

# Sciatica

## Hobart Osteopathic Clinic

### Osteopath

## Sciatica

We have all heard of sciatica but just what is it? Often accompanied by lower back pain it is either burning or a toothache like pain felt in the buttock and leg, usually on one side but occasionally on both. It may be constant simply varying in intensity according to activities and body positions or the pain may come and go again according to activity and body position. It may be accompanied by pins and needles and / or numbness in the leg or foot or in both. It can occur from teens onwards but is most common in middle age.

We know sciatica as that aggravating sharp pain that we feel in the buttock that may travel down the back and side of the leg. As well as pain there may also be numbness and tingling or weakness in the leg. By definition the symptoms are as follows:

The pain is due to pinching or irritation of the nerve roots of the Sciatic nerve as these roots emerge from the spinal column in the region of your lower back. It is the main motor and sensory nerve of the leg and the pain from Sciatica will vary in location according to which nerve root is being irritated. So although the cause of the pain is actually in the lower back and pelvis where the nerve is being pinched, the brain interprets the pain as coming from the part of the leg where the nerve signals usually come from.

Sciatica usually comes on gradually and can be associated with the following although not always:

- **Lumbar disc bulge:** This is a common cause of sciatica. The spinal discs are positioned between each of the bones that make up the spine (the vertebrae) and act like ball bearings to allow movement to occur between the vertebrae allowing the spine to be mobile and flexible. Sciatica can occur when one of your lumbar discs weakens and starts to bulge sideways pressing against one of the emerging nerve roots. This bulging may follow a fairly major trauma such as an excessive lifting strain or occur after repeated over use of your back as might occur in laboring jobs. However people seated at a desk all day are not immune.
- **Lumbar disc herniation:** This occurs when your disc becomes so weakened that the outer fibrous capsular layer tears and the inner soft core escapes or leaks out and presses on a nerve root emerging from the spine.
- **Narrowing of the spinal canal:** This is related to natural ageing in the spine and is relatively common over 60. It can be due to arthritis or enlarging of the joints between the vertebrae (the bones which make up the spine). Note however, you can have fairly marked wear and tear with arthritis in your lower back without any symptoms of low back pain or sciatica.
- **Idiopathic:** Idiopathic means of no known cause. You have sciatica and X Rays and Scans have been taken but there is no obvious evidence of any particular structure irritating the exiting nerve roots.

## What can you do about your sciatica?

Your Doctor will usually refer you to a surgeon for further evaluation. Being a surgeon they will probably recommend surgery and, indeed, this may be the only solution. However, unless you are losing strength in the muscles of the affected leg and your are told that the surgery is urgent, you owe it to yourself to speak to an Osteopath before going ahead with the surgery.

However some people are reluctant to go ahead with surgery straight away and for them an option is to see an Osteopath. Your Osteopath will seek out the mechanical strains that underlie your symptoms and endeavor to restore your lower back and pelvis to optimum function. That is optimum for you keeping in mind the amount of wear and tear in your back and how much damage has occurred to your discs. The more normally your back is working regardless of any underlying wear and tear or damaged discs the greater your chance of recovering from sciatica without having to resort to surgery. If you fail to respond to treatment you can still go ahead and have the surgery.