

Sciatica – Can Pilates Help?

by Holly Nuttall

As a Pilates Foundation teacher I see a lot of clients with sciatica – so many that if I based my idea of what proportion of the local population suffers from sciatica on my professional experience, I would think that it was at least 60% – which must be more than is the case in reality! It is, however, a pretty prevalent condition that can cause a great deal of distress and pain for those who experience it. Sufferers end up coming to Pilates after having been referred by GPs, osteopaths and others, but can it really help?

In terms of referring patients on, I would say yes, absolutely, as long as it is to an experienced, highly qualified teacher who works in a suitable environment. There is no point in someone who experiences chronic sciatica attending a packed gym Pilates class of no specified level with a different teacher each week. This is something which takes care, time and attention to help. But team someone with sciatica up with a professional teacher in a small class or 1:1 setting and the results can be excellent. In my five years of teaching, I have never come across a client who hasn't found that Pilates has benefitted their sciatica – be that management of the pain or a complete recovery from all symptoms.

So what is sciatica? Well, the answer isn't totally straightforward. In a literal sense, sciatica is essentially a symptom rather than a condition in itself – pain resulting from the compression of the sciatic nerve. This is a major nerve (the longest one in the body) which runs from the lumbar spine all the way down both legs. This location means that the resulting pain can often radiate from the low back or buttock all the way down to the foot. It can be the result of a structural problem in the lower back, such as a herniated disc which compresses the nerve, but this is not always the case, and in some cases no identifiable cause will be found. It is also important to remember that a disc problem does not necessarily result in sciatic-type pain – in fact, not all disc degeneration is symptomatic, so just because someone has a disc problem they won't necessarily experience sciatic pain and vice versa.

For those who do experience it, sciatica can range from annoying to seriously debilitating. Symptoms include low back pain, shooting or tingling pains from the buttock into the thigh, muscle weakness down the leg, pins and needles in the affected area and cramp in the back of the leg and calf – however, this is by no means an exhaustive list. I've met clients whose sciatica has stopped them from being able to work and others for whom it just bothers them from time to time.

So how can a Pilates teacher go about helping those who experience sciatica? The key here is gently and slowly releasing the tight areas and then working to correct the imbalances that will have built up over time. I find that looking at the alignment of the pelvis is a good place to start, as it can give you a good clue as to which muscle groups aren't functioning as they should

be. Exercises that work on a diagonal, such as dead bugs and superman, are a great way to address the pelvic (and often scapular) instability, but as ever, it's crucial to start with closed chain work and build up to the open chain versions. Movements focusing on glute medius and eccentric work for the hamstrings (clam, leg lifts from prone) can be very effective, but can also be very challenging to begin with – expect a lot of muscle weakness and/or restricted ROM. Axial elongation working from the feet up can help to alleviate the pressure going down into any affected areas of the lumbar spine as well as getting clients to use their legs in a more balanced way. There is often a marked difference between the relative strength of each leg, and footwork on the reformer can be very useful in highlighting and helping to address this. Last but by no means least, I have found that many clients have really benefited from stretching the calf of the affected leg – particularly those who wake up with cramp at night.

It can be a lengthy process, but for those who have been suffering for months or even years it really is worth persevering. From a teacher's perspective, I have found it incredibly rewarding to see what a difference this kind of work can make to a client's life.

Holly Nuttall teaches at the Synergy Pilates Studio in South London/North West Kent. She founded Synergy Pilates in 2009 after her completing her matwork training with the Pilates Foundation. The studio offers a range of group mat Pilates classes alongside reformer and mat 1:1's with an emphasis on working with those with injuries and medical conditions.

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