

Sciatica Pain

WHAT IS SCIATICA?

Sciatica is pain somewhere in the leg that originates in the back. Many people never have back pain which may make it hard to diagnose. The sciatic nerve emerges from the lower spine, goes down the leg, and stimulates the muscles and skin of the thigh, leg and foot.

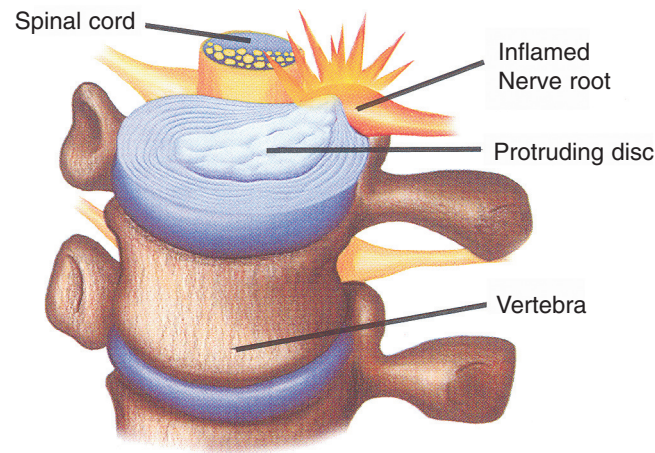
WHAT CAUSES SCIATICA?

Injury or inflammation of the sciatic nerve can cause pain to travel down the leg from the thigh and into the foot and toes. Sciatica may be caused by a back injury or from pressure on the nerve at various points along the nerve pathway.

Sciatica pain may also be caused by an abnormal bulging or protrusion of a disc in the lower back. The discs are jelly-like pads which act as elastic cushions to separate the vertebrae (spinal bones). The affected disc(s) may press on the spinal nerve root of the sciatic nerve. This condition is known as a herniated or “slipped” disc, and the pain may be felt along the lower back.

Sciatica may arise when a muscle goes into a spasm, contracts abnormally and puts pressure on the nerve. Injury occurs as a result of weak back muscles, by prolonged or improper use of the back or as a result of being overweight.

One of the most common causes of sciatica is a bulging or protruding disc, also called a “slipped” or herniated disc. The affected disc(s) may press on the spinal nerve root of the sciatic nerve.



An arthritic spur irritating the nerve is a common cause of sciatica.

HOW CAN YOU EASE YOUR PAIN?

If you have low back pain or have reason to believe you have sciatica, apply ice to the lower back to help reduce inflammation and swelling and to decrease the pain. You can use the ice for periods of 15 to 20 minutes, 4 or 5 times a day. Make sure you use a thin towel or pillowcase next to your skin when applying the ice. Heat can be used but may not be as effective.

Avoid sitting for any length of time. Sitting puts the weight of the body on the lower discs of the spine, which may aggravate disc problems related to sciatica. A small towel roll for lumbar support (in the small of your back) may also be helpful while sitting.

You may be most comfortable when lying on your back or walking. A word of caution: these are temporary remedies and not a substitute for seeking immediate professional care. If you have sciatica, consult your doctor as soon as possible.

WHAT TREATMENTS ARE AVAILABLE?

Our spine specialists are trained in the detection and treatment of problems affecting the joints. Many cases of sciatica lend themselves to correction through Epidural Steroid Injection (ESI). Physical therapy can also be helpful.

WHAT IS EPIDURAL STEROID INJECTION (ESI)?

ESI is a procedure in which a cortisone-like drug is injected into the spinal canal. These cortisone compounds are potent anti-inflammatory agents that deliver medication directly to the inflamed area.

While the anti-inflammatory properties of the medication tend to be temporary (one week to one year), an ESI can be beneficial in providing relief for patients during an episode of severe back pain and allows patients to progress in their rehabilitation.

HOW IS AN ESI DONE?

ESI is an outpatient procedure, really no longer than an office visit. The procedure causes little discomfort, and the risk of complication is very low.

A local anesthetic is used to numb a small area in the lower back. A needle is then placed through the skin into the epidural space and area adjacent to the affected nerves. The medication is painlessly injected through the needle and spread to the nerves.

PHYSICAL THERAPY

Your doctor may recommend physical therapy to help manage your pain.

Physical therapy is designed to strengthen the muscles of the lower back, abdomen, buttocks, and legs, in order to promote good posture and enhance your treatment. The therapy may include electrical stimulation, traction, manual therapy and a lumbar stabilization program. The lumbar stabilization program should include education, exercises and proper body mechanics to minimize recurrence and promote healing.

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Questions & Answers



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