

Top 10 Burning Questions About Sciatica

By Christopher Taylor, Physical Therapist

1. Q: How long is this going to take to go away?

A: It depends on *YOU*.

In general, it takes to 4 to 8 weeks to go through the first 3 phases of healing (Pain relief, mobility and strengthening).

It may take another 1 to 4 months to get back to all of the activities you want to do, and back to an active lifestyle.

Here are 9 variables that determine how fast someone can heal:

- ✓ Healthy people heal faster. Younger people heal faster. Health issues such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, tobacco use, alcohol abuse and body weight all influence how long it will take you to get better.
- ✓ People who consume more nutrients in their calories heal faster than those who primarily eat processed foods.
- ✓ Our bodies need sleep and rest to rebuild. A lack of sleep slows healing time.
- ✓ People who have high levels of stress heal slower.
- ✓ People who sit all day for work or who are generally sedentary take a longer time to heal.
- ✓ People who follow advice and instruction from top level healthcare professionals heal faster than those who do not follow through with care.
- ✓ People who are aware of their posture and daily habits get better quicker because they can adjust their habits such as sleep or sitting position faster.
- ✓ People who learn about their condition are more likely to follow through with their home exercise program and heal quickly.
- ✓ People who are optimistic tend to be more persistent and won't let anything stop them from getting better.

2. Q: How long before I see improvements?

A: Most people we see in the clinic start to feel better in 2 to 3 visits; or within 1 to 2 weeks. If you go longer than 2 weeks without feeling better or moving better you may be wrong about the cause of your sciatica regardless of what your X-ray or MRI shows.

3. Q: Can I be completely healed or will this come back again?

A: Most people we see who complete the [5 Phases of Healing](#) (meaning they no longer have pain, motion and strength are back to normal and they're back to doing all the activities they want to do without pain) have a minimal chance the pain will return.

The more active a person is, the less likely the sciatica symptoms will come back.

Your body is like a car. If you take care of it, regularly change the oil and keep it running and fine tuned, there will be little chance of break down. If you ignore it, it will be more likely to break down and need repair.

4. Q: Do I need any special equipment?

A: At Physio Physical Therapy and Wellness, we use a minimalist approach.

We don't use big, fancy, expensive equipment, because we don't need to.

The only exception would be traction machines. We find Saunders Lumbar Home Traction unit to be very effective for home use. For people who show signs of sciatica, traction may be performed through manual therapy or the use of inversion tables. Our smaller sized 830Laser™ also speeds the healing process and rapidly decreases pain. Otherwise, most exercises can be done with a simple ball, Thera-bands and a safe place to exercise.

Our model focuses on world-class hands-on Physical Therapy, a table and some basic exercise equipment you can use at home or on the road if traveling. This works best for most people.

5. Q: Should I use heat or ice on my leg?

A: The cause of most sciatica (pain, numbness or tingling in the leg) is in the lower back so ice or heat on the leg will not help.

Consider that sciatica is “inflammation,” if you’re inflamed, putting heat on it will make it more inflamed. However, ice can be used temporarily to calm down the inflammation

6. Q: Which exercises should I do?

A: The best exercises for you depend on what the cause of your sciatica is.

The 3 most common causes are:

- Herniated discs
- Stenosis, arthritis
- Pelvic or SI joint problem

Each cause has a series of gradually more advanced exercises.

So the key to picking the right exercise is to find the cause of your sciatica.

7. Q: How often should I do the exercises? And do I need to do them forever?

A: Most people we work with in the clinic for sciatica do their exercises at least once per day, every day. Some people do them up to 4 times per day.

However, doing the same exact exercises for years without changing could be a mistake. In general, to get stronger, your exercise(s) should progress and gradually provide more of a challenge.

Keeping that in mind, there are 2 rules to training:

1. Everything works.
2. Nothing works forever.

This means that exercise will make you stronger. Once your body adapts, it’s time to move on to something different or more challenging. One of the best programs you can move on to once you complete the 3 Phases of Healing for your Sciatica is a consistent walking program. People who walk every day have less risk of reinjuring their back and sciatica.

8. Q: What do I need to do for complete care? Am I going to relapse?

A: The best thing to do for sciatica, if you are worried about it coming back again in the future, is to complete all 5 phases of healing.

Phase One is getting rid of the pain, numbness and tingling.

Phase Two is working on mobility to restore your ability to move freely.

Phase Three is building up your strength and stability.

Phase Four is getting back to previous activities you want to do.

Phase Five is promoting optimal wellness and overall health.

In our clinic, after we see a person who has had sciatica in the past and they have completed the 5 phases of healing, we ask what activities they have avoided in the past month that they want to get back to doing. Some will say walking, or golfing or gardening. We'll tell that person to take the next month or two and do everything they want to do that they could do before their sciatica pain.

They keep doing their exercises at home to get stronger and stronger. Many come back for a follow up appointment down the road and have no trouble at all. Some do have a relapses and we'll take a look at the activities they want to do and adjust their program to get back on track.

As mentioned before, people who are active recover faster, so it's usually only one or two visits before that person is on the right track again.

9. Q: How do I know the cause of my pain?

A: There are 3 common causes of pain. Here are some general guidelines for each:

People with sciatica from a herniated disc usually have pain bending forward, twisting, coughing or sneezing. The sciatica pain they experience is usually sharp and runs specifically down the back of the leg...possibly into the foot. Herniated disc sufferers are usually 35 years of age or younger.

People suffering from sciatica because of stenosis or arthritis usually answer yes to these 3 questions:

- Are you 50 Years of age or older?
- Do you have pain with standing or walking?
- Does it help relieve the pain to sit?

People suffering with sciatica from SI Joint or Pelvic problems usually have pain with sitting for long periods. The sciatica they experience is usually on the outside of the thigh. Symptoms may include heaviness of one leg or feeling twisted.

10. Q: Which position should I sleep in?

A: On your back is best, next would be on your side, and last would be on your stomach.

An important key is to keep your spine in “neutral”. This means that it is not twisted to the right or left but keeps its natural curve.

Pillows or folded towels can be placed under your knees, under your side, or under your feet to help you sleep in the least painful position for you.

If you continue to have symptoms, call Physio Physical Therapy and Wellness today for an appointment. (828) 348-1780