



CHRONIC PAIN AND WOMEN'S HEALTH NEWSLETTER

What is Sciatica?



Sciatica is a term that most people are familiar with but don't have an accurate understanding of what the term actually means. I commonly hear patients refer to any low back or leg pain as "sciatica". When they have a problem, they often speak to friends or family members who tell them "I had sciatica- the exact same thing as you- and I did XYZ treatment."

The problem is that "sciatica" refers to a set of symptoms instead of a specific cause or diagnosis. For example, suppose you saw someone crying (symptom). That person may be happy, sad, hurt, scared, or may just have something in their eye. Without more information you would not be able to determine the cause (diagnosis) and therefore know what to do to help the person (treatment).

The symptoms of sciatica may include pain in the lower back, leg, buttock, leg or foot. There may also be numbness or tingling, muscle weakness, difficulty sitting, standing or moving.

Sciatic symptoms are caused by either compression of the sciatic nerve or the nerve roots that form the sciatic nerve (see pic-

ture). Think of the sciatic nerve as a larger river that is formed by several smaller rivers (nerve roots). The smaller rivers (roots) start at your spine and join the larger river in your buttocks (sciatic nerve) and then branch again into smaller sections that supply the back of the leg into the foot. If a dam were built at any of the smaller feeder rivers or on the larger river, the water flow would be affected past that spot.

In your body, anything that compresses the nerve roots or sciatic nerve will affect the "flow" of the nerve throughout its territory. That means that anything that compresses the nerve will cause similar "symptoms" but the cause can be very different. This also explains how pain in the leg may actually be coming from a problem in the back.

(continued on page 3)

Tips and Tricks: Self- Help for Back Pain

You reach over to unload the groceries from the car and feel a pain in your back. You sit for 2 hours at your son's little league game on the hard bleachers and get so stiff you can

hardly get up. You wake up stiff in the morning and your spine aches. Your back hurts after delivering your baby and you are having a hard time caring for your new bundle of joy.

What can you do?

Back pain is a common complaint. It is estimated that over 80% of Americans will suffer from back pain

(Continued on page 2)

Clemens Physical Therapy PLLC

**Volume 4, Issue 1
2009**

Inside This Issue

Sciatica	1, 3
Tips and Tricks: Self-Help for Back Pain	1-2
Research: Physical Therapy for Back Pain	2
Contact Info	4

Coming Soon!

- © Info on Women's Health Issues
- © Tips and Tricks
- © Info on special topics such as fibromyalgia, TMJ jaw pain, headaches, pelvic pain
- © Your Questions Answered
- © And More!
- © Marnie Clemens 2009

Tips and Tricks: Self-Help for Back pain continued...

(Continued from page 1)

at some point during their lifespan. This means that everyone is likely to experience some form of back pain.

The good news is that some back pain will go away on its own. Other times you may need help to resolve the pain or speed the healing process. Still other symptoms may require immediate emergency medical attention.

Danger signs include loss of control of bowel or bladder or progressive weakness in the leg. These should result in seeing your medical doctor or going to the ER immediately. Symptoms such as nausea/vomiting, pain unrelieved by resting, and pain into the leg also warrant a trip to the doctor.

On the other hand, if you just have stiffness or localized pain, there are some things you can try on your own.

1. **DO** Rest from the aggravating activity. Say you went out the first nice day of spring and did yard work all day after being a couch potato all winter. You may notice that your back may remind you how out of shape you are. Should you get up the next day and do even more? Common sense says you might want to lay off the extreme activities that

your body is not used to yet. Work up to activities gradually.

2. **DON'T** lay in bed. It has been shown that bed rest can make the problem worse. You lose muscle tone and run the risk of developing dangerous blood clots if you stay still too long



3. **DO** walk and move as much as you can tolerate. Movement helps speed the blood flow and healing process.

4. **DO** try ice or heat. Use ice (a frozen pack of peas works well) the first couple of days after hurting your back. After that you can try a heating pad or warm bath/shower

5. **DON'T** sleep with the heating pad. Yes it feels good, but you can burn yourself this way.
6. **DO** watch your posture and positioning. Keep your back straight when standing.
7. **DON'T** bend over, especially to lift something, before your pain improves. When you do have to pick something up use good lifting techniques
8. **DON'T** sit anymore than you have to. Sitting places a lot of pressure on your back. Lie down or stand instead
9. **DON'T** smoke— or at least cut back. Smoking significantly affects the speed in which your body heals.
10. **DO** drink lots of water. Water keeps your muscles and discs hydrated and speeds the healing process.
11. **DO** position yourself well when lying down. Use pillows under your knees when on your back and between your knees when on your side. While not a good long term solution, some people find lying in a recliner to be the most comfortable resting position.

Research: Physical Therapy Effective for Back Pain

A new article published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons* recommends that physical therapy combined with anti-inflammatory medications is the most effective treatment for lumbar degenerative disc disease. They also conclude that most patients with low back pain can improve without surgery.

This type of degenerative back pain can develop when a spinal disc

(the spacer between the bones of the spine) weakens due to ageing or repetitive trauma such as lifting. This causes “wear and tear” over time and the disc is no longer able to perform it’s job as a back supporter, stabilizer and shock absorber. This can lead to back pain.

Physical Therapists work with patients to improve the strength of the muscles that help support the spine.

They are also able to help teach proper body posture and movements to avoid more wear and tear and to move in more functional, less painful ways. Other beneficial PT treatments include manual “hands-on” therapy and stretching. They can also work with each person to develop an exercise program to prevent future problems.

Sciatica continued...

(continued from page 1)

Just because Uncle Bert or Fred at work says he had “exactly the same thing as you” and that you should do the same thing he did to get better, is not necessarily true. Doing the wrong treatment may make the problem worse.

The causes of sciatic pain can include the following: Disc herniation, spinal stenosis, piriformis syndrome, trigger points, pregnancy. Lets discuss each one briefly.

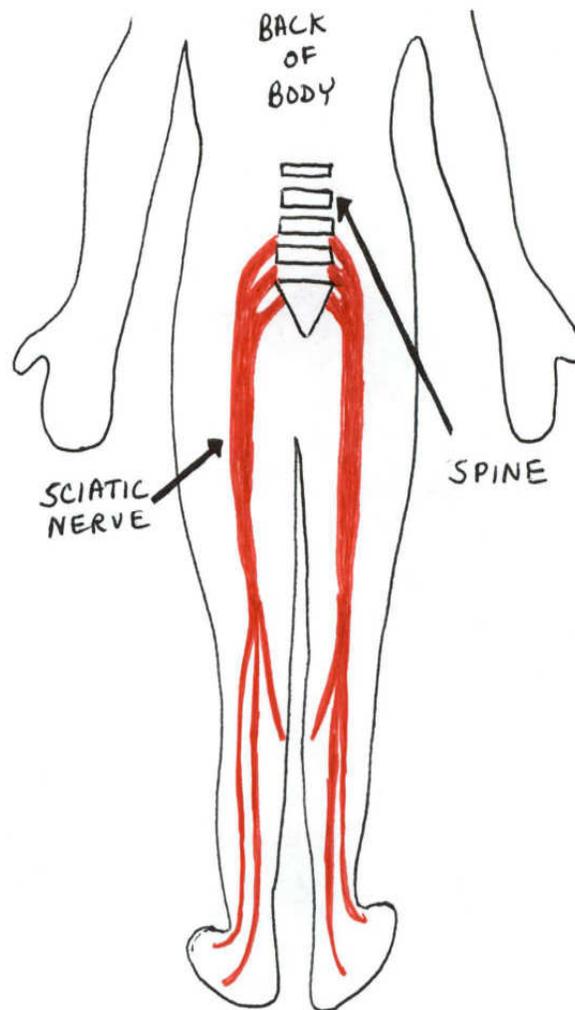
DISC HERNIATION: This is the “classic” cause of sciatica, and one of the more serious. There are spongy “discs” between each of the vertebra bones in the spine. Normally they act as shock absorbers for movement much like your tires cushion your car ride. Sometimes with lifting or moving certain ways the disc can bulge or “blow” like a tire by herniating. When this happens, the disc can press on the nerve causing sciatica symptoms.

SPINAL STENOSIS: This is caused by a narrowing of the spaces around the spinal cord or nerve roots. A common cause of this is degenerative arthritic changes in the spine causing bone spurs. This is similar to corrosion happening in a water pipe that narrows the diameter of the pipe causing less water to flow through.

PREGNANCY: During pregnancy, the expanding uterus can put pressure on the sciatic nerve. The ligaments also loosen and the weight of the baby changes Mom’s posture in

a way that can place more pressure on the nerve.

PIRIFORMIS SYNDROME: The piriformis is a muscle in the buttocks. The path of the sciatic nerve goes through or beneath this muscle. When the muscle is tight this can compress the nerve causing sciatic symptoms.



SPONDYLOLISTHESIS: This is a condition where one vertebra shifts forward on another causing pressure

on the nerve and sciatic symptoms.

OTHER CAUSES: Things such as tumors and infections are a less common but more serious cause of sciatic symptoms. ***See your Dr. immediately if you have bowel or bladder problems, progressive weakness, nausea/vomiting or severe pain that won't go away with resting.*

Each different cause of sciatica requires a very different approach to treatment. What works for one diagnosis may not work for another and may in fact make it worse. For example: Treatment for a disc problem often includes backward bending exercises. These exercises are contraindicated for stenosis and spondylolisthesis and can make the problem worse. There are also other common problems such as sacroiliac dysfunction and pulled muscles that may cause pain in the buttocks or back of the leg that are not “sciatica” and are treated differently.

As you can see, it is important to realize that “sciatica” can mean similar symptoms from very different problems. It is important that you see your medical professional or physical therapist to determine the cause and correct course of treatment. Uncle Bert’s treatment for his “sciatica” caused by stenosis may make your condition worse if that is not what you have. Once the proper cause of the problem is determined, physical therapy can help with an individual treatment program to help get you feeling better and able to do the things you want to do.



**Clemens Physical
Therapy PLLC**

Chronic Pain and Women's Health

302 West Main Street
Bridgeport, WV 26330

Phone: 304-842-6008

Fax: 304-842-0060

Email: marnie@clemenspt.com

Helping People Who Hurt



Chronic Pain and Women's Health Newsletter

Dr. Clemens is a physical therapist who specializes in the treatment of women's health and chronic pain in men and women.

(304) 842-6008

Clemens Physical Therapy, PLLC

302 West Main St

Bridgeport, WV 26330



The content of this newsletter is provided for informational purposes only and is not intended to diagnose or suggest treatment for individuals. Please see your health care provider regarding your specific needs.

Fibromyalgia
Chronic Pain
Neck and Back Pain
Headaches
Bladder Control
Pelvic Pain
TMJ (Jaw Pain)
Osteoporosis
Biofeedback
Tai Chi, Pilates, Yoga
Manual Therapy