

Sciatica

Sciatica is where the sciatic nerve is irritated or compressed. It usually gets better in 4 to 6 weeks but can last longer. The sciatic nerve runs from your lower back to your feet.

Check if you have sciatica

Sciatica affects your bottom, the back of your leg, or your foot and toes.

These areas may feel:

- painful – the pain may be stabbing, burning or shooting
- tingly – like [pins and needles](#)
- numb
- weak

Your symptoms may be worse when moving, sneezing or coughing.

You may also have back pain, but it's not usually as bad as the pain in your bottom, leg or foot.

You probably do not have sciatica if you only have back pain.

How you can ease the pain yourself

Sciatica usually gets better in 4 to 6 weeks, but it can sometimes last longer.

To help relieve your pain and speed up recovery:

Do

- ✓ carry on with your normal activities as much as possible
- ✓ regular exercises for sciatica
- ✓ start gentle exercise as soon as you can – anything that gets you moving can help
- ✓ hold heat packs to the painful areas – you can buy these from pharmacies

- ✓ ask your pharmacist or GP about painkillers – NSAIDs like ibuprofen are often recommended – paracetamol on its own is unlikely to relieve your pain
- ✓ put a small, firm cushion between your knees when you sleep on your side
- ✓ put several firm pillows underneath your knees when you lie on your back

Don't

- ✗ do not sit or lie down for long periods – even if moving hurts, it's not harmful and can help you get better faster
- ✗ do not use hot water bottles to ease the pain – you could scald yourself if your skin is numb

See a GP if the pain:

- has not improved after trying home treatments for a few weeks
- is getting worse
- is stopping you doing your normal activities

Go to your emergency department (ED) or call 112 or 999 if you:

- have sciatica on both sides
- have weakness or numbness in both legs that's severe or getting worse
- have numbness around or under your genitals, or around your bottom (anus)
- find it hard to start peeing, cannot pee or cannot control when you pee – and this is not normal for you
- do not notice when you need to poo or cannot control when you poo – and this is not normal for you

These could be symptoms of a serious back problem that needs to be treated in hospital as soon as possible.

Treatments from your GP

If you have sciatica, your GP may:

- suggest exercises and stretches
- prescribe painkillers that help with nerve pain like sciatica

They might also refer you for:

- physiotherapy – including exercise advice and techniques like massage (manual therapy)
- psychological support – to help you cope with the pain

Other treatments for sciatica

If your pain is very bad and treatments from your GP have not helped, they may refer you to a hospital specialist for:

- painkilling injections
- a procedure to seal off some of the nerves in your back so they stop sending pain signals
- surgery – an operation called decompression surgery can sometimes help relieve sciatica

How to stop sciatica coming back

To reduce the chances of getting sciatica again:

Do

- ✓ stay active – take regular [exercise](#)
- ✓ use a safe technique when lifting heavy objects
- ✓ make sure you have a good posture when sitting and standing
- ✓ sit correctly when using a computer
- ✓ lose weight if you're overweight

Don't

- ✗ [do not smoke](#) – smoking can increase your risk of getting sciatica

Causes of sciatica

Sciatica happens when something presses or rubs on the sciatic nerve.

Causes include:

- a slipped disc (the most common cause) – when a soft cushion of tissue between the bones in your spine pushes out
- spinal stenosis – narrowing of the part of your spine where nerves pass through
- spondylolisthesis – when one of the bones in your spine slips out of position
- a back injury

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