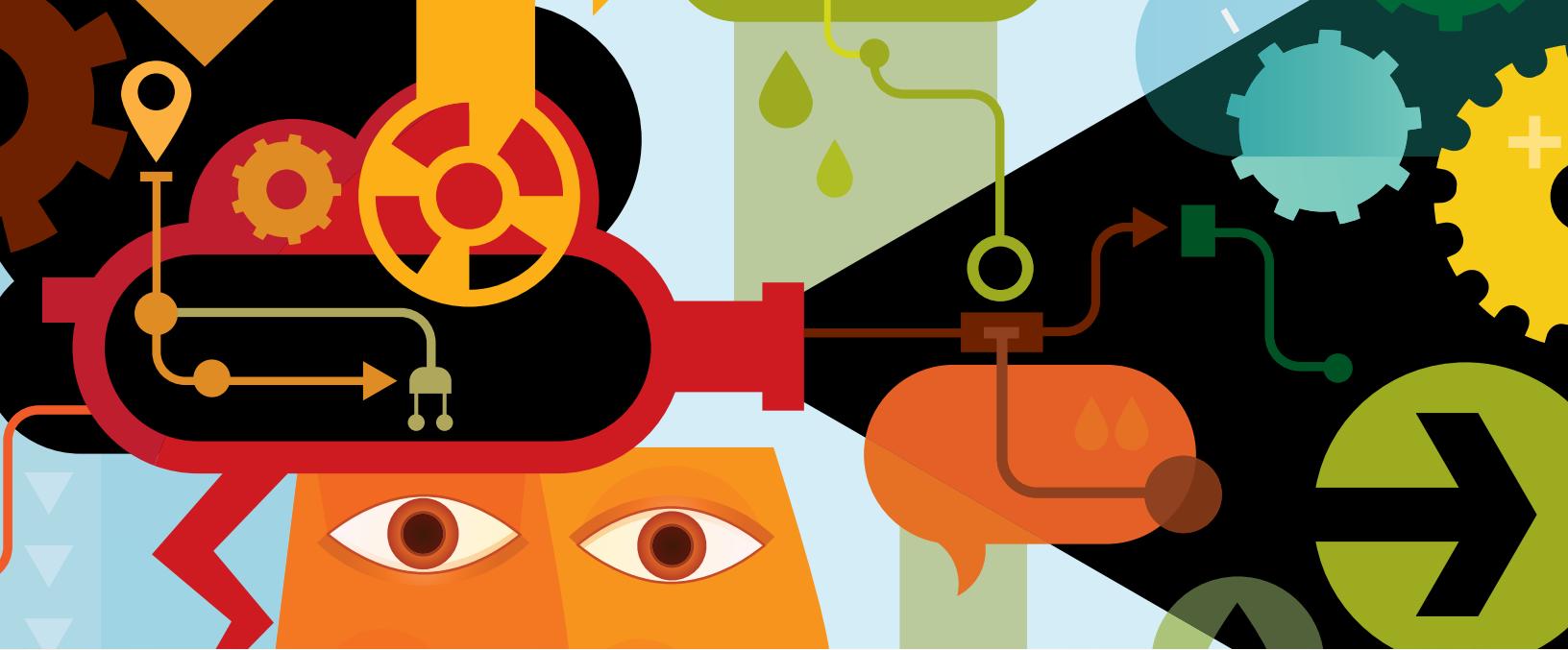
Many people have a chest X-ray before they have an operation. This is called a “pre-op” chest X-ray.

If you have a heart or lung disease, you may want to get a pre-op chest X-ray. It can show medical problems, like an enlarged heart, congestive heart failure, or fluid around the lungs. These could mean that your surgery should be delayed or cancelled.

However, if you don't have signs or symptoms of a heart or lung disease, you should think twice about having a chest X-ray before surgery.

- » **A CHEST X-RAY USUALLY DOESN'T HELP.** If you do not have symptoms of a heart or lung disease, and your risk is low, an X-ray probably will not help. It is not likely to show a serious problem that would change your treatment plan.
- » **A CHEST X-RAY DOES NOT HELP THE SURGEON OR THE ANESTHESIOLOGIST MANAGE YOUR CARE.** Most of the time, a careful medical history and physical exam are all you need.
- » **A CHEST X-RAY CAN HAVE RISKS.** Risks from radiation exposure may add up, so it is best to avoid it when you can.
- » **A CHEST X-RAY CAN SHOW SOMETHING THAT LOOKS TO BE ABNORMAL.** This is often a false alarm. But you will need follow-up tests to rule out a serious problem. This can cause anxiety, cost you money, and expose you to risks from the other tests.

Click here to learn when these tests are appropriate. 



② IMAGING TESTS FOR HEADACHES

Many people who have very painful headaches want a CT scan or an MRI. They want to find out if their headaches are caused by a serious problem, such as a brain tumor. But most of the time you don't need these tests.

- » **IMAGING TESTS RARELY HELP.** Doctors see many patients for headaches. And most of them have migraines or headaches caused by tension. Both kinds of headaches can be very painful. But a CT scan or an MRI rarely shows why the headache occurs. And they do not help you ease the pain.
- » **A DOCTOR CAN DIAGNOSE MOST HEADACHES DURING AN OFFICE VISIT.**
- » **CT SCANS HAVE RISKS.** A CT scan of the head uses a low radiation dose. This may slightly increase the risk of harmful effects. Risks from radiation exposure may add up, so it is best to avoid unnecessary radiation
- » **THE RESULTS OF YOUR TEST MAY ALSO BE UNCLEAR.** This can lead to more tests and even treatment that you do not need.

[Click here to learn when these tests are appropriate.](#) ↗

③ IMAGING TESTS FOR LOWER-BACK PAIN

You probably do not need an X-ray, CT scan, or MRI.

You may think you need one of these tests to find out what is causing your back pain. But these tests usually do not help. Here's why:

- » **THE TESTS DO NOT HELP YOU FEEL BETTER FASTER.** Most people with lower-back pain feel better in about a month, whether or not they have an imaging test. People who get an imaging test for their back pain do not get better faster. And sometimes they feel worse than people who took over-the-counter pain medicine and followed simple steps, like walking, to help their pain.
- » **IMAGING TESTS CAN ALSO LEAD TO SURGERY AND OTHER TREATMENTS THAT YOU DO NOT NEED.** In one study, people who had an MRI were much more likely to have surgery than people who did not have an MRI. But the surgery did not help them get better any faster.
- » **X-RAYS AND CT SCANS USE RADIATION.** Radiation has harmful effects that can add up. It is best to avoid radiation when you can.

[Click here to learn when these tests are appropriate.](#) ↗