Sciatica
Summary

- Sciatica is pain in the buttock and leg, caused by pressure on nerves in the lower back.
- Sciatica can be caused by slipped discs, pinched nerves or some forms of arthritis.
- Treatment options include rest, painkillers, epidural injections and surgery.

Sciatica is nerve pain arising from the sciatic nerve. It can be produced by pressure on the nerve, where it passes through the buttock. Sciatica can be brought on by sitting on a hard seat. When your leg goes to sleep, that is also a form of sciatica.

The sciatic nerve is a large nerve, formed from nerve roots that originate from the spinal cord. These nerve roots pass out between the disc spaces and join up to form the sciatic nerve. It passes from the spine into the buttock, then into the back of the thigh and leg.

The sciatic nerve controls sensation and function to the leg and foot. In sciatica, prolapsed or 'slipped' discs tend to bulge and press on the intervertebral nerve(s). This pressure irritates the nerve, causing referred pain.

Most cases of sciatica resolve by themselves within six weeks to three months. Sciatica can also be caused by narrowing of the nerve tunnel between discs due to osteoarthritis. Elderly people who suffer from disk degeneration as a consequence of ageing tend to be troubled the most by sciatica.

Symptoms of sciatica

The symptoms of sciatica include:
- hot pain in the buttock
- aching in the buttock, back of the thigh (hamstring) and calf
- pain in the ankle and foot
- pins and needles
- increased pain when lifting, straining or coughing
- loss of power to the muscles of the leg and foot.

Lumbar vertebrae are vulnerable to injury

The area of the spine that takes the most punishment from movement and activity is the lower back, or lumbar region. This consists of five relatively large vertebrae. The discs cushioning these vertebrae are particularly susceptible to degeneration caused by ageing. The cushioning discs become progressively thinner and harder, which stresses this portion of the back and may result in a variety of lower back pain disorders, including sciatica.

Bed rest may not be helpful for sciatica

Traditional advice for treating sciatica recommended complete bed rest. However, recent Australian studies have concluded that lying in bed may offer only minimal improvement, or may even exacerbate the condition.

Unless specifically advised by your doctor, remaining active may be the preferred option. Gentle exercises can help. Swimming is particularly useful, as it is not a weight bearing exercise so flexibility and strength can be improved without unduly stressing your back. Herniated spinal discs usually heal themselves with time.

Self-care for sciatica

Suggestions for managing sciatica include:
- rest, but not prolonged bedrest
- over-the-counter pain-relieving medication
- ice packs
- proper posture
- resting the back by not bending, flexing or lifting heavy weights
- warm baths
- sleeping on a mattress that is not too soft or too hard
- ergonomic furniture, such as chairs with lumbar support
- gentle exercises to strengthen and support the lower back.

Treatment for sciatica
Sciatica that doesn't resolve itself after a few days needs medical attention. Professional treatment for sciatica includes:

- medication, including pain-relieving and anti-inflammatory medication
- traction
- manipulative therapies, such as chiropractic or osteopathy
- epidural injections – medication injected directly into the spine
- chemonucleolysis – Injection of a special enzyme into the disk
- physiotherapy, including electrical stimulation of the back muscles
- complementary therapies, including acupuncture
- surgery as a last resort.

Surgery for sciatica

The operation for sciatica that is caused by a ruptured or 'slipped' disc is called a 'partial discectomy'. Your lower back is initially x-rayed to identify the problem area. Under general anaesthetic, a small cut is made in the back, and the muscles and underlying ligaments are pushed aside. The fragments of the ruptured disc are then removed.

Nine out of 10 people experience relief of symptoms following surgery. However, there is a chance for one in 20 that the pain will return at a later date.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Chiropractor
- Osteopathic practitioner
- Physiotherapist
- Acupuncturist
- Surgeon

Things to remember

- Sciatica is pain in the buttock and leg, caused by pressure on nerves in the lower back.
- Sciatica can be caused by slipped discs, pinched nerves or some forms of arthritis.
- Treatment options include rest, painkillers, epidural injections and surgery.

References


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- dial triple zero (000) in an emergency
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Brains and nerves

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Brain and nerve basics
- Brain and head injury
- Brain tumours
- Brain related conditions
- Epilepsy and seizures
- Nerve related conditions
- Spinal cord
- Speech and language
- Tests and procedures

Brain and nerve basics

- Brain

Messages relay between the brain and the motor and sensory nerves of the body in a constant 'conversation'.

- Brain death

Brain death differs from other states of unconsciousness in important ways.

- Brain surgery

Brain surgery is performed for a number of reasons, including alterations in brain tissue, brain blood flow and cerebrospinal fluid.

- Central nervous system birth defects

Folic acid taken before conception, and during at least the first four weeks of pregnancy, can prevent around seven out of 10 cases of neural tube defects.

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Coma
A wide range of illnesses, conditions and events can cause coma...

Epilepsy
Epilepsy is the world's most common serious brain disorder and is characterised by a tendency to have recurrent seizures. Most seizures are spontaneous and brief yet self-limiting and can involve...

Nervous system
The nervous system helps all the parts of the body to communicate with each other...

Brain and head injury

- Acquired brain injury
  The long-term effects of brain injury will be different for each person and can range from mild to profound...

- Alcohol related brain impairment
  A person with alcohol related brain impairment (ARBi) might experience problems with coordination, thinking, planning and memory...

- Alcohol related brain impairment - memory loss
  If a person with alcohol related brain impairment is aware of their memory limits, they can learn how to deal with them...

- Alcohol related brain impairment - support
  People with alcohol related brain impairment benefit when their life is organised and follows a good structure...

- Brain injury and sexual issues
  A brain injury can change the way a person experiences and expresses their sexuality...

- Head and spinal injuries first aid
  Head injuries can be serious and require urgent medical attention. A hard blow to the head from a fall, knock or assault can injure the brain, even when there are no visible signs of trauma to the...

- Head injuries and concussion
  There is no specific treatment for mild head injury other than plenty of rest, and not overdoing things...

- Subarachnoid haemorrhage
  A subarachnoid haemorrhage is any bleed located underneath one of the protective layers of the brain known as the arachnoid layer...

- Subdural haematomas
  Subdural haematomas are blood clots formed underneath one of the protective layers of the brain...

Brain tumours

- Acoustic neuroma
  In its earlier stages, an acoustic neuroma can present similar symptoms to other, less serious conditions, which may delay diagnosis and treatment...

- Brain tumours - cancer
  Brain cancer symptoms and treatment depend on which part of the brain is affected...

- Brain tumours - gliomas
  Gliomas are brain tumours associated with the three types of glial cell in the brain...

- Meningioma
  A meningioma is a non-cancerous brain tumour and responds well to treatment...

- Pituitary tumour
  Generally, pituitary tumours are benign and slow growing, and pituitary cancers are extremely rare...

Brain related conditions

- Amnesia
  Loss of memory can be temporary or permanent, but 'amnesia' usually refers to the temporary variety...
Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD)
Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease is characterised by physical deterioration of the brain, dementia and walking difficulties.

Dementia explained
Dementia is not a normal part of ageing and can happen to anybody.

Epilepsy and Young People - Diagnosis (video)
Epilepsy is the world's most common serious brain disorder and is characterised by a tendency to have recurrent seizures. Most seizures are spontaneous and brief yet self-limiting and can involve.

Headache
Although nearly all of us will experience a headache during our lifetime, persistent headaches need to be medically investigated with tests such as scans, eye tests or sinus x-rays.

Headache - migraine
Migraine causes a severe and throbbing headache, usually on one side of the head, as well as symptoms such as nausea.

Hydrocephalus
Hydrocephalus is the abnormal enlargement of the brain cavities (ventricles) caused by a build-up of cerebrospinal fluid.

Leukodystrophy
Leukodystrophy refers to a group of inherited disorders that affect the white matter of the brain, which causes loss of normal brain functions.

Stroke explained
A stroke interrupts blood flow to an area of the brain and is a medical emergency.

Epilepsy and seizures

Epilepsy and employment
Many people living with epilepsy are successfully employed across a range of professional fields.

Epilepsy
Medication can provide seizure control for approximately 70 per cent of people with epilepsy.

Epilepsy and exercise
It is rare for a person with epilepsy to have a seizure during physical activity, but you should always take safety precautions when exercising.

Epilepsy - first aid and safety
Good seizure management is an important part of reducing the risks associated with epilepsy.

Epilepsy in children
Children with epilepsy generally have seizures that respond well to medication, and they enjoy a normal and active childhood.

Epilepsy - lifestyle issues
Learn about your epilepsy so that you can make informed decisions about your lifestyle.

Fever - febrile convulsions
A febrile convolution is a fit that occurs in children when they have a high fever.

Fibromyalgia
Fibromyalgia is a condition associated with widespread pain and tenderness.

Medicinal cannabis
Medicinal cannabis is a legal, high quality medicine that can be prescribed for people by their doctor.

Nerve related conditions

Bell's palsy
The majority of people with Bell's palsy, around 90 per cent, will recover completely with time.

- **Carpal tunnel syndrome**
  Carpal tunnel syndrome can be caused by repetitive hand movements, pregnancy and arthritis.

- **Complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS)**
  Complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS) is a painful condition of a person's arm, hand, leg or foot, which occurs after an injury, such as a fracture.

- **Diabetes type 2**
  Type 2 diabetes may be prevented, but it cannot be cured.

- **Diabetic neuropathy**
  Diabetic neuropathy is the most common cause of neuropathy.

- **Eyes - optic neuritis**
  Optic neuritis is inflammation of the optic nerve that causes blurred, grey and dim vision.

- **Friedreich's ataxia**
  To the casual observer, a person with Friedreich ataxia may seem to be drunk.

- **Guillain-Barré syndrome**
  Most people with Guillain-Barré syndrome experienced some form of viral or bacterial infection before the onset of symptoms.

- **Neuralgia**
  Neuralgia is pain in a nerve pathway. Generally, neuralgia isn't an illness in its own right, but a symptom of injury or a particular disorder.

- **Sciatica**
  Most cases of sciatica resolve by themselves within six weeks to three months.

**Spinal cord**

- **Quadriplegics - tendon transfer surgery**
  Many quadriplegics could live more independent lives with a highly specialised operation called tendon transfer surgery.

- **Spina bifida**
  Folate can prevent up to 70 per cent of spina bifida cases if taken daily for one month before conception and during the first three months of pregnancy.

- **Spinal cord injury - paraplegia**
  Most people who have a spinal cord injury are young males, who have a greater tendency to indulge in risky behaviour.

- **Spinal muscular atrophy (SMA)**
  A child with spinal muscular atrophy type 1 rarely lives beyond three years of age.

- **Syringomyelia**
  Syringomyelia is the growth of a cyst in the spinal cord that may result in paraplegia or quadriplegia if not treated.

**Speech and language**

- **Childhood apraxia of speech**
  Childhood apraxia of speech affects a person's ability to organise the muscles used in speech.

- **Dyslexia**
  Dyslexia is a type of specific learning difficulty (SLD) in which the person has difficulties with language and words.

- **Stuttering**
  Children who stutter should see a speech pathologist, preferably before they start school.

**Tests and procedures**

- **CT scan**
  The CT scan is a medical imaging procedure that uses x-rays and digital computer technology to create detailed images of the body.

- **EEG test**
In a person with epilepsy, an electroencephalogram (EEG) may show bursts of abnormal discharges in the form of spikes and sharp wave patterns.

- MRI scan
  The MRI scan is a medical imaging procedure that uses a magnetic field and radio waves to take pictures inside the body.

- PET scan
  PET scans are tests that show how an organ or tissue is working.

- X-ray examinations
  An x-ray examination uses a special machine to take two-dimensional pictures of internal body structures to help diagnose conditions or injuries.

Related Information

- Pain and pain management
  Pain is our bodies built in alarm system. Learn about types of pain, what is acute, persistent or chronic pain and and how to manage your pain.

- Neuralgia
  Neuralgia is pain in a nerve pathway. Generally, neuralgia isn’t an illness in its own right, but a symptom of injury or a particular disorder.

- Complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS)
  Complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS) is a painful condition of a person's arm, hand, leg or foot, which occurs after an injury, such as a fracture.

- Pins and needles
  Pins and needles is a sensation of uncomfortable tingling or prickling, usually felt in the hands or feet.

- Carpal tunnel syndrome
  Carpal tunnel syndrome can be caused by repetitive hand movements, pregnancy and arthritis.

Home

Related information on other websites

- Adelaide Spine Clinic - Sciatica

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