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SCIATICA

Sciatica is defined in the medical dictionary as "pain down the back of the leg in the area supplied by the sciatic nerve". The sciatic nerve is the largest in the body and is about the thickness of your little finger. If the nerve and its blood supply becomes "trapped" it can lead to pain in the buttock and, if severe, can spread all the way down the back of the leg as far as the ankle and foot. There may also be pins and needles or numbness in the foot and toes.

Sciatica is usually aggravated by sitting, bending, coughing and sneezing and is frequently worse first thing in the morning. Although the root of the problem is frequently the vertebrae and the discs there may not be any back pain at all.

Up to 10% of sciatica like symptoms can be caused by tightness in the piriformis muscle which is a deep muscle that runs across the buttock underneath the more well-known gluteus maximus. In some people the sciatic nerve actually passes through a split in this muscle so any spasm here will cause pressure on the nerve and pain spreads into the back of the thigh. There is also a condition known as "back-pocket sciatica" which is caused by men sitting on their wallets!

Sciatica responds well to treatment from a Chartered Physiotherapist. A detailed examination will be performed to find the cause of the pressure and pain. If it is due to a "slipped disc" this can be treated with a specific exercise regime pioneered by a New Zealand physiotherapist called Robin McKenzie. The aim of the exercise is to "centralise" the symptoms which means to bring the pain up out of the leg and into the back where it is coming from. There are many other hands-on manipulative techniques and stretches that are beneficial in the treatment of sciatica and some pain relief can be achieved with electrotherapy or acupuncture. The aim is to reduce the pain without need for MRI scan and surgery. In fact there is very little correlation between scan/ Xray findings and symptoms- the size of the disc prolapse does not relate directly to the amount of pain.

Once the pain and any numbness etc has been resolved specialised exercises can be taught to strengthen the deep core muscles of the back and abdomen. They support the spine inside you like a corset to prevent the pain recurring in the future. Frequent recurrence is the biggest problem with sciatica. If you have had sciatica in the past you are likely to experience it again so advice from a Chartered Physiotherapist can help to prevent this.