

# Self-help for lower back pain and sciatica

## Information for patients

### What is sciatica and what causes it?

Sciatica is a term used to describe pain in the back of the leg. You will typically experience pain in the lower back/buttock, leg pain, pins and needles or numbness in your leg and weakness in your leg or foot.

Sciatica may occur suddenly or develop gradually over time. True sciatica occurs when there is pressure or irritation on the sciatic nerve.

It is possible to experience lower back pain with leg pain without nerve involvement.

Sciatica is the term most commonly used but you may also hear the terms “radiculopathy” or “nerve compression”.

### How soon will I recover?

In the majority of cases sciatica does not last long and symptoms will show improvement within a few weeks or months. A small number of people may have ongoing symptoms.

### What can I take for my pain?

Speak to your GP or Pharmacist if you are unsure about what medication to use to help reduce your pain. Simple pain-relieving medication or anti-inflammatories can help. It is important that you take your medication regularly, as prescribed and do not just wait for your symptoms to increase. You may be prescribed medication specifically for nerve pain.

### How can I treat my leg symptoms?

**Exercise** - If you have sciatica it is important to keep your back moving. If you become too inactive, your joints can get stiff and muscles can weaken – this can make your pain worse.

Keeping up regular general exercise is important to manage pain and help prevent flare-ups in the long-term. It is also important not to overdo it by doing activities that make symptoms in your leg worse. It is not dangerous to do such activities but this may delay your recovery.

### What else can I do to help my leg pain?

**Postural advice** - Try to sit straight and avoid slumping. The most important thing is not to stay still for too long, as this may cause further stiffness. If you are unable to sit, you may wish to have short periods of rest in these alternative positions below.



**Physiotherapy** - You may self-refer to a Physiotherapist who can advise you on treatment to help your symptoms which will include exercises. You don't need an appointment with your GP to complete a self-referral form. You can usually pick up a form at your GP surgery.

### Things to consider

- It is important that you see your Physiotherapist or GP if you develop new or worsening symptoms of pins and needles or numbness in your legs or feet or weakness in your lower limbs
- Keep active - try not to stay in one position for too long and try to continue with activities you enjoy as much as you can
- Staying at work is important for your overall well-being
- Bed rest is not recommended for back pain and sciatica – it can be detrimental and delay your ability to return to your normal activities and full recovery
- Use medication as prescribed to manage your pain effectively
- Don't forget most back pains with sciatica do get better
- Not everybody with lower back pain and sciatica will require medical interventions or imaging such as scans or x-rays

### When to seek urgent medical help

These symptoms are rare but if you have a sudden onset of any of the following, please seek urgent medical advice:

- Numbness around your back passage or genitals
- Weakness in your legs that makes you unsteady on your feet
- Difficulty controlling or passing urine
- Loss of control of your bowels

This information is available in audio, Braille, large print and other languages. To request a copy, please ask a member of staff.

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