

Advice for managing sciatica

Sciatica is pain that travels down the back of the leg due to a problem in the lower back is called sciatica. The pain in the leg is often more severe than the back pain and it may be accompanied by pins and needles or numbness; usually below the knee or in the foot.

90% of cases get better by themselves without any specialist input. More than 70% of people report an improvement in their symptoms within four weeks.

What causes sciatica?

The spinal canal and intervertebral foraminae are tunnels in the spine through which nerves travel. In the lower back these nerves merge together to form the sciatic nerve which runs down the entire leg to supply specific muscles and areas of skin. When the size of these tunnels is reduced (e.g. by swollen joints or ligaments or a bulging disc) pressure on the nerves can occur. This can cause pain, altered sensation and weakness anywhere along the length of the sciatic nerve.



Three important things to know

1. Sciatica is not usually a sign of serious damage or disease

Back problems are most often due to a simple injury to back structures and are usually not due to something serious.

2. Rest rarely helps

Bed rest can be helpful for sudden and severe pain but only for a very short time (not more than two days). Once the pain has been there for a while, resting in bed actually prolongs the pain.

3. Staying active helps

Staying gently active will help your back to recover. Movement helps to stop your back becoming stiff and your muscles from weakening, allowing you to return to normal activity as soon as possible. **Even if movement causes some extra pain you will not be harming your back.**

What you can do to help your sciatica

Stay active – don't rest for too long

Prolonged rest lengthens recovery time and prolongs pain. The best advice is to keep gently active, even if it causes some extra pain.

Taking pain relief regularly is often important to help you to keep moving. Talk to your doctor about what medication is best for you. Other options for pain relief could include heat packs, relaxed breathing and distraction, such as listening to music.

Keep doing your everyday activities

Back pain and sciatica need not stop you from doing all of the things you want to do. Be aware of the activities that make the pain worse and avoid things like excessive lifting and staying in the one position for too long. Doing activities in small amounts with rest breaks will avoid flaring up your symptoms. Remain at work if possible.

Exercise

Gentle exercises, stretches and walking may help to ease your pain. Begin to exercise regularly, for short periods of time and gradually increase the amount you do as it feels more comfortable.



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Is a scan necessary?

In most cases of back pain routine x-rays or scans are not necessary as they do not show the cause of pain. They expose you to radiation and do not change how your pain is managed. Scans often reveal wear changes that are not relevant to your current pain. This can add confusion and worry to some people and slow down the recovery.

Seek medical advice

Occasionally back and leg pain can be the result of a serious problem. It is important to seek medical advice immediately if you have any of these symptoms:

- > difficulty passing or controlling urine
- > poor control of your bowels
- > numbness around your back passage or genitals
- > numbness, pins and needles weakness or pain in both legs
- > unsteadiness when walking
- > unexplained loss of weight
- > night sweats, chills, fevers, nausea/vomiting or unrelenting night pain.

Acknowledgements:

The Back Book, Royal College of General Practitioners, NHS Executive

Australian Acute Musculoskeletal Pain Guidelines Group: Evidence Based Management of Acute Musculoskeletal Pain

Sheffield Back Pain
web site: <http://www.sheffieldbackpain.com>

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For more information

Web: www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/lowbackpain

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