

BCBI Insight

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Spinal Decompression and Sciatica

The symptoms of Sciatica have often been difficult to treat, but a new option to this debilitating problem provides effective relief in most cases with little or no risk.

The term sciatica is often used to describe pain down the leg; however the true definition of sciatica is irritation of the sciatic nerve, which is a combination of several nerves as they leave the lower back. The majority of cases of sciatica are caused by herniated or bulging discs in the lumbar spine. These discs are soft cartilaginous structures that provide cushion between each vertebra.

The inner portion of the disc has much higher water content than the outer portion and is much softer in consistency. As the outer fibers become weaker or damaged the softer material begins to move its way outward because of the positive pressure on the disc itself. As it moves out it begins to create a bulge or what's called a herniated disc eventually causing the disc to protrude outwards and narrowing the opening out of the spinal canal where the nerve roots exit. The narrowing can cause direct pressure on the nerve itself or create inflammation that can then irritate the nerve creating symptoms of pain, numbness or weakness down the leg.

Traditional treatment programs for sciatica typically consist of pain medication, injections and in severe cases surgery. These approaches may work in the short term to reduce inflammation and decrease the pain somewhat, however they also carry with them significant risk. The risk to reward benefit is often not worth it long term as most of these treatments are only temporary. If the problem becomes more severe and the nerve is actually compressed then these treatments may offer no relief at all.

Let's look at steroid injection used specifically now as a common sciatica treatment. The goal with an epidural steroid injection is to reduce inflammation to the nerve root and surrounding structures. While these types of injections can bring temporary relief, they can also cause what's called a rebound effect, where the pain comes back much more intense. They can spike blood sugar in diabetics and over time can lead to other potential side effects. If the pain is severe however, the benefit of some pain relief may in fact be worth the risk, but the key is to do something proactive while the pain is decreased.

If sciatic pain becomes unbearable then surgical intervention may be recommended. In a small



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number of sciatica cases this treatment may provide relief, at least temporarily. The problem is that surgical outcomes on the spine are low with about a 50% success rate and it brings with it significant risk factors. A common condition called failed back surgery syndrome is associated with spinal surgery and is the result of excessive scar tissue formation, spinal instability after surgery and increased stress on other spinal structures. The risk is also there for the need for a repeat surgery in the relatively near future. The other question that should be asked is what the parameters are for surgery to be considered successful. If your pain drops 50% for 12 months, surgery is considered successful regardless of whether or not you need another surgery two years down the road. That being said, sometimes surgery is the only option.

The treatment is safe and gentle and brings with it a very high success rate in the 70–75% range and because it physically treats the cause of sciatica the problem is not likely to return.

Fortunately a new treatment exists that is highly effective and doesn't bring with it the risk of side effects associated with other treatments. Spinal Decompression is a relatively new, form of treatment. It should *not* be confused with spinal traction. The decompression device provides a gentle and logarithmic pull of the spine safely bypassing the guarding reflex muscle contraction associated with traditional traction. Bypassing this muscle response allows a therapeutic negative pressure to develop inside the disc space drawing in nutrition and fluid to help the disc heal, while also reducing herniated or bulging material thus relieving the sciatica nerve. The treatment is safe and gentle and brings with it a very high success rate in the 70–75% range and because it physically treats the cause of sciatica the problem is not likely to return.

As research done by neurosurgeons and orthopedic surgeons continues to pour in on spinal decompression, the benefits of this technology are more and more evident. It represents a real option for many suffering from sciatica to truly correct the problem and remain pain free. Although there are some who are not good candidates for spinal decompression, many will find long lasting and highly effective relief from spinal decompression.