

# Nerve Root Pain

Patient  
Information

## What is nerve root pain?

Pain referred from the nerve roots of your lower (lumbar) spine in to the leg is commonly termed as 'sciatica'. If a nerve root in the neck is affected, it may cause symptoms in the arm. Nerve roots can cause shooting pains, pins and needles, numbness, weakness or odd sensations in the arm or leg and can be on one side or both.

## Prognosis

Nerve root pain usually improves by itself with time. This can happen very quickly for some people but can take longer for others, with studies showing that around 90% of people experience a good to excellent improvement by 32-52 weeks after the onset of symptoms.

## Causes

In younger people, nerve root pain is often caused by a disc bulge. In older people, it is often associated with age-related changes causing narrowing around the nerve root. Disc bulges and age-related changes are both common even in people without symptoms, but may contribute to symptoms if they occur near a nerve root.



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## Warning signs

Nerve root pain is not usually a cause for concern. However, if it is associated with a new onset of significant weakness which affects your function you should seek advice immediately from your GP or 111. If it happens outside of working hours or if you are unable to contact a medical professional for advice immediately, attend your local emergency department without delay.

Low back pain or sciatica can also be associated with a rare but serious back condition, Cauda Equina Syndrome, which can lead to permanent damage or disability and will need to be seen by an Emergency Specialist Spinal Team. The following are some warning signs of Cauda Equina Syndrome:

- Loss of feeling/pins and needles between your inner thighs, or genitals
- Numbness in or around your back passage or buttocks
- Altered feeling when using toilet paper to wipe yourself
- Increasing difficulty when you try to urinate
- Increasing difficulty when you try to stop or control your flow of urine
- Loss of sensation when you pass urine
- Leaking urine or recent need to use pads
- Not knowing when your bladder is either full or empty
- Inability to stop a bowel movement or leaking
- Loss of sensation when you pass a bowel motion
- Change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- Loss of sensation in genitals during sexual intercourse

**If you have any combination, seek help immediately by attending your local Emergency Department.**

Wording for the warning signs section is copied with permission from the MACP Cauda Equina Syndrome reference card: <https://macpweb.org/home/index.php?p=396&id=276>

## How to manage the symptoms of sciatica

- **Exercise and activity**
  - Continuation of normal activities is encouraged to help with recovery from nerve root pain although you may have to adjust things to make them comfortable.
  - Lifting and heavy manual work do not seem to be associated with incidence of sciatica but it might be sensible to avoid or modify these activities temporarily if they are uncomfortable during an episode of nerve root pain.

- There is no hard and fast rule regarding what type of exercise to do, so pick something that you feel comfortable with, preferably something you enjoy that fits with your lifestyle. Many people find exercises like walking, swimming or Pilates helpful. Follow this link for some suggestions of stretches to try at home: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/exercises-for-sciatica/>
- Physiotherapists can provide further assessment and guidance – contact your local department on the details overleaf to find out how you can self-refer to a physiotherapist, or your GP can make the referral for you.

- **Pain Relief**

- Simple pain killers can be used to help manage your pain. Ask your local pharmacist for advice. Please follow the instructions on the packet carefully.
- Your GP can prescribe stronger medication or nerve pain modifying drugs if required.

- **Other treatments**

If your symptoms do not reduce to a manageable level with these measures, spinal injections or surgery can be helpful in some cases. As with any surgery, this does carry risks. Talk to your GP or Physiotherapist if you would like to know whether either of these options might be helpful for you.

## **Preventing recurrence**

Genetics have a role to play in risk of developing sciatica and are not alterable but there are a number of other things you can do to look after your spinal health.

- Regular exercise may reduce the risk of sciatica, with sedentary occupations increasing the risk of onset
- Maintaining a healthy weight can be beneficial
- Smoking has been associated with age-related changes, particularly to the discs of the spine. Help with smoking cessation is available on the NHS in Wiltshire: <http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/public-health-stop-smoking>

## **Further Information**

Nerve root pain patient information: <http://www.spinesurgeons.ac.uk/patients-area/patient-information/nerve-root-pain-treatment-options/>

Below are the telephone numbers for the Community Outpatient Physiotherapy departments. Please call your local department for any further information/guidance;

Chippenham	01249 456451
Devizes	01380 732520
Malmesbury	01666 827583
Melksham	01225 701027
Salisbury	01722 336262 Ext 4425/4413
Savernake	01672 517310
Trowbridge	01225 711341
Warminster	01985 22471

## **Safeguarding**

Wiltshire Health and Care has a strong commitment to care that is safe, of a high quality and that upholds our patients' rights. All our patients have the right to live lives free from abuse or neglect and, where they are able, to make or be supported to make informed decisions and choices about their treatment, care and support. Where patients are not able to make their own decisions, Wiltshire Health and Care staff are committed to ensuring that treatment, care and support is undertaken in accordance with the person's best interests. In order to fulfil these commitments, Wiltshire Health and Care follow the Safeguarding principles and responsibilities laid out in Sections 42-46 of the Care Act (2014) and are informed by, and apply, the guiding principles and provisions of the Mental Capacity Act (2005).

If you or your carer have any concerns about abuse, neglect or your rights in relation to care provided by Wiltshire Health and Care or any other agency or individual, please raise this directly with any Wiltshire Health and Care staff or contact the Safeguarding Adults Team by telephone on: 0300 4560111.

Regarding children, WHC is responsible for providing services in accordance with Section 11 of the Children's Act (1989) and works under the principles of Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018).

## **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

If you have any questions, or concerns, suggestions or compliments about our service, please speak to a member of staff.

This information sheet is available in other languages and formats. If you would like a copy, please contact us on 0300 1237797 and

[PALS.wiltshirehealthandcare@nhs.net](mailto:PALS.wiltshirehealthandcare@nhs.net)

## **Patient and Public Involvement**

We value your opinions which will help us to further develop our services.

If you wish to provide feedback or get involved in our patient participation groups, please email the Patient and Public Involvement Officer at

[ask.wiltshirehealthandcare@nhs.net](mailto:ask.wiltshirehealthandcare@nhs.net) or telephone 01249 454386.