

What is sciatica and how is it treated?



Dr. Daveed D. Frazier is medical director of New York City Spine Surgery, PLLC.

If you've experienced shooting pain that begins in your lower back and travels down your leg, it may be sciatica.

Dr. Daveed Frazier, medical director of New York City Spine Surgery PLLC, with offices in Morristown and Manhattan, explains that sciatica is the catchall term used to describe symptoms that are brought on by irritation of a part of the sciatic nerve, which is the largest nerve in the body. The sciatic nerve is formed by 5 nerves in the lower back merging together in the buttock to create the sciatic nerve. Irritation of any one of these lower back nerves (called lumbar roots) is what we call sciatica or radiculopathy.

"The most common scenario is when someone has a herniated disc in their lower back," Dr. Frazier says. "But it also can occur as a result of arthritis, infection, tumors or any other condition irritating the nerve."

When the lower back nerves becomes compressed or irritated, it typically causes pain traveling along the nerve pathways; but it can also cause numbness, burning and/or tingling sensations. Frequently, sciatica may be associated with weakness, which requires evaluation to prevent permanent loss of function.

If you've been burdened by these symptoms, you're not alone. Approximately 40 percent of adults experience this painful condition at some point during their lifetime. Typically, sciatica affects only one side of the body, but it isn't limited to the legs and lower back.

"There is an equivalent condition in the arm and it's known as a neck or cervical radiculopathy. If you have a pinched or irritated nerve in the neck, you may feel pain radiating down the arm," Dr. Frazier says. Although he notes that while it's a similar scenario, it's not quite as common as lower back sciatica. If you think you may be suffering from sciatica or radiculopathy, consider the following symptoms:

- Pain; ranging from dull ache to sharp or excruciating
- Burning, numbness, tingling, pins-and-needles sensation
- Muscle weakness
- Difficulty walking or with prolonged sitting
- Another unpleasant, but less common, symptom is loss of bowel and/or bladder control, Dr. Frazier says. Should you experience these symptoms, it's extremely important to seek medical attention immediately.

"It's very rare, but if someone has an alteration of bowel or bladder function, you have approximately 48 hours to intervene or run the risk of damage becoming permanent," Dr. Frazier says. He added that during his two decades in practice, he's known young adults who've suffered irreversible effects as a result of not recognizing the condition right away.

Visit www.newyorkcityspine.com for more information.

What Causes Sciatica?

Dr. Frazier explains that there are certain spine disorders or medical conditions that put pressure on the lower back nerve roots causing sciatica. These include:

- Herniated discs
- Lumbar spinal stenosis
- Arthritis
- Spinal tumors
- Infections
- Fractures

In some cases, it's unknown what brings on the condition. However, evidence suggests that a sedentary lifestyle, long-term tobacco use or alcohol abuse may be factors that contribute to its development.

What Are Your Treatment Options?

If there's a bright spot for those suffering from sciatica, it's that in 90 percent of cases, the condition will improve with conservative treatment.

"Although I'm a spine surgeon, my philosophy is to make every attempt to avoid surgery if at all possible," says Dr. Frazier, who has repeatedly been recognized by The New York Times Magazine as a "New York Super Doctor" for his prevention-focused approach to patient care.

For many who suffer from sciatica, physical therapy, chiropractic treatment or acupuncture, in conjunction with anti-inflammatory medication and rest, can be enough to remedy the condition.

At New York Spine Surgery PLLC, Dr. Frazier works with the top pain management doctors, neurologists, internists, physical therapists, chiropractors, and acupuncturists in the area and can easily make a referral for patients in need.

"Some patients may benefit from epidural steroid injections," Dr. Frazier notes, "but that is not a first line of treatment."

If surgery is necessary, minimally invasive approaches are available, explains the orthopedic spine specialist. The gold-standard is a procedure called the microdiscectomy.

"In my practice, we specialize in less invasive surgeries," Dr. Frazier says. "Those are done on an outpatient basis, meaning the patient can have a procedure and, a couple of hours later, go home."

Additionally, the spine surgeon points out that with minimally invasive techniques, patients can expect less pain, less blood loss, minimal scar tissue formation, and a faster return to normal activity. At times, the difference from traditional, open surgeries can be significant.

Dr. Frazier notes that with microdiscectomies, a very small portion of the disc or bone spur which is irritating the nerve is removed. This relieves compression and provides room for the nerve to heal. He is a master at performing this procedure through several different techniques.

"If surgery is recommended, it's best to find a doctor who has the experience and skill to offer you different options and works with you to recommend the treatment best suited for your specific needs." Dr. Frazier reminds us that "each patient and problem is unique and should be treated accordingly."

— Elizabeth Alterman



When the lower back nerves becomes compressed or irritated, it typically causes pain traveling along the nerve pathways; but it can also cause numbness, burning and/or tingling sensations.