

Sciatica

Patient Information Fact Sheet

›What is sciatica?

Sciatica refers to pain that occurs along the path of the sciatic nerve, the largest nerve in the body (about as thick as a finger). The nerve starts in the lower spine, divides, and extends behind each hip, running down the buttocks and the back of each leg to the foot, ending at the big toe. Sciatica pain can occur anywhere along this path. While it can be different from general back pain, both can occur together. There are many potential causes for this pain.

›What are the symptoms of sciatica?

Sciatica typically affects one side of the body and low back pain may accompany it. The pain radiates along the nerve, commonly reaching the buttock or back of the thigh, leg or foot. Symptoms can range from mild tingling to severe, sharp pain that makes standing difficult. Numbness, weakness, and reduced movement in the leg or foot may occur. Activities that increase pressure in the spine or stretch the nerve, like coughing, sneezing, or sitting, can worsen the pain.

›What causes sciatica?

Sciatica may result from the sciatic nerve being pinched as it leaves the spine. It can also occur if the space surrounding the nerve narrows due to arthritis or swelling from a sprain. One of the most common causes is a prolapsed (herniated) lumbar disc, which bulges into the vertebral canal, compressing the nerve roots. This can be triggered by improper lifting techniques, heavy lifting, or strenuous activities like gardening. The pain may start as mild back pain and gradually worsen, or it may begin as sudden, severe pain radiating down one side.

›What tests confirm a diagnosis of sciatica?

A physical exam is often sufficient to diagnose sciatica. X-rays are very helpful for analyzing the alignment of the spine in the areas the sciatic nerve exists the spine, determining the presence and extent of degenerative changes in the area, and diagnosing any other spinal malformations like a spondylolisthesis which may be contributing to the sciatica. If symptoms persist after 4-8 weeks of conservative chiropractic care or if complications arise, a CT scan or MRI may be necessary to identify the exact cause.

›How is sciatica treated?

For severe sciatica, the initial treatment is rest and ice. A firm mattress or on the floor is best. Avoid sitting or lying in the bath as this will make the pain worse. Complete rest is advised for the first few days, followed by very short periods of moving around, with avoidance of any bending or lifting.

Chiropractic care is safe and effective for the treatment of sciatica. Chiropractic adjustments help by re-aligning the spine, restoring spinal joint mobility, and relieving sciatic nerve pressure. Interferential electrotherapy is often recommended during a chiropractic treatment to reduce swelling, alleviate pain, and speed up the body's natural healing process.

There are natural alternatives to traditional medications, including Salizain (white willow bark) as an alternative to aspirin, Formula 303 (valerian root) as a natural muscle relaxant, and Boswellia or turmeric, which are natural anti-inflammatories.

›Self-help measures

- Unfortunately, sciatica tends to recur. Once an episode of sciatica has happened, take care to avoid further injury to the back by keeping your spine strong and mobile with a combination of stretches and strengthening exercises.
- Swimming, walking, and other general exercise programs also help to strengthen the muscles of the back.
- Avoid sitting for long periods, and take regular breaks on long journeys. Avoid lifting more than you your spine can handle, and avoid lifting and twisting or twisting and reaching motions, which make the spine very vulnerable to injury in the lower back.



Use a tennis ball or similar ball to massage. Sit on the ground and put the ball under the side of your affected buttock. Support your weight behind you with your hands. Cross your ankle over your opposite knee. Roll around on the ball until you find an area of discomfort.



Sciatic nerve flossing gently mobilizes compressed or irritated nerves. Discontinue if pain worsens.

