

Introduction

Sciatica is pain, weakness, numbness or tingling that begins in the lower back and extends down the leg. It's usually on only one side of the body.

Sciatica is a symptom of a problem with the sciatic nerve, a large nerve that runs from the lower back down the back of each leg. Sciatica is common. Most people who experience sciatica are 30 to 50 years old.

This reference summary will help you understand sciatica. It covers the causes, symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of sciatica.

Anatomy

The spine protects the spinal cord and nerves that go to different parts of the body.

The spine is formed of solid sections of bone called vertebrae. The vertebrae are joined together by the facet joints. Softer discs separate the vertebrae. These discs allow the spine to bend and flex. The discs act as cushions in between the vertebrae and absorb shock and vibration produced by walking and running.

Nerves branch off from the spinal cord to various organs and muscles including those in the arms and legs. The nerves carry instructions from the brain to the muscles, organs and limbs.

When the brain orders body parts to move, or if it gives other orders to body parts, the orders are carried through the nerves. These orders travel by electrical impulses in the nerves.

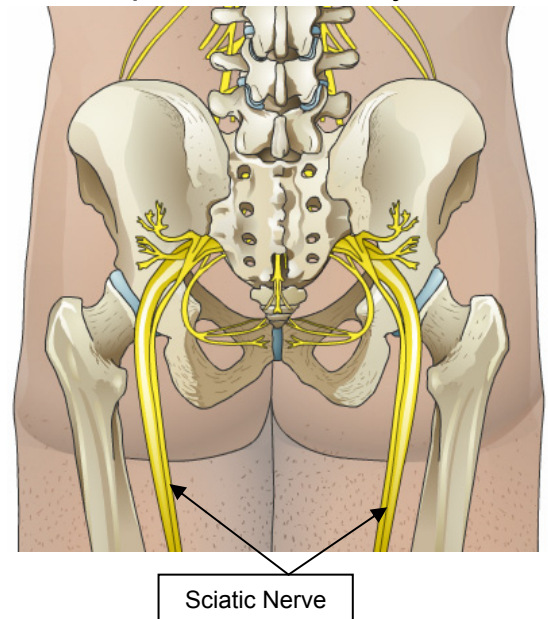


The nerves also carry sensations, such as pain, from different parts of the body to the brain.

Many of the nerves of the lower spine join together to form the sciatic nerve. The sciatic nerve runs through the hips and buttocks and down the back of each leg. The sciatic nerve controls muscles in the back of your knee and lower leg. It provides feeling for most of the leg.

Causes

Sciatica can happen when there is a problem with the sciatic nerve itself. But problems are more common with one of the lower spinal nerves that form the sciatic nerve. There are many conditions that may cause the sciatic nerve to become irritated or inflamed.



Sciatica may be caused by a herniated disc. This is also called a ruptured or slipped disc. A herniated disc is when part or all of the center of the disc pushes into the disc's outer lining. The disc can then push on one of the nerves in the lower spine that end up joining with other nerves to form the sciatic nerve. This can cause pain, numbness, tingling and weakness down the leg.

Spinal stenosis is a narrowing of the spinal canal that puts pressure on the nerves in the lower spine. This pressure can cause sciatica.

Piriformis syndrome is a rare disorder that happens when the piriformis muscle compresses or irritates the sciatic nerve. The piriformis muscle is a narrow muscle in the buttocks.

Injury to the pelvis or sciatic nerve may cause sciatica.

Tumors are abnormal growths. Tumors that grow near the sciatic nerve may compress the nerve and cause pain.

Sciatica may also result from the sciatic nerve being damaged over time due to aging. In many cases, no cause can be found for sciatica.



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Symptoms

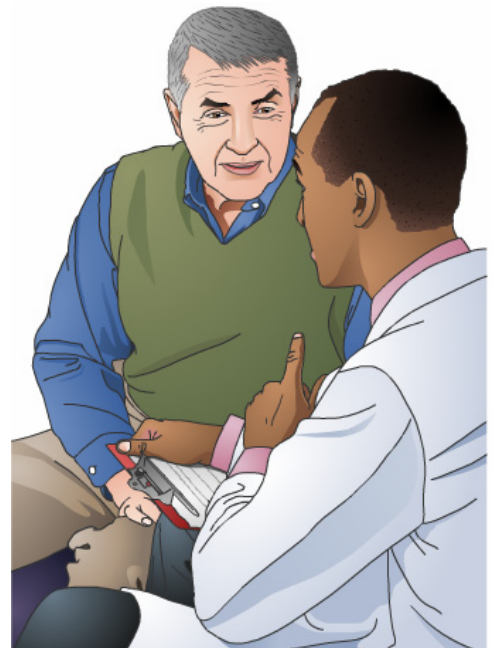
When you have sciatica, you have pain, weakness, numbness or tingling. It can start in the lower back and extend down your leg to your calf, foot or even your toes. It's usually on only one side of your body but can affect both sides, especially in cases of spinal stenosis. Sciatica may begin suddenly but often starts slowly. It also may last weeks. It can feel like a bad muscle cramp or even a burning or tingling sensation. You may have pain in one area and numbness in others.

Certain activities may make sciatica worse. This depends on what causes the sciatica pain. Standing or sitting may make the pain worse, as well as coughing or laughing. Sometimes the pain may be worse at night.

Diagnosis

Your health care provider will ask you about your symptoms in order to make a diagnosis of sciatica. You will also have a physical exam to look for signs of weakness and pain.

Tests may be used to rule out other causes. These tests include blood tests, x-rays, and MRIs or other imaging tests. Other tests are usually not needed unless the pain is severe or lasts for a long time. MRI stands for magnetic resonance imaging. An MRI is used to make detailed pictures of areas inside your body. It uses strong magnets to create images of the inside of the body.



Treatment

In some cases, sciatica will get better over time without any treatment. But, there are some options to help manage the pain. Treatments for sciatica aim at reducing irritation and inflammation of the sciatic nerve.

These include at-home treatments such as:

- Resting and reducing your level of activity.
- Applying ice for the first 48-72 hours, then heat.
- Taking over-the-counter pain medicines like acetaminophen or ibuprofen.

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Your health care provider may also suggest other treatments if at-home treatments don't work. These include injections around the nerve to reduce inflammation. Prescription medicines may also be prescribed.

Physical therapy is another possible treatment for sciatica. A physical therapist can teach you exercises that may help with sciatica.

About 80-90% of people with sciatica get better without surgery. Surgery may be an option if the pain is severe and other treatments haven't worked.



Summary

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Sciatica can happen when there is a problem with the sciatic nerve itself. But problems are more common with one of the lower spinal nerves that form the sciatic nerve. There are many conditions that may cause the sciatic nerve to become irritated or inflamed.

Sciatica is common. Most people who experience sciatica are 30 to 50 years old. About 80-90% of people with sciatica get better without surgery. At home treatments include rest and over-the-counter pain medicines.

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