

## WHAT IS SCIATICA?

Sciatica is the medical term for pain arising from the sciatic nerve. The sciatic nerve is the largest nerve in the body, approximately the circumference of your finger. The nerves are formed along the lower spine, pass behind the hip joints, and travel down the buttocks and back of the leg to the foot. Sciatica may therefore result in pain felt from the hip to the big toe.



Sciatica is often confused with generalized back pain. Usually, sciatica

only affects one side of the body, and although low back pain is a common symptom, pain often radiates down the buttock or leg. Patients describe pain ranging from pins-and-needles, to tingling and burning, to excruciating shooting pain that makes standing up nearly impossible. Coughing, sneezing and sitting often make the pain worse. Leg or foot numbness, weakness and odd sensations are common symptoms. Patients may be unable to move their foot or bend their knee. A movement that is normally harmless, such as bending over, suddenly brings on violent pain.

Sciatica is caused by several different factors, the most common being a herniated disk. The disk, which functions as a cushion between the vertebrae, may bulge out of place and press on the nerve. Sometimes the nerve passageways are narrowed by arthritis or swelling of a sprained ligament in the area, causing the components of the nerve to become irritated and tender.

As the sciatic nerve passes behind the hip joint, it shares the space with several muscles, including the piriformis muscle. The piriformis muscle is closely associated with the sciatic nerve. In some people, the nerve actually runs through the muscle. If this muscle becomes injured or spasms, it places pressure on the sciatic nerve, in effect, compressing it. This condition is known as piriformis syndrome and is a form of sciatica.

Special care should be taken to prevent sciatica or any other types of back injury:

- Lift objects (no matter how light) with your back straight, bringing yourself up with your hips and legs and hold the object close to your chest.
- Strengthen your back and abdominal muscles that support your spine with such activities as

pool exercise, walking, or other exercises recommended by your physical therapist.

- Always maintain good posture and avoid sitting for long periods of time to relieve pressure on your lower back.

Always seek out professional medical treatment before attempting to begin your own program addressing any type

of back pain. Often sciatica will subside with the use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS), a proper physical therapy program, and the application of hot or cold packs. If severe pain or strange sensations persist, particularly if the pain lasts more than six weeks, or if you have difficulty walking you may need further medical attention.