

# Sciatica

## What is sciatica?

The medical term for sciatica is lumbar radiculopathy. What you are experiencing is irritation of one (or more) of the nerves in the low back, also called the lumbar region. Nerve irritation can cause leg pain (at times very severe), sensitivity, pins and needles, numbness, weakness or a combination of symptoms. It is just as possible to have a kind of sciatica in the arm, this gives all the same symptoms, but it's caused by a nerve irritation in the neck.

For most people the nerve sensitivity reduces in around 12 weeks. For some people it can persist. Some people find the symptoms settle of their own accord, some may need help from their GP or a physiotherapist.

## What factors affect nerve health and sensitivity?

A surprising number of things can contribute to nerve sensitivity and irritation. Often it's a combination of factors and if these are addressed, it can help with reducing the pain.

All of the factors below are worth consideration:

- Injury
- Overweight
- Posture and poor movement
- Sedentary lifestyle
- Alcohol/smoking
- Work – repetitive tasks, prolonged sitting, driving extended periods of time
- Diabetes, thyroid function
- Neurological diseases
- Ageing factors

## What can I do?

- **Try to move as normally as possible** – to reduce muscle spasm and stiffness.
- **Daily walking** – encourages circulation and oxygen supply to the nerves to help reduce sensitivity
- **Pace activities** – this can help symptoms become more manageable. Sometimes nerve sensitivity can flare up after activity rather than during. Pacing can help reduce this. Good pacing can be difficult to achieve on your own but you can get good advice from your physiotherapist.
- **Medication** – Medications can be taken to help ease the pain and inflammation. Ask your GP or local pharmacist for advice.
- **Heat and Ice** – The use of heat can help with pain and muscle relaxation. Use a warm water bottle, or microwavable wheat bag, following the instructions provided when you purchased it. To protect your skin from heat burns, wrap the item in a few layers of towel. Leave in place for 10-15 minutes. It can be reapplied after 2 hours if you wish.

The use of ice can help with pain and inflammation. Use crushed ice cubes or a bag of frozen peas. Protect the skin from an ice burn by placing the ice pack in a wet towel. Leave in place for 10-15 minutes. It can be reapplied after 2 hours if you wish. It's normal for the skin to become pink with either heat or ice, however if you experience discomfort or a burning sensation remove the item immediately. Don't apply heat or ice packs if you have poor skin sensation or poor circulation, if you are diabetic or over areas of infection.

- **Nutrition** – try to maintain a healthy weight. Nutrition is important to prevent conditions such as diabetes and some types of anaemia, which can all affect your nerves.

<https://www.calderdale.gov.uk/v2/residents/health-and-social-care/bls/adults/eat>

- **Lifestyle** – Alcohol and smoking can also impact on nerve health, see the following links for support with alcohol use and smoking:

<https://yorkshiresmokefree.nhs.uk/>

<https://www.calderdale.gov.uk/v2/residents/health-and-social-care/bls/adults/smoking>

<https://kirkleesinrecovery.com/services/chart-kirklees/>

<https://calderdaleinrecovery.com/>

- **Mental health** – Issues like stress, anxiety, depression and even poor sleep can impact on our pain levels and coping strategies with pain. There are local services that you can access without seeing your GP if you need support for these issues:

<https://www.southwestyorkshire.nhs.uk/services/improving-access-to-psychological-therapies-iapt/#service-about>

## Muscle Weakness

In rare cases, pressure on the nerves can cause significant weakness of muscles in the leg and foot, such as a foot drop – where the muscles of the ankle become incapable of lifting the weight of the foot. Sometimes weakness can also happen in the knee or hip. If symptoms are in the arm, you may notice inability to grip or lift. If this occurs it is recommended to consult your GP practice urgently, or call 111.

## Cauda Equina Syndrome

Very rarely, 1 person in 40,000 can experience pressure on a collection of nerves that supply the muscles and organs of the pelvis. These nerves are responsible for genital sensation, sexual function, bowel and bladder control. If you have noticed new altered or reduced control in your bladder or bowel function, reduced sensation around the anus or genitals, altered sensation during sexual intercourse or reduced erectile function then you should urgently telephone 111 or go to A&E.

## What about investigations?

Investigations are rarely helpful early on, as sciatica will usually clear up on its own within 4-12 weeks. Following the advice above is the best way to help symptoms to settle.

Occasionally, imaging such as an MRI may show a pinched nerve - this doesn't necessarily mean this is always the cause of the symptoms. Images often show no specific cause for symptoms, but normal ageing features are usually found, which shouldn't be a cause for concern.

Imaging is sometimes used when a person has symptoms of significant weakness or persistent, severe symptoms that are not settling. This is to determine whether further treatment is needed.

## Spinal Injections

If the nerve pain is severe and does not settle on its own, injections are sometimes considered. Usually this is a combination of steroid and local anaesthetic. This can reduce the sensitivity of the nerve and reduce inflammation. This can be helpful if the pain is severe and not responding to medication - especially to allow better movement, sleep patterns and return to normal day-to-day function.

Relief of pain after injections is often short term. This is the best time to focus on rehabilitation and physiotherapy for long term benefits.

## Surgery

Surgery is rarely required for sciatica. In most cases, symptoms are well controlled with the treatments above. If a surgical consultation is likely to be helpful, your physiotherapist will discuss this with you or refer you to the MSK spinal department

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**If you have any comments about this leaflet or the service you have received you can contact :**

Physiotherapy Department  
Huddersfield Royal Infirmary  
Telephone: 01484 342434

MSK Pysiotherapy Admin Office  
Telephone: 01484 905380

[www.cht.nhs.uk](http://www.cht.nhs.uk)

**If you would like this information in another format or language contact the above.**

Potřebujete-li tyto informace v jiném formátu nebo jazyce, obraťte se prosím na výše uvedené oddělení

Jeżeli są Państwo zainteresowani otrzymaniem tych informacji w innym formacie lub wersji językowej, prosimy skontaktować się z nami, korzystając z ww. danych kontaktowych

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