

Therapeutic yoga stretches for sciatica

As a therapeutic sequence, it will work best if you do the stretches once a day. You may get better results if you do it twice: morning and night, but don't overdo it. Also, if another activity that you are doing - for instance, yoga - is causing your sciatica, this may not be enough to relieve your symptoms. You may have to ease off your other activity for a while if you want to feel results.

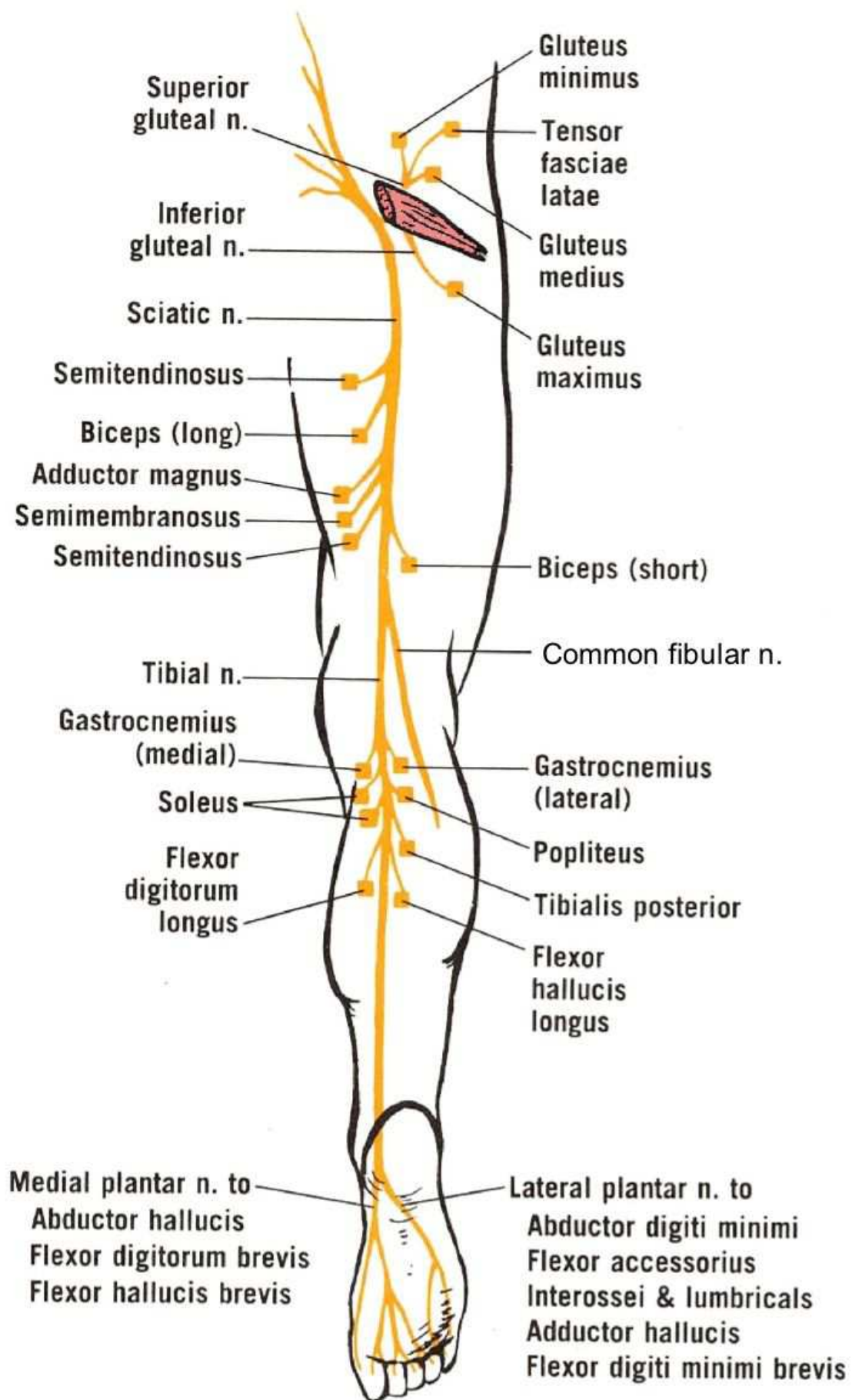
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Sciatica is a broad term used for pain relating to an inflammation or pinching of the sciatic nerve. The pain is usually felt in the lower back around the sacrum area, in the hips, or along the backs of the thighs. Sciatica is complicated by the fact that the sciatic nerve attaches at several points along the lower spine, and then runs all the way down your leg (it's the largest nerve bundle in the body after the spinal cord!), so the inflammation could be caused at any point along the nerve, and not necessarily where the pain is felt.

Sciatica can often be caused by repetitive motions or postures, such as pushing the gas pedal while driving or sitting cross-legged for extended periods. In yoga, sciatica is often associated with forward bending.

While by no means a miracle cure, this sequence targets the SI joint and the piriformis muscle, two areas of the body where sciatic irritation often occurs. The entire sequence could take 15-20 minutes, depending on how quickly you move. If you have time you will get the best results by focusing on slowing down your breath and trying to make your exhalations about twice as long as your inhalations.

**NB:** One of the **WORST** things you can do if you have sciatica is to **overstretch** the already irritated areas. Although you might think that stretching it more will make the pain go away, this is actually likely to **inflamm the nerve even more and make your symptoms worse**. So instead, use gentle movements and deep breathing to bring your body to a state of relaxation and allow it to heal.



POSTERIOR

## Sciatica Sequence

**1. Apanasana: Warms up the lower back while keeping the SI joint stable.** Begin lying on your back with your knees to your chest. Place your hands on top of your knees. As you inhale, push the knees away from your body. As you exhale, hug the knees to the chest. Repeat 4-6 times.



INHALE



EXHALE

**2. Hip circles: Warms up the hips while keeping the SI joint stable.** After your next exhalation, as you inhale let the knees come out wide and begin a circular motion - circling the knees out and up to centre as you inhale, drawing them to the chest as you exhale. Do 4-6 circles in each direction.



**3. Supta eka padangustasana: Warms up the hamstrings.** Release your left knee and let the foot touch the floor, keeping the left knee bent. Clasp your hands behind the right knee - use a hand towel if you can't comfortably reach. Inhale, stretch the right leg straight up (keeping the foot active, with the toes flexed back towards you!), exhale, bend the knee and bring it down. Repeat 6-10 times, then switch sides. Optionally, proceed to Step 4 on the first side before switching. Hug your knees to your chest when done.



INHALE



EXHALE

**4. Upside-down pigeon: Stretches the gluts and opens the hip joint.** Place the left foot on the floor about a foot away from your body. Bring your right leg towards your chest and gently cross the right ankle over the left knee. Keep both feet lightly flexed. Now, gently walk the left foot closer towards your body until you can reach through to grasp the back of the left thigh or the front of the shin. Use your hands (or a strap) to gently pull yourself deeper into the stretch. You should feel a fairly strong stretch in your right glut (that's your butt, folks) and your right hip. If you feel any pain or twinging in your right knee, ease off immediately! Hold for about 1 minute, then do the other side. When you're done hug both knees to your chest.



**5. Supine Crescent pose:** Gives a lateral stretch to the spine and the glut medius. Lie flat on the floor with your feet together and your arms stretched all the way out behind you. Move your right foot out to one side. Then bring the left foot to meet the right foot. Now move your right arm out to one side, and bring the left hand towards the right, so you are lying in a crescent moon shape. Breathe here for 30 seconds to 1 minute, then repeat on the other side. Hug both knees to your chest when done.



**6. Jathara Parvritti:** Stretches and releases the piriformis. Move both hips a few inches to the right side. Extend the left leg straight out on the floor. Place the right foot on the floor about level with your left knee, and let your arms stretch out to either side. As you exhale, let the right knee fall towards the left side (but keep your right shoulder on the ground). As you inhale, slowly lift the right knee up about 2 inches and hold it there. As you exhale, release it back down. Repeat 4 times and then stay in the "exhale" position for about 30 seconds - then continue on to Step 7.



INHALE



EXHALE

**7. Jathara Parvritti II:** Stretches the piriformis and the glut max. This is a big stretch, so be gentle and skip it if it's too much! From position 6, as you inhale, straighten the right leg. As you exhale, bend the right knee again. Repeat 4 times and then stay about 30 seconds with the leg outstretched. Use a book or a chair to support the foot so that your right shoulder stays on the ground! Now, as you inhale, lift the straight right leg about 2 inches and hold it there. As you exhale, bring it back down. Repeat 4 times and then stay in the "exhale" position for 30 seconds - 1 minute before slowly coming out. Repeat 6 and 7 on the left hand side. When done both sides, hug both knees to your chest.



INHALE



EXHALE

**8. Bridge pose:** Stretches the psoas muscle. Place both feet on the ground, about sitting-bone distance apart so that your thighs and feet are in line with one another. As you inhale, lift your tailbone and slowly peel your spine away from the floor, coming into bridge pose. As you exhale, release your spine with control, vertebrae by vertebrae. This should be done gently with an emphasis on keeping the length of the spine - don't go very high if you experience any pain. Repeat 4-6 times. When you are done, hug your knees to your chest for a few breaths.



INHALE



EXHALE



**9. Bhujangasana or Cobra Pose: Strengthens the lower back muscles, which stabilise the SI joint.** Lie on your belly with your palms resting underneath the shoulders (elbows tucked in) and your feet together on the floor. This is position A. Exhale, engaging the abdominals. Inhale and look forward, gently lifting your chest up off the floor (the lower ribs and everything below them stay on the floor!). Exhale, come down. Theeet (1metre) apart (position C). Then work your way back to position A.



The 2nd time, bring the feet about 2 feet (60cm) apart (position B). The 3rd time, bring the feet about 3 feet (1metre) apart (position C). Then work your way back to position A.



**10. One-legged Cobra: Strengthens the lower back muscles and works the SI joint asymmetrically.** From Position A, above, on an inhalation lift your chest off the floor and bend the right knee. Exhale back down. Inhale, lift the chest and left knee. Repeat twice on each side. **NB** - the "exhale" photo shows you coming back to position A with the chest lifted - but actually you should **come all the way down until your forehead touches the ground!**



**11. Full cobra Pose: Strengthens the lower back muscles and works the SI joint symmetrically.** From Position A, inhale and lift the chest and both knees. Exhale back down. Repeat this four times. **NB** - the "exhale" photo shows you coming back to position A with the chest lifted - but actually you should **come all the way down until your forehead touches the ground!**

When you are done, if your lower back is feeling a bit worked, rest a few breaths in child's pose (see step 13). If this is too intense on your lower back, skip straight to the next pose, or alternate between 11 and 12 each time you do the sequence.



**12. Locust pose variation:** Works the spinal extensors, the piriformis, and the gluteus maximus. Come to Position A of step 9, above, but this time also lift both feet off the floor. The focus here is **not on height**, but on lengthening the legs behind you. From here, turn the toes of both feet outwards, and bring the legs wide apart. Then, turn the toes inwards and bring the feet back together until the toes are touching. Come down and rest, then repeat this four times. **NB** - if you are like me and have a sensitive pelvic bone, put a folded up towel/blanket or a pillow underneath your pelvis when you do this pose.



**13. Child's pose:** Counter-pose to backbending. Come to your hands and knees, and then drop the buttocks back towards the heels. Bring your hands back towards your feet and rest your forehead on the floor (or a book/block/blanket). Stay for at least 30 seconds.



**14. Savasana:** Allows your body to absorb the benefits of the practice! Lie flat on your back in final resting pose, placing a rolled up towel / blanket / yoga mat underneath the knees. You can also place your lower legs on a chair seat! This releases the lower back and the backs of the legs. Stay here for a minimum of 3 minutes, breathing naturally and letting go of all tension in your body. If you enjoy visualisations try the following: as you inhale, visualise a wave of warm, pure, healing water entering your body from the top of your head and moving towards your lower back and legs. As you exhale, visualise the wave leaving your body, taking with it all tension and stress.

