

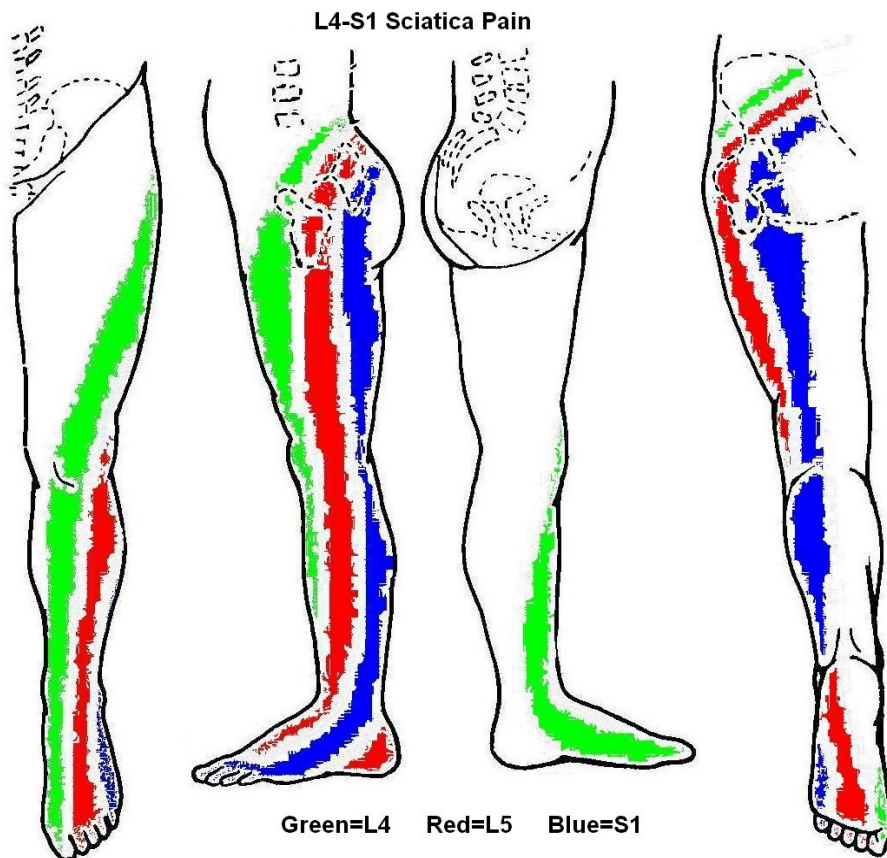
# Sciatica Pain

Links to information on sciatica provided by the US Government's National Institutes of Health are listed at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/sciatica.html> (see below).

An excellent review of sciatica can be found at <http://www.mayoclinic.com/invoke.cfm?objectid=BBE9CE6F-FF7D-4715-A30693A2BF77474F&dsection=6>.

To answer a free questionnaire that may help to identify the cause of your back or sciatica pain, go to <https://www.masterdocs.com/backsciaticapain/start.php>.

Sciatica is pain in the sensory distribution of the sciatic nerve usually caused by pressure on the nerve. Pain may be felt from the lower back, down through the buttock and down the leg as far as the foot. However, sciatica pain in most patients is concentrated in the buttocks and the back and side of the thigh. Sciatica pain can be very severe and disabling and tends to be associated with a hot/burning feeling, pins-and-needles and a numb feeling. It is sometimes associated with weakness of the muscles of the leg (e.g., an inability to lift the front of the foot when standing). About 95% of cases of sciatica involve the L5 or S1 nerve root (red and blue areas in the diagram below).





## **Causes of Pressure on the Sciatic Nerve include:**

- Herniated inter-vertebral disk in the lower back (the most common cause).
- Osteoarthritis (degenerative joint disease) of the lower back causing stenosis (narrowing) of the spaces in the lower spine where the roots of the sciatic nerve exit the spine.
- Spondylolisthesis where one vertebra slips slightly forward over another vertebra. The displaced bone may pinch the sciatic nerve where it leaves the spine.
- Piriformis syndrome. The piriformis muscle runs above the sciatic nerve from the lower spine to your thighbone (femur). If the piriformis is tight or in spasm it can put pressure on the sciatic nerve. The piriformis syndrome tends to occur in active women, and also to be associated with prolonged sitting, car accidents or falls.
- Tumors can compress the spinal cord or the nerve roots which can cause severe back pain, sciatica pain, muscle weakness, loss of sensation in the legs, and sometimes loss of bladder or bowel function.
- Trauma. A car accident, fall or blow to the spine can injure the sciatica nerve roots.
- In some cases, no cause is found for the sciatica pain.

## **Diagnostic Evaluation may include:**

- Medical history and physical examination.
- X-rays of lower back.
- CT scan
- MRI scan

Note that even though special tests may show abnormalities of the lower back, these may not necessarily be the cause of the sciatica pain.

Sciatica usually goes away on its own after a few days or within 6 weeks. If not, you should seek medical attention. Short episodes of sciatica often occur repeatedly over a number of years.

You should seek immediate medical attention if you have severe weakness in a leg, numbness in the groin or rectum, or loss of control of bladder or bowel function.

During the acute phase, pain relieving medications such as acetaminophen and hot and cold compresses may be helpful. Muscle relaxants or gabapentin are sometimes used. The optimum level of physical activity to maintain during the acute phase has not been determined. Rarely surgery is required for refractory cases.

## **Prevention of Sciatica or of Further Episodes of Sciatica**

- Back exercises (e.g., abdominal crunches).
- Maintain good posture.
- Lift objects safely (squat, use hips and legs for heavy work – don't bend over).
- Walk or swim regularly
- Don't sit or stand for long periods (take regular breaks to walk around).
- Sleep on your side or on your back with a pillow between the knees.
- Don't wear high heels.

**Links at** <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/sciatica.html>

## **Overviews**

- Sciatica (Harvard Medical School, IntelliHealth)
- Sciatica (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)

## **Anatomy/Physiology**

- Spine (American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons)

## **Diagnosis/Symptoms**

- Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI): Spine (Radiological Society of North America)

## **Treatment**

- Low Back Surgery (American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons)

## **Clinical Trials**

- ClinicalTrials.gov: Sciatica (National Institutes of Health)

## **Specific Conditions**

- Piriformis Syndrome (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke) - Short Summary

## **Genetics**

- Common Genetic Risk Factor Identified for Lumbar Disk Disease (American Medical Association)

## Directories

- Find an Orthopaedist (American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons)
- Spine Care Finder (North American Spine Society)

## Organizations

- American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons
- National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases. Also available in: Spanish

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