

easy rider



Intermittent bouts of sciatica disrupted Candy Doran's cycling career. After discovering yoga, she's back in the saddle.

One day 25 years ago Candy Doran, an avid cyclist and competitive runner, bent over to pump a bike tire and was struck by lightning. Not literally, but that's how she describes the searing pain that shot through her lower back and leg and made her collapse to the ground in agony. The pain quickly subsided, and she resumed her routine of training for half marathons and vigorous cycling competitions like the California Death Ride, for which she biked through five mountain passes in a

by Matthew Solan • photography by Debra McClinton



single day. Over the years, the pain would return, sometimes not as severe; sometimes she just had trouble getting comfortable while seated. It always went away and didn't interfere with her regular activities, so she just "ran and cycled through the pain," she says. When it was gone, it was forgotten. Eventually, after hearing her running and cycling buddies complain about sciatica and reading about the condition in fitness magazines, she put two and two together and realized that she too was suffering from inflammation of the sciatic nerve.

When she tried to address her pain, the results were discouraging. A chiropractor and physical therapist weren't helpful. So she consulted her running magazines and tried the back exercises they recommended. Her hope was that strengthening the muscles of the lumbar area would lessen the frequency or severity of the attacks. But it didn't, and at times the exercises made matters worse.

It wasn't until a knee operation ended her running career a few years ago that she became determined to control her sciatica. "I was physically deteriorating and I knew I needed to preserve what I had left," says Doran, who still cycles about 100 miles each weekend around San Francisco. "And I knew I had to go outside my Western experience of physical therapy to do it."

She found solace at the Iyengar Yoga Institute and with her teacher, Kathy Alef. For the past four years, her twice-weekly practice has taught her to stretch correctly, concentrate on proper alignment, and focus on her overall physical needs. This has been a departure from her physical therapy exercises, which she says are often designed just for specific areas. Now she fights the entire fire instead of individual flames. "Yoga has taught me to pay attention to how my body moves and how it relates to my sciatica," Doran says.

For the first time in decades, Doran's sciatica is almost nonexistent. Besides an occasional flare-up, the equivalent of a 24-hour cold, she is practically pain free. Best of all, at 55, she's able to stay active at an age when most people have to slow down. "Now when my sciatica does occur, I know what to do to ease the pain—stretch and strengthen like crazy."

Of All the Nerve

The sciatic nerves are the body's two largest nerves. They are about as thick as your pinkie and emanate from the lower lumbar spine. They thread through the buttocks down the back of each leg to the soles of the feet and big toes. Pain strikes when a root that helps form one of the sciatic nerves, or when the

poses by Anna Delury

The following sequence is not designed for everyone with sciatic pain, but it has had a high success rate, and it is based on the teachings of B.K.S. Iyengar. As you do each pose, be mindful of the three steps outlined by Anna Delury on page 134. They can help you gauge how deep you should go. This sequence has suggestions for how long to hold each pose, but stay in an asana only as long as it provides relief. "Holding longer doesn't mean better," Delury says.

can yoga cause sciatica?

Sometimes your yoga practice can be the culprit of your sciatic pain. This happens, says Anna Delury, when yogis develop bad habits in poses.

"They overly rotate their back leg or twist their feet or square their hips too much, like in Warrior I," she says. This can cause pressure on the lumbar spine and may irritate the sciatic nerves. Her suggestion: In standing poses keep your feet flat on the floor, each knee facing in the direction of your toes, and let your hips move naturally. Unfortunately, people misunderstand directions from their teacher about where they should place their hips, which often results in squaring them too much, she says. "The hips should receive the movement, not initiate it. Don't force your body into a movement or position it's not ready for." M. S.



Supta Padangusthasana

1 (Reclining Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose), variation 1

Lie on your back beneath a doorway or next to a column. Raise your right leg and rest it against the door frame or column for support. The left leg is outstretched. At first, your raised leg may not be flush with the door frame. As the hamstrings release, you'll gradually move more toward a 90-degree angle. If you feel any pain, turn the raised leg out to see if that releases it. Over time you'll be able to bring your leg back to parallel. Resist overworking. Let the door frame help you relax while it teaches the legs and pelvis proper alignment. Hold the pose for 30 seconds or as long as it's comfortable. Repeat on the other side.

Supta Padangusthasana

2

(Reclining Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose), variation 2

This position is like variation 1, only instead of using a door frame for a prop, you lower your foot out to the side and support the outside of the foot on a chair. Make sure to keep your hips level. Again, allow the prop to pacify the lower back. Hold for 30 seconds on each side, or for as long as it's comfortable.



Utthita Trikonasana

3

(Extended Triangle Pose)

Stand at a wall with your feet about four feet apart and the heel of your left foot pressing against the baseboard. Turn your right foot out 90 degrees. Reach your arms out to the sides, keeping your shoulder blades spread wide and your palms facing down. Firm your thighs and turn your right thigh outward, so that the center of the right knee is in line with the center of the right ankle. Exhale and extend your torso to the right directly over the right leg, bending from the hips, not the waist. Rest your right hand on a block or chair so both sides of the torso are even. Rotate the torso to the left, keeping the sides of the waist equally long. Hold for 30 seconds. To come out, push the back foot against the wall and pull up to standing with the back arm. Repeat two to three times on each side.



sciatica strategies

When a sciatica attack hits, there are several ways to naturally soothe flare-ups or prolonged bouts of pain.

nerve fibers, become pinched or irritated. You can feel it anywhere along the nerve's branch: low back, buttocks, leg, calf, or foot. It can be felt down one leg or both.

Sciatic pains are like snowflakes: no two are ever the same, and their severity can change throughout an attack. The pain can feel like a dull soreness, numbness, or tingling, or more like an electric shock, throbbing heat, or stabbing pain. It can begin as an annoying ache that makes it uncomfortable to sit, or turn into a variety of intense, and at times debilitating, sensations that make it nearly impossible to walk or stand. An episode can last anywhere from a few hours to several weeks. Some are frequent and consistent—you can almost set your watch by them—while others may arrive out of the blue after a long hiatus.

A common culprit for sciatic pain is a herniated disk (sometimes referred to as a ruptured disk, pinched nerve, or slipped disk). “Your disks can get fatigued like a wire hanger being constantly bent back and forth. Eventually, a disk may weaken and perhaps break,” says Loren M. Fishman, M.D., the coauthor with Carol Ardman of *Relief Is in the Stretch: End Low Back Pain Through Yoga*. “Or a vertebra can slip forward and the nerve fibers may become compressed that way, much like a kink in a garden hose.” This can happen due to an injury or trauma, long bouts of physical activity (as is the case with many athletic people who suffer from sciatica), or simply from years of constant bending or sitting for long stretches. It’s possible to ignite pain with the simplest movement, much like what happened with Doran. “People may aggravate their sciatica with a sneeze or reaching for a box of cereal,” Fishman says.

Yet sciatica is not always related to back issues. “You can have back pain without having sciatica, and you can suffer from sciatica without back pain,” Fishman says. For instance, osteoarthritis can narrow the opening through which the nerve roots exit the lower spine, injuring the fibers that make up the sciatic nerve. Another cause is piriformis syndrome, in which

effects are most likely due to its active ingredient, curcumin, which gives turmeric its yellow color and may be as effective as cortisone in fighting acute inflammation. Or try a strong tea made from gotu kola (one ounce of dry herb steeped in one pint of water), which can help heal chronic conditions if taken daily for several days or weeks, Khalsa says. (Check with a naturopath before taking these or any other herbs.)

LEG STRETCHES Place the foot of the painful leg up on a box, chair, or stair, while standing, suggests Loren Fishman, M.D. “Lifting the leg stretches spastic muscles in the leg, buttock, and lower back,” he says. If both legs hurt, lie on your back, bend your knees, and bring them to your chest. “Make sure your movements are slow and careful,” Fishman counsels. For unbearable pain, do the poses while in a warm shower, and let the water cover as much of your body as possible: shoulders, back, and leg; or chest, abdomen, and leg.

ICE Old-fashioned ice therapy numbs sore tissue and can slow inflammation. Apply an ice pack or ice wrapped in a towel (never place ice directly on the skin) to the area around your lumbar spine or wherever the pain is most intense. M. S.

ACUPRESSURE In this massage technique, the therapist applies pressure with her fingertips or knuckles. There are about 30 to 40 acupressure points. The goal is to release physical tension to the painful area, relax tight muscles, and increase blood circulation. It’s possible to learn how to identify the points and massage them yourself when a flare-up occurs.

ACUPUNCTURE In traditional Chinese medicine, sciatica, like other physical pain, is considered a chi (energy) stagnation, says Javaharian Mohammad, L.Ac., of the Pacific College of Oriental Medicine in San Diego. Acupuncture treatments use thin needles to stimulate points in the lower back to help unblock chi and ease pain.

HERBS Many herbalists use St. John’s wort flowering tops for mild painful conditions, including sciatica and muscle inflammation, says herbalist Karta Purkh Singh Khalsa. Turmeric is another widely used herb. Its anti-inflammatory

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Ardha Uttanasana



(Half Standing Forward Bend)

4 Stand in Tadasana (Mountain Pose) with your feet hip-width apart, facing a table or countertop. Your iliac crests (hip points) should be level with the edge. Lay your torso over the flat surface so that your hips fold over the edge and your back is long. You can stand on a block or other prop if you need more height; or if you're tall, place a support on the table on which to rest your torso. Turn your toes in and your heels out to release the muscles around the tailbone and lower body. Slowly unwind. Let your legs do the work, not the back. Stay here for as long as it's comfortable.

Utthita Parsvakonasana

(Extended Side Angle Pose)

5 Stand at a wall just as you did for Triangle Pose, and place a block near your right foot. Press your left heel against the wall, and turn your right foot out 90 degrees. Reach your arms out to the sides, keeping your shoulder blades spread wide and your palms facing down. Firm your thighs and turn your right thigh outward, so that the center of the knee is in line with the center of the right ankle. Bend your right knee over the right ankle so that the shin is perpendicular to the floor. Exhale and lower the right side of your torso as close as possible to the right thigh. Place your right hand on the block. Extend your left arm up toward the ceiling, turn the left palm toward your head, then reach the arm over your left ear, palm facing the floor. Stretch the entire left side of your body from your heel through your fingertips. Hold for 30 seconds, then push the back foot against the wall to come back to standing. Repeat twice on each side. Then repeat Ardha Uttanasana.



Bharadvajasana I

(Bharadvaja's Twist), with chair

6 If the previous poses bring relief after two to four weeks, add this seated twist. Sit sideways in a chair with your buttocks lined up with the right edge of the chair back and your left side perpendicular to the chair back. Twist to the left and grasp the sides of the chair back with your hands. As you do this, wedge a bolster or rolled-up blanket between your waist and the chair back. It will feel like a tight fit. The bolster forces you to twist upward instead of downward, which is the usual tendency in twists, and provides space between the vertebrae. The emphasis in the pose should be on lifting, not twisting. Just placing your hands on the chair back provides enough of a twist, so don't pull to create more of a twist. Hold for 30 seconds. Release, move your legs to the other side of the chair, and repeat. Repeat two to four times in each direction.

