

I Am Worried I Have Sciatica—What Do I Need to Know?

Sciatica is a type of pain that is caused by irritation of the sciatic nerve. This nerve travels from the low back down the legs. Sciatica most commonly happens when a disk in your spine gets damaged or worn out and presses on the sciatic nerve.

What Are the Typical Symptoms of Sciatica?

Low back pain is one of the most common symptoms of sciatica, but you can also have sciatica without it. The pain can be sharp and aching. It is often accompanied by numbness, tingling, or shooting pain down the back of one leg. Rarely, sciatica can cause muscle weakness, like having difficulty lifting your foot.

What Testing Is Required to Diagnose Sciatica?

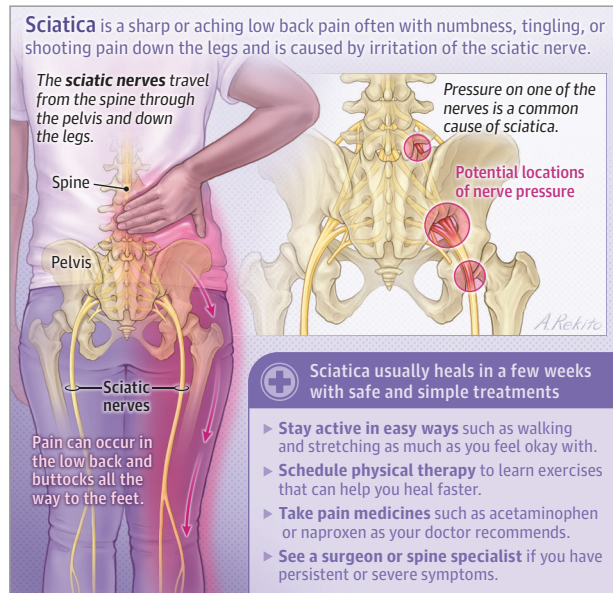
A medical professional can usually diagnose sciatica by asking about your symptoms and doing a physical examination. For most people, blood tests and imaging such as x-ray or magnetic resonance imaging are not necessary. If you have had cancer, spine infections, or injection drug use; have a new fever; cannot feel your groin area; cannot control going to the bathroom; have trouble urinating; or your leg feels weak, you should see a medical professional right away.

Does Sciatica Get Better?

Most people with sciatica fully recover without any treatment. About one-third of people with sciatica recover within 2 weeks, and three-fourths of people feel better within 3 months. It is hard to predict who will get better and who will still feel pain. Sciatica can come and go. If your sciatica lasts more than 12 weeks, it is a good idea to get reevaluated by a health care professional.

What Options Do I Have to Treat My Pain?

There are many ways to treat pain related to sciatica. Anti-inflammatory drugs like ibuprofen or naproxen may provide modest, short-term relief. Acetaminophen (Tylenol) can also be helpful for pain. Other prescribed medications such as muscle relaxers, steroids, opioids (eg, tramadol, oxycodone), and gabapentin are not proven to help, and some may have dangerous side effects. Talk with your doctor about what medications are best for you. Maintaining gentle physical activity (eg, walking, light housework) as tolerated is important for recovery. A physical therapist can help to coach you on specific exercises to speed up the recovery process. There is no strong evidence that treatments like back adjustments (eg, from chiropractors), gentle spine stretching (called lumbar traction), or acupuncture work. Doctors sometimes give injections of steroid or numbing medications near the spine to help with pain. These might help relieve pain for a short time, but they do not help to heal sciatica.



I Am Still in Pain—Should I Consider Surgery?

If treatments like physical therapy and pain medications do not help after 4 months, surgery may improve symptoms for some people. But there is a chance that the pain may return even after surgery. Most surgeries for sciatica use small cuts and special tools to remove the damaged part of the spinal disk. This can relieve pressure on the sciatic nerve. Recovery time from sciatica surgery varies among people but generally takes 6 to 12 weeks. While surgery can help, it has risks, including nerve damage and infection. If you are thinking about surgery, speak with a health care professional who can help you decide if it is right for you.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Cleveland Clinic

<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/12792-sciatica>

Johns Hopkins Medicine

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/back-pain/5-questions-to-answer-before-considering-sciatica-surgery>

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