

Numbness & Pain Running Down My Leg

What You Need to Know

What Is Causing This?

Numbness, tingling, or pain that travels down one or both legs is most often caused by irritation or compression of a nerve — either in the lower spine or somewhere along its path down through the buttock and leg. The most common culprits are a herniated disc, bone spurs, spinal stenosis (narrowing of the spinal canal), or tight muscles in the buttock that press on the sciatic nerve.

This type of symptom is broadly called radiculopathy when it originates at the spine, or sciatica when it involves the sciatic nerve specifically. Both terms describe a nerve being pinched, inflamed, or irritated somewhere along its route from the spine to the foot.

What Does It Feel Like?

The sensation varies considerably from person to person and even from day to day. Common descriptions include:

- Sharp, shooting, or electric-shock pain that travels from the low back or buttock down the leg
- Burning or hot sensations along the back of the thigh or calf
- Numbness or "dead" feeling in the leg, foot, or toes
- Tingling or "pins and needles" that come and go
- Weakness in the leg, knee, or ankle — difficulty lifting the foot (foot drop) in some cases
- Pain that is worse on one side only
- Symptoms that worsen when sitting, coughing, or straining, and ease when walking or lying down

Where Is the Pain Coming From?

The location and pattern of your symptoms often points to which nerve is involved:

- Pain into the outer thigh and shin — often L4 nerve root
- Pain down the back of the thigh and into the top of the foot — often L5 nerve root

- Pain down the back of the leg and into the heel or small toes — often S1 nerve root
- Pain deep in the buttock with radiation down the leg — may involve the sciatic nerve at the piriformis muscle, not the spine

Your physical therapist will assess your symptom pattern, reflexes, strength, and movement to help identify the likely source.

What Makes It Worse?

- Sitting for long periods, especially in low or unsupported seats
- Bending forward or twisting
- Coughing, sneezing, or straining
- Getting up from a chair after sitting
- Certain sleeping positions

What Caused This?

The most common underlying causes include:

- Herniated or bulging disc pressing on a nerve root
- Spinal stenosis — narrowing of the canal the spinal cord travels through
- Degenerative disc disease or bone spurs from arthritis
- Piriformis syndrome — the sciatic nerve being compressed by a tight muscle in the buttock
- Spondylolisthesis — one vertebra slipping forward on another
- A tumor or cyst (rare)

When Should I Be Concerned?

Seek immediate medical attention if you experience:

- Loss of bladder or bowel control — this is a medical emergency
- Numbness in the groin or inner thighs (saddle anesthesia)
- Rapid or severe weakness in both legs
- Pain following a significant fall, accident, or injury

The Good News

The majority of people with nerve-related leg pain improve significantly with physical therapy. Treatment focuses on reducing nerve irritation, restoring normal movement, improving the strength and flexibility of the spine and surrounding muscles, and teaching you positions and habits that protect the nerve during daily activities.

Most patients experience significant relief within **6 to 12 weeks** of consistent physical therapy treatment.

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