Sciatica

What is sciatica?
Sciatica is a general name given to any pain that is caused by irritation or compression of the sciatic nerve. The sciatic nerve is the longest nerve in the body. It runs from the back of the pelvis, through the buttocks, and travels along the back of both legs, ending at your feet.

Your spine is made up of vertebrae, discs and nerves. Vertebrae are the blocks of bone that make up the structure of your spine and protect the nerves.

The vertebrae are supported and cushioned by discs. The discs are made from a tough, fibrous case that contains a softer gel-like substance.

What are the causes?
Many things can cause the sciatic nerve to become irritated. The most common causes are:

- **Slipped (herniated) disc** – a slipped disc occurs when the outer part of the disc ruptures (splits), allowing the gel inside to bulge and protrude outwards between the vertebrae. This can press on the nerve causing sciatica, or irritate the nerve by the chemicals released.

- **Spinal stenosis** – this is the narrowing of the nerve passages in the spine. It occurs when the bones, ligaments or discs of the spine restrict the nerves of the spine. This usually occurs in people over 40 year of age.

- **Injury to muscles/ligaments** – This can cause swelling and inflammation around the back which can irritate the sciatic nerve. Some muscle problems can mimic sciatica.

Less common causes include:

- Infection

- A growth in the spine such as a tumor

Symptoms of sciatica
Sciatica is different to general back pain. The pain of sciatica usually causes little problem to the back, however radiates from the lower back, past the buttocks and into one or both of the legs, often as far down as the calf or foot. Sciatic pain can range from being mild to very painful and can last for weeks or months.
If you have sciatica, you may also experience the following symptoms around your legs and feet:

- Numbness.
- Tingling.
- Muscle weakness.

**Cauda equina syndrome**
Cauda equina syndrome is a rare but serious condition that can cause sciatica. The cauda equina is a bundle of nerves that split from the spinal cord. Cauda equina syndrome occurs when these nerves are compressed or damaged.
One of the warning signs of cauda equina syndrome is suddenly or progressively losing control of your legs, or bladder / bowel. If this happens seek urgent medical attention.

**How is it sciatica treated?**
Most cases of acute sciatica will pass without the need for treatment. Following basic self help advice can usually help relieve the symptoms.
For persistent sciatica, you may be advised to try a structured exercise program under the supervision of a physiotherapist.
In very rare cases, surgery may be needed to free the nerve.

**Self Help**

**Painkillers**
Over-the-counter painkillers are usually effective in relieving sciatic pain. Your GP or pharmacist will be able to advise you as to what medication would be suitable for you.
If this is not relieving your pain you should visit your GP to discuss other prescribed medication that may be more effective.

**Exercise**
If you have sciatica, it is important for you to remain as physically active. While bed rest may provide some temporary pain relief, prolonged bed rest may be unnecessary and hinder your recovery.

Recommended exercises include walking and gentle stretching exercises. It is important to make use of positions that you find comfortable. Some people will prefer to sit and curl up into a ball, others may prefer to stand or lean backwards. Make use of the position that brings you most relief.

**Heat and ice packs**
Using heat or cold packs may help reduce pain.

Ice pack - wrap a bag of frozen peas in a damp tea towel. Do not leave on for more than 20 minutes and keep checking the skin for cold burns.

Hot Pack - these can be purchased from most pharmacies or you can use a
hot water bottle (with bath temperature water not boiling water). Leave the heat on for 20 minutes and check your skin to prevent burns.

**Lifting and handling**
One of the biggest causes of back injury, particularly at work, is people lifting or handling objects incorrectly. Learning the correct method for lifting and handling objects can help prevent sciatica.

Please view our online video for looking after your back whilst lifting.

**Physiotherapy**
You may benefit from a physiotherapy assessment if the advice given in this leaflet has not changed your symptoms.

**Injection of a corticosteroid**
If other methods of pain relief have not worked, your GP may refer you to a specialist for an epidural steroid injection. This delivers strong anti-inflammatory medication directly to the inflamed area around the nerves of your spine. This can help to reduce the inflammation around the sciatic nerve and reduce pain.

For further information view the following NHS website