

# Healthy Spine Service

GETTING YOU BACK ON TRACK

## FACT SHEET

### Advice for Managing Sciatica

Sciatica is pain that travels down the back of the leg due to a problem in the lower back. The pain in the leg is often more severe than the back pain and it may be accompanied by pins and needles or numbness; usually below the knee or in the foot.

90% of cases get better by themselves without any specialist input. More than 50% of people report an improvement in their symptoms within 6 weeks.

#### What causes sciatica?

In the lower back nerves merge together to form the sciatic nerve which runs down each leg to supply specific muscles and areas of skin. When the size of these tunnels is reduced (e.g. by swollen joints or ligaments or a bulging disc) pressure on the nerves can occur. This can cause pain, altered sensation and weakness anywhere along the length of the sciatic nerve. The pressure usually reduces over time as spaces between vertebrae, joint, ligaments or discs heal.

#### Important things to know about Sciatica

##### Sciatica usually settles well with time

Back problems are most often due to a simple injury to back structures and are usually not due to something serious. Most people recover with time whether or not they have surgery.

##### Rest rarely helps

Bed rest can be helpful for sudden and severe pain but only for a very short time. It is important to start some simple small amounts of activity as soon as possible.

#### Is a scan necessary?

In most cases of back pain and sciatica X-rays or scans are not necessary in the first 6 weeks. They are not helpful and do not change how your pain is managed.

#### What you can do to help your back pain

##### Stay active – don't rest for too long

Prolonged rest lengthens recovery time and prolongs pain. The best advice is to keep gently active, even if it causes some extra pain.

Taking pain relief medication regularly is often important to help you to keep moving. Talk to your doctor about what medication is best.

##### Keep doing your everyday activities and remain at work

Back pain need not stop you from doing what you want to do in your daily life. You can do most things as long as you think about the way you do them.

Be aware of the activities that make the pain worse and avoid things like excessive lifting and staying in one position for too long. Remain at work if possible.

##### Exercise

Gentle exercises, stretches and walking may help to ease your pain. Begin to exercise regularly, for short periods of time and gradually increase the amount you do as it feels more comfortable.

#### When to seek medical advice

Occasionally, back pain can be the result of a serious problem. It is important to seek medical advice immediately if you have any of these symptoms:

- difficulty passing or controlling urine
- poor control of your bowels
- numbness around your back passage or genitals
- numbness, pins and needles or weakness in both legs
- unsteadiness when walking
- unexplained loss of weight
- night sweats, chills, fevers, nausea/ vomiting or unrelenting night pain

