

Ananda Seva Mission

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SCIATICA

Yogic Treatment of Disease
Research Project

By Martha Bond E-RYT

Yogic Treatment of Disease Research Project: Sciatica

If you have ever had an open wound or sore, you have witnessed the miracle of healing. The body wants to heal, tries to heal. The body remembers it's original form. As it is with our journey to expose our true inner being, sometimes the journey to healing can be met with physical, mental and emotional obstacles. The purpose of this research is to explore ways to remove these obstacles and promote the natural healing process of the mind and body.

I. Disease/Condition or Ailment Researching:

Sciatica caused by nerve impingement due to compression in the lumbar spine.

II. Brief Description of Condition (Pathophysiology and causes from both the western model and, if different, the yogic model):

Sciatica is often felt as a sharp, burning or shooting pain radiating down the leg. Although many people that experience these symptoms recover in a few weeks, some people experience long-term chronic sciatic nerve pain that can be debilitating. An important thing to understand is that sciatica is not always a result of an injury or trauma, but often caused by wear and tear on the lower spine. Also important is that sciatica is a symptom of something compressing or irritating the nerve roots that comprise the sciatic nerve. Other causes of sciatica like pain are piriformis syndrome and compression of the sacral nerve root. Sciatica can be traced to where the pressure on nerve occurs. We must understand the underlying cause of sciatica to properly treat and ultimately relieve the symptom that is sciatica. For the purpose of this research I will focus on the treatment of sciatica caused by conditions of nerve impingement in the lumbar spine, and not sacral nerve root compression or piriformis syndrome.

III. The western model

Sciatica describes the symptoms of pain, tingling, numbness and possibly weakness radiating down the sciatic nerve from the low back, through the buttocks, down the back of the leg and depending on where the root nerve is affected maybe to the foot and toes. Sciatica is the most common sign of a herniated lumbar disk that places pressure on the nerve roots as they exit the spine. Some other common spinal conditions that result in sciatica are, spinal stenosis, degenerative disk disease and isthmic spondylolisthesis.

The nerve roots that exit the spine to form the sciatic nerve are extremely sensitive, and the inner portion of the disc that may herniate or extrude contains proteins that are inflammatory and can easily irritate the nerve. Therefore, if some of the inner portion of the disc (the nucleus) comes too close to the nerve, the nerve may be irritated and become inflamed, causing sciatic pain - or sciatica.

The following chart outlines symptoms and corresponding location of pressure on the sciatic nerve as it exits the spine.

L3-L4	May have reduced knee-jerk reflex. Symptoms may include: pain and/or numbness to the medial lower leg and foot; weakness may include the inability to dorsiflex the foot.
L4-L5	May have weakness in the extension of the big toe and ankle (foot drop). Symptoms may include: pain and/or numbness to the top of the foot, particularly in the web between the great toe (big toe) and the second toe.
L5-S1	May have reduces ankle-jerk reflex. Symptoms may include: pain and/or numbness to the lateral or outer foot. Weakness that results in difficulty raising the heel off the ground or walking on the tiptoes. Urinary incontinence may also present.

Common causes of symptoms sometimes thought to be “sciatica”

Sacral Nerve Root Compression	Caused by pressure on the sacral nerve roots from sacroiliac joint dysfunction. May display a sciatica-like pain or numbness or deep ache inside the leg. Not a well-defined linear geographic area of pain and numbness that is a symptom of true sciatica.
Piriformis Syndrome	Pressure on the sciatic nerve from the piriformis muscle can tighten and irritate the sciatic nerve. May display symptoms of sciatica-like pain or numbness in the leg, usually beginning in the area of the buttocks instead of the low back. Piriformis syndrome can mimic the signs and symptoms of sciatica pain from a disc herniation and therefore a consideration in diagnosing the cause of sciatica.

The Yogic Model:

From an Ayurvedic view, sciatica or Grudrasi in Sanskrit is aggravated by vata but may also include secondary characteristics of pitta and kapha. Keep in mind however that behind pitta or kapha pain there is always vata.

“There is no pain without vata, no inflammation without pitta, and no congestion without kapha.”

*Vasant Lad
Ayurvedic Perspectives on Selected Pathologies*

Vata pain is characterized as shooting or cutting pain. Often radiating, throbbing and migrating. It worsens during vata times or seasons, ~~Autumn~~ autumn through early winter, dawn and dusk. It is often caused by trauma or accident. Gentle manipulation, relaxation, yoga, pranayama & meditation are especially helpful in relieving vata pain. Pitta pain worsens at midnight & midday and during hot seasons. It is characterized as sharp, tender, burning and pulling. There will be a painful spot in the midpoint of the gluteal fold (sphig marma) when pressed. If vata is aggravating pitta there will be inflammation as well as pain. If vata is aggravating kapha the pain will present as dull or static. If the secondary dosha is kapha there will be congestion as well as pain. Asking the patient “What makes it better?” and “What time of day is it most painful?” can help to establish the current doshic characteristic of the pain. As a diagnostic tool, back conditions can be identified on the tongue by cracks on the midline of the tongue. Toward the back of the tongue is where lumbar “cracks” will be visible.

As in the western model the compression or prolapse of an intervertebral disc pressing against the sciatic nerve as it exits the spine is the main cause of Grudrasi. Using the chart above can help determine the location of the compression.

Also consider the involvement of apana vayu as it regulates the sciatic nerve and the lower body. Apana vayu is related to motor pain, and associated with the motor function of the lumbosacral spine. Because apana vayu is involved in bodily excretions including urination, it should be considered in the treatment of sciatica if urinary incontinence is a symptom or the L5-S1 are involved.

Potential information: Psychosomatic

The following chart stems from the work of Louise Hayes in the field of psychoimmunoneurology.

L3	Sexual abuse-Guilt-Self-hatred
L4	Rejection of sexuality-Financial insecurity-Fear of career-Feeling powerless
L5	Insecurity-Difficulty in communication-Anger-Inability to accept pleasure
Sacrum	Loss of power-Old stubborn anger

If it is determined that the cause of the pain is pressure on the sacral nerve root it can sometimes be traced to a psychological cause. The sacrum supports the lumbar spine. If there is a sense of insecurity or fear, the sacrum moves downward and creates a gap in the lumbosacral area. Creating a space where vata is easily aggravated and may cause pain.

IV. Chakra Focal Point:

The three lower charkas may be involved with sciatica. Determining the source of the condition will help establish the chakra or chakras in which to focus. Muladara represents physical, mental and emotional stability. Svadisthana is relative to the sacrum. Manipura is relative to the lumbar spine. Since all of these chakras are associated with the low back, it may be beneficial to focus on all three.

V. Common Medical Treatments:

Medical treatments include treating the symptoms of the pain with heat and ice applied alternately (12 minutes ice, 15 minutes heat) or independently. Medications may be helpful in relieving sciatica. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs i.e. ibuprofen, COX-2 inhibitors or naproxen. Oral steroids can be helpful in reducing the inflammation, which is usually a contributing factor in sciatica. Sometimes epidural steroidal injections are used to target the inflammation of the sciatic nerve directly. At the onset of a sciatic episode, the patient may need a day or two to rest. But too much inactivity has proven to make the condition worse. The goal is to provide enough relief to the patient so they can progress to an exercise program often guided by Physical Therapist. Movement helps exchange nutrients and fluids within the discs to keep them healthy. Without movement, the back muscles and spinal structures become deconditioned and less able to support the back.

Surgery is considered when all other treatments have been exhausted. Microdiscectomy or a microdecompression and laminectomy spine surgery are typically performed for lumbar herniated disc where a small portion of the bone over the nerve root and/or disc material from under the nerve root is removed to relieve neural impingement and provide more room for the nerve to heal.

VI. Yogic Remedies:

I. Meditations or Visualizations:

The word meditation, is derived from two Latin words: meditari(to think, to dwell upon, to exercise the mind) and mederi (to heal). I feel that it is not only helpful for the practitioner to meditate on or with the patient before treatment but necessary as a way to open yourself to the unlimited possibilities for healing.

The following are a few ways we can apply the healing wisdom of meditation and visualization to treat the symptoms and cause of sciatica.

In the event that the patient is unable to perform strength training due to acute pain or weakness, there is evidence that mental imagery of strong muscle contractions can increase strength in those muscles. A recent study conducted by Dr. Vinoth Ranganathan of the Cleveland Clinic trained volunteers to imagine contracting specific muscles in their arms for fifteen minutes, five days a week. At the end of 12 weeks test showed that they statistically increased strength in those muscles compared to the control group. This treatment in conjunction with the following visualization exercises plus pranayama, bhanda & meditation can have positive results for the immobilized patient.

As explained by Nischala Joy Devi in her book *The Healing Path of Yoga*

Active Imagery:

“In active imagery we formulate an action to work directly on an area in need of healing and, with concentration, we project that image to do the task.” “Let yourself be guided by a sense of knowing.”

An example of how this type of healing can serve to heal sciatica is to imagine of the touch of a loved one as a healing tool. This type of imagery must be detailed and very specific. The greater detail you can impose, the greater the validity of the process.

Passive Imagery:

“Passive imagery acknowledges our innate ability and wisdom to heal.” Where active imagery is very specific to a particular disease or injury, passive imagery is all encompassing. “...encourage the healing energy to move through the body and the mind in the form of light, color, or just a feeling.” Passive imagery cultivates a sense of wholeness as the healing energy brings health and balance to the entire being.

2. Asanas

It should go without saying that any patient presenting symptoms of a spinal injury should be treated **only** with consent and guidelines from their doctor. It is very helpful to know exactly which vertebrae are involved and even where the compression is to determine the most beneficial asanas. More important is to know which are contraindicated. Remember, movement helps exchange nutrients and fluids within the discs to keep them healthy. Without movement, the back muscles and spinal structures become deconditioned and less able to support the back.

Some of the following asanas may also be indicated for treatment of piriformis syndrome & sacral nerve root compression. However, they have been chosen for their specific benefit to sciatica as a result of compression in the lumbar spine. Attention will also be given to those asanas that positively affect the lower three charkas and apana vayu, established to be associated with sciatica.

When treating sciatica, we focus on improving the structural integrity of the lumbar spine since it is caused by compression in one or more of those vertebrae. Exercise caution with abdominal strengtheners, as they may cause more compression if not done correctly i.e. Navasana (boat pose). Also be aware of any sacral issues the patient may have where forward folds would be contraindicated.

To reduce excess vata associated with the shooting pain of sciatica, practice warming asanas in a quiet systematic way. Slow gentle vinyasa also integrate the three lower koshas which relate to the lower charkas associated with Sciatica.

- Surya & Chandra Namaskar-Done slowly
- Pelvic Stabilizing Sequence-To improve lumbosacral rhythm
- Psoas Balancing Sequence-Psoas major arises from the bodies of T12, L1, L2, L3, L4 & L5. Most of these vertebrae are sources of sciatic nerve compression
- Viparita Karani Mudra (Half Shoulder-Stand)-Tones spinal nerves, also reduces pitta if inflammation exist
- Prasarita Padottanasana (Standing Wide-Leg Forward Fold)
- Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward Dog)-Tones & balances Lumbar-sacral, thoracic & spinal nerves. Stimulates Apana
- Virabhadrasana I (Warrior I)-Tones back leg hip extensors. May relieve sciatica
- Virabhadrasana II (Warrior II)-Opens groin & releases compression of the lower back
- Garudasana (Eagle Pose) Lengthen piriformis muscle
- Gomukasana (Cow Face or Face of Light Pose)-Lumbar-sacral region toned. Positive affect on sciatic nerve. Apana Vayu stimulated
- Ustrasana (Camel)-Stretching quadriceps & hip flexors has progressive effect on relieving sciatica
- Utthita Parsvakonasana (Extended Side Angle)
- Baddhakonasana (Bound Angle)-Vatta impacted
- Dandasana (Staff Posture)-Placing blocks under hands enhances decompression of vertebrae
- Bharadvajasana I (Baradvahasana's Twist)-Lengthens and relives tension in the spine
- Malasana Variation (Garland)-Deep squat with hand in prayer lengthens lumbar spine, stimulates Apana Vayu
- Kumbakasana (Plank Pose)-For abdominal strength. Done on the forearms increases effectiveness and alleviates wrist stress

- Janusirsasna (Heat to Knee Posture)-Also called “Life Nerve Stretch” in Kundalini Yoga practice. Stimulates Apana Vayu
- Supine Leg Lift Pose (Supine lift heels to 30°)-Hold for 30 seconds breathing naturally to increase abdominal strength. Strengthens the lower 3 Chakras and stimulates Apana Vayu
- Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose)-Strengthens spine, lengthens abdominal muscles. Tones Apana Vayu
- Dvipada Pitham (Bridge Pose)-Strengthens spine. Stimulates Apana Vayu
- Chakravakasana (Cat Pose)-Stretches spine

Mudras:

Gertrud Hirschi details an effective hand mudra for “backache” in general in her book *Yoga In Your Hands*.

- Touch the tips of your thumb, middle finger and little finger. Extend the index and ring finger of your right hand. Place your thumb joint on the nail of the index finger of your left hand. Do this 4 times a day for 4 minutes when pain is acute. To enhance this mudra you can lie on your back knees bent at a 90° angle supporting your lower legs on a chair.
- Yogamudrasana (Yoga Mudra) Stretches hips, piriformus & low back. Activates Apana Vayu
- Bandhatraya Yoga; Maha’ Mudra, Maha’ Bandha & Maha’ Vedha – Apana vayu is strengthened when pulled upward into samana vayu
- Par’vrthivii Mudra for muladara chakra, A’mbashii Mudra’ for Svadhisthana chakra and A’gneyii Mudra for manipura chakra. Increases the ojas and prana of the lower three chakras

Bhandas:

Mula Bhandas-Purifies and strengthens Apana Vayu. Apply Mula Bhandas to those asanas that stimulate Apana Vayu will enhance its effects i.e. Badha Konasana, Dvipada Pitham, Bhujangasana, Gomukasana, Malasana and Janusirsasana. Mula Bhandas is also a valuable tool when used in conjunction with Pranayama

Relaxation:

From Nischala Joy Devi in her book *The Healing Path of Yoga, ...* “Mano Maya Kosha, the body of the mind and senses, where our everyday thoughts and feelings reside.” According to Ms. Devi this is the sheath where all of our memories of our physical and emotional pains and injuries are held. With each emotional or physical injury a scar remains in the mind-body. She suggests that this could be the reason for *phantom limb syndrome* when after a limb is removed either by accident or surgery, the person may still have pain where the limb used to be. This pain is held at the Mano Maya Kosha. There is an energetic memory of that body part. This may also explain why many attempts to alleviate sciatica or other back pain surgically do not succeed. The pain may be an energetic memory, not only of the physical nerves and muscles. It can also be a result of scars from old experiences and emotions that have not healed. Remembering that what affects the mind affects the body and vice versa. Deep relaxation progressively moving from the outer Koshas to the Mano Maya Kosha can reach suppressed physical, mental and emotional scars and allow them to be resolved naturally.

3. Optimal Yogic Diet Recommendations

Generally a Vata reducing and possibly Pitta reducing diet is recommended. Refer to the patient's doshic constitution to make judgment and recommendations. A Sattvic diet is also helpful in reducing stimulants that may aggravate the nervous system. You may need to enlist the guidance of an Ayurvedic doctor to make this judgment-

4. Lifestyle and Other Tools:

Pranayamas:

After establishing the type pain, (vata or pitta) consider either of the following pranayama practices to enhance the healing process.

- Bramari or *bee breath*. Begin with 5 rounds to reduce Vata. It is a chest breath and therefore heating. If the symptoms are accompanied by inflammation a Pitta condition than treat the Pitta first.
- For excess pitta the following pranayamas that incorporate belly breath are recommended. Shitali, Sitkari, bhujangini mudra, or kiki mudra. These practices address inflammation and negative emotions of anger, frustration & irritability.

Karma yoga practices:

On the subject of Karma yoga; during a conference I attended, a Tibetan Buddhist Geshe said "If you have a backache...rub someone else's back." [Simple and yet effective.](#)

Marma Points:

According to Ayurveda there are 107 vital energy points or marmas in the human body. These are focal point of pranic energy that can be stimulated to increase the flow of energy or remove blockages. Marma therapy can therefore be useful in aiding the healing process. Using the pad of the thumb (the tip can be uncomfortable to the patient and hyperextension can lead to injury of the practitioner) apply clockwise motion to revitalize a marma point & counterclockwise movement to remove blockage & stagnations. Pressure should be gentle for Vatas, moderate for Pittas, and deep for kaphas. Focus on the marma point being treated and direct your breath to that area. Inhaling healing energy and exhaling negative energy. Encourage the patient to use their breath as well. Have them breathe through those times when a marma point is particularly tender.

- The Marma point for the sciatic nerve in the foot is on the sole of the foot in the center of the heel.
- The Marma point for the Sciatic nerve directly is in the mid fold of the buttocks in the center.

Herbs & Oilings:

Speaking from personal experience there are Ayurvedic oil massage therapies and herbs that can be very affective pain management. However, when it comes to treating pain it can get very complicated. You have to consider not only the doshic qualities of the pain but also of the

patient. This goes well beyond my expertise and I would advise consultation with an Ayurvedic Doctor to add these therapies to a treatment plan.

Having said that, there are a some products on the market used for chronic or occasional sciatica flare ups. Two that I am familiar with are Sciatic Rescue by Peaceful Mountain. A gel that can be massaged into the painful area as needed. Another product that I have found helpful is Panaway by Young Living, an organic essential oil that's a blend of helichrysum, wintergreen, clove, and peppermint. Although designed to relieve muscle soreness and tension I have found it affective for treating sciatic nerve pain.

In conclusion I would like you to consider the gift that we are offered when someone brings us into their healing process, and the responsibility we are accepting when we choose to treat them. Remember that we are offering ourselves as a vehicle for transmitting sacred wisdom about healing that are both ancient and effective. Remember ahimsa. Impress upon the patient how important this concept is to there healing process. Teach them to do now harm to themselves in their haste to heal.

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