

Lumbar Radiculopathy

This leaflet aims to give you some information about what Lumbar Radiculopathy is and what you can do to help manage the symptoms you are experiencing.

What is Lumbar Radiculopathy?

Nerve root pain (also called radicular pain) is the medical name for pain coming from a nerve in the spine, and is more commonly known as sciatica.

A lumbar radiculopathy is usually caused by a disc prolapse, but there are other causes.

How is Lumbar Radiculopathy Diagnosed?

A lumbar radiculopathy is diagnosed from the signs and symptoms you describe alongside an examination, which may include:

- Movements of the back
- Nerve tests including, sensation, reflexes and muscle power
- Nerve stretching tests
- Imaging with or without nerve conduction studies

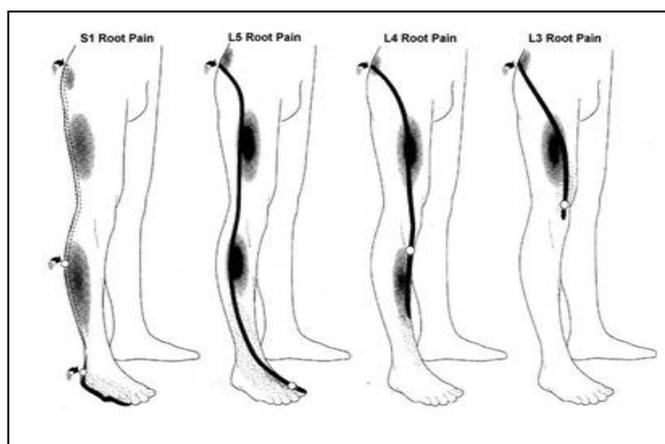
What's wrong with me?

As you get older, the tissues in your spine change in response to the stresses and strains of normal everyday life. For example, the discs of the spine may become thinner, bulge, and ligaments can stiffen. This process starts around the age of 25-30 and is a normal aging process. These changes can lead to a narrowing of the holes in the back that nerves pass through, and in some cases can cause pressure on the nerves. Some of these changes may cause irritation or compression of the nerve tissue in your spine.

These changes occur over many years, like wrinkles on our skin. For most people, these changes do not cause any symptoms. Up to 80% of individuals over the age of 60 will have visible signs of age related changes on an X-ray and MRI, however few will get pain.

How can this affect me?

Nerve symptoms are felt in the leg depending on the part of the spine that is affected. This usually occurs in the area of the body the affected nerve travels to. The pictures below demonstrate common patterns of symptoms into the arm.



What are the main symptoms of a lumbar radiculopathy?

Irritation of the nerves in the spine can cause a variety of symptoms, which differ from person to person. Common symptoms include:

- Pain and increased sensitivity
- Pins and needles, and Numbness
- Muscle Weakness
- Altered sensations such as trickling water

Nerve pain is usually described as burning in nature, and normally spreads below the knee or elbow in the affected limb. Often nerve pain and back pain are present at the same time.

How long will it take to get better?

Research shows 60-80% will see significant improvements in their symptoms within 6 weeks, and have fully recovered by 13 weeks. Some people can experience low grade symptoms for several months.

Medications and therapies can help but there isn't usually a "quick fix". There is a need to wait for natural recovery to take place. If the pain isn't getting better, is really affecting your ability to function, and have had it for more than 6 weeks, you should seek further assessment from your GP.

What I can do to help myself get better?

Although a lumbar radiculopathy can affect your quality of life, it is not serious or dangerous. Your spine is still strong and you should remain as active as possible.

If your symptoms are manageable then it is unlikely that surgery is needed. Most people with nerve root pain can successfully manage their symptoms with simple less risky treatments, called conservative treatment options.

While it is common that people with back pain will look for someone to get rid of their pain, it is more effective to find a strategy that allows you to be in control and manage your symptoms.

Conservative treatment options

1. Managing pain

You can take over the counter painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. Your GP or pharmacist can provide further guidance on the risks of these and how to use them effectively. They can also advise you on different types of painkillers such as neuropathic pain medication.

2. Exercise

Exercising with nerve pain may seem daunting, but it is one of the most important elements of managing nerve root pain. Improving your flexibility, strength and overall level of fitness is important in helping you manage your symptoms.

There is no evidence that one type of exercise is better than another, however, you should enjoy what you are doing.

Exercise in a way that is tolerable for you and your symptoms.

3. Physiotherapy

Physiotherapists are experts in helping people develop self-management strategies and developing exercise routines for individuals with pain and medical problems.

Individuals with nerve root pain may also find some physiotherapy treatments helpful in reducing their pain.

What if my symptoms do not improve?

Most people's symptoms will settle within 3-6 months; however in some cases further intervention may be needed such as steroid injection or surgery.

Summary: what are the key take home messages?

A lumbar radiculopathy usually settles over time and recurrence is rare. Distress and fear often make pain worse.

- Lumbar radiculopathy can be very varied and the amount of pain you are in, is NOT related to the size of the disc bulge.
- Stay at work or return back as soon as possible. It will hurt whether or not you are working, and normal activities will not delay recovery.
- Medications and adjustments in lifestyle help to improve your quality of life while healing occurs.
- Only a small number of patients who are not settling over the usual time scale will require further intervention such as injection or surgical interventions.