Incidental Findings are Common in Shoulder MRI:
A Summary for Workers’ Compensation Adjustors, Case Managers, Attorneys, and ALJ’s
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Incidental Finding: a pre-existing abnormality on MRI that has no relationship to an alleged work injury; these abnormalities are not painful or symptomatic.

Examples of Potentially Incidental Findings on Shoulder MRI:
- Degenerative Labral Tear
- Degenerative Rotator Cuff Tear
- Paralabral cyst
- Acromioclavicular arthritis
- Rotator Cuff Tendinitis
- Bone cyst
- Degenerative biceps tear
- Partial thickness rotator cuff tear

What do Studies Show? MRI and other imaging of asymptomatic, uninjured shoulders often show abnormalities. One study (Girish et al American Journal of Radiology 2011) showed imaging abnormalities in 96% of asymptomatic, uninjured individuals. Another (Miniaci et al American Journal of Sports Medicine 1995) showed that even in young individuals with no pain or history of injury, MRI showed abnormalities in the rotator cuff (tendinitis at least) in 100% of cases. The bottom line is that a shoulder MRI is rarely “normal” even in a person with no symptoms and no known injury. Abnormalities on MRI are a normal part of aging, and become more common as with increasing age. This has been repeatedly shown in studies of shoulder MRI.

What Should a Provider Do? As a provider, it is important to be able to state that the alleged injury had sufficient force to cause the MRI finding. Minor injuries (e.g. “I was picking up a file” or “I was reaching up to get something from a top shelf”) are not sufficient to cause a labral tear or rotator cuff tear. These types of injuries may cause a strain or sprain. A shoulder MRI performed in a patient with a minor injury will likely show an incidental abnormality. A provider should be able differentiate an incidental, pre-existing finding from an acute injury causing a tear or other pathology. Mechanism of injury is the key. The question to be answered is: could the alleged injury have caused the MRI finding?

Can the MRI Tell You if a Findings is Real or Incidental? No. There is no “magic finding” that definitively tells you if a finding is incidental or acute. Some clues exist, however. The presence of atrophy suggests a chronic finding, while the presence of edema suggests an acute injury. If arthritis is present then other findings, such as tears, may also be degenerative.

Summary: Abnormalities on MRI are commonly found in normal, painless shoulders. It is important that medical providers recognize this and use the mechanism of injury to formulate an opinion on the issue of causation. An abnormality on shoulder MRI by itself is not sufficient to establish a causative relationship with an alleged injury.