
Sciatica/Pain Down the Leg

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The nerves that leave your lower lumbar spine join to form the sciatic nerve, the nerve that provides sensation and controls the muscles of your lower leg. Compressive pain, or nerve-related pain, occurs when the nerve roots that leave the spine are irritated or pinched. If this happens, the pressure or irritation on the nerve roots can interfere with the normal function of the sciatic nerve.

A herniated disc is the most common cause of sciatica, but even carrying a wallet in your back pocket can attribute to the condition. One of the earliest signs of pressure on a nerve root can be numbness in the area supplied by the nerve. Pain usually persists in the same area, normally extending below the knee to the foot, and you may feel more comfortable standing than sitting. You may also have accompanying low back, buttock, and hip pain, as well as weakness in your leg or foot. Straining, stooping, coughing, and sneezing can make the pain worse. In some cases where there's pressure on a nerve root as it comes out of the spine, it's not uncommon to not feel pain in your back. Also, the muscles that the nerve controls may become weak and your reflexes may disappear. This happens because the pressure on your nerve roots interferes with the signals from your brain to your muscles, so there's no signal going from the brain to the muscle to tell it to contract.

Your doctor may order X-rays to help determine the correct cause and best treatment.