Piriformis Syndrome

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What Is Piriformis Syndrome?

Piriformis syndrome occurs when a small muscle deep in the buttock, called the piriformis muscle, irritates or puts pressure on the sciatic nerve. The sciatic nerve is the largest nerve in the body and travels from the lower back down each leg. When the nerve becomes irritated, it can cause pain, numbness, tingling, or discomfort in the buttock and leg.

Common Symptoms

Symptoms may include:

- Deep aching pain in the buttock
- Tenderness in the buttock area
- Pain that travels down the back of the thigh or leg
- Numbness or tingling in the buttock, leg, or foot
- Increased pain with prolonged sitting
- Discomfort when crossing the legs, squatting, or climbing stairs
- Symptoms that may improve with standing, walking, or changing positions

What Causes It?

Piriformis syndrome can develop from:

- Overuse of the hip and buttock muscles
- Prolonged sitting
- Muscle tightness or spasm
- Falls or direct injury to the buttock
- Repetitive activities such as running, cycling, or climbing

How Is It Diagnosed?

Diagnosis is based primarily on your symptoms and a physical examination.

Your healthcare provider may:

- Assess hip movement and flexibility
- Perform tests that reproduce symptoms
- Evaluate for other causes of sciatic nerve pain

In some cases, additional testing such as MRI or nerve studies may be recommended to rule out conditions such as a herniated disc or other causes of nerve irritation.

Treatment Options

Most people improve with conservative treatment.

Conservative Care

- Stretching exercises for the piriformis and hip muscles
- Strengthening exercises for the hips and core
- Manual therapy and soft tissue treatment
- Sciatic nerve mobility exercises ("nerve glides")
- Chiropractic care when appropriate
- Ice or heat for symptom relief

Medical Treatment

For persistent symptoms, additional treatment may include:

- Anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDs)
- Muscle relaxants
- Corticosteroid injections
- Other specialized injections in difficult cases

Surgery is rarely necessary.

What Is the Outlook?

Most patients respond well to conservative treatment and experience significant improvement over time. Recovery is often faster when treatment begins early and contributing factors such as muscle tightness, weakness, and movement habits are addressed.

Typical Treatment Schedule

Many patients are seen:

- **Approximately 2 visits per week for 6 weeks**
- Progress is reassessed regularly and treatment is adjusted as needed

Following your home exercise program and staying active are important for long-term success and preventing symptoms from returning.

Contact Your Healthcare Provider If You Experience:

- Progressive leg weakness
- Severe or worsening numbness
- Loss of bowel or bladder control
- Significant back pain with leg symptoms
- Symptoms that do not improve or continue to worsen