



## **Sciatica**

**Definition:** Sciatica is a general term used to describe pain that runs down the leg from the back or buttock area. It is usually related to the sciatic nerve in the low back, and is usually a symptom caused by an injury or irritation to the nerve itself.

**Common Terms:** Sciatic nerve dysfunction, radiculopathy, pinched nerve, herniated disc

**Typical Mechanism of Injury:** The symptoms of sciatica usually occur when the nerve becomes compressed or irritated. Many conditions can contribute to this compression or irritation including: lumbar disk herniations, scar tissue formation around the nerve root, muscular imbalances, obesity and poor posture. Trauma as seen in car accidents, occupational activities such as twisting and lifting, or prolonged periods of sitting may also induce sciatica.

**Common Signs and Symptoms:** Sciatica is usually associated with pain that travels down the leg, in some cases all the way to the foot. The pain usually starts in the buttocks or low back, although some people have no low back pain. Over time muscle weakness in the legs and inability to perform daily functions without discomfort may develop. Occasionally numbness and tingling may also be present. Simple activities such as changing positions from sitting to standing, and rolling over in bed may become painful to perform.

**Common Treatment:** Rehabilitation programs that focus on flexibility, strength and stabilization of the low back, pelvis and trunk are usually key to helping this condition. Anti-inflammatory and pain medications may also provide some relief to a person experiencing acute symptoms. Exercises are designed to reduce the pressures on the nerve and help to prevent future recurrence of the injury. Treatments such as electrical stimulation, ultrasound and massage have also been found to be helpful.

Not everyone finds relief through rehabilitation however, and in these cases surgery may be necessary. Regardless of the treatment approach, a focus of long-term care should be placed on proper body mechanics, minimizing obesity and strengthening muscles that assist in providing optimal movement and stability of the spine.

**Prevention:** Preventing sciatica can be accomplished through steps such as using proper body mechanics, avoiding unnecessary weight gains, resting frequently during activities that place stress on the spine and becoming educated on work-related risk factors. Exercise may be another key factor that keeps muscle tissue healthy which leads to an overall reduction in back injuries.

**Expectations:** Individuals with sciatica report varying time lengths of improvement, solely based upon the severity of the condition and the predisposing factors. It is not uncommon for the condition to exist for weeks to months. It is not uncommon for sciatica to re-occur if the exercise and body mechanic programs are not followed over time.

## **DEPARTMENT OF ORTHOPAEDICS & SPORTS MEDICINE**

Carol & Frank Morsani Center for Advanced Health Care \* 13330 USF Laurel Dr \* Tampa, Florida  
33612 \* (813) 396-9625 \* FAX (813) 396-9195 \* [www.health.usf.edu](http://www.health.usf.edu)

[usfORTHO.com](http://usfORTHO.com)