Low Back Algorithm 3. Evaluation of Subacute, Chronic, or Slow-to-Recover Patients with Low Back Pain Unimproved or Slow to Improve (Symptoms >4 Weeks)

Patients with activity limitations due to low back symptoms not improving or slow to resolve over 4 to 6 weeks.

- Neurologic symptoms in lower limbs?
  - Yes: Significant (e.g., limiting work ability) sciatica present >4 weeks?
    - Yes: Go to Algorithm 2
    - No: Obvious level of nerve root dysfunction on physical exam?
      - Yes: Go to Algorithm 2
      - No: EMG. For new radicular pain, wait at least 3 weeks from onset.
  - No: Primarily low back symptoms.

Primarily low back symptoms.

- Evaluate for specific suspected conditions, especially AP/lateral x-rays. Consider also urinalysis, CBC, ESR, bone scan, hepatic enzymes, amylase.
  - Test results positive?
    - Yes: Age-related changes only?
      - Yes: Go to Algorithm 4
      - No: Evaluate as indicated.
    - No: Evaluate as indicated.
  - No: Exit Algorithm or Go to Algorithm 6 if chronic back-related disorder

- Phsyiologic and anatomic evidence of nerve root compression?
  - Yes: Go to Algorithm 4
  - No: Go to Algorithm 5