

# Sciatica

## Information for Patients



**This leaflet has been written to give you the right information about sciatica and what you can do to help with your recovery.**

### What is sciatica?

The term sciatica generally relates to an irritation of the sciatic nerve.

Your sciatic nerve comes from the lower levels of your back, passes through your buttock, and down the back of your leg on its way to the foot. It is most often characterised by leg pain, but some people may also experience tingling or numbness. Back pain can also sometimes be associated with sciatica.

### What are the common symptoms?

**Pain:** One of the main symptoms associated with sciatic nerve irritation is pain. In most cases, the discomfort will be felt on the back or outer edge of the thigh and/or calf and possibly into the foot. Back pain can be a feature of sciatica but not for everyone.

**Pins & needles/numbness:** Pins and needles, numbness (reduced or altered feeling), a feeling of heaviness in the leg or simply a 'weird' feeling that is hard to describe can be a sign of an upset nerve.

**Worry:** Pain can often make you feel vulnerable and can be concerning, especially if it is new and/or is affecting your normal everyday life. Reassuringly, these feelings are normal and it is worth reminding yourself that your back/leg is strong, robust and very resilient. It can be sore and nerves can get irritated but they remain strong and can improve.

### What can I do to help myself?

**Calm it down:** Often the best place to start with any painful complaint is to try and calm it down. In a lot of cases there will be things your leg likes to do and some that it is less happy to do since your symptoms started. Calming it down simply means looking at the things it doesn't like and trying to make some adjustments or changes to make it easier for yourself. For example, sitting with your feet up on the coffee table or sitting on a firm chair might make your leg more uncomfortable. It might be that sitting with a bent knee (rather than straight) or on a softer chair with more cushioning makes life a little easier whilst your leg is unhappy. You may find resting your leg in a cross-legged position may help.

**Get your back and leg moving:** Movement is medicine for your body. Any movement is good movement, even if it is sore, however, if something is really painful then working around that movement is sensible.

Your back and leg are strong and that won't have changed since your symptoms began. Although it is sore, they remain robust and moving your back/leg as early as you can, can help improve your chances of a better overall outcome.

### **Is there anything that I should look out for?**

Most low back pain is caused by an irritation of certain structures around your lumbar spine region, however it is very important to be aware of certain symptoms that are less common with back pain and what you should do if you have any:

- New (within the last 2 weeks) altered bladder function (difficulty starting, stopping, maintaining a wee or even knowing that you need to go).
- New (within the last 2 weeks) altered bowel function (incontinence or leaking or not knowing when your bowel is full).
- New (within the last 2 weeks) altered sensation around your genitals, anus or inner thighs (a change in the feeling or ability to feel temperature around where you would sit on a bike or horse saddle).
- New (within the last 2 weeks) difficulty coordinating your legs/rapid loss of leg strength ('jelly-legs' or that your legs won't go where you want them to)
- New (within the last 2 weeks) altered sexual function (men: unable to achieve an erection or ejaculate; women: altered feeling during penetrative or oral sex)
- New (within the last 2 weeks) pain going into both legs.

**If you suddenly develop any or a combination of the symptoms listed above, you may need urgent medical attention and should attend A&E as soon as you can.**

You can find this information in different languages by searching online for: **MACP CES card**

A short, animated video about this information can be found by searching online for: **MACP CES video**

### Is there anything else I should be looking out for?

The list above are the things that are most important for you to be aware of if you are dealing with back pain. However, there are a few other things that you should be aware of that are not dangerous, damaging or worrying, but might just mean that a different type of treatment will suit you better.

Along with your back pain, if you have any of the following symptoms (or more than one), you should discuss them with your physiotherapist or GP:

- Having a temperature or fever alongside your lower back pain.
- Inability to lie flat due to your back pain.
- A history of cancer and/or loss of weight alongside your lower back pain.

### Will it get better?

For most people, sciatica will not be a pleasant experience but reassuringly, it does have the potential to get better. By understanding the issue as best you can and by adjusting what is sore to then allow you to explore some exercise/s, is often the best formula for success.

If you would like to know more about sciatica or find a greater choice of exercises, you can explore our dedicated webpage.

**Search online: [Norfolk and Waveney MSK services](#) 'sciatica'**

# Exercises



On the bed. With one or both legs, bring your knees to your chest and allow your back to round. Continue to breathe normally and allow your back to round.

Complete little and often throughout the day.



Sitting. Look up to the ceiling and at the same time straighten your knee then look down, and at the same time bend your knee.

Complete this slowly and rhythmically for 30 seconds little and often throughout the day.



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