

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.



Picture ref: [Lumbar spine- back pain, pelvic pain, hip pain, leg, knee, calf, ankle, foot pain. - Ross Brennan Chiropratico \(comochiro.com\)](#)

Working in partnership
Great Western Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust
Salisbury NHS Foundation Trust

Follow Wiltshire Health and Care on social media:



www.wiltshirehealthandcare.nhs.uk

Date of last review: Sept 2023

Document Ref: 301255

Printed on 07/11/2023 at 2:13 PM

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.

Please watch this video for more information about serious causes of back and leg pain: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdlxfcJmn-4&t=121s>

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 nerve root pain/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

If you would like to seek the advice of a physiotherapist, there are a number of options within Wiltshire. Please speak to your GP practice about the ways you can be referred.

Alternatively, you can visit our website for further information on accessing our services;

<https://wiltshirehealthandcare.nhs.uk/physiotherapy/>

Nerve root pain patient information: <https://spinesurgeons.ac.uk/Nerve-Root-Pain-and-Some-of-the-Treatment-Options>

Other useful websites;

<https://www.activewiltshire.org.uk/>

Here you will find information on improving your activity level and details of what is available in your local area.

<http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/public-health-weight>

Here you will find information about weight management options in your local area.

[Health improvement coaches - Wiltshire Council](#)

Health Improvement Coaches work on a one to one basis to support behaviour change and improve health. They concentrate on behaviours associated with ill health including unhealthy eating often linked to obesity, stop or reduce smoking, sensible drinking, increasing physical activity, building confidence and motivation to change and boosting self-esteem, they also signpost and support clients to access other services and activities where appropriate.

Safeguarding

Wiltshire Health and Care (WHC) are committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, young people and adults at risk of abuse, including victims and survivors of domestic abuse. We expect all WHC staff to share this commitment and promote safeguarding by implementing WHC policies and procedures, act promptly on concerns and share information appropriately.

If you or your carer have any concerns regarding a child or adult's safety, please phone Wiltshire Safeguarding Team on 0300 456 0111 (Adult) or 0300 456 0108 (Child) (9am – 5pm Monday - Friday) or please call 999 if you feel they are in immediate danger.

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 123 7797 and whc.pals@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 or telephone 01249 454386.