

# Sciatica or Radicular Pain Service User Information Leaflet

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Produced by Fife Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy Service

Diagrams: ©PhysioTools

### **What is sciatica or radicular pain?**

Sciatica or radicular pain is the name given to any sort of pain that is caused by irritation or compression of the sciatic nerve. If a nerve is irritated, pain can radiate from your back down to your calf and foot. You can have back pain as well as the leg pain. Often the leg pain is worse than the back pain.

### **What causes it?**

Symptoms of sciatica are caused by irritation of the sciatic nerve. You can experience pain and / or pins and needles in the area that is supplied by this nerve. Sciatic nerve irritation can be caused by inflammation of the nerve and the surrounding tissues.

### **Is it serious?**

This type of pain can be very painful but most of the time it is not serious.

### **Cauda Equina Syndrome Warning Signs**

Many patients have a combination of back pain, leg pain, leg numbness and weakness. These symptoms can be distressing, but do not necessarily require emergency medical attention. **A rare, but serious back condition, Cauda Equina Syndrome, can lead to permanent damage or disability and will need to be seen by an Emergency Specialist Spinal Team. Some warning signs of Cauda Equina Syndrome are as follows:**

- Loss of feeling/pins and needles between your inner thighs or genitals
- Numbness in or around your back passage or buttocks
- Altered feeling when using toilet paper to wipe yourself
- Increasing difficulty when you try to urinate
- Increasing difficulty when you try to stop or control your flow of urine
- Loss of sensation when you pass urine
- Leaking urine or recent need to use pads
- Not knowing when your bladder is either full or empty
- Inability to stop a bowel movement or leaking
- Loss of sensation when you pass a bowel motion
- Change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- Loss of sensation in genitals during sexual intercourse

**Any one or  
combination  
of these  
seek  
medical  
help  
immediately**

## What can I do to help?

### **Medication**

You can use medication to manage your pain to help keep active. It is recommended you take your medication regularly with the prescribed dosage rather than waiting until the pain is at its worst. It is best to speak to your GP or a pharmacist about which medication to take.

*You may find the positions below helpful.*



Prolonged sitting is a common position which increases back pain. It is recommended to use a rolled up towel (lumbar roll) to help support your back whilst sitting.



If sitting is uncomfortable a hard straight backed chair may be better than a soft, low armchair.

### **Remain active**

Sciatica can be helped by changing your position often.

Keeping your back moving stops the spine stiffening up. It may be uncomfortable a little at first but this pain should settle and movement can help you improve.

### **What are the best exercises?**

You do not need to do any special exercises. Try to continue with your normal activities with frequent rests in between.

### **What treatments are available?**

This type of pain generally gets better over time. In the early stages, there is no specific treatment which has been shown to benefit this type of pain apart from the advice given above. If your pain does not settle you may be referred to a physiotherapist for further assessment and treatment as appropriate.

If there is no improvement after 4-6 weeks, you should seek the advice of a healthcare professional. If your pain does not settle, you may be referred for further assessment and treatment as appropriate. In 9 out of 10 cases, pain resolves without specialist treatment.

### **Prognosis**

The severe pain may last for about 2-3 months. Milder pain may stay for many months after this. Do not panic if your pain temporarily increases, small set backs or flare ups during this period are common. It may take 12 to 18 months for your symptoms to settle.

### **Should I Have an X-ray or scan?**

An x-ray of your back will not help identify the cause of pain, unless you have had a fall or direct injury. Discs, nerves, muscles and ligaments do not show up on x-ray.

A scan may not show where the pain is coming from. The information you give your doctor or physiotherapist is much more helpful in diagnosing your problem.

### **Useful Information**

[www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints](http://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints)

NHS Inform Helpline: 0800 22 44 88

For free and confidential advice about work call the Healthy Working Lives Advice line on **0800 019 2211**. [www.healthyworkinglives.com](http://www.healthyworkinglives.com)