

North-East London Musculoskeletal MRI Imaging

REVIEWED NOVEMBER 2025

RECOMMENDATION:

North-East London Integrated Care System advises against routinely performing Musculoskeletal (MSK) MRI in primary care settings. Advanced MSK imaging should be conducted in specialist settings where appropriate interpretation, clinical judgement, and onward management can be arranged.

For MSK imaging needs in primary care, please refer the patient to the relevant community MSK service as outlined in the table below. First Contact Practitioners integrated with community MSK services and meeting governance standards, will have access to MSK MRI from primary care. This will be coordinated through primary, community, and ICB shared governance structures.

For **suspected cancer**, refer to [local cancer referral pathways](#). If a patient under oncology care presents with suspicious MSK pain, refer them back to their oncology team for further investigation.

For suspected **cauda equina syndrome**, follow the [national CES pathway](#)

For **suspected sarcoma**, consult the [Suspected Sarcoma Referral Guide](#)

Further guidance on **urgent MSK pathways** can be found under MSK Pathways in NEL Wide: [Musculoskeletal – North East London](#)

National clinician advice – [Best MSK Spinal MRI Clinician Information](#)

Resources & Evidence:

[NICE Best Practice Recommendations | Low back pain and sciatica](#)

[Academy of Medical Royal Colleges / NHSE guidance LBP](#)

[Academy of Medical Royal Colleges / NHSE Guidance Knee](#)

[Academy of Medical Royal Colleges / NHSE Guidance Hip](#)

[Academy of Medical Royal Colleges / NHSE Guidance Shoulder](#)

[BMJ - MRI & Unintended consequences:](#)

[BJSM Best Practice MSK](#)

[Systematic literature review - PubMed](#)

[Abnormal findings MR asymptomatic subjects - PubMed](#)

RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION:

MRI is rarely indicated for back or neck pain and should only be organised after assessment by a MSK practitioner with spinal expertise ([GIRFT](#)). Evidence from both observational studies and randomised trials shows little-to-no clinically meaningful improvement in outcomes from earlier access to musculoskeletal MRI in primary care. In fact, extensive literature demonstrates potential patient harms from imaging, particularly misinterpretation. National and Institutional Guidelines and recommendations, highlight the importance of reducing unnecessary low value imaging, which has significant potential for patient harm due to misinterpretation of common radiological findings ([NHSE](#)).

Significant evidence supports improved clinical care through advanced practitioner-led, multidisciplinary community musculoskeletal (MSK) services. North East London ICS is invested in and developing these community services to enhance early patient assessment, manage both short- and long-term conditions, and support primary, community and secondary care services, as well as embedding MSK care within the Neighbourhood health strategy.

Please see relevant sections of the primary care portal on MSK for further resources on referral pathways & criteria:

[Musculoskeletal – North East London](#)

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