MRI Scans of the Spine: What to Expect

One-page summary of the full Spinemathema guide. Scan the QR code for the full guide, with references and audio.

Key points

- An MRI scan uses a strong magnet and radio waves, not X-rays, to create detailed pictures of the spine.
- It is excellent at finding serious problems such as infection, tumours and pressure on nerves.
- It cannot show where everyday back pain is coming from, so many people with simple back pain do not need one.
- The scan is painless but noisy; you will need to lie still inside a tunnel-shaped machine for a while.
- Age-related changes are very common on scans and are often no more worrying than grey hair.

Call 999 or go to A&E now if you have back pain or sciatica with:

- Numbness or tingling around your bottom, genitals or inner thighs
- New difficulty passing urine, or not feeling when your bladder is full
- New leaking of urine, or loss of bowel control
- New loss of sexual sensation or function
- Pain, numbness or weakness in both legs, or leg weakness getting worse quickly

These can be signs of cauda equina syndrome. Do not wait for an appointment.

Not sure how urgent it is? Call NHS 111. More warning signs: spinemathema.com/warning-signs

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General information only, not personal medical advice.
If you are worried about your symptoms, contact your GP, NHS 111, or in an emergency call 999.

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Scan for the full guide