

# Unnervingly Pain?

You've likely heard of a slipped disc that can affect the back. But, what does it actually mean for a disc to "slip"? DR COLUM NOLAN, senior consultant neurosurgeon at Oxford Spine & Neurosurgery Centre, walks us through what this type of condition entails – and what to do about it.



While only one leg is typically affected, it is possible for symptoms to be present in both legs in severe cases. What's more, the pain may worsen when sitting, trying to stand up, twisting or bending forward. Lying down or gentle walking can usually offer some relief.

## What causes a slipped disc in the first place?

Sciatica tends to be more prevalent in people whose occupations involve heavy lifting, or prolonged periods of leaning over or sitting.

To reduce your risk of sciatica from a slipped disc, it's advisable to do the following:

- maintain a healthy weight
- maintain good posture, even while sleeping
- quit smoking
- practice safe lifting techniques when carrying heavy objects

## Can a herniated disc heal on its own?

The pain caused by a herniated disc will usually resolve on its own in about six to eight weeks in more than 90 percent of cases. Only a minority of cases will have pain that persists beyond this time period.

## What is a slipped disc?

The spinal column is made up of a series of bones (vertebrae) stacked on top of one another, each cushioned by a "disc" of connective tissue that contains an outer ring with a soft, gel-like centre. A slipped, or herniated, disc occurs when the tough outer ring becomes weak or injured, allowing the inner portion to bulge out and press on one or more of the spinal nerves that make up the sciatic nerve – that's the nerve that runs down through the buttock and back of the thigh, all the way to the heel and sole of the foot. Sciatica refers to the pain that typically occurs with this condition.

## What are the symptoms of sciatica from a herniated disc?

Symptoms may include:

- A shooting or burning pain that originates in the lower back and travels down through the buttock, the back or front of the thigh, leg or foot.
- numbness or tingling in the same area as the pain; this is sometimes accompanied by weakness in the leg; and
- a disturbance of bowel and bladder control in severe cases.



## What are the treatment options?

Most patients can recover naturally in six to eight weeks with the right combination of medication for symptom relief and physiotherapy to correct posture, strengthen the back and core muscles, and improve flexibility.

If symptoms persist beyond this time period or the pain is very severe, spinal injection treatments may be useful to relieve the pain. This would typically involve a nerve block with local anaesthetic and steroid medication to reduce the pain or a minimally invasive procedure to shrink the slipped disc and reduce the pressure on the nerve(s).

Surgery may also be recommended if the symptoms are very severe or aren't improving over time, or if there is any sign of nerve damage such as weakness or difficulty with bowel or bladder control. Minimally invasive surgical techniques can be used to relieve the pressure on the nerve(s). These involve smaller incisions, less damage to the surrounding tissue and faster recovery than traditional open surgery. **a**

Oxford Spine & Neurosurgery Centre

- #06-48/49 Mount Elizabeth Novena Specialist Centre, 38 Irrawaddy Road | 6333 3013
  - #07-57 Medical Centre D, Mount Alvernia Hospital, 820 Thomson Road | 6337 3013
- [oxfordspineuro.sg](http://oxfordspineuro.sg)