Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust

Lumbar Radiculopathy

Patient Information Leaflet

MSK Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy Service

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www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/

What is a lumbar radiculopathy?

Nerves carry messages between your brain and body. They help you feel sensations and give power to your muscles to move.

A lumbar radiculopathy happens when a nerve in your lower back becomes sensitive or compressed. These nerves travel from your lower back, down into your legs and feet.

When a nerve is affected, you can feel pain anywhere along the path of the nerve. This is why you may feel pain moving from your back, down your leg and sometimes to your foot.

This sort of pain is often termed 'sciatica'. However, sciatica only refers to one specific nerve. Sometimes, different nerves are involved, hence the term 'lumbar radiculopathy'.

Even though the pain can feel severe, it does not always mean there is serious damage. Nerves can become very sensitive and produce a lot of pain, but with time this often gets better.

Why does it happen?

There are several potential reasons why a nerve may become sensitive and cause pain, but sometimes there is no clear reason.

Some common causes include:

Disc bulges or disc herniations

Between the bones in your back (the vertebrae) are intervertebral discs. These are strong, resilient structures that act as shock absorbers. Throughout life, slight changes to the shape and structure of these discs commonly occur. These are often referred to as disc bulges or herniations. These changes are seen in people with and without back and leg pain and can be a normal part of ageing. Sometimes, these changes can irritate a nerve and lead to pain down the leg.

You may have previously heard this being described as a 'slipped disc'. However, this is an inaccurate, outdated term. Discs do not actually slip or move out of place. The good news is, most disc problems will improve and heal on their own.

Age-related changes

As we get older, normal changes occur within the spine to structures like our bones and discs. As highlighted above, these changes are a normal part of life and often do not cause pain. However, in some cases, these changes can reduce the space around the nerve, which can cause

irritation. This can be responsible for causing pain down the leg.

Inflammation

Sometimes, a nerve can become irritated by inflammation, even if there is little or no direct pressure on it. In many cases, this will settle down and symptoms will gradually improve.

Poor sleep, stress, low mood, or feeling run down

These factors can contribute to pain and may make your symptoms feel worse by making your nervous system more sensitive. They can also make it harder to recover.

Common Symptoms

Symptoms vary from person to person, but may include:

- pain that travels from the back, down the leg and sometimes into the foot
- sharp, shooting, burning or electric shock-like pain
- pins and needles, numbness or tingling in the leg or foot
- weakness in the leg or foot
- increased pain when coughing or sneezing
- pain that changes with movement

Some people may feel more pain in their back, while others may feel it more in their leg.

Diagnosis

A lumbar radiculopathy may be suspected from your symptoms, but it is usually diagnosed during a clinical assessment.

A healthcare professional will consider:

- your symptoms
- where you feel the pain
- how your symptoms change with movement or activities
- your medical history
- the findings from a physical assessment

They will also consider whether another condition may be causing your symptoms.

Most people with back and leg pain do not need a scan, as imaging often does not change treatment, and many findings are common in people without symptoms.

An MRI scan may be recommended if your healthcare professional is concerned about a serious underlying problem, such as cancer, infection or fracture.

An MRI scan may also be considered if your leg pain has not improved after several weeks of treatment and the results could help decide whether specialist treatments might be helpful, such as injections or surgery.

Will it get better?

Most people begin to see some improvement within the first 6 weeks. Many people are feeling significantly better by 12 weeks.

Sometimes, symptoms can last longer, but this doesn't mean serious damage.

It is normal to have good and bad days during recovery.

A positive sign is when the pain starts to move out of the leg and becomes more noticeable in the back. This is known as centralisation and is often a sign that the nerve is becoming less irritated.

Self-help

Change your activity levels

It is not recommended to completely rest when you experience low back pain and leg pain. In the early stages, it is ok to reduce your activity levels and take things a little easier. However, staying as active as you can and returning

to your usual activities as soon as possible can help your recovery.

While it is normal to move differently in the first few days of pain, being overprotective of your back and / or leg can be unhelpful and may slow your recovery in the longer term.



Although movement may be painful to start with, gradually getting yourself moving again in a relaxed way will help your recovery.

Exercise

Exercise can be very helpful in managing back and leg pain. It can also reduce the chance of pain coming back in the future.

Guidelines suggest:

- a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity per week: something that raises your heart rate and gets you breathing more heavily
- strength exercises twice a week

Starting slowly and gradually building up what you do is important. Some muscle soreness is normal when you start exercising and a short-term increase in pain is rarely a sign you are causing harm and need to stop. There is no one specific exercise that is more effective than another.

The best form of exercise is one that:

- you enjoy
- you can afford
- you can keep up with
- fits in with your daily schedule

Specific exercises to try

Here are a few specific exercises that you may like to try to see if they help. These exercises may reproduce a mild version of your symptoms, but it should not cause a lasting increase in pain.

If your symptoms become significantly worse or remain worse for several hours afterwards, reduce the movement or perform fewer repetitions.

aim to repeat each exercise slowly **up to 10 times**

do **not** hold the stretch position

repeat **once or twice daily**

1. Pelvic Tilt

Sitting down, draw your belly button inwards and tilt your pelvis backwards (i.e. flatten your spine against the chair).

Then tilt your pelvis forwards again, allowing your back to arch away from the chair.



Watch the video here: https://youtu.be/PdEKzbBFZrE

2a. Sciatic Glide – Level 1



In a sitting position, straighten your affected leg. Bend your ankle forwards and backwards to create a stretch to the back of the leg.

Watch the video here: https://youtu.be/-LlGOh0Q9dM

If this feels easy, move on to the next exercise.

2b. Sciatic Glide – Level 2



In sitting, straighten your affected leg. Bend your ankle towards you, as you extend your neck.

Bring your neck towards your chest as you relax the ankle, to point your toes downwards.

Optionally, allow the back to round slightly as you point the toes down.

Watch the video here: https://youtu.be/HkXkUjffCYw

Self-help continued...

Simple Pain Relief

You may find that over-the-counter pain relief helps to manage your pain. Before taking any medicine, make sure it is safe for you. Always follow the instructions on the packet. If you are unsure, speak to your pharmacist or GP.

You can also use heat or ice to help ease your pain.

Heat: Try a hot water bottle or wheat bag.

Ice: Try an ice pack or a bag of frozen vegetables wrapped in a towel. Apply for up to 20 minutes at a time. You can repeat this every 2 to 3 hours if needed.

Do not place heat or ice directly on your skin, as this may cause burns or skin damage.

Stay at work or return as soon as possible

Being off work for long periods of time can affect your health and wellbeing. Staying at work, or returning when you are able, can support your recovery.

You may need to discuss temporary adjustments with your employer or GP to help you manage at work.

Ensure you get a good night's sleep

Getting a good night's sleep when you are in pain can be difficult; however, sleep is an important part of recovery. Good sleep can help reduce stress, improve wellbeing and may help you cope better with pain. Most adults need around 7–9 hours of sleep each night, but everyone is different.

There is no single best position to sleep in or type of mattress for back and leg pain. The best option is usually the one that feels most comfortable for you and allows you to get a good night's sleep.

For more information on sleep, how it affects pain and ways to improve your sleep, see the 'Helpful Resources' section at the end of this leaflet.

Look after your mental wellbeing

How you feel can affect the amount of pain you experience. Stress, low mood and anxiety can all contribute to your pain. Everyone experiences stress from time to time, and a certain amount of stress is normal and can even be helpful. However, high levels of stress, or stress that lasts for a long time, can affect both your wellbeing and your recovery.

Taking time to relax, spend time with others and do activities you enjoy is important for your mental wellbeing and may help you manage your symptoms.

For more information on mental wellbeing, how it affects pain and ways to improve it, see the 'Helpful Resources' section at the end of this leaflet.

Maintain a healthy weight

Maintaining a healthy weight can help reduce strain on your muscles, joints and bones and reduce levels of inflammation in the body. This may improve pain and movement, making everyday activities easier. Even a small amount of weight loss can make a difference, particularly for weight-bearing joints such as the spine, hips, knees and feet.

Healthy weight management is best achieved through:

- gradual, long-term changes
- eating a balanced diet
- being physically active and reducing time spent sitting
- setting realistic goals
- making small, sustainable changes

This can lead to lasting improvements in both your physical health and overall wellbeing.

For more information on eating well and to support weight management visit www.leicestershirewms.co.uk/

Stop smoking

People who smoke are more likely to experience back pain than people who do not smoke. Reducing or stopping smoking may help improve your pain and has many other health benefits. If you would like support to stop smoking, speak to a healthcare professional who can direct you to local stop smoking services.

When should I seek urgent medical advice?

Back pain is rarely serious, however you should **go to A&E immediately** if any of the following symptoms have started **within the last 4 weeks**:

- altered feeling when using toilet paper to wipe yourself
- change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- inability to stop a bowel movement or leaking
- increasing difficulty when you try to stop or control your flow of urine
- increasing difficulty when you try to urinate
- leaking urine or recent need to use pads
- loss of feeling or pins and needles between your inner thighs or genitals

- loss of sensation when you pass a bowel motion
- loss of sensation when you pass urine
- not knowing when your bladder is either full or empty
- numbness in or around your back passage or buttocks
- severe weakness in your legs or your ankle is not moving properly when walking

You should contact your **GP or call 111 urgently** if you have:

- new, unexplained lower back pain, accompanied by a history of any of the following
    - → cancer
    - → HIV
    - → TB (Tuberculosis)
    - → inflammatory arthritis
- lower back pain combined with any of the following
    - → feeling unwell
    - → a loss of appetite
    - → fever
    - → unexplained weight loss
    - → night sweats

When should I seek physiotherapy advice?

You may benefit from physiotherapy if:

- your pain is not improving despite the above advice
- you are struggling to return to work or normal activities
- you keep getting episodes of back and leg pain
- you would like more advice on exercises and recovery

Remember

Lower back pain and leg pain are common and will often show signs of significant improvement within 12 weeks of symptoms starting.

Recovery often has ups and downs, but most do get better with time.

Although symptoms can be very painful, the amount of pain you feel does not always reflect the amount of damage in the body.

Staying active and keeping moving are important parts of your recovery.

Scans or X-rays are often not needed to diagnose or manage your symptoms.

Helpful Resources

Mental Wellbeing Information Leaflet

www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/health-and-wellbeing/

Sleep Information Leaflet

www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/health-and-wellbeing/

Acknowledgements

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If you need help to understand this leaflet or would like it in a different language or format such as large print, Braille or audio, please ask a member of staff.

MSK Physiotherapy Service

Find out more about the MSK Physiotherapy Service and what we offer www.leicspart.nhs.uk/service/musculoskeletal-msk-therapy-physiotherapy/

Further Resources

Access our other MSK Physiotherapy resources www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/

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