Sciatica--Just the Facts Please

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It's interesting to observe that certain diseases seem to ebb and flow in popularity. A few years ago, if someone had back pain he was likely to blame it on his "sacro-iliac joint." Like, "I strained my "sacro-iliac."" Now, that's mostly passe. One seldom hears about the sacroiliac anymore. So then, what's in and what's cool with back and buttoc disorders? Currently, it's "sciatica."

Sciatica is simply inflammation of the sciatic nerve. And a huge nerve it is; about the size of your thumb, at least where it emerges from the spinal column. Making it's way through the buttock muscles it cruises down the leg, giving up vital fibers as it goes on its way clear to the feet. When it is stimulated up there near the spine pain will sizzle all the way down the leg.

So what is it that prompts the pain, the hurt that we call "sciatica?" Simply this: anything that causes an affront to the nerve, either near its origin or along the way. Perhaps the commonest insult is the pressure of a bulging disk right there where a nerve filament squeezes between 2 vertebrae. Indeed, the pain caused thereby may locate low in the back, deep in the buttock, and on down the leg.

What else irritates the sciatic nerve? Sitting can do it. True, the nerve is well padded with buttock muscles when we sit; yet long hours on a hard surface, (and even the softer seats of your car or truck) can irritate the nerve and incite sciatic neuritis. Repetitive lifting abets sciatica. A fall can do it. So can a sport injury. And curiously, chalk up another negative for tobacco. Smoking? Yes, apparently cigarettes extend their toxic insults all the way to the sciatic nerve and then it's the searing pain of sciatica all over again. Sometimes, even the withering scrutiny of science can't account for its presence.

So what can we do when the lightning-flashes of sciatica strike? When the pain is severe, really bad, a day or two at rest is comforting. Not too much longer though, because inactivity can make matters worse. So move around as pain permits. A heating pad to the buttock muscles for up to 20 minutes every few hours may afford comfort. Some sufferers find that cold packs are preferable; whatever works best.

Yes, there is a place for medicines like the NSAIDS (Motrin, Aleve and many others). They relieve the inflammation and with it the pain.

Red Alert! If after a few days, the pain is not better, or maybe getting worse, speak with your doctor.

Or should you notice that bladder or bowel function is iffy, irregular or hesitant, it's time for professional help. These symptoms may be warnings of permanent damage.

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