

# Sciatica

Physiotherapy & Occupational Therapy

The prevention of infection is a major priority in all healthcare and everyone has a part to play.

- Please decontaminate your hands frequently for 20 seconds using soap and water or alcohol gel if available
- If you have symptoms of diarrhoea and/or vomiting, cough or other respiratory symptoms, a temperature or any loss of taste or smell please do not visit the hospital or any other care facility and seek advice from 111
- Keep the environment clean and tidy
- Let's work together to keep infections out of our hospitals and care homes.



# Introduction

Sciatica is a very common condition. It relates to pain in the leg, where the nerves that travel from the lower back down the leg become irritated and very sensitive. Occasionally people with sciatica can also have back pain. It is important to remember that although sciatica can be very scary and painful, it is rarely serious. Most sciatica will normally resolve without any treatment within six to 12 weeks.

## Common causes

The sciatic nerve from lower back can become irritated or inflamed. A number of factors have been associated with sciatica; these often include:

- Sprain or strain for example, lifting something awkwardly or something that is too heavy for what you are physically used to doing
- A sudden increase or decrease in your normal activity or exercise levels
- Disc related changes that cause sciatic nerve irritation, inflammation and or compression
- Following a period of increased stress, worry or low mood
- Following a period of poor sleep, fatigue or feeling run down
- Other lifestyle factors such as being overweight and smoking
- A flare up of longstanding sciatica and or back pain
- Other conditions

## Common symptoms

These include:

- Pain that you may feel in your back, buttock, hip and down the back of the leg, sometimes travelling as far as your foot
- Burning or electric shock pain
- Tingling, numbness, coldness, cotton wool or heaviness feelings in your leg and or foot
- Back pain, but the pain in the leg is often worse

- Difficulty sitting, standing, bending, walking and or lying down
- Disturbed sleep

You may experience constant or intermittent (come and go) symptoms, that are aggravated by certain activities (or no obvious activities) and reduced by others.

## What can I do to help it?

- In the first few days after an onset of sciatica changing or reducing your usual activities may help. However, there is strong evidence that trying to keep active and gradually returning to all your usual activities and exercise will help you recover. As you recover the leg pain should get less severe, less often and less extensive
- It is normal to experience some pain during your recovery, but it does not mean that you are causing harm or damage to your sciatic nerve or back
- Try to stay at work or return as soon as you are able to. Your employer, GP or health practitioner will be able to advise on how to return to your normal work duties and support you with any adjustments you might find helpful in the short-term

Try some of these self-help tips.

- Apply a heat or icepack whichever you find most helpful to the painful area – for up to 15 minutes. **Never apply heat or ice directly to the skin**
- A short course of simple pain medication as advised by your pharmacist or GP may help reduce pain and allow you to move more comfortably
- Finding a balance between taking some rest and regular movement in the early days is often important
- Regular movement and exercise is safe and helpful for sciatica in the long run. It is important to build up gradually – the exercise or activity you enjoy most, is likely to help your recovery

- If sitting causes pain and your job involves long periods of sitting, regular positional change may be helpful
- Good sleep habits and managing stress may help you cope better with your pain

## Facts about sciatica

- Sciatica is **RARELY** linked to serious tissue damage or a life-threatening condition
- Sciatica is often caused by nerve irritation and or inflammation
- If the sciatic nerve is compressed, you may experience numbness and weakness in your leg(s)
- Discs **DO NOT** 'slip' in or out of place, as they are strongly attached to the bones in your back
- Discs are **STRONG** round structures that sit between the bones in your back
- If there is a disc prolapse – it often shrinks and returns to normal over time (around six months). In fact, the bigger the disc prolapse usually means the better and faster a person is likely to recover
- X-rays and scans are **NOT** always needed to show the cause of your pain or to help your recovery
- Regular movement, exercise, good sleep, relaxation, managing stress and improving your general health **CAN HELP** reduce inflammation and help sciatic nerve related pain
- Gradually loading your back by including bending and lifting movements is **SAFE**. In fact, running exercise has been shown to strengthen discs
- There is **NO** perfect posture, but varying your posture and activity may help
- Treatments such as medications and injections **CAN HELP** in some cases, but surgery is rarely needed

- Your sciatica can often improve with the right management. So even if you have had it a long time regardless of your age, **DO NOT** give up and try to work with a healthcare professional who can guide you with a self-management plan that you can stick to

# 4 SCIATICA FACTS YOU NEED TO KNOW

## 1. Sciatica is **NOT** a diagnosis.

Sciatica describes a set of symptoms caused by a condition that results in compression of the sciatic nerve.

## 2. Sciatica **CAN** occur at any age.

The peak incidence of sciatica is in people who are in their 40s and 50s but it can occur at ANY age.

## 3. An Abnormal MRI does not indicate a **SYMPTOMATIC** spine problem.

Just because an MRI finds something abnormal, that doesn't mean the patient is experiencing symptoms as a result. Spine experts must be able to connect the MRI findings with the patient's actual symptoms.

## 4. Sciatica **RARELY** requires surgery.

Most cases of Sciatica improve with time and conservative care including chiropractic treatment, physical therapy, activity modification and medication.

## When should I seek medical advice?

### Call your GP surgery if

- Your leg pain is getting worse
- You have tried the self-help tips for three to four weeks and your symptoms have not improved
- You have any of the following symptoms
  - An unexplained onset of leg and or back pain accompanied by a history of Tuberculosis, HIV, cancer or rheumatoid arthritis
  - Feeling unwell with your leg and or back pain and have a fever or significant sweating that is keeping you awake at night
  - Feeling unwell with your leg and or back pain and have a history of cancer, loss of appetite or unexplained weight loss

## When to seek immediate medical advice

**Cauda Equina Syndrome is an extremely rare but serious back condition. It can cause permanent damage and disability. It is important to seek immediate medical advice if you have a combination of the following symptoms:**

- Pain in both legs accompanied by weakness and/or a loss of feeling or pins and needles
- Loss of feeling or pins and needles between your inner thighs or genitals
- Numbness in or around your back passage or buttocks
- Altered feeling when using toilet paper to wipe yourself
- Increasing difficulty when you try to urinate
- Increasing difficulty when you try to stop or control your flow of urine
- Loss of sensation when you pass urine
- Leaking urine or recent need to use pads
- Not knowing when your bladder is either full or empty

- Inability to stop a bowel movement or leaking
- Loss of sensation when you pass a bowel motion
- Change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- Loss of sensation in genitals during sexual intercourse

## Do I need an X-ray or scan?

- X-rays or scans are NOT usually required to diagnose sciatica
- X-rays or scans are NOT able to tell us how much pain you are experiencing. They often show normal age-related changes and often this DOES NOT change how you manage your pain
- X-rays and scans are best used where a serious injury (for example, a broken bone) or conditions such as cancer, infection or cauda equina syndrome are suspected
- A scan may be used if you experience weakness and pain in your leg(s) that is worsening and is significantly affecting your daily function

## Why exercise?

It is important to get the back moving early in order to gain mobility, strength and return to normal function. Early exercise can have a positive influence on tissue healing and reduce the potential for joint and soft tissue stiffness.

## Back exercises

These are suggested exercises and are to be performed within comfortable limits. If you have any concerns about any of the exercises, please seek medical advice.

### Resting positions

Try lying on your back with the head supported and the knees bent. This position offloads the spine.



Alternatively, lie on your back with the head supported and pillows under the knees.



If side lying is more comfortable, place a pillow between the knees.



1. Lie on the floor or a firm bed, on your back. Bend your knees and put your feet flat on the floor, hip distance apart. Press your lower back into the floor to allow your bottom to begin to lift, then press your bottom down to allow the back to arch away from the floor. All the movement should be in your lower back. Repeat 10 times, two to three times per day.



2. Lie on the floor, or a firm bed. Knees and feet together, feet flat on the floor. Allow the knees to drop first right and then left, keeping the upper body still. Repeat 10 times, two to three times per day.



3. Lie on your back on the floor or a firm bed with your knees bent and feet flat. Bring both knees up towards the chest, hold the knees and squeeze them gently towards the body. The movement is slow and the pressure gentle. Lower the feet back down to the floor, knees bent. Repeat 10 times, two to three times per day.



4. Lie on your front on the floor or on a firm bed. Legs and bottom relaxed, put your hands under your shoulder palms on the floor. Push through your hands to arch the back as far as you can keeping the legs apart and bottom relaxed. Lower back down, repeat 10 times, two to three times per day.



5. Lie on your back, knees bent and feet on the floor, hip distance apart. Engage the tummy and squeeze the buttocks. Lift the pelvis and bottom off the floor, hip, knee and shoulder all in a diagonal line. Hold the position for a count of four, continuing to squeeze the buttocks then lower slowly to the starting position. Repeat 10 times, two to three times per day.



6. Sit on a chair toward the front of the seat. Feet firmly on the floor, hip width apart. Arms outstretched. Ensure the chair is stable. Lean forward to take the weight onto the feet and come up into standing position. Do not allow the knees to come together as your move into standing. Once in standing, begin to bend the knees again and lean slightly forward to allow the bottom to stick out and sit back down onto the front of the seat. The knees should remain apart throughout. The movement is slow and controlled. Repeat 10 times, two to three times per day.



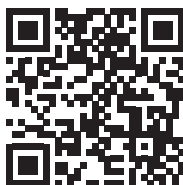
7. Standing sideways by a wall or counter top with the unaffected leg closest to the wall and a shoe on that foot. The affected leg should be barefoot and there should be room to swing that leg forwards and back. Allow the affected leg to swing freely forward and back, pointing the toes as the leg swings forward and pulling the ankle up as the leg comes back. Keep the knee straight throughout. Repeat 20 to 30 seconds, four to five times per day. This exercise should be relatively pain-free.



## Gradually

- Return to your normal activities
- Resume hobbies and sports

If you are unsure of when to progress your exercises, or you have any concerns about your injury please use the PHIO self-referral platform or scan the QR code below.



## Do I need a fit note?

- If you're sick and off work for **seven days or less**, your employer will normally ask you to complete a self-certificate for sick leave as soon as you return to work
- If you're sick and off work for **more than seven days** your employer will normally ask for a fit note (or Statement of Fitness for Work) from your GP
- You can read more information here <https://www.nhs.uk/common-health-questions/caring-carers-and-long-term-conditions/when-do-i-need-a-fit-note/>

## Useful websites and resources

- Ten sciatica facts – South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust <https://www.southtees.nhs.uk/resources/10-sciatica-facts/>
- Facts about back pain 10 facts about back pain <https://www.pain-ed.com/blog/2017/04/12/10-facts-about-back-pain/>
- Patient Stories behind the 10 back pain facts every person should know <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puj06Wls1pM>
- Facts about posture and back pain, Posture and Pain: Infographic <https://www.pain-ed.com/blog/2019/08/02/postureinfographic/>
- 10 facts about exercise and back pain <https://www.pain-ed.com/blog/2018/02/13/10-facts-about-exercise-and-back-pain/#:~:text=10%20facts%20about%20exercise%20and%20back%20pain%201,is%20the%20one%20you%20enjoy%20...%20More%20items>
- Back pain – Separating fact from fiction <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dISQLUE4brQ>

# Accessing information and support to make healthy lifestyle choices

## Online support

### Exercise

- <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/?tabname=exercise-tips>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-fitness-studio/>

### Sleep

- <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/10-tips-to-beat-insomnia/>

### Diet

- <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/start-the-nhs-weight-loss-plan/>

### Emotional well being

- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing/>



## English

If you need information in another way like easy read or a different language please let us know.

If you need an interpreter or assistance please let us know.

## Lithuanian

Jeigu norėtumėte, kad informacija jums būtų pateikta kitu būdu, pavyzdžiui, supaprastinta forma ar kita kalba, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.

Jeigu jums reikia vertėjo ar kitos pagalbos, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.

## Polish

Jeżeli chcieliby Państwo otrzymać te informacje w innej postaci, na przykład w wersji łatwej do czytania lub w innym języku, prosimy powiedzieć nam o tym.

Prosimy poinformować nas również, jeżeli potrzebowałiby Państwo usługi tłumaczenia ustnego lub innej pomocy.

## Punjabi

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਰੂਪ ਵਿਚ, ਜਿਵੇਂ ਪੜ੍ਹਨ ਵਿਚ ਆਸਾਨ ਰੂਪ ਜਾਂ ਕਿਸੇ ਦੂਜੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ, ਚਾਹੀਦੀ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਦੁਭਾਸ਼ੀਏ ਦੀ ਜਾਂ ਸਹਾਇਤਾ ਦੀ ਲੋੜ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।

## Romanian

Dacă aveți nevoie de informații în alt format, ca de exemplu caractere ușor de citit sau altă limbă, vă rugăm să ne informați.

Dacă aveți nevoie de un interpret sau de asistență, vă rugăm să ne informați.

## Traditional Chinese

如果您需要以其他方式了解信息，如易读或其他语种，请告诉我们。

如果您需要口译人员或帮助，请告诉我们。