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Healthy Lifestyles

by



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Sciatica: a real pain in the butt

It seems lately that many people have come to us complaining of a pain in their rear. My first thought might be “funny that’s what my wife calls me” but then I realize they are most likely talking about sciatica. Sciatica is a bit of a catch term for irritation of the sciatic nerve. The sciatic nerve is comprised of a bundle of smaller nerves coming from your spinal cord in the area of your lumbar spine. Outside of the spinal cord it is the largest nerve in your body, about the width of your thumb. It travels down through your hip, through the buttock muscles and down the back of your leg all the way to the foot. It also has the very important role of being responsible for the majority of sensation of motor function of your leg.

It is important to know that nerves, by nature, are easily irritated and have a tendency to hold a grudge. If you pinch, stretch, or interfere with the blood supply to your nerves the result can be pain (often radiating down the leg), altered sensation, and sometimes feelings of weakness in the muscles. Typically in sciatica these symptoms are variable and depend on what you are doing to cause the nerve to become irritated. The pain is often a deep or dull throbbing pain in the hip that can “shoot down” the leg with focal points of pain at the knee, calf or ankle.

Sciatica can usually be distinguished from a disc herniation or back injury by the specific symptoms a person might have. Disc herniations usually affect only one nerve root and therefore have a very specific pattern of pain, weakness, or sensation loss. A severe disc herniation will often result in crippling pain, loss of reflexes and specific muscle strength, and a

certain pattern of sensation loss. Clinically we use a combination of special tests to help determine if your symptoms are coming from a disc injury or from irritation of the sciatic nerve.

There can be many factors that cause sciatica. Tension or twisting of the lumbar spine and pelvis can create a pull on the nerves leading to inflammation of the sciatic nerve, also resulting in tightness in muscles of the hip and thigh. Tension on the nerve and pressure from these tight muscles reduces the blood supply to the nerve. This is common after lifting injuries or after driving in an awkward position for a prolonged period of time. Hip and core stability weakness can also lead to increased stress to the muscles and tissues surrounding the sciatic nerve. Finally, any direct trauma to the hip such as from a car accident or slip and fall on the ice can cause muscle spasm or injury to the nerve and also result in sciatica.

The solution to this nasty problem is to correct what is irritating the nerve by strengthening the hips and core, releasing tight muscles, gently stretching and mobilizing the sciatic nerve and improving the movement and alignment of the spine and pelvis. Many people find acupuncture helpful as the needle points easily access the sciatic nerve and can be beneficial in decreasing the inflammation. Whatever your problem, it is better to have it looked at sooner than later because chronic imbalances can take longer to correct. So remember if you have a pain in the butt, don’t put up with it and see a physiotherapist for help. (Unless of course it is your spouse and then you have no choice!)

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