

Sciatica – it's not as scary as you think

By Laura Douglas Marquit

“For sciatica, a combination of a gentle movement routine and some form of gentle bodywork tends to be the best solution, along with addressing posture, alignment and lifestyle issues.”

Sciatica is super common, super treatable, and yes, at times, super painful. Conflicting information from medical doctors and other professionals — or even your next door neighbor — often leads to confusion about the best way to treat sciatica. **If you think you have sciatica, don't hit the panic button.** Sciatica is a common health issue. Except in rare cases such as severe physical trauma, sciatica can be resolved by a consistent mix of small, specific movement exercises, gentle bodywork to release tension, and moderate strengthening. If you find a good practitioner, recovery times can be as brief as 4 weeks or less. A few of my clients have gotten relief within only a few sessions. More stubborn cases, or ones that haven't been treated for months or years, can take 2-6 months to resolve.

If you want to get started right away, see “Easy Do-It-Yourself Approaches to Support Healing” at the end of this article.

What is Sciatica?

The sciatic nerve is the largest and longest spinal nerve in the body. The sciatic nerve descends to the base of the spine and passes through a very narrow gap in a bony plate called the sacrum. From this narrow gap, called the sciatic notch, the sciatic nerve descends into the buttocks, down both legs and into the feet.

Ideally, the spine, pelvis and sacrum are in balanced, functional alignment. If that alignment is thrown off by injury, postural habits, inactivity, or over-training, the sciatic nerve can become pinched. The result can be pain, numbness or tingling affecting some or all of the area between the lower back and the feet. Depending on the severity, the pain ranges from a mild, dull ache to excruciating, shooting pain.

When working in my studio, I like to get out a skeleton and show people what goes on with their vertebrae, sacrum and pelvis to cause the pain. Sciatica can be a difficult concept to grasp, but if you can see visually how the skeletal muscles work, most people quickly grasp the basic concepts.

Why is Sciatica so confusing?

Here is the frustrating part! Sciatica --and back pain in general -- often follow no predictable rules and can change hour-by-hour and day-to-day. Sciatica and back pain can vary widely in each individual. Every situation is slightly different and can be affected by many factors not related to just the structures of the body. Often stress, lack of sleep, or other emotional issues play a big role. Negative emotions can affect the

spinal area and nervous system so much that in some cases sciatica and back pain are literally caused by the stress of the negative emotions. For all these reasons, sciatica and back pain often require a lot of patience, creative thinking and trial and error.

What Causes Sciatica?

Causes of Sciatica that you will often hear are spinal stenosis (a narrowing of the spinal canal), spinal disc degeneration, herniated disc, and bulging disc. MRI's are often used to identify these and other disc issues, and their specific location. Sciatica can also be caused by a number of different situations like pregnancy, or having a large belly, which puts extra stress on the back.

An episode of sciatica can be brought on by lifting heavy objects without correct alignment, bending or turning the wrong way, over-training — particularly with running or jogging or lifting weights — or by jobs that require a lot of standing. Another cause of sciatica and other back injuries is fitness classes like large group Pilates or Yoga classes in which the instructor does not emphasize correct alignment or the repertoire is too advanced for the participants.

Should I see my doctor first?

A good medical doctor can diagnose sciatica. But beyond diagnosis, a medical doctor will typically limit treatment to anti-inflammatories (such as Advil) or other pain medicine. While this can be essential in the beginning to get people out of excruciating pain, over-the-counter pharmaceuticals and narcotic painkillers or muscle relaxants are not long-term solutions because they do not address underlying alignment, movement and lifestyle issues.

On a special note – please take care with narcotic pharmaceuticals, as they can be highly addictive. If you pick up a newspaper these days, there is almost always some tragic story of someone who died of a pharmaceutical overdose, often being first prescribed by a doctor to treat back pain. Advil and other anti-inflammatories are safe when used as prescribed for limited periods of time. Extensive use of Advil and other OTC anti-inflammatories can sometimes cause internal bleeding and kidney damage. The goal is to use pharmaceutical therapy for only a brief period of time.

If you think you have sciatica , it's best to combine a gentle movement program and bodywork, and stick to the basics:

- Find a good practitioner for treatment.
- Be an active participant in your rehabilitation plan.
- Stay the course.

Sciatica can present itself in the body in so many different ways, and can be affected by so many different factors, that it's important for a practitioner to tailor an exercise and

movement plan based on each client and their pain pattern. The approach that has been most effective with my clients is teaching them very subtle, gentle movements, along with gentle, targeted bodywork to specific muscles groups.

The key benefit in using movement routines is that through movement, a person can actively stimulate small, deeper muscles often ignored in our daily routines or through bodywork alone. Over time the atrophy of those small muscles can lead to misalignment, back pain and sciatica.

Another benefit to prescribed movement routines that are unique to your injury pattern, is that movement routines put you in the driver's seat and offer a more long-term solution. If the symptoms kick up again you will know the movements to relieve the pain, and you can do them yourself on your living room floor.

If you work with a Certified Pilates Instructor or someone who has a Pilates Reformer in their office, this can be of great benefit. Joseph Pilates invented the Reformer for very injured people who couldn't walk. The Reformer allows people to lie down, move gently and stretch simultaneously. It's really a brilliant movement concept that is now practiced in Pilates studios that focus on injury recovery, and often in some physical therapy offices.

Sciatica can sometimes resolve using gentle forms of bodywork alone such as Osteopathy, cranial sacral therapy, or Network Spinal Analysis. However, I've found that sciatica is more likely to return if you treat it with bodywork alone. A combination of movement therapy and some form of gentle bodywork tends to be the best solution, along with addressing posture, alignment and lifestyle issues.

What about Physical Therapists?

A good Physical Therapist can definitely diagnose sciatica. A seasoned Physical Therapist with a good track record of treating sciatica successfully can be a good solution. That said, I see a lot of clients who have already been through a full course of physical therapy but continue to have symptoms.

What questions should you ask a prospective practitioner?

A good practitioner should be willing to get on the phone with you and spend 5-10 minutes speaking and answering some basic questions. If you have a good rapport or first impression, then a few more questions to ask the practitioner could include:

- Have you ever had sciatica yourself?
- What is your background, training, degrees and/or certifications?
- Have you had any bodywork or massage training? What kind of certifications?
- What is your success rate in treating sciatica?
- How long should I expect treatment to last before I see results?
- What will be expected of me when we start working together?

Should Surgery Be Considered?

Some of my clients are in so much pain, they think surgery might be a good option. Surgery should never be a first option. In addition to the inherent risks of any surgery, surgery for sciatica has a high risk of making the situation worse over time by creating scar tissue and inducing permanent changes to natural movement patterns in the body. I have never had a trouble treating anyone for sciatica over my 17 years of working with injured clients. But I have had trouble treating clients who have had back surgery. Once someone undergoes back surgery, it changes the natural rhythms, patterns and flow of the spinal muscles and nerve signals.

What role does stress play?

Stress is always a piece of the puzzle because anyone who is in pain is also stressed out, which increases body tension, which makes the pain worse. Getting to the root cause of someone's stress is essential, which is where the coaching skills I have learned come in handy. If you are seeing a good physical therapist who isn't trained to work with lifestyle issues, you may ask to be referred to a somatic therapist or a similar professional to help you sort through lifestyle issues or stress. After studying healing for 20 years, I believe that stress is at the root of all illness as the main contributing factor.

Easy Do-It-Yourself Approaches to Support Healing

In addition to working with a good practitioner there are several things you can do on your own to reduce pain and encourage better alignment.

1. When sleeping, **lie on your uninjured side with a king-sized pillow** or roller between your knees and ankles, OR sleep with your legs elevated on top of pillows. Sleep on a good, supportive **mattress**.
2. **Heat** is usually better than using ice, even though doctors and physical therapists might tell you the opposite. Wet heat is better than dry heat. Sometimes a mix of heat and ice is the best – experiment, and find out what reduces the pain most effectively. Hot water bottles can often relieve pain, you can find good ones on Amazon. Usually **warm baths** are good, but if the pain increases with heat, stop immediately. If the baths feel therapeutic, throw in some good Epsom or Himalayan salts to reduce inflammation and reduce muscle aches. Add some lavender oil to reduce stress!
3. **Topical anti-inflammatories** such as Arnica or other similar products can reduce swelling and be soothing when rubbed on the skin. Traumeel is a homeopathic gel that works great for many people. Important note: never use a heating pad after you have applied a topical gel, because the combination can increase your risk for burns.
4. **Oral anti-inflammatories and painkillers** might be needed for a while. Advil and painkillers can be good for the short term. But I recommend natural anti-inflammatories such as oral Arnica or Curcumin, or similar products. Adding ginger to your foods or drinking tea made from real ginger can also reduce swelling in the body, and eating anti-inflammatory foods is always a good idea.

5. You can do your own **self-massage** of the low back, buttocks, and back of the leg area to release tension. You can also roll on a tennis ball to relieve tension in the neck and shoulder area. If you release the neck and shoulders, it releases all the way down the body.
6. Throughout the day, **take breaks and lie on your uninjured side** with a pillow under your neck (keeping it in a neutral position) and with a roller [picture here] between your legs to relieve pain.
7. **Do pelvic floor exercises.** Women who have had children will know this by the term “Kegel exercises”. If you are a man, or haven’t had kids, you want to try and engage the muscles you use to stop the flow of urine when urinating. The pelvic floor muscles are a group of small muscles that support the pelvis and internal organs. When engaged, they will also stimulate the tiny hair like muscles on the sacrum that are used to stabilize the sacrum and low back. By stimulating these muscles, you can reduce pain and create stability in the pelvis and low back.

If you have more questions or need more guidance, email laura@joyfulmovement.com.

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