

Sciatica

What it is and what I found out about it and how I overcame it.

Sciatica is a sharp nagging pain that starts in the left cheek, runs down the left leg, all the way to the foot. It is piercing when it is at its worse. It acts different with different people. For me, it affected my standing and walking. For some, it affects sitting and walking. It is caused by irritation of the sciatic nerve, usually because something comes in contact with it. That something may be arthritis or a herniated L5 disk.

I suddenly came down with Sciatica last March 2005. I was devastated. The pain was unbearable and my life changed drastically. At first, it thought it was a simple strain or irritation and that it would go away. Ascripton, Advil, nor Tylenol did nothing for me. Weeks passed and it didn't go away. I finally called the doctor and he prescribed the prednisone pills, the 5,4,3,2,1 decreasing dose, which he said was necessary to stop the inflammation. He also prescribed a pain medication. There was no relief.

I learned several things immediately. One, I had to keep walking. Rest will not work and you need to keep mobility to prevent other things from happening. That was good because I didn't want to loose work. Two, I had to stop all lifting. The limit given was 5 pounds, but even that, my little poodle, aggravated my back. I had only lifted household furniture around the house when requested of me, and computers at work every day. Computers typically weigh 20 to 25 pounds. I also learned that there was no pain medication that worked for me. I stopped all prescribed drugs shortly after the prednisone pill treatment and kept on with Advil because I was told I needed an anti-inflammatory.

After finding out that it wasn't going to go away, I called my doctor again. After reporting that it wasn't going away, he prescribed Physical Therapy. The purpose of PT is to build up the weak muscles that allowed all this to happen. There were also certain stretches that could be important to tone the muscles. After 2 months of this PT, I had vacation plans and wasn't going to blow them off. I only take a week off in a year, so this was important for mental reasons. My wife was worried that the vacation would be ruined by all this. It wasn't.

Our vacation took us to Myrtle Beach for a week. One of the things that drew me back for the third time was the Lazy River pool at our resort. Last time I was in Myrtle Beach, I used the Lazy River as a fun thing to do because it was very relaxing.

A Lazy River is like a big odd shaped pool with a large island in the middle, creating a channel where you float on a tube, pulled along by the water current, created by the pumps. Normally, you would sit in a large tire tube and float along, but that was too much being hunched over for my back problem. I put my head and arms thru the tube and stretched out, floating along the Lazy River. I spent every day, over 2 to 3 hours, in the Lazy River. By the end of the week, I was actually feeling a little better. Upon returning home the next day, I was even able to walk the Board Walk at Ocean City, struggling just a little, but using a cane for support.

I started PT again the following week. Each visit, they would ask me how my pain level was, and of course, it varied, depending on how far I had to walk from parking, and somewhat, what I did at work during that day. It really wasn't a true measure of the overall picture. After 3 more weeks, I realized I wasn't getting any better. In fact, the little extra that I gained on vacation disappeared. I called off the PT.

A friend gave me an article from the local newspaper about "decompression", the week before I stopped PT. Decompression is where you lie on a table rigged with 2 sets of harnesses and your back is stretched by a special machine to take the pressure off the herniated disk. The article was written by a local chiropractic doctor and it explained how this all was supposed to work. It also mentioned that it worked

for about 80% of patients. The stretching was supposed to take the pressure off the disk so it would eventually go back into place.

After an evaluation, I was scheduled 3 times a week for months. The stretching or decompression didn't cause any pain, although some called it the torture table. After the first 2 weeks, they started "adjusting" my back, with the familiar twisting to make bones crack and go back into alignment. I have been familiar with chiropractic treatments for most of my years, strongly believing that adjustments fixed many ailments. On 2 separate occasions, 2 months into the treatments, each of the 2 doctors in the office did a radical "crack" of my whole lower back while on my side. Both times, I was left really hurting after those adjustments. They even scheduled me for an extra "decompression" treatment the next day when I complained. After the first month, I really wasn't improving, and I told the doctor. He prescribed extra pulling pressure. Over the next weeks, I was going downhill fast. The pain increased while standing and walking and I could barely walk, even a short distance. In fact, the last week there, I couldn't walk without the help of a cane. I barely made it in the doctor's office for the last several visits. I quickly called off the treatments and called my regular doctor.

My doctor prescribed the cortisone injections in the back. The following week, I was in the Hospital where I received the injection while the doctor used X-Ray technology to see exactly where the needle was going. I was told that any doctor that injects without this X-Ray technique is "shooting in the dark" and doing a worthless treatment, wasting your time, money, and energy. I was also told that I would see some relief immediately, but more within a week. I never saw any relief, either immediately, or in the next 2 weeks. Usually, this procedure is done with up to 3 separate injections, but my experience while getting the first shot was very scary. They give you a morphine drip to kill the pain in case they hit the nerve with the needle. About 45 minutes into the procedure, 15 minutes past what they estimated, I became very dizzy, nauseous, and my blood pressure started to drop drastically. When I told the doctor that I was dizzy and then nauseous, the doctor ordered something else injected into the IV quickly. I had almost passed out. Whether it was a reaction to the stuff they put in with the cortisone or something else, they didn't tell me, but it really scared me. I didn't want to consider the second and third injections at this point. Sciatica is often treated by surgery when all the above fails. I didn't want surgery because so many people that I knew had bad luck with the surgery. One is even crippled worse from the surgery and another has unbearable pain years after it.

I found a video and book on the Internet that slammed conventional treatment. Certain stretches were supposed to fix sciatica. It was worthless.

I remembered my vacation and the Lazy River. I also remembered that my UPS driver had sciatica and had used water therapy for his sciatica. I started asking everyone I knew about finding an indoor heated pool. A friend told me of a place in Downingtown called "In-Motion". I checked it out and the pool was 92 degrees average and very inviting. The cost for the fitness center was also inviting, \$30 a month, on a month to month basis. In Motion has regular PT, but they also have a super complete fitness center and pool. I started immediately, every day. I would do the leg stretches that stretched my back and upper legs that I learned in PT. I also did the arched back thing in the water, hanging from a "noodle" like I was in the Lazy River. Just being in the water for any hour was very relaxing, but within a week and a half, I no longer needed the cane to walk. Each week, I got better and better. I kept it up, 1 hour a day, every day for 8 weeks. After this time, I no longer was suffering from sciatica. I could walk to WAWA for lunch again (which I hadn't been able to do for 8 months, and I could walk in the grocery store with my wife.

I am still continuing the water therapy, even after the 8 weeks, because I want to make sure it stays gone. As I write this, I have been doing the pool thing for 11 weeks. I got my wife, Maria in the pool with me now.

Gene Mitchell

Addendum

I receive numerous inquiries because of the radio publicity and would like to clarify a few things. First, "IN Motion Fitness Center" is located on Country Club Drive, Downingtown, just below BJs and across the street from Home Depot. You enter the driveway at the traffic light there and turn right as if you were going to the Country Club, only turn right again to the Fitness Center. There phone number is 610-518-9100. The phone machine answers with 2 choices: Physical Therapy or Fitness Center. The Fitness Center is the first entrance at the lower level where the pool is located. Michael Miller is the Fitness Center Manager. Membership is \$30 a month. There is only a 1 month cancellation fee should you leave, rather than a initiation fee or joining fee. The pool is normally 92 degrees. You should check the schedule as there are several organized activities such as "organized PT, Aquatics Class, and a swim class. These are the only times you can not use the pool. Bring a swim suit – they provide towels and a locker room.

Specifically, I grab a 4 foot foam "noodle" and float on it under my arms. I alternate between various stretches: one leg up on ledge at 90 degrees and straighten my back up right. It stretches the upper leg and lower back muscles. I then switch legs and repeat. I then float flat, arching my back for a while. Another stretch is to pull each leg up as far as I can, alternating left and then right. I finish with tucking both legs up, and pulling up as tight as possible. I then repeated the floating arched back thing. After several weeks, and finding things are improving, I lay out, on the noodle, and do a very cautious sideways wiggle, flexing my back, side to side. I was asked to do this in regular PT and it was very painful. I applied this to "in the water" and did it only gently and after finding relief from the other exercises. Don't over stretch. If it hurts, stop! Usually, the increased pain was delayed, so try a bit at a time. I never when to the extreme.

After 4 to 5 weeks and noticeable improvement, I started lightly kicking my legs like in regular swimming. Remember, I said lightly. I still hung onto the noodle. In fact, I never let go the whole hour I was in the pool. I started 1 hour a day, every day, including Saturdays and Sundays for 5 weeks and then dropped back to 5 days a week. I wanted to lick this without surgery, so I became very dedicated to the time period of doing this.

I do not jump around in the pool. The whole idea is to avoid impact. There are some ladies that believe they should, so they do. Everything you do in the pool should be totally relaxing, and the idea of hanging on the noodle is so it is relaxing. If you have to work both your arms and legs at the same time as in real swimming, it becomes a workout. Save that for when you get cured.

If you have had surgery prior, use extra caution. I have had friends totally wrecked by surgery and that's why I fought so hard doing what I did.

I am not a doctor. I am only relating what I was told from doctors and the therapists. I then applied it to the water therapy that I conjured up myself. I had over \$1800 in co-pays from the PT and Decompression that didn't work, and \$30 a month for the pool that did, and that was a welcome relief in billing.

If you see your doctor and are under their care, ask about water therapy instead of regular therapy. When I told my doctor about my water self treatment, he said "I should have thought of water therapy".