
A pain in the you-know-what

by MARK L. FUERST



After years of leg and back pain and appointments with one neurologist after another, Stephanie Levine finally followed a relative's advice and consulted an orthopedist. "Within minutes of my consultation, I was diagnosed with 'piriformis syndrome,'" Levine says. "Later on, the doctor did the half-hour surgery to release the piriformis muscle, and, aside from a little muscle soreness, I was up and around within days and completely free of pain."

The piriformis (meaning pear-shaped) muscle is located deep in the buttock. At its widest, it attaches to the flat bone at the base of the spine just above the tailbone. It continues across the buttock and at its narrow point attaches to the head of the thighbone. Its main job is to rotate the hip when you turn your leg outward and up to the side.

The most common causes of piriformis problems are hours of prolonged sitting, such as working at a computer or driving long dis-

tances; activities that involve twisting or rotating the torso, such as serving a tennis ball; and, as in Levine's case, trauma caused by a fall onto the buttock. Men who carry a fat wallet in their back pants pocket can also experience the syndrome, which can happen to almost anyone regardless of age, weight, sex, or physical fitness.

When the sciatic nerve, which passes under and through the piriformis muscle, becomes entrapped or inflamed, that causes piriformis syndrome. Pain in the upper buttock radiates down the thigh and sometimes to the lower leg, lower back and groin.

While more than 2.5 million North American suffer from piriformis syndrome, it remains a little known version of sciatica, and it's often misdiagnosed and improperly treated. "Most patients suffer pain for months or years before getting the proper diagnosis," says **Dr. Jacob Rozbruch**, the New York City orthopedist who did Levine's surgery. "Patients

may be told they have a disk disease in the spine or gynecological problems and undergo costly, unnecessary tests.”

Once you know what to look for, the condition is easy to diagnose, either through a simple clinical exam or by using an electronic test that measures the speed of messages transmitted along the sciatic nerve. “If your pain becomes worse when you sit or press on the buttock, you may very well have piriformis syndrome,” says Dr. Loren Fishman, physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist at Columbia University in New York.

Fishman has seen thousands of piriformis patients from around the world and

stretch the piriformis muscle, but Fishman cautions against self-treatment until potential skeletal defects are ruled out.

Patients often receive anti-inflammatory medication, and some receive injections directly into the muscle to relieve pain. For those who fail conservative treatment, surgery allows three-quarters to feel 65 percent better.

A new controlled study shows that treatments with botox, a synthetic toxin, work, and for longer than steroid injections or placebos. “Physiologically, botox paralyzes muscle fibers enough so that the muscle is no longer strong enough to squeeze the nerve,” Fishman says.

“Most patients [with Piriformus Syndrome] suffer pain for months or years before getting the proper diagnosis,”

says Dr. Jacob Rozbruch

invented the test for it “out of frustration with patients who didn’t have herniated disks, but certainly had pain,” he says.

He also developed a simple exercise program that stretches the piriformis muscle, and two-thirds of his patients feel 65 percent better within three months. First, he uses ultrasound to heat the muscle for 10 minutes and to stretch it slightly. Then, a physical therapist applies pressure to the muscle for 10 minutes using fingers, the heel of the hand or the elbow.

Home exercises may also help you

“Over the last 50 years, the emphasis of sciatica has been on cervical disks,” he continues. “Now we know that 6 percent of sciatica is caused by muscle involvement that is easily curable.”

Since Levine’s surgery more than two years ago, she hasn’t had to see a doctor for her leg or any related condition. “I went through so many expensive, unnecessary tests, and the result was that I had a minor condition that just needed to be recognized,” she says.

For more on Dr. Jacob Rozbruch, visit www.jacobrozbruchmd.com