

# Piriformis Syndrome: It's a Real Pain in the Butt!!!

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Do you suffer from pain and/or burning in your buttock? Does it affect your ability to sit comfortably for long periods of time? Do you find yourself limping because of this pain? If you answered yes to these questions, then you may be suffering from piriformis syndrome.

The piriformis is a small muscle located in the center of each buttock that acts to rotate the hip outward. This muscle is commonly tight in individuals who have weakness internally rotating their hip and raising the leg out to the side (abduction). When this muscle becomes tight it can become very tender to the touch and may cause significant discomfort.

In addition to causing buttock pain, pain may also be referred down the back of the leg if the sciatic nerve becomes involved. The sciatic nerve is a large nerve that runs through the buttock and down the back of the leg. This nerve runs behind the piriformis muscle in most people. The nerve actually splits through the piriformis muscle in about 20% of the population. When the piriformis becomes tight it can put pressure on the sciatic nerve causing irritation and sending pain down the back of the leg (sciatica).

The following are helpful hints that can help decrease or may even resolve your symptoms:

**Piriformis stretch:** Sit erect in a chair with the painful leg crossed over the thigh of your other leg. Grab the knee of the painful leg and pull up towards the opposite shoulder until you feel a comfortable stretch. Hold 30 seconds and repeat 2-3 times, 2-3 times/day.

**Hamstring stretch:** Lie on your back with the good leg flat on the floor. Grab behind the knee of your painful leg with the knee pointing up to the ceiling. Lift your foot up to the ceiling (straighten your knee) as high as you can until you feel a gentle stretch in the back of your leg. Slowly pull your toes toward you and then point them to the ceiling repeatedly while keeping your leg stationary. Hold this stretch for 30 seconds and repeat 2-3 times, 2-3 times a day.

**Massage:** Deep massage can be painful, but may be effective in helping to decrease muscle tension in the piriformis.

**Heat/cold:** If you have symptoms going down your leg, it is likely that there is inflammation present from the piriformis pressing on the sciatic nerve. If this is the case, then you want to apply cold to your buttock. If you only have buttock pain, then heat and/or cold may help. Try both and use the one that seems to help more (or both if they are equally effective).

**Avoid sitting/standing with your weight shifted to one side all the time.** Shift from one side to the other periodically if you are unable to sit/stand with equal weight on both sides.

**Do not keep anything in your back pockets** (e.g. wallet/checkbook...).

**Anti-inflammatories may help if there is inflammation present.**

If symptoms persist, you should contact your primary physician and inquire about physical therapy. Physical therapy can be very effective in treating piriformis syndrome and sciatica. Just remember, the longer you wait to seek medical attention the worse your symptoms may become, resulting in a longer road to recovery. Early intervention can stop your symptoms before they result in a chronic problem.