

A dirt path winds through a lush green forest. The path is covered in brown leaves and dirt, leading into the distance. The forest is dense with green foliage, including many ferns and tall, thin trees. The lighting is soft, suggesting a shaded forest environment.

5 Step Checklist for Sciatica Relief

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Disclaimer: The information contained in this e book is general and not intended to be individual medical advice. For individual medical advice regarding a specific issue you may have, consult your local physical therapist or physician for an evaluation.

“Sciatica” (leg pain, numbness and weakness related to irritation of the sciatic nerve) is common. The majority of sciatica cases resolve with conservative treatment, including physical therapy, massage, acupuncture, use of medication, etc. Some cases of sciatica become chronic however and can then limit one’s ability to be physically active, perform basic daily activities or even earn a living.

Over the 27 years during which I’ve worked as a physical therapist I have taken note of many activities that worsen sciatica with my patients. It is important to be aware of these factors and to commit to changing your lifestyle in order to decrease your pain. The following 5 guidelines are very likely to help you to this end. These are meant to empower you to give you some control and self responsibility over your pain. I frequently remind my patients that there are 168 hours in a week, and I only get to work with you for one of those during treatment. The potential to either worsen or improve your pain is to a large degree up to you! Here are 5 tips to help you reduce your pain levels and improve the quality of your life!



Step 1: Sit less. When you do sit, sit better!

We've heard it a million times. Sitting is not good for you. It's the "new smoking". Unfortunately sitting is unavoidable at times, especially in these days of emphasis on technology, working from home, etc.

There are two factors regarding sitting that can be significant with your pain: How you sit and how much time you spend sitting. Let's discuss how you sit first.

Sitting at a desk. First of all, you don't need an expensive or fancy chair. What you do need is a seat with a flat, fairly firm seating surface that can be adjusted height wise. You want to raise the height of the seating surface to a level that is higher than that of your knees. This allows your hips to be higher than your knees, your thighs to slope downward toward the floor and your pelvis to naturally tilt to a more upright position. Your weight will be on the front part of your pelvis and not on your tailbone. You will notice your ability to sit more upright with much less effort when your seat height is raised appropriately.



Another tip to help you sit at a desk with better posture is to fold a hand towel to a thickness of approximately one half inch. Place this in the rear half of the seat pan and place your sit bones on this towel when you sit at a desk. This will allow your pelvis to be supported in a more upright position thereby allowing you to sit up right with much less effort.

When you employ the previous tips you will not need to lean back on to the back of the chair. In fact, you should avoid utilizing the back of the chair while sitting in this manner. Why? Because your body weight will be oriented in a slightly forward direction and placed on your feet to a greater degree. This is appropriate, as your work (computer) is also forward (in front of you). It makes sense from a mechanics standpoint that your weight should be forward if your work is in front of you.

Finally, while sitting in the above manner DO NOT work too hard at "sitting up tall" by intentionally arching your lower back and lifting your sternum upward. This is frequently aggravating to lower back and sciatic pain. Relax your abdominal muscles, and allow your body weight to settle into the foundation - the pelvis and feet. Just as a skyscraper stands upright due to having a solid foundation and a vertical orientation, no external support (muscular effort) is required to help you maintain this posture!



Sitting on a sofa.

When sitting on a sofa, place a pillow behind your lower back to fill up the space between your lower back and the back of the sofa. If you don't do this, your lower back will round, filling up this space itself. In addition, try placing a 1-2" thick board, text book, box or other item under the soles of your feet while you sit, with your knees bent. This will take the weight of your legs off of your lower back and allow your lower back to relax to a greater degree.

Finally, do not sit upright on your couch with both of your legs stretched out in front of you, knees straight with your feet on an ottoman. This is one of the worst things you can do if you have sciatic nerve pain!

Even if you follow the above tips consistently, prolonged sitting will likely increase your pain. Set a timer for 20 minutes and stand up for 2 minutes at a time. Get a glass of water, go to the bathroom, stretch, walk around your house. The importance of this cannot be over emphasized!



Step 2: Avoid unnecessary bending of your lower back.

Bending forward while putting on your socks, pants, underwear and shoes can be painful and a daily aggravation to your sciatic nerve pain. Standing on one leg (especially the painful side) and attempting to balance as you step in to your pants is a challenge that most of my sciatica patients face. People do not realize that there may be another option for dressing your lower body which is not painful!.

Lie on your back with both knees bent up and feet flat on the floor. Lift one foot up and place your leg in underwear, one leg at a time. Repeat for pants, socks and shoes. Gently lift both hips up off of the bed (“bridge”) as you pull your pants up. This will significantly reduce stress on your sciatic nerve.

Bending forward while performing such activities such as doing dishes, laundry, lifting, etc are common ways to aggravate your pain. Use your legs and bend your knees to get down to the lower level. Kneel while unloading the dryer instead of standing and bending to remove your dry clothes. Attention to seemingly small details like these will reduce daily stress in your painful areas. Be aware of your body’s position and listen to your pain 24/7. Your body will communicate to you through pain which positions or movements are detrimental. Do not ignore these signals!



Step 3. Stop doing inappropriate or painful exercises!

No one form of exercise is good for all people. If a certain exercise that you are doing hurts, do not continue to do it! This seems simple enough, but many time folks seem to convince themselves that they need to continue to perform painful exercise. Over the years patients have voiced several reasons for doing this.

- 1) They have an intense desire to get into shape and/or lose weight.
- 2) The fact that exercise carries the benefit of reducing stress in the short term.
- 3) The misconception that feeling increased pain during exercise is "good".

Let's look at these one at a time:

The desire to get into shape and/or loose weight: Many of us fall in to the trap of setting unrealistic goals for ourselves in terms of how we look. This can sometimes drive workout habits that are counterproductive, especially when our sciatica symptoms are being aggravated by our workout activities.

One must tame these thoughts and accept that the exercise that you are currently performing is not appropriate. Even if your physical therapist had a magic wand and "fixed" you each time you came in for treatment, continuing to perform aggravating workouts will prevent you from making long term progress. You must get yourself out of pain first through discontinuing such exercise, and then be guided by a Physical Therapist back to a sustainable, enjoyable and non-aggravating method for burning calories and weight loss!

Over-exercising in order to reduce stress: Exercise is a great way to reduce stress, however NOT at the expense of creating more pain! Folks so enjoy their post-workout “runner’s high”, or “endorphin fix” however that they become addicted to this in a way. You might feel a temporary reduction in emotional stress following exercise, however if your pain levels are being increased and perpetuated by a certain form of exercise, this is pointless. Remember that you may be causing significant tissue damage by continuing to exercise. This can at times result in surgery being the only answer to your problem. This is not a scenario that you want to deal with! Talk about stress! Long term stress associated with continuing to exacerbate your pain through exercise is overwhelmingly greater than any temporary, short term stress reduction you get immediately following working out! Be smart, and work with your Physical Therapist to find a more appropriate and less painful means with which to achieve your “endorphin fix”! The key to weight loss and long term fitness is consistency - not super high intensity exercise that consistently increases your pain!.



Inappropriate method of exercise: There are several very popular forms of exercise. Remember though that no one form of exercise is appropriate for all individuals.

-Yoga is great for many folks, but at times can aggravate sciatic pain in certain individuals, as this discipline involves postures which demand many extreme positions of the spine. These specific postures may be counterproductive and not appropriate for your issue.

-CrossFit involves high intensity work which is frequently performed in a timed manner. It is very difficult to perform any exercise with correct form when beating your previous time is emphasized.

-Running can be “painful” in terms of the amount of high physical effort and the discomfort that inevitably accompanies this. Putting up with pain is in a runner’s nature as they regularly train themselves to do so, through their daily running sessions. Endorphins released during running may mask your sciatic pain during your run, only to have it return with a vengeance later that day or night following your run.



Step 4: Provide correct support for your body while in bed at night.

Correct positioning and support is as important with sleeping as it is with sitting, or any other activity.

First of all, do not sleep on your stomach. This is bad for your lower back, neck and has been shown to compromise the blood flow to your brain, due to the extreme neck position of being rotated to one side for a prolonged period of time! This is aggravating to your pain and possibly more dangerous to your health than you might think. Work hard to break the habit!

Correct positioning for sleeping on your back: Place at least one pillow, width wise under your thighs and just at the edge of your buttocks. You should feel an immediate reduction in lower back strain, tightness and pain in you SI or leg when positioned in this manner. If you don't notice this, add another pillow. Generally placing a pillow under your legs reduces the tension in your hip flexor muscles and results in their reduced pull on your lower back while in this position. When you get up from this position you should feel reduced pain. This is a sign that this position is a very beneficial one to utilize at night.



Correct positioning for sleeping on your side:

Place 1-2 pillows lengthwise between your knees, feet and hips. This pillow should be long enough to support all three of these joints simultaneously and therefore allow your legs to be positioned in parallel while on our side. When in doubt, add another pillow.

To support your lower back and prevent it from sagging sideways toward the floor while lying on your side, fold a towel a couple of times and place it under your side between your pelvic bone and rib cage areas, under the soft tissue of the side of your abdomen. The towel should be approximately 5" wide and 1" thick. You should feel improved support when using such a support.

Again, getting up and standing following being in this position should allow one to feel less pain. Finally, placing a pillow under your "up" arm while in a side lying position will allow you to feel more comfortable and better supported in this position.

The challenge with using pillow and towel supports while sleeping is to maintain their position through the night. Let me just say that this is worth the effort. When you wake the next morning with noticeably less pain, this sets you up for a better day. If you start to stack good days up one after the other, you start to make great progress. Commit to the above practice of maintaining good spinal support at night!

5. Step 5: Provide Support for "Flat Feet"

Foot and ankle issues are the norm rather than the exception. Feet are your first contact with the ground and any problems at the feet are translated up the leg to the knee, hip, pelvis, lower back and even higher. If you have significant foot problems (flat feet, etc), failure to use a good shoe and/or arch support (orthotic) could lead to pain in any or many of the above regions. Try an over the counter orthotic such as "Superfeet" (I usually recommend the green option). Very slowly start to include use of these orthotics into your daily routine. Start with wearing them for one hour/day, and add an hour per day until you get to the point at which you are wearing them for 7 hours straight without any increased pain in any regions of your body. At that point, start to wear the orthotics regularly and for recreational walking or during periods of being on your feet for a long period of time.

The above is a general list of five common causes of sciatic pain and general strategies for improving your symptoms. However, nothing beats a full, one on one evaluation with a physical therapist when determining the cause of your pain. Each individual is different and requires different treatment. A PT can determine which factors in your specific situation are the most significant and most in need of treatment, in order to help to decrease your pain and optimize your daily functional abilities!

Thank you for downloading this e book and taking initiative toward eliminating your sciatic pain! If you are in need of more specific evaluation and treatment for your problem please give me a call me right now!

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