

Moving back to health: Sciatica



Information for patients PhysioWorks

This advice is provided by a team of healthcare professionals to help and support you so you can take control of your symptoms. It is important not to let back pain take over your life and following this information on sciatica, you will know more about what it is, what you can do about it and how we can help. For further information, see - www.sheffieldbackpain.com

What is sciatica?

Sciatica refers to pain that travels down the back of the leg from the lower back or buttock to the foot. The pain is due to irritation of the sciatic nerve. It is often accompanied by back pain, but normally the leg pain is worse than the back pain.

Good news – 9 out of 10 cases resolve without specialist input and treatment. More than 7 out of 10 people report improvements in their symptoms within 4 weeks.

What causes it?

Our nerves leave the spine through small tunnels made by the bones of the spine. Some of these nerves in our lower back then merge to form the sciatic nerve. This happens on both sides of the spine and we therefore have a sciatic nerve running down each leg. If any of the nerves leaving the spine are irritated as they travel through the tunnel, either by swollen joints, muscles or ligaments, or due to a bulging disc, this can cause us pain anywhere along the length of the sciatic nerve.

A 'slipped disc' is a term commonly used. The term is incorrect, and discs do not slip, they bulge. They change regularly so being told you have a bulge does not mean it will stay like that forever.

Why does the pain travel down the leg?

The sciatic nerves leave the spine in the lower back and travel into the buttock and down the leg to the lower leg and to the foot. When a sciatic nerve is irritated, as described previously, the irritation caused leads to severe, shooting pain travelling down all or part of this nerve. This pain can be accompanied by pins and needles and numbness.



Warning signs

Rarely, the spinal cord that is responsible for bowel and bladder function can be pressed upon. If you suffer from any of the symptoms below, you should visit A&E immediately:

- Loss of feeling / 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
- Increased 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 movement
- Change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- Loss of sensation in genitals during sexual intercourse

What treatments are available?

Keeping active is very important and you may find that you need to take regular pain relievers to achieve this. Use pain relievers to mask the pain as you need to keep active and you cannot do yourself any harm in doing so. You will be given advice on activities that will help you and it is common to have some degree of discomfort during recovery but this is not harmful. By keeping mobile and doing gentle activity, you will stop your muscles becoming tight and weak – this may lead to long term problems. Remember: if you have specific concerns it is important to discuss this with your healthcare professional.

As highlighted earlier, sciatica is only rarely the sign of a serious problem. We acknowledge it is very unpleasant, but the pain you experience does not mean ongoing damage is being done.

Initially you should visit your GP practice for an assessment. They will provide you with appropriate pain relief and advice. If this is not helping they should review you and adjust your treatment. It takes time for things to settle. If your symptoms are not settling you may be referred to a team with multiple skills to offer further assessment and treatment. A small number of people sometimes have pressure on their nerves that is not improving. These people are assessed for things like MRI scans or a surgeon's opinion. This is not the route for the vast majority of people as things should get better.

An important resource is the community pharmacist who can help advise you what pain relievers to take and which are available over the counter.



Sheffield
Hospitals
Charity

To help support your local hospitals visit
sheffieldhospitalscharity.org.uk

Registered Charity No. 1107902

Alternative formats can be provided on request. Please call the department on your appointment letter or email: sth.alternativeformats@nhs.net

© Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust 2022

Re-use of all or any part of this document is governed by copyright and the "Re-use of Public Sector Information Regulations 2005" SI 2005 No.1515. Information on re-use can be obtained from the Information Governance Department, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals. Email sth.infogov@nhs.net