

**TOP TEN**

**BURNING  
QUESTIONS  
ABOUT  
SCIATICA**

**FROM PEARSON PHYSICAL THERAPY**

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2021 South E Street, Suite #1  
Broken Bow, NE 68822  
[pearsonpt.com](http://pearsonpt.com)



**TOP TEN**

**BURNING  
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# 1.

## FIRST OF ALL, WHAT IS SCIATICA?

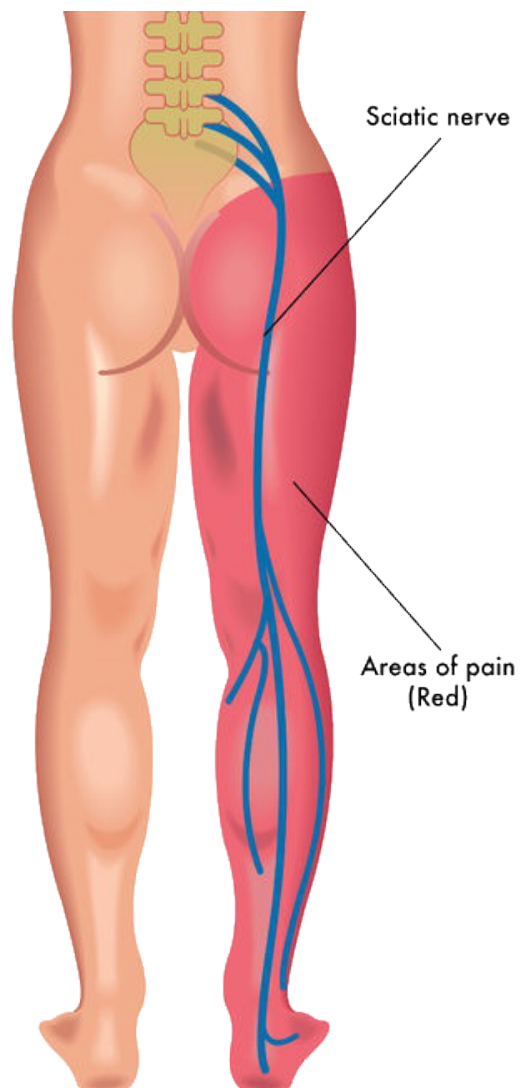
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In the last thirty days, how many times have you experienced back pain? Was that back pain accompanied by numbness or tingling down one of your legs?

We often see patients at the clinic who are experiencing neuropathy (numbness) down their leg and have no idea that the root cause could be the compression of a spinal nerve root in their lower back.

If we think of the sciatic nerve as a hose, then sciatica is just like getting a kink in that hose. When you have a kink in your garden hose, eventually there isn't enough water to keep your garden growing. Similarly, if the sciatic nerve has a "kink" in it for too long, the muscles in your leg will weaken.

It's our job as physical therapists to figure out where the "kink in the hose" is and come up with a treatment plan to unkink it and prevent future dysfunction.



# 2.

## HOW DO I DETERMINE THE CAUSE OF MY PAIN?

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**T**here are three common causes of sciatic pain. Each type has its own signs and symptoms associated with it that can help determine its cause.

People with sciatica caused by a **herniated disc** usually have pain bending forward, twisting, coughing or sneezing. The sciatica pain they experience is usually sharp and runs specifically down the back of the leg, sometimes even down to the foot.

Those whose sciatica is due to **stenosis or arthritis** are typically fifty years of age or older, have pain with standing or walking, and experience symptom relief when they sit down.

Finally, patients who suffer from sciatica due to **S.I. joint or pelvic dysfunction** have the inverse experience as those with stenosis. Those with pelvic dysfunction typically have symptoms of sciatica when sitting for long periods of time. The symptoms are usually felt on the outside of the thigh and can include heaviness of the leg or a feeling like the leg is “twisted.”

# 3.

## HOW LONG IS THIS GOING TO TAKE TO GO AWAY?

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It depends on YOU! I know that's not the answer you want to hear, but it's the truth. In general, it takes four to eight weeks to get rid of your pain and restore movement. It may take another one to four months to build your muscle strength back and get back to all your regular activities.

Here are ten variables that determine how fast you'll heal:

- **Overall Health:** Healthy people heal faster, as do younger people.
- **Other Underlying Medical Conditions:** Health issues such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, tobacco use, alcohol abuse and body weight all influence healing rates.
- **Diet:** People who consume more nutrients in their calories heal faster than those who primarily eat processed foods.
- **Rest:** Our bodies need sleep to rebuild tissue. A lack of sleep will slow your healing time.
- **Stress:** People with high levels of stress tend to heal more slowly.
- **Sedentary Lifestyle:** People who sit all day for work or watch TV a lot heal more slowly.

- **Adherence to Medical Advice:** Those who follow advice and instruction from top level healthcare professionals heal more quickly than those who do not follow-through with care.
- **Good Posture:** People who are highly aware of their daily postures and habits heal more quickly because they have a higher awareness of their body position and can easily adjust habits such as sleep or sitting positions.
- **Optimism:** Persistence is key. Those who don't let anything stop them will typically heal faster because they won't give up.

**TOUGH TIMES DON'T LAST.**  
**TOUGH PEOPLE DO.**





# 4.

## HOW LONG BEFORE I SEE IMPROVEMENTS?

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**J**ust because it may take weeks for your sciatica to fully resolve, doesn't mean you won't quickly see results. Most people we see in the clinic begin feeling better in two to three visits. If, after two weeks you aren't feeling better, you may need further evaluation by an orthopedic specialist.

# 5.

## CAN I BE COMPLETELY HEALED OR WILL THIS COME BACK AGAIN?

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**M**ost people we see who complete the four phases of healing (no longer have pain, motion and strength are back to normal, and are back to doing all the activities they want to do without pain) have a minimum chance that the pain will return. Additionally, the more active the person is, the less likely the sciatica symptoms will come back.

# 6.

## DO I NEED SPECIAL EQUIPMENT?

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**W**e believe that a minimalist approach is best. We don't use big, fancy, expensive equipment. Most of our exercises can be done with an exercise ball, exercise bands, and room to move. This means that after some practice at the clinic, you'll be able to do these exercises at home.

Traction machines, which help to relieve the pressure on your spine, as well as modalities such as ultrasound and electrical stimulation also speed the healing process and decrease pain rapidly.

The most important piece of our treatment plan is quality, hands-on physical therapy. Retraining your body to move shouldn't take an act of God. It's natural, you just need to be reminded how to do it!

**“IT’S ALWAYS THE SIMPLE THAT  
PRODUCES THE MARVELOUS.”**

# 7.

## WHICH EXERCISES WILL I DO?

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**T**he best exercises for you depend on what the cause of your sciatica is. Each cause has an associated series of gradually more advanced exercises. So the key to finding the right exercise is first identifying the cause.

# 8.

## HOW OFTEN DO I NEED TO EXERCISE?

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**E**very day. At least once a day. Sometimes four times per day. But that doesn't mean you'll be doing the same exercises every day for the rest of your life. Instead, to get stronger, your exercises should progress and gradually provide more challenge.

With training your body adapts. With that in mind, there are two rules to training:

- 1. Everything works**
- 2. Nothing works forever**

This means that exercise will make you stronger, but as your body adapts, it's time to move on to something different or more challenging.

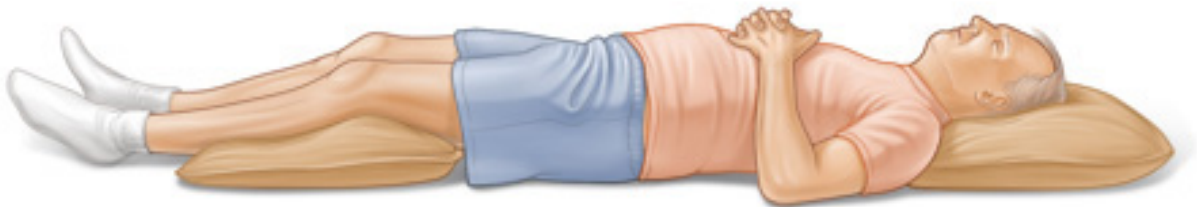
# 9.

## WHICH POSITION SHOULD I SLEEP IN?

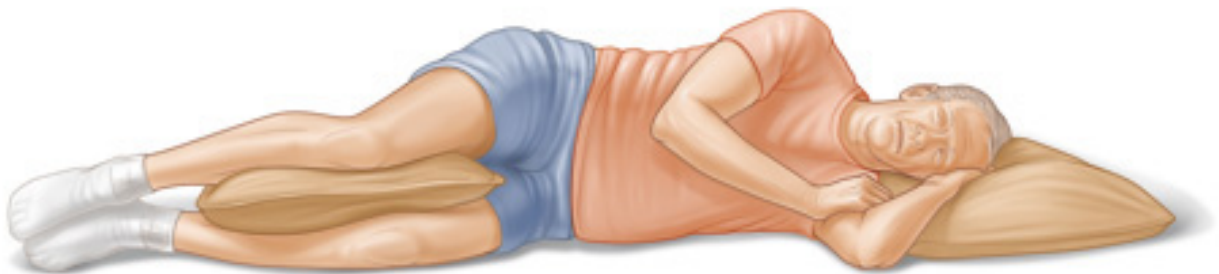
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**K**eeping your spine in a neutral position is key. This means that it is not twisted to the right or left, but keeps the natural curve that it normally has.

The best position is on your back, with a pillow or two under your knees. Next would be on your side, with your knees bent up and a pillow between them.



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If you must sleep on your stomach, then place a pillow under your stomach (not your chest) to help with maintaining a neutral spine.

# 10.

## HOW DO I PREVENT MY PAIN FROM COMING BACK?

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**T**he best thing to do for sciatica, if you are worried about it coming back again in the future, is to complete the first three phases of healing. This means completing the plan of care prescribed by your therapist.

The phases of healing are:

1. **Phase One:** Focus on getting rid of the pain, numbness, and tingling
2. **Phase Two:** Restoration of normal joint mechanics
3. **Phase Three:** Build up strength and stability
4. **Phase Four:** Return to previous activities before injury

It's tempting to leave therapy and quit doing your exercises once the pain subsides. If you're looking for lasting results, exercise is the key. Building muscle strength takes time, but if you stick with it, and complete the third phase of healing, you'll be much more likely to prevent your sciatica from returning.



# ABOUT PEARSON PHYSICAL THERAPY

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We are committed to providing the most personalized, integrative, and skilled physical therapy services available. With sensitivity and compassion, we work with our patients to promote physical rehabilitation in a professional and caring environment.

Our highly-trained therapists provide treatment that reduces pain and inflammation, increases range of motion, and improves posture, strength and body mechanics. We pride ourselves on our commitment to excellence, integrity and quality physical rehabilitation care through the variety of services our staff provides. With us, you will always be well cared for and receive the personalized attention you deserve.

Your health is our highest priority. You'll get back to enjoying your life sooner with our advanced physical therapy treatments, flexible scheduling and consistent care. Come see us! Your body will thank you.

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**2021 South E St., Ste. #1**

**Broken Bow, NE 68822**

**(308) 872-5800**

**pearsonpt.com**