

Press release of 27 July 2022

Expensive lower back pain: extensive medical procedures despite little evidence

X-rays, CT scans or MRIs: many doctors use medical imaging to diagnose the cause of lower back pain. More than 85% of the persons treated are also prescribed painkillers, and in many cases even opiates (40%). Both medical procedures lead to high health costs, according to a study carried out by the University of Zurich based on data provided by Groupe Mutuel.

Lower back pain is a common condition. In Switzerland, more than 80% of the population has suffered from lower back pain at least once in their lives. The condition ranks high on the list of reasons for seeking medical advice. With the support of Groupe Mutuel, the Institute of Primary Care Medicine of the University of Zurich analysed the data available on the treatment of pain in this area of the back.

The study included insured persons who had undergone imaging techniques such as X-ray, CT or MRI scans. The authors of the study found that more than 85% of those treated had received at least one pain medication. More than two out of five people were prescribed an opiate. In 30% of cases, these were even strong opiates such as fentanyl, oxycodone or morphine, which are also known to be highly addictive. Yet, the smarter medicine institute advises against the prescription of opiates for non-specific back pain.

Extensive medical procedures in the absence of serious symptoms

Of the imaging methods chosen, MRI scans were the most popular (44%). Other studies have shown that MRI examinations are often performed too early and without sufficient indications. Instead, they often lead to additional examinations and expenses and may even delay the healing process.

On average, those treated during the study period incurred costs of around CHF 518 million in total and of CHF 8,722 per patient per year (gross costs for the AOS/OKP basic health insurance). Compared to patients who did not undergo a medical imaging examination, the health expenses of patients with back pain were 72% higher. "The study shows that patients with back pain are often over-treated. In the future, the focus should be on the relevance of treatment, and financial compensation should be based on a corresponding model", explained Daniel Volken, Head of the General Secretariat of Groupe Mutuel.

Information on the study

Number of cases reviewed for calculating the costs: 75,296 (57% of women, average age: 54,5 years)

Period: 2015-2019 (with medical imaging in 2016 or 2017)

Selection criteria: medical imaging for the lumbar spine

Scientific literature:

- Characteristics and health care costs in patients with a diagnostic imaging for low back pain in Switzerland, Di Gangi et al., Eur J Health Econ. 2022 Jul;23(5):823-835
- Treatment Patterns in Patients with Diagnostic Imaging for Low Back Pain: A Retrospective Observational Study, Di Gangi et al., J Pain Res. 2021 Oct 7;14:3109-3120.



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