



# Sciatica

Most people will have heard of or know someone who has suffered from sciatica at some stage in their lives. Sciatica is the name given to any sort of pain caused by irritation, compression or injury of the sciatic nerve. It can be a very painful and debilitating injury which needs careful examination to determine the true cause.

The sciatic nerve is the longest nerve in the body starting near the base of the spinal cord and travelling down the leg. It provides a vital communication link between your brain and the muscles, joints, blood vessels and skin of your legs and feet, helping you to move.

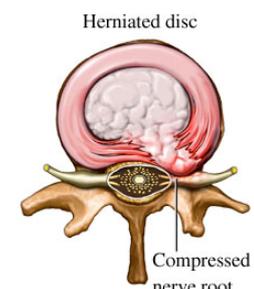
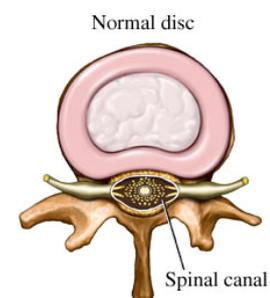
Injury to the sciatic nerve usually includes leg pain which can start at either the buttocks or low back, travelling below the knee, often to the foot or ankle. Most people with this injury experience a numbness, tingling or pins and needles sensation in the legs and feet, with associated muscle weakness. It is important, however, to distinguish between an injury or irritation of the sciatic nerve. This can be determined through careful examination by your Chiropractor.



## How does sciatica occur?

The most common cause of sciatica is through injury to the intervertebral discs (the shock absorbers of your spine) in the lower back. This can happen if the discs 'bulge' or 'herniate'. With a disc *bulge*, a small tear of the inner part of the disc occurs, allowing the fluid inside the disc (nucleus pulposus) to leak out into the firmer outer casing (annulus fibrosus). This causes the outer casing to bulge and swell and press against the spinal canal causing irritation and compression to the nerve as it exits the spinal cord. A disc *herniation* is when a tear occurs in both the nucleus fibrosis casing and the outer annulus fibrosis casing causing the discal fluid to leak and seep out of the disc as shown below:

This again causes compression, irritation and in some cases injury to the spinal nerve as it exits the spinal cord. Both of these injuries are accompanied by inflammation as your body's normal response to an injury.



Other causes of injury to the sciatic nerve include spinal stenosis (narrowing of the spinal canal), spondylolisthesis (when one of your vertebrae or spinal bones slips either forward or backwards instead of sitting directly on top or underneath the vertebra above or below), or piriformis syndrome (tightening and spasm of the piriformis muscle in the buttocks causing irritation and compression of the sciatic nerve as it passes either through or below the piriformis muscle).

### **How can it be treated?**

The cause of your sciatica needs to be determined as this can influence the treatment options available and allow you to make the best informed decision. In extreme cases, surgery may be an option to relieve the pressure on the sciatic nerve. However, in many cases, manual therapy, exercise and medication provides an effective package of care.

The use of medication in the form of pain killers and anti-inflammatories can provide pain relief, but one should be cautious when taking these, as they can mask the symptoms and often do not address the reason the injury occurred in the first place.

Chiropractic care is an evidence-based option for the treatment of sciatica. The first aim of your Chiropractor will be to reduce the inflammation, achieved by using ice packs applied to the lower back for 20 minutes at a time at least 3-4 times/day. Your Chiropractor will use spinal manipulative techniques to reduce any compression or irritation on the nerves by improving spinal joint function, and will work on the surrounding musculature. Specific exercises will also be prescribed, aimed at strengthening the supporting muscles of the spine to give you long-term support and to help prevent future recurrences.

For more information about how Chiropractic can help provide relief from your injuries and help towards injury prevention, speak to your Chiropractor.

## **Chiropractic Safe and Effective**

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