

9 things you can do for LBP/SCIATICA today

Physical therapists typically treat LBP or sciatica (pain, numbness, or tingling down the back of the leg) that are caused by one of the following: spinal stenosis or arthritis, a herniated lumbar disc or a sacroiliac (SI) dysfunction. There are other medical issues that can cause LBP such as a tumor, cancer, kidney issues, etc that sometimes a PT will treat as well. The difficulty in treating your LBP/sciatica without support of medical professionals is that the treatment for each of these conditions are different. However, there are some generic tips that could make you more comfortable until you seek out medical intervention. Remember pain is your guide, if any of these tips make you feel worse, do not do them.

1. Sleeping position

Sleeping is a time for your body to rest, recover and heal, but your body can't do that if it's in a position or on a bed that does not promote healing.

- a. Sleep on your back with 1+ pillows under your thighs.
- b. Sleep on your side with a medium size pillow between your legs. One side may be better than the other.
- c. Do not sleep on your stomach
- d. Evaluate your bed, a bed with too much give or a bed that has no give, may make your pain worse.

2. Sitting

If sitting is more comfortable than standing try any or all of these tips:

- a. When sitting your knees should be lower than your hips. Sometimes sitting on a wedge may be helpful, the thicker end under your butt.
- b. Use a lumbar support, a small towel roll, behind the small of your back to promote a normal curvature of the spine.
- c. Do not sit on a mushy couch that will compromise the position of your back.
- d. Sit on a firm chair
- e. Keep feet flat on the floor.
- f. Do not cross your legs.

3. Standing

- a. Engaging your lower abdominals will help support your back. A simple trick to find and engage your lower abdominals: put your tongue on the back of your top teeth, make a “Thhhh” sound. Do this every 3-5 minutes as you are standing or doing any activity
- b. Stand evenly on both feet by finding your center of balance like this: rock forward/backward at your ankles to find the center point of your feet

4. Pain relief – ice or heat?

Typically, sciatica or pain down the leg is coming from the back so putting heat or ice on the leg will usually not help. The rule of thumb is if it's an acute episode, brand new pain, put ice on your low back for 10-20 minute. After 2-3 days you can switch to heat, but in my experience people have more relief from ice. Ice or heat will not cure your back pain, but it might make it more tolerable in the short term.

5. Sensible shoes

Wearing shoes that allow your back to be in a proper alignment will undoubtedly feel better. So, if you notice your back feels better in certain shoes than others, than wear the shoes that promote better health. Typical poor shoes choices are: high heels or flat flip flops.

6. Reaching for something down low or on the floor

- a. Do not bend at waist
- b. Hinge at hips and bend knees
- c. Use a grabber to pick up things off the floor

7. Bracing for sneeze or cough

Unfortunately, something as natural as sneezing or coughing can make your back pain or sciatica worse. Protecting your back when needing to sneeze or cough by wrapping your arms around your belly may help.

8. Exercise

More often than not, movement will be helpful instead of complete rest. The easiest and best exercise when experiencing LBP is walking, ONLY if it does not make your pain worse. You could also try walking in a pool.

9. Physical Therapy

If your pain is persistent and to prevent another LBP episode, get into see a physical therapist sooner than later, as pain relief will be quicker with PT intervention as opposed to just rest or just medications. Your physical therapy should be a combination of manual therapy, exercise, and education.

Recent research from *JAMA Internal Medicine* states that exercise or a combination of exercise and education work the best in preventing LBP. According to a study by BMC Health Services Research, early physical therapy intervention for LBP will significantly lower ultimate healthcare costs by reducing the use of expensive treatments such as spinal surgery, injections, imaging and pain medications.

In much of the US a person can see a PT without seeing their doctor first, but here in Illinois, you will need to go to your doctor first in order to get a prescription for PT.

Mindy, Not sure where I will use the following case study, just needs reviewing. Thanks!

Case Study:

Rebecca had daily LBP, sometimes sharp, for the past 2-3 years particularly with sitting and bending. As a busy mom of 4 girls, Rebecca, chose to ignore the symptoms hoping it would just go away. Well, after 2-3 years, she realized it was only getting worse. Rebecca had a round of PT, chiropractic and 3 epidurals with very little relief. Recently she began to see a massage therapist and had some results, but not completely. So her massage therapist referred her into me. Rebecca began having pain relief after 1 PT treatment of manual therapy, education on body positioning and some exercises. By the 5th visit Rebecca no longer had sharp pain with bending or sitting. After 6 weeks, Rebecca has many painfree days, improved mobility and is much more aware of her body position when functioning in life. Rebecca has returned to her love of running, pilates and taking care of her home without fear of having that sharp LBP return.

Implications of early and guideline adherent physical therapy for low back pain on utilization and costs, *BMC Health Services Research* 2015;15:150

<http://goo.gl/fdr02l>