

What is Sciatica

Sciatica refers to pain, weakness, numbness or tingling in the leg or legs. Sciatica is a symptom of a medical problem - it is not a medical condition by itself. Generally, the pain travels along the pathway of the sciatic nerve, which starts at the lower back and crosses the buttocks and hips before it travels down into the leg(s). It occurs most often when a disc or bone overgrowth puts pressure on/pinches a part of the sciatic nerve causing inflammation, pain and often numbness in the affected leg. Although the pain can be severe, most cases are self-limiting and will resolve in a few weeks with treatment. Severe sciatica can require surgical intervention to relieve the pressure on the nerve before permanent damage occurs. Sciatica is also a condition that can recur causing significant pain and frustration for the individual. It would be important to identify any causative behaviors and avoid those in the future. This is a very common condition that affects more than 3,000,000 persons per year.

Risk Factors for Developing Sciatica

- Age
- Obesity
- Occupations which require heavy lifting, repetitive twisting or driving/sitting for long periods
- Diabetes- especially if poorly controlled.

Symptoms

- Pain can occur anywhere along the nerve pathway
- Pain can occur in a portion of the nerve or all of the nerve which would include the low back, buttock, thigh and calf
- Pain can vary from a mild ache to a sharp burning continuous pain
- It can feel like an electrical shock anywhere along the nerve pathway
- It can cause or be associated with numbness, tingling, or weakness in the leg or foot
- Part of the nerve pathway can be painful, while the other portion of the nerve pathway is numb

When Should I Call my Physician/Seek Help

- Sudden, severe pain in the low back/leg or numbness and/or weakness in the leg
- Pain after an injury, such as a motor vehicle accident
- Any issues with bowel or bladder control

Diagnosis

- Diagnosis is generally made during a physical examination by your medical provider
- If pain does not improve - your physician may order an x-ray, MRI, CT scan or electromyography/nerve conduction study

Treatment

- Home care - cold packs, heat, stretching and over-the-counter medications
- Medications - anti-inflammatories, antidepressants, anti-seizure medications and opiates
- Physical therapy - to get the patient out of pain and then provide the patient with routine exercises to strengthen core, improve range of motion and prevent repeat episodes of sciatica
- Steroid injections - this can be a local injection or often an epidural injection
- Alternative medicine - acupuncture and chiropractic manipulations may be an option
- Surgery- to remove bone or disc material that may be pressing on the nerve root

Complications

- Loss of feeling in the affected leg

Prevention

- Exercise regularly to keep the back and core muscles strong
- Maintain good posture when sitting - utilize seats or purchase desk chairs with lower back support, arm rests and use a lumbar support device
- Keep knees and hips level while sitting
- When standing for prolonged periods, lift one leg up and place on a step or box to reduce tension
- Lift appropriately - use your legs, hold the load close to your body, never lift and twist at the same time, and ask for help