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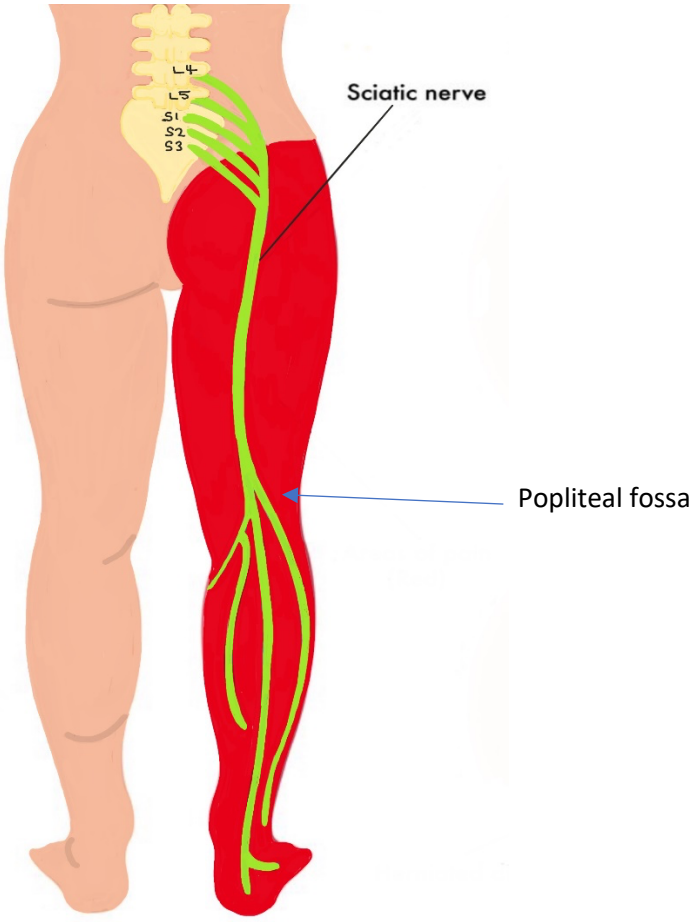
Sciatica – what is it and what can you do about it?

The word ‘sciatica’ has, in recent times. Become a bit of a ‘go to’ phrase for any pain in the lower back or the legs. So what is sciatica?



Anatomy.

The sciatic nerve is the largest and longest nerve in the human body, it is approximately as thick as a human's thumb! It originates from the anterior rami of the lower lumbar (L4-L5) (bottom of the back) and upper sacral spinal nerves (S1, S2, S3) (below the back in the pelvic area). It contains fibres from both the posterior and anterior divisions of these spinal nerves.



The sciatic nerve arises in the lumbosacral region. It descends through the posterior aspect of the thigh. Before entering the popliteal fossa, the nerve terminates by splitting into two large terminal branches: the tibial nerve and common fibular (peroneal) nerve.

The main function of the sciatic nerve is to provide sensory and motor supply to the skin and muscles of the thigh, leg and foot.

What is sciatica?

Sciatica refers to pain that travels along the path of the sciatic nerve. Sciatica most often occurs when a herniated disk or an overgrowth of bone puts pressure on part of the nerve. This causes inflammation, pain and often some numbness in the affected leg. In almost all cases, the pain is felt in only one side of the body. The greater the pressure on the nerve, the further down the route of the sciatic nerve the pain is felt.

Symptoms

Sciatica pain can be almost anywhere along the nerve pathway. It's especially likely to follow a path from the low back to the buttock and the back of a thigh and calf.

The pain can vary from a mild ache to a sharp, burning pain. Sometimes it can feel like a jolt or electric shock. It can be worse when coughing or sneezing or sitting a long time. Usually, sciatica affects only one side of the body.



Some people also have numbness, tingling or muscle weakness in the leg or foot. One part of the leg can be in pain, while another part can feel numb.

Risk factors for having sciatica

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**. Being overweight increases stress on the spine.
- **Occupation**. A job that requires twisting the back, carrying heavy loads or driving a motor vehicle for long periods might play a role in sciatica.
- **Prolonged sitting**. People who sit a lot or don't move much are more likely to develop sciatica than active people are.
- **Diabetes**. This condition, which affects the way the body uses blood sugar, increases the risk of nerve damage.

Complications

Most people recover fully from sciatica, often without treatment. But sciatica can damage nerves. Seek immediate medical attention for:

- Loss of feeling in the affected leg
- Weakness in the affected leg
- Loss of bowel or bladder control

Treatment

Most types of lower back pain are often referred to physical/exercise therapy as one of the first-line treatments. Physical/exercise therapy for low back pain includes guided therapeutic exercises that strengthen the lower back muscles and condition the spinal tissues and joints.

The short- and long-term goals of physical/exercise therapy for back pain typically include the following:

- **Decrease painful symptoms** in the lower back and/or leg
- **Improve low back function** to tolerate daily activities as independently as possible
- **Increase the spine's flexibility** and improve its range of motion
- **Formulate a maintenance program** to prevent the recurrence of back problems

The exercises are intended to provide flexibility and strength training to the entire kinetic chain—groups of body segments, joints, and muscles that work together to perform bodily movements.

Physical/exercise therapy helps restore the patient's ability to perform daily activities with little-to-no discomfort. Large-scale studies have shown that

physical/exercise therapy can provide up to 60% improvement in lower back pain and other symptoms.

Prevention

It's not always possible to prevent sciatica, and the condition can come back. To protect your back:

- **Exercise regularly**. To keep the back strong, work the core muscles — the muscles in the abdomen and lower back needed for good posture and alignment. A health care provider can recommend activities.
- **Keep good posture when sitting**. Choose a seat with good lower back support, armrests and a swivel base. For better low back support, place a pillow or rolled towel in the small of the back to keep its normal curve. Keep knees and hips level.
- **Use your body correctly**. When standing for long periods, rest one foot on a stool or small box from time to time. When lifting something heavy, let your legs do the work. Hold the load close to your body. Don't lift and twist at the same time. Find someone to help lift heavy or awkward things.

How we can help

If you are experiencing discomfort in your back, or anywhere else in the body, we can offer you an online video consultation. We will take a history from you, including how and when you might have incurred the problem. We will guide you through some tests, just as you would perform them in our clinic and then give you a diagnosis and create a treatment programme that you perform in the comfort of your own home.

You can contact us today:

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Or visit our website and click on the ‘Contact Us’ button.

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