

Do I Have Piriformis Syndrome?

What You Need to Know

What Is Piriformis Syndrome?

The piriformis is a small but important muscle located deep in the buttock. It connects the lower spine to the top of the thighbone and helps rotate the hip and turn the leg outward. When this muscle becomes tight, inflamed, or goes into spasm, it can irritate or compress the sciatic nerve — the large nerve that runs directly beneath it (and sometimes through it). This condition is known as piriformis syndrome.

It is often mistaken for a herniated disc or other causes of sciatica because the symptoms can feel very similar. The key difference is that the problem originates in the muscle, not the spine.

What Does It Feel Like?

Symptoms can range from a dull ache to sharp, shooting pain. Common experiences include:

- A deep, aching pain in one buttock
- Pain that radiates down the back of the thigh, calf, or into the foot (sciatica-like symptoms)
- Burning or tingling sensations down the leg
- Tenderness when pressing on the buttock
- Pain that is worse when sitting for long periods — especially on hard surfaces
- Discomfort when climbing stairs, walking uphill, or rising from a seated position
- Pain during or after prolonged physical activity such as running or cycling

What Makes It Worse?

People with piriformis syndrome typically notice increased pain or discomfort when:

- Sitting for extended periods (driving, desk work, long flights)
- Crossing one leg over the other
- Squatting or deep bending at the hip
- Running, especially on uneven terrain or with poor form
- Sleeping on the affected side without support between the knees

How Did This Happen?

Piriformis syndrome can develop gradually or come on suddenly. Common causes include:

Overuse or muscle imbalance:

- Running or cycling with poor hip mechanics or weak glutes
- Sitting for long hours with poor posture
- Sudden increases in activity level without proper conditioning

Injury or trauma:

- A direct fall or blow to the buttock
- A twisting injury to the hip or lower back
- A car accident or other impact

Anatomical factors:

- In some people, the sciatic nerve passes directly through the piriformis muscle, making it more vulnerable to compression
- Leg length discrepancy or flat feet can alter gait and overload the piriformis

Is This the Same as Sciatica?

Not exactly. Sciatica is a symptom — pain along the sciatic nerve — that can have several different causes. Piriformis syndrome is one cause of sciatica, but it is different from disc-related sciatica because the nerve is being irritated in the buttock, not at the spine.

A key clue: if your pain is primarily in the buttock and leg but you have little or no lower back pain, piriformis syndrome may be more likely than a disc problem. Your physical therapist can help determine the true source of your symptoms.

When Should I Be Concerned?

Seek prompt medical attention if you experience:

- Loss of bladder or bowel control
- Severe or rapidly worsening leg weakness
- Numbness in the groin or inner thighs
- Pain following a significant injury or fall that does not improve

The Good News

Piriformis syndrome responds very well to physical therapy. Treatment typically focuses on stretching the piriformis and surrounding hip muscles, strengthening the glutes and core, improving movement patterns, and reducing nerve irritation. Manual therapy, dry needling, and targeted exercise can all play a role in recovery.

Most patients experience significant relief within **4 to 8 weeks** of consistent treatment.

This information is for general educational purposes only and is not a substitute for a professional evaluation. If you think you may have piriformis syndrome, call us today — we have immediate openings with no waitlist.

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