

So What Is Sciatica Anyway?

So what is sciatica anyway? Most adults have experienced this to some degree or at least know someone who has had it. Unfortunately, 80% of people will experience an acute bout of low back pain at some time in their life. Of those who get this back pain, a number of them will also experience sciatica. To allow you to really understand what sciatica is and how it occurs, I need you to first understand how the nerves work.

The term “*sciatica*” comes from the name of the largest nerve in the entire body – the “sciatic nerve”. The low back, known as the lumbar spine, consists of five vertebrae. Between each of these vertebrae, a nerve exits from the spinal cord. These nerves eventually fuse to form one large nerve, called the sciatic nerve. It is responsible for controlling many of the muscles in the leg. It also tells the brain when the leg is being touched, what position the knee and ankle joint are in, and if the leg is being hurt. All nerves are capable of carrying messages from one part of the body to another, in both directions. Within the same nerve, a message can go from point A to point B or from point B to point A.

The sciatic nerve carries messages from the spinal cord to the leg. For example, a message from the brain is required to make the toes move. This message travels down the spinal cord, out through one of the nerves of the spine, then down the sciatic nerve to the toes. If one of the nerves of the spine that make up the sciatic nerve, or the sciatic nerve itself, is being irritated or pinched even slightly, problems arise. The message going to the toes will be interfered with. The toes will not be able to move as much or with the same strength. This is the reason why patients in our office who have a seriously pinched or irritated nerve in their low back may have weakness in their lower leg muscles.

The sciatic nerve also carries messages from the leg to the spinal cord. For example, if you stub your toe on a bedpost, a message of “ouch” will travel from the toe, up the sciatic nerve to the nerves of the spine, into the spinal cord, and up to the brain. It is at this point that you consciously become aware that you have injured your toe and the cursing begins. Again, if one of the nerves of the spine, or the sciatic nerve itself, is being irritated or pinched, problems arise. The strong sensation of pain from the toe may not be consciously felt in the brain as much as it should be. I also see extreme cases of this in my office. If someone has a seriously pinched or irritated nerve in his or her low back, you can prick their foot with a pin or sharp object and they may not even feel it.

So what does sciatica have to do with all this? Normally, the messages originating from the leg, up through the sciatic nerve, then to the spine are very calm and quiet. If there is a pinching or irritation of the nerves at the spine, this message becomes highly amplified. Suddenly, this calm and quiet message has been amplified to that of a roar. This travels up the spinal cord to the brain. The brain assumes that this roar of a message is legitimate and that the leg is injured.

So, sciatica is really just mild to severe pain extending down the leg when the nerves in the low back or even the sciatic nerve itself is being irritated or pinched. As you can now see, the term “*sciatica*” is not a diagnosis. It is just a symptom of the injury in the low back. You could compare acute low back pain to the common flu. When you have the flu, it is a viral infection that may cause symptoms such as fever, headache, and a runny nose. This is just like an acute low back injury. With the back injury, you may experience muscle spasms and sciatica. The sciatica is just a symptom of the actual problem you have in your back. To make it even more confusing, there are many different types of low back injuries that can all cause sciatica. They will all give you some degree of pain and one type of injury may feel very similar to another. It is the job of the chiropractor to identify and treat the actual cause of the sciatica. Once this is done, the symptoms will disappear on their own.

