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the piriformis muscle in the buttock compresses the sciatic nerve. “It’s commonly caused by overuse and oversitting, and is seen in people with sedentary jobs like bus drivers and office workers,” Fishman says.

Sciatica may seem like a pain to treat, but Fishman says more than half of all sufferers can soothe and reduce flare-ups by combining some form of exercise, in particular yoga, to strengthen the back and help relieve the pressure on the nerve root, with the judicious use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen, aspirin, or naproxen. Many people have also relied on other complementary approaches to manage attacks. (See “*Sciatica Strategies*,” page 92.) Of course, more intense pain may need stronger medications to ease the inflammation, such as oral steroids or epidural injections, and severe or recalcitrant cases may even require surgery to remove the portion of the disk that irritates the nerve root. But a yoga mat and a clear plan may be all that a sciatica sufferer needs.

MANAGED CARE

Can you “cure” your sciatica with yoga? The answer is yes and maybe. “It’s wrong to say that your sciatica can never be relieved,” Fishman says. But it’s also unfair to blindly believe that if you simply put in the time and effort, your pain will disappear forever, says certified Iyengar yoga teacher Anna Delury. That’s why she recommends a management-style approach, with the intention to keep your pain at bay, which is more realistic and won’t set you up for disappointment.

“You definitely can use the Iyengar method to bring your sciatica under control and make flare-ups less and less common,” says Delury, who has trained with B.K.S. Iyengar since the early 1980s and now teaches yoga in her home studio in Los Angeles. “But it is also possible to cure your sciatica with yoga.” She speaks from experience. Delury suffered from sciatica for years—the result of a series of childhood falls and an active, sports-oriented youth. It wasn’t until she fully embraced Iyengar Yoga, however, that her sciatica

withered and eventually vanished. She has been pain free now for 11 years.

Delury emphasizes that managing your sciatica with yoga is not something you can accomplish in a few weeks, or even months. “Everyone is different, but it may take, on average, six months to one year to be able to control your sciatica,” she says. “The reason is that it takes longer for nerve and spinal-related problems to heal from injury. It can be painful at times, and you may have setbacks along the way, but you’ll also feel relief too.”

SCIATICA ACTION PLAN

There are different approaches to using yoga to manage your sciatica. It depends on your yoga experience and the severity of your pain. Delury believes that the sequence on pages 91 and 93 is ideal for most people because it focuses on beginner-level

A yoga mat and a managed-care plan may be all that a sciatica sufferer needs to reduce flare-ups and keep pain at bay.

poses. “I’ve found that 80 to 85 percent of the time, sciatica sufferers benefit from this sequence,” she says. Since everyone’s sciatica is different, Delury has her students follow a three-tier approach, based on Iyengar’s teaching, while doing each pose. They are like individual check marks so students can gauge what they need to focus on, how deep they should go into a pose, and how long they should hold it. Here’s a look at the steps and how they are connected.

STEP 1 Pacify the pain. Take pressure off the sciatic nerve and rest the lumbar spine by using a variety of props common in the Iyengar tradition: straps, belts, blocks, chairs, bolsters, and walls. “Props provide traction, which releases any pain or discomfort, and they also help educate the body and mind about what it’s supposed to feel like,” Delury says.

STEP 2 Understand proper alignment. When the lights flicker in your home, the likely culprit is a loose wire in the wall. You have to go into the wall to examine the structure and evaluate the problem. The same philosophy applies to your sciatica.

You need to investigate where your wires are messed up. Your pelvis and spine work together to ensure proper alignment. Misalignment can cause pressure on the sciatic nerve. Using props helps the body understand proper alignment.

STEP 3 Build muscle strength to maintain alignment. To build strength, increase the repetitions of the poses, or hold them longer, or both. You can do this while you learn to align your pelvis and spine in step 2. But you may need to just focus on your alignment first—anywhere from six months to a year—before you are ready to build strength.

BASELINE FORMULA

When you use yoga to manage your sciatica, Delury advises that you cut back on all other activities at first. This means taking a break from strenuous physical activities like skiing or running, or even your usual intense yoga practice.

“You have to go to the baseline,” Delury says.

In her case, she gave up running, dancing, and even sit-ups. “All I did was focus on the sequence given to me by Mr. Iyengar for a year,” she says.

This is sometimes more difficult to endure than the sciatic pain itself. It’s a big psychological hurdle for active people, especially serious yoga practitioners. But it’s necessary, Delury says. The reason is twofold: First, any strenuous activities may inadvertently aggravate your sciatica and cause a setback, and second, you need to break any bad habits you may have picked up in how you move and bend, so you can learn proper alignment.

If you find this complete abandonment too difficult, Delury suggests that you take a trial-and-error approach. If possible, eliminate your most extreme activity first, like marathon running or cycling, or a “lopsided” sport like golf or tennis that emphasizes one side of the body, and monitor how your sciatica reacts.

“Sometimes just eliminating the most intense activity is enough. If it’s not, and you find your sciatica still flares up, cut back on another activity, and then another, until your sciatica is OK,” she advises. Even



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if you have to stop doing all sports, you can still stay active with gentle walking, Delury says, while you focus on your sciatica yoga routine.

That's what Toby Brusseau, 27, did. In 2003, he fell 15 feet onto a bed of rocks while climbing in Malibu Creek in Southern California. It caused a herniated disk that triggered painful bouts of sciatica, sometimes so intense that the mere pressure of the keys in his pants pocket was too much to bear.

He took up Delury's yoga sequence, with some modifications to fit his experience level and sciatica. He stopped all other physical activities for several months and focused on just the yoga, sometimes practicing several times a day. This regimen meant he could do no rock climbing, cross-country running, weight lifting, skiing, or mountain biking. Brusseau even stopped going to his regular group yoga class. He admits it was hard to suddenly slow to a crawl like that, but after just one month he noticed a difference and within 10 months felt 100 percent cured.

When the pain began to subside, however, he didn't take it as a sign to throw a harness around the nearest boulder and hoist himself up. He literally took small steps. He began with walks, and when that didn't aggravate his sciatica, he began to run again in his old confines of Fryman Canyon near Hollywood. He began with flat surfaces and worked up to steep hills. When that was OK, he added another of his previous adventures but always gauged how his sciatica reacted. Eventually he made it back to rock climbing.

Brusseau's experience may be unusual, but he's an example of what may be accomplished with diligence and a plan. "So many people are looking for the quick fix for their sciatica, like a steroid shot, so they can get back to their life, but I wanted to feel my way through it," he says. "I wanted to test myself and my yoga to see if it could work—and it did." ■

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