

Presented by Katie Gravesen, DC

## Chiropractic Care for Sciatica

*The sharp, shooting pain of sciatica ranges from uncomfortable to downright debilitating. Numbness and muscle weakness in addition to pain in the sciatic nerve — the longest and widest nerve in the body — may strike anywhere that this nerve travels, from the lower back and buttock down to the foot.*

*While bed rest and medication are often useless against sciatica, there is hope, says Dr. Gravesen. Study after study shows that safe, drug-free chiropractic care can make a real difference for those who suffer from sciatica. Read on to better understand this condition and learn the latest research about the most effective methods for addressing this unique pain.*

### The Sciatic Nerve and the Spine

Each of the two sciatic nerves runs through the buttock and down the back of the leg. It transmits all sensory information from the back of the thigh and most of the lower leg and foot. The sciatic nerve also governs the hip joint as well as the hamstrings and other muscles of the thigh.

Like all nerves, the sciatic nerves emit from the spinal cord, the central messenger between nerves and the brain. The spinal cord is protected by the spinal column, which consists of 33 bones called vertebrae. The spinal column is also the central support of the musculoskeletal system. Many types of pain throughout the body can be traced back to misalignments of the vertebrae that place pressure on the spinal cord and radiating nerves.

### Causes of Sciatica

Dr. Gravesen tells patients that sciatica is not a disease of its own but rather a symptom of musculoskeletal dysfunction.

Sciatica may result from trauma to the spine — indeed, research points to a higher likelihood of sciatica in individuals engaged in regular physical labor (*Best Pract Res Clin Rheumatol*

2010;24:241-52).

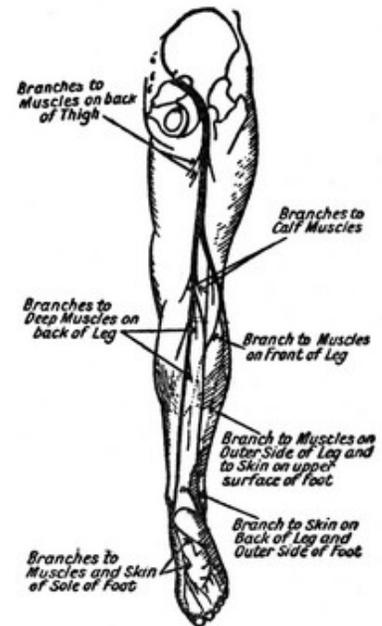
The sciatic nerve is most often compressed or irritated by three particular problems.

One common cause of sciatica is a *herniated disc*, sometimes called a “slipped disc.” Between the vertebrae that make up the spinal column are intervertebral discs — cushions made of cartilage that connect the vertebrae, which allow space for nerves to enter and exit the spinal cord and absorb impact to the spine.

A herniation is a tear in the tough outer fibers of the disc, which allows the soft inside to bulge out. A herniation may be due either to long-term wear and tear or a traumatic injury. The swelling of a herniated disc near one of the five roots of the sciatic nerve may cause sciatica.

Sciatica may also be a symptom of *spinal stenosis* in the low back (lumbar region). This condition is often due to a slightly misaligned vertebra (*vertebral subluxation*). It may also be triggered by a bone spur, inflammation, or other such problem. All these conditions compress the sciatic nerve, causing painful irritation.

Sciatica can also be sparked by *piri-*



*formis syndrome*, in which the nerve passes through — rather than behind — the piriformis muscle near the hip joint. Tightness or spasms in this muscle compress the sciatic nerve (*Eur Spine J* 2010;19:2095-109).

### Ineffective Measures

Many of the oft-recommended approaches to sciatica are minimally effective and in some cases even dangerous, warns Dr. Gravesen. A review published in the *British Medical Journal* examined 23 studies of various classes of medication for sciatica, including non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), corticosteroids, antidepressants, anticonvulsants, muscle relaxants and opioid analgesics.

Most drugs showed no benefit over a placebo, and the drugs caused adverse side effects in 17 percent of patients (*BMJ* 2012;344:e497).

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Pain medications for sciatica carry many risks, including gastrointestinal upset and damage, addiction and the potential for adverse reactions when combined with other drugs (*Clin Cornerstone* 2001;3:50-60).

Another common suggestion for those with sciatica is bed rest. However, another review concluded that bed rest does not reduce pain associated with sciatica any more than remaining active or undergoing physiotherapy (*Cochrane Database Syst Rev* 2004; CD001254).

### How Chiropractic Can Help

By far, the safest and most effective mode of care for sciatica is chiropractic care.

Chiropractic care is a drug-free approach to health that emphasizes preventive care and supporting the body's natural ability to recover from illness and injury. In addition to nutrition and fitness counseling, stress management and ergonomics, chiropractic centers on **chiropractic adjustments**. These gentle and safe manipulations to the spine relieve areas of dysfunction called **vertebral subluxations**.

By aiding the spine in maintaining normal, healthy alignment, chiropractic adjustments relieve pressure on the spinal cord and nerves, easing myriad physical complaints and protecting the whole body from future injury.

The doctor points to promising evidence of chiropractic's power to ease sciatica. One research review shows that chiropractic is effective for pain like sciatica that radiates from the lower back (*Phys Med Rehabil Clin N Am* 2011;22:105-25).

Another promising trial looked at 102 patients with moderate to severe back pain and sciatica associated with disc protrusion (a precursor to herniation in which the disc bulges but is intact).

Half the group received up to 20 chiropractic adjustments while the other half received simulated adjustments.

The actual adjustments outperformed sham adjustments in terms of both total relief and number of days without pain (*Spine J* 2006;6:131-7).

Another study included 40 patients with sciatica from disc herniation who had unsuccessfully tried medication, physiotherapy, massage therapy, lifestyle changes, and/or acupuncture. These patients were randomly assigned to chiropractic care or microdiscectomy, a surgical procedure which removes tissue that has escaped from the herniated disc.

A full 60 percent of the patients receiving chiropractic care had improvement. This was equal to the recovery rate of the microdiscectomy patients — but without the risks inherent in surgery (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2010; 33: 576-84).

Chiropractic is not only effective against sciatica but also proven safe. A review of studies following various therapies for disc herniation and similar injuries found that chiropractic care worsens the condition in fewer than one of 3.7 million instances. This statistic far exceeds the safety of pain

medication and surgery (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2004;27:197-210).

### Stop Suffering

Chiropractic has an excellent record of patient satisfaction. A survey of over 2,000 adults experiencing back pain shows that over twice as many rated chiropractic "very helpful" compared to similar ratings for conventional healthcare providers (*Spine* 2003;28:292-7).

Why not join the millions who get pain relief and peace of mind from a doctor of chiropractic? If you or someone you know suffers from sciatica, call our office today to schedule an evaluation!

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