

## sciatica and spinal health management plan

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Sciatica is a common condition where pain is felt radiating down the buttocks, back of the thighs and legs. Sciatica is caused by irritation, compression or damage to the sciatic nerve, which is a large nerve, about the thickness of a pencil, which serves a large portion of the lower body.

Pain may be sharp, stabbing, burning or “electrical” in nature, may occur in one or both sides.

Sciatica is often difficult to treat with conventional pain killers and anti-inflammatories, in part because it is not really one condition, but a group of different conditions. Each of these has their own set of recommended treatments and therapies. This also means that diagnosis is important because a friend or relative’s sciatica might be quite different from your own.

The most common causes of sciatica nerve pain are as follows:

- **An Inflamed Piriformis Muscle**  
This muscle is located in the buttocks just above the sciatic nerve and is used to rotate the hips. If the muscle is over worked or inflamed, sciatica is likely to occur. People who are seated at work, such as office workers or drivers are at risk. Rotating movements such as shovelling or playing golf may worsen the condition. Injury by falling on the buttocks may also lead to piriformis syndrome. Pain is aggravated by sitting and particularly after first rising in the morning.
- **Lumbar Herniated Disc**  
For a variety of reasons including repetitive lifting and poor posture, the discs within the spine can become weakened. If a disc becomes herniated (or bulging) then sciatic pain is likely to occur. Symptoms include sudden “electrical” sharp pain down the buttocks and rear of the thighs, and stiffness in the lower back. When a straight leg raise is performed, pain will be felt in the leg, not the back.
- **Lumbosacral Muscle Strain**  
When the supporting muscles of the lower back are unduly strained or inflamed, sciatic pain can result. Lifting heavy objects improperly is the most common cause. Symptoms include onset of pain after the lifting activity, a dull ache and lower back stiffness. When a straight leg lift test is performed, pain will be felt in the lower back, not the leg.
- **Spinal Stenosis**  
This is a narrowing of the spinal canal caused by bony growth (bone spurs) within the spine. Onset of pain is gradual, which may be eased with rest.
- **Emotional Stress**  
Stress may tighten the muscles of the lower spine and irritate the sciatic nerve. A person under stress is usually unaware that excessive muscle tension is occurring.
- **Weak Muscles**  
The sciatic nerve is particularly susceptible to poor posture. A sedentary lifestyle and obesity are risk factors where weakened abdominal and back muscles may fail to adequately support the spine. Sciatica is often the result.

### Managing your Sciatica

There are a number of practical strategies that can be used to help your sciatica.

#### 1. Obtain a Clear Diagnosis

Because sciatica is really a group of conditions each with a slightly different treatment, knowing the true cause of your sciatica is the first step in managing it effectively.



## 2. Use a Combination of Measures to Manage Your Sciatica

The most successful treatments are usually a blend of different therapies including externally applied and oral pain relievers, abdominal and lower back muscle strengthening exercises, stress reduction, hydrotherapy, weight loss, improved posture and seating, acupuncture, physiotherapy and improved ergonomics at work and home.

## 3. Use Externally Applied as Well as Oral Medications

Many external preparations have excellent warming and muscle relaxing properties and often work well in combination with pain relieving tablets. There is also potential to reduce medication side effects such as drowsiness by lowering the dosage of pain relieving tablets.

## 4. Strengthen Supporting Muscles

Both the lower back muscles and the abdominal muscles give crucial support for the spine and sciatic nerve. Most sciatica patients can safely strengthen these muscle groups using appropriate exercises. Check with your practitioner for strengthening exercises suitable for you.

## 5. Weight Loss

Being obese or overweight is often a worsening factor for sciatica, and even modest weight reduction can help reduce symptoms.

## 6. Think Posture

Good posture is regularly a victim of modern day living. Sitting or standing with correct posture allows you to be more balanced, and, surprisingly more relaxed. The occasional "posture reminder" may be all that is required for better sciatica control.

## 7. Good Seating

Firm, supportive and comfortable seating which promotes good posture is a great step towards improved sciatica. The same is true for bedding. Avoid prolonged sitting by getting up for a brief stretch every 30 minutes.

## 8. Stress Reduction

Meditation, relaxation massage or simply unwinding with some good music can be very helpful in reducing tense back muscles. Set up a regular relaxation programme if possible. If your back muscles are overly tense, you will unlikely be aware of it.

## 9. Improved Ergonomics at Home or Work

Sciatica thrives where there is repetitive lifting, prolonged sitting, turning and lifting, excessive bending and increased stress in the home or workplace. Consider changes and improvements that reduce sciatica risks. Often very simple changes can produce major benefits, or prevent someone from becoming a sciatica sufferer.

## 10. Consider Additional Therapies

There are many therapeutic options such as hydrotherapy, balneotherapy (bath therapy), acupuncture, therapeutic massage, pain management clinics, TENS (Trans Electrode Nerve Stimulation), biofeed back, hypnotherapy and physiotherapy. Each has something in its own right to offer the sciatica patient, and used as part of the overall sciatica management plan, may provide great benefit.

Further information on sciatica treatment is available at [www.nutripharm.net](http://www.nutripharm.net).



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at:

PO Box 7313  
Karingal Centre, Vic, 3199  
Australia

Ph: +61 3 5983 8525  
Fax: +61 3 9789 6404  
Email: [info@nutripharm.net](mailto:info@nutripharm.net)

