

Live Healthy and Be Well!

“Straight Talk on a Common Ailment – Being up front about the back!”

The idea for this month’s topic comes from not one, but many of my good patients and also from many of you seen in the Emergency Room at the hospital. The story is usually, “Doc, I was (insert event here), and woke up this morning and my back is killing me, it’s hard to walk, and it is even shooting down my (right/left) leg.” Further complaints are usually along the lines of it is hard to get comfortable, keeping one awake at night, and there may even be a sense of numbness/tingling down the affected leg even to the foot or toes on that side. This is a common condition that is actually the result of compressing, “pinching,” or somehow traumatizing one or more of the sciatic nerve roots that exit from the lower back, which then irritates the sciatic nerve. This nerve travels down the buttock and along the side of the leg all the way to the foot. Its purpose is to provide sensory and motor innervation to the leg and foot on that side of the body. There is a short video which explains all this very well: <http://www.spine-health.com/video/sciatic-nerve-anatomy-video>

Sciatica pain can vary widely. It may feel like a mild tingling, dull ache, or a burning sensation. In some cases, the pain is severe enough to make a person unable to move. The pain most often occurs on one side. Some people have sharp pain in one part of the leg or hip and numbness in other parts. The pain or numbness may also be felt on the back of the calf or on the sole of the foot. The affected leg may feel weak.

The pain often starts slowly. *Sciatica* pain may get worse:

- After standing or sitting
- At night
- When sneezing, coughing, or laughing
- When bending backwards or walking more than a few yards, especially if caused by spinal stenosis

Because *sciatica* is a symptom of another medical condition, the underlying cause should be identified and treated. In some cases, no treatment is required and recovery occurs on its own. Conservative treatment is best in many cases. Your doctor may recommend the following steps to calm your symptoms and reduce inflammation.

- Apply heat or ice to the painful area. Try ice for the first 48 - 72 hours, then use heat after that.
- Take over-the-counter anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) such as [Ibuprofen](#) (Advil, Motrin IB) or Aleve.
- Perform some gentle stretching in the opposite direction of the injured side to help open up the tight space compressing the nerve roots.

Bed rest is not recommended. Reduce your activity for the first couple of days. Then, slowly start your usual activities after that. Avoid heavy lifting or twisting of your back for the first 6 weeks after the pain begins. You should start exercising again after 2-3 weeks. This should

include exercises to strengthen your abdomen and improve flexibility of your spine – as these are the muscles that help stabilize your back and prevent injury.

If at-home measures do not help, your provider may recommend injections to reduce inflammation around the nerve. Other medicines may be prescribed to help reduce the stabbing pains associated with sciatica, such as muscle relaxers (muscle spasms usually result from this condition and can make it worse). Physical therapy exercises may also be recommended. Additional treatments depend on the condition that is causing the sciatica. Nerve pain is often very difficult to treat. If you have ongoing problems with pain, you may want to see a neurologist or a pain specialist to ensure that you have access to the widest range of treatment options. Try to avoid starting on narcotic pain medicines like Lortab, Norco, or Percocet. These do not usually help the real pain that much, but are very habit forming in the long run. Your provider can help you get a good handle on and treatment/management for this common but very bothersome condition!

To younger readers out there...prevention is always the best medicine! Try to be good to your back and use proper techniques for lifting, reaching, and be careful of exercises and activities that are hard on the back. Once the disks are injured and cause the problem – it is very difficult to make it go away completely.

We really do enjoy hearing from you with any questions, concerns, or ideas for future columns and/or health and wellness related issues for the *Georgia Mountain Laurel*. Please send an email to rabundoctor@gmail.com, or call us at 706-782-3572, and we will be sure to consider your input. This and previous articles can now be found on the web at www.rabundoctor.com in an archived format. If you use Twitter, then follow us for health tips and wellness advice @rabundoctor. Until next month, live healthy and be well!