

Dealing With the Pain of Sciatica



Ahmed Sewielam, M.D., is a specialist in pain management at Sugar Land Pain & Spine Specialists. He is certified as a Fellow of Interventional Pain Practice (FIPP), the highest distinction for an interventional pain physician from the American Board of Interventional Pain Physicians.

Q: What is sciatica?

A: Sciatica is caused by irritation, inflammation, or compression of the sciatic nerve, which originates in the buttocks and runs down each leg, ending at the knee. The sciatic nerve then branches into other nerves, which extend down into the foot. Sciatica can result in mild to severe pain anywhere from the lower back through the hips, buttocks, and down the leg to the feet. It can also cause weakness or numbness in the leg. Sciatica pain can be very disabling, resulting in loss of function and inability to perform daily activities. Approximately 40 percent of people in the U.S. experience sciatica at some time during their life.

Q: Why is it so common?

A: The number of cases has been rising in the last few decades because of our sedentary lifestyles. We rely on motorized transportation, and many of us sit at desks using computers for hours. Day-to-day use of technology, which has us spending more than half our day sitting and staring at a screen, has contributed to the development of abnormal posture. This poor posture, plus lack of physical activity, leads to weakness of the lower back muscles. This, in turn, predisposes us to all kinds of lower back problems. Poor eating habits that can lead to excess weight and obesity are also major factors in the rising incidence of sciatica.

Q: When should you seek medical help?

A: If you feel sciatic pain, see your doctor right away. A primary care provider will evaluate you and begin pharmacological treatment to help with inflammation and pain. Your doctor may also order X-rays. If the pain does not improve, it may be time to see a pain management specialist or spine physician. These specialists usually offer more advanced diagnostic studies such as MRIs, and more advanced treatment options such as spinal injections.

Q: What are the usual forms of treatments?

A: Initially, medications in the form of oral steroids, anti-inflammatories, and muscle relaxants together with physical therapy may help. If there is no improvement, stronger medications such as opiate painkillers and antiseizure medications are known to be effective for treating nerve pain. There are several forms of injections to target the inflamed nerves in the spine that may also be effective and are usually the fastest way to control disabling sciatic pain, especially when used in conjunction with physical therapy and/or other medications.

Q: Can sciatica be prevented?

A: The best way to prevent sciatica is to practice good posture. In addition, always stretch before physical activity, whether it's pickleball, jogging, golfing, or any sport. It's also important to strengthen your lower back. The best back exercises are the ones that strengthen your core, the muscles around the central part of your body: the pelvis, lower back, hips, and stomach. Flexibility exercises also help loosen the area. Yoga and Pilates are two disciplines that help prevent lower back and sciatic problems. A healthy diet, daily exercise, and weight management are also factors that may prevent sciatica. □