

Sciatica: A Genuine Pain In The Butt

A Message From Ruth Jones, City Of Quincy Health Commissioner



RUTH JONES

Editor's note: due to the coronavirus outbreak and health emergency, Quincy Health Commissioner Ruth Jones is unable to submit new articles to The Quincy Sun. We are running some of her old health articles in the interim. The column below first appeared in The Sun two years ago.

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Sciatica refers to pain that radiates along the path of the sciatic nerve, which branches from your lower back through your hips and buttocks and down each leg.

Characteristically, sciatica affects only one side of your body. Pain that radiates from your lower (lumbar) spine to your buttock and down the back of your leg is the trademark of sciatica. You might feel the discomfort practically anywhere along the nerve pathway, but it's particularly likely to pursue a path from your low back to your buttock and the back of your thigh and calf.

The pain can vary extensively, from a mild ache to a sharp, burning sensation or agonizing pain. Sometimes it can resemble a jolt or electric shock. It tends to be more severe when you cough or sneeze, and prolonged sitting can aggravate symptoms. Traditionally only one side of your body is affected. Some

people also exhibit numbness, tingling or muscle weakness in the affected leg or foot. It is possible to have pain in one part of your leg and numbness in another part.

Mild sciatica usually goes away over time. Although most people recover fully from sciatica, often without treatment, sciatica can potentially cause permanent nerve damage. Notify your doctor if self-care measures fail to ease your symptoms or if your pain lasts longer than a week, is severe or becomes progressively worse.

Get immediate medical care if: you have sudden, severe pain in your low back or leg and numbness or muscle weakness in your leg, the pain follows a violent injury, such as a traffic accident or you have trouble controlling your bowels or bladder.

Though sciatica usually occurs when the sciatic nerve becomes pinched, either by a herniated disk in your spine or by an overgrowth of bone (bone spur) on your vertebrae. More rarely, the nerve can be compressed by a tumor or damaged by a disease such as diabetes. Risk factors for sciatica include:

- Age - Age-related changes in the spine, such as herniated disks and bone spurs, are the most common causes of sciatica.
- Obesity - By increas-

ing the stress on your spine, excess body weight can contribute to the spinal changes that trigger sciatica.

- Occupation - A job that requires you to twist your back, carry heavy loads or drive a motor vehicle for long periods might play a role in sciatica, but there's no conclusive evidence of this link.

- Prolonged sitting - People who sit for prolonged periods or have a sedentary lifestyle are more likely to develop sciatica than active people are.

- Diabetes - This condition, which affects the way your body uses blood sugar, increases your risk of nerve damage.

It's not always possible to prevent sciatica, and the condition may recur. The following can play a significant role in protecting your back:

- Exercise regularly. To keep your back strong, pay special attention to your core muscles, the muscles in your abdomen and lower back that are essential for proper posture and alignment. Ask your healthcare provider to recommend specific activities.

- Maintain proper posture when you sit. Choose a seat with good lower back support, armrests and a swivel base. Consider placing a pillow or rolled towel in the small of your

back to maintain its normal curve. Keep your knees and hips level.

- Use good body mechanics. If you stand for long periods, rest one foot on a stool or small box from time to time. When you lift something heavy, let your lower extremities do the work. Move straight up and down. Keep your back straight and bend only at the knees. Hold the object close to your body. Avoid lifting and twisting simultaneously. Find someone to assist you if the object is heavy or awkward.

Diagnosis begins with a physical exam; your healthcare provider may check your muscle strength and reflexes. You may be asked to walk on your toes or heels, rise from a squatting position and, while lying on your back, lift your legs one at a time. Pain that results from sciatica will usually exacerbate during these activities.

Many people have herniated disks or bone spurs that will show up on X-rays and other imaging tests such as an MRI or CT

scan, but have no symptoms. So doctors don't typically order these tests unless your pain is severe, or it doesn't improve within a few weeks. Electromyography (EMG) a test measuring the electrical impulses produced by the nerves and the responses of your muscles, can confirm nerve compression caused by herniated disks or narrowing of your spinal canal (spinal stenosis).

Self-care treatments that might be useful are:

- **Cold packs** - Initially, you might get relief from a cold pack placed on the painful area for up to 20 minutes several times a day. Use an ice pack or a package of frozen peas wrapped in a clean towel.

- **Hot packs** - After two to three days; apply heat to the areas that hurt. Use hot packs, a heat lamp or a heating pad on the lowest setting. If you continue to have pain, try alternating warm and cold packs.

- **Stretching** - Stretching exercises for your low back can help you feel better and might help relieve

nerve root compression. Avoid jerking, bouncing or twisting during the stretch, and try to hold the stretch for at least 30 seconds.

Over-the-counter medications - Pain relievers such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) and naproxen sodium (Aleve) are sometimes helpful for sciatica.

If your pain doesn't improve with self-care measures, your doctor might suggest medications such as muscle relaxants or steroid injections, physical therapy, or in rare cases surgery if symptoms are severe or other treatment methods are unsuccessful. Some other alternative therapies commonly used to relieve pain and discomfort are acupuncture and chiropractic spinal adjustment.

Ruth Jones is the health commissioner for the City of Quincy.

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