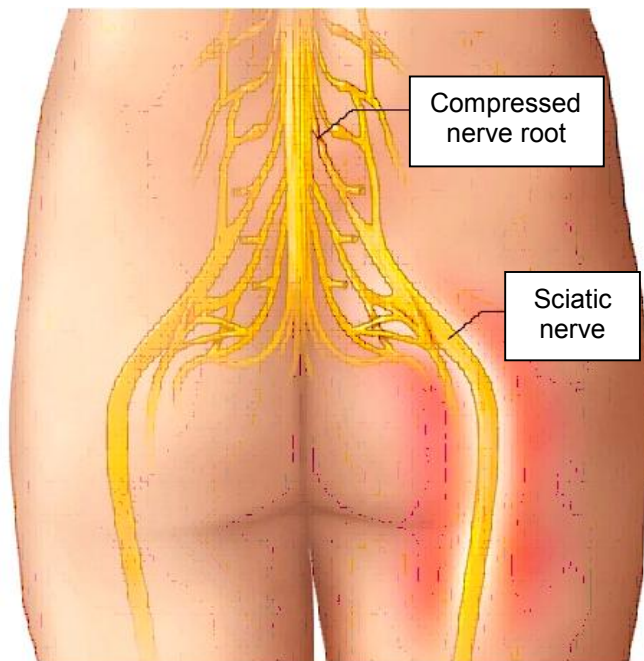


Sciatica – Cause and Effect

How the pain of sciatica is transferred from the site of injury

Sufferers of this uncomfortable, often debilitating medical condition can be of any age and from different walks of life. The problem arises when the sciatic nerve is damaged in some way and becomes inflamed. Although the original injury tends to occur in the lower back close to the spine, the pain and discomfort is not necessarily localised and typically is experienced in the leg. This is because the nerve itself branches out, running first through hips and buttocks before continuing on down the leg. Depending on the severity of the damage, with careful management and the correct treatment most cases will be resolved in a matter of weeks. There are, however, certain extended symptoms that may suggest surgical intervention; and these will be covered later.

To fully understand the cause and effect of sciatica, the diagram below produced by the Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research makes it fairly clear.



As the nerve is close to the spinal column, damage to the root may occur when it is pinched by one of the disks (often referred to as a slipped disk) or is compressed by a protruding spur of bone on the vertebrae. Tumours can also exert pressure; and damage can be caused by diabetes; but these cases are rare.

Once sustained, the initial injury transfers pain and discomfort along the path of the nerve which travels through the hips, then to the buttocks and eventually down the leg. Usually this is felt in the thigh; but sciatica can also result in numbness experienced in the calf and even the foot.

Frequently accepted as just another part of growing old, younger generations are probably unaware that certain aspects of their current lifestyle will contribute to sciatica at a later date. Manual exertions, in particular heavy lifting over a long period, are a major cause of spinal deterioration which may eventually trigger the condition. Over time, the soft tissue separating the vertebrae can wear down resulting in a progressive narrowing of the spine known as spinal stenosis. This not only results in a person growing shorter; but can be responsible for the compression of the sciatic nerve, as shown in the above diagram. Frequent twisting may eventually bring on the condition; but even those who rarely perform this type of physical action are not immune. In fact, people who lead a relatively sedentary

lifestyle are more prone to suffer from sciatica than those who are fairly active. The former demographic is also at risk because they spend much of their time just sitting, so quite a few tend to become overweight, even obese. Those extra kilos will, in time, affect the spine; which, in turn, can pinch the sciatic nerve.

Sitting at a desk in front of a computer is one of those contributing activities; or should they be better called in-activities? Correct posture in a chair that supports the spine where needed is essential, specifically in the small of the back; and the height of the seat should be adjusted so that the knees and hips are level. Standing for long periods at a bench, conveyor, or checkout can be just as bad, especially if the work surface is too low requiring the worker to stoop. Resting feet alternately on a box or something similar can relieve the strain on the spine and prevent developing a list favouring one side which may eventually become an unbreakable habit. Having this prior knowledge, younger people would be less likely to suffer sciatica later in life by being mindful of the way they behave now.

As mentioned before, sciatica causes discomfort and mild to severe pain; but there is, unfortunately, a worse-case scenario when serious weakness or loss of feeling in the affected leg; and bowel or bladder changes occur. The only remedy in such situations might have to be surgery. For the majority of sufferers, though, taking care not to exacerbate the condition should see a gradual improvement.

Needless to say, prevention is always better than cure. Maintaining the proper posture wherever possible at all times is important. Particularly when lifting heavy weights, the load should be held close to the body and the back kept straight while bending the knees. Picking up any object by having to stretch for it is not a good idea; neither is bending and twisting at the same time. In some instances, accepting assistance from others, or using specially designed lifting equipment are better options than going solo. Although usually involuntary, coughing and sneezing can cause tension spasms which may aggravate an already damaged sciatic nerve.

Another precaution to take is regularly performing exercises to strengthen those muscles in the back and abdomen which support the spine; and some of these can be found in the illustrated article: Oh My Aching Back - Healthy Living 26.

Young or old, please don't be complacent about this issue. Sciatica will probably come to haunt most of you eventually; so minimise the effects by doing the right things early on. I didn't, and I'm regretting it now.

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