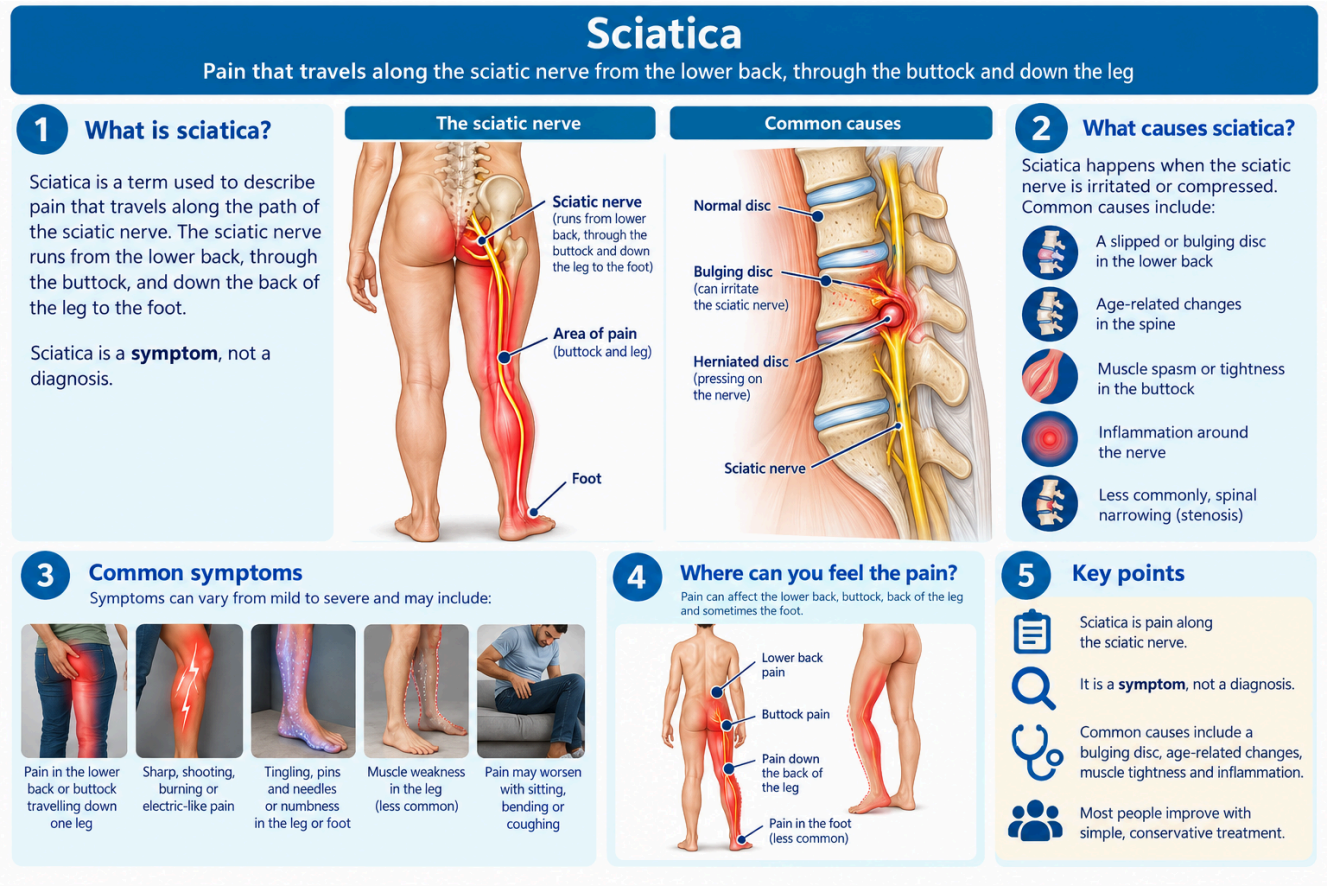
Sciatica

Understanding sciatic nerve pain, symptoms and care

Sciatica

A guide to causes, treatment and recovery



What is sciatica?

Sciatica describes pain travelling along the sciatic nerve from the lower back, through the buttock and down the leg, sometimes to the foot. It is a symptom, not a diagnosis.

What causes sciatica?

The sciatic nerve can be irritated or compressed by a bulging disc, age-related spinal changes, buttock muscle tightness, inflammation or spinal narrowing.

Symptoms, diagnosis and treatment

Recognising symptoms and managing discomfort

1. Common symptoms

Pain from the lower back or buttock down one leg; sharp, shooting, burning or electric-like pain.

2. Sensory changes

Tingling, pins and needles or numbness in the leg or foot; sometimes leg weakness.

3. Aggravating activities

Pain may worsen with sitting, bending or coughing.

4. Diagnosis

Usually based on symptoms and examination. MRI is not routinely needed unless symptoms are severe, worsening or not improving.

5. Staying active

Continue normal activities as tolerated, avoid prolonged bed rest and try gentle walking.

6. Symptom relief

Heat or wrapped ice for 10-15 minutes may help. Ask a clinician or pharmacist about suitable pain relief.

Important information

Seek urgent help for new bladder or bowel problems, numbness around the genitals or anus, or severe or worsening leg weakness.

Exercises and rehabilitation

Gentle movement and activity under clinical guidance

Sciatica exercise examples

The original leaflet illustrates piriformis and hamstring stretches, lumbar extension, glute foam rolling and sciatic nerve mobility exercises. Ask your physiotherapist which are suitable.

Sciatica – Exercise Examples

Gentle exercises to help reduce pain, improve flexibility and strengthen your back and legs

1 Knee to chest stretch



- Lie on your back.
- Gently pull one knee towards your chest.
- Hold for 15–30 seconds.
- Repeat 2–3 times each leg.

2 Piriformis stretch



- Lie on your back.
- Place one ankle on the opposite knee.
- Gently pull the other knee towards you.
- Hold for 15–30 seconds.
- Repeat 2–3 times each leg.

3 Hamstring stretch



- Sit with one leg straight and the other bent.
- Gently reach towards your toes.
- Keep your back straight.
- Hold for 15–30 seconds.
- Repeat 2–3 times each leg.

4 Foam rolling (glutes)



- Sit on a foam roller with one leg crossed over the other.
- Gently roll over the glute area.
- Spend 30–60 seconds on each side.
- Keep the pressure comfortable.

5 Pelvic tilt



- Lie on your back with knees bent.
- Gently tighten your abdominal muscles and flatten your lower back into the floor.
- Hold for 5–10 seconds.
- Repeat 10–15 times.

6 Bridging



- Lie on your back with knees bent.
- Squeeze your glutes and lift your hips off the floor.
- Hold for 5–10 seconds.
- Repeat 10–15 times.

7 Lumbar extension (standing)



- Stand with your hands on a wall.
- Gently lean back, keeping your hips forward.
- Hold for 2–3 seconds.
- Repeat 10–15 times.

8 Prone press up (lumbar extension)



- Lie on your front with hands under your shoulders.
- Gently push your upper body up, keeping your hips on the floor.
- Hold for 2–5 seconds.
- Repeat 10–15 times.

9 Sciatic nerve glide



- Lie on your back.
- Gently lift one straight leg up.
- Slowly point and flex your foot.
- Move within a comfortable range.
- Repeat 10–15 times each leg.

Rehabilitation

Exercise safely

Recovery and next steps

Practical steps for managing sciatica

1. Activity and pacing

Keep moving within comfort, break up prolonged sitting and gradually increase activity as symptoms allow.

2. Physiotherapy

Your physiotherapist can advise on posture, activity modification, movement, strength and flexibility.

3. Pain relief options

Heat or ice may ease symptoms. Ask a clinician or pharmacist about medicines suitable for you.

4. Injections or surgery

These are rarely needed, but may be considered for severe, long-lasting symptoms or significant loss of function.

5. Outlook

Most people improve over weeks to months. Continue appropriate activity and follow professional advice.

Important information - urgent symptoms

Seek emergency assessment for bladder or bowel changes, saddle numbness or severe or worsening leg weakness.

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