

What Is Back Pain?

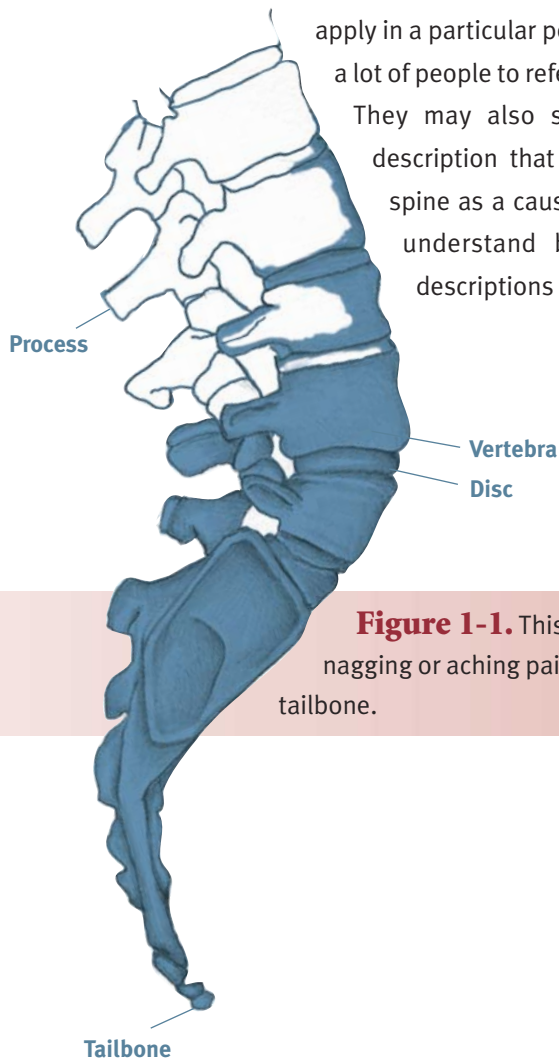
If you have suffered from back pain, you are not alone. This kind of pain affects over 70% of the American public at one time or another in their lives. Visits to the doctor for back pain are frequent, and chronic pain in the low back is the most common cause of disability for persons under 45 years of age. The costs of evaluating and treating low back pain are tremendous and are measured in billions of dollars.

In this book, we will primarily focus on low back pain. We define low back pain as a nagging or aching pain in the lower spine, from the belt line to the tailbone (Figure 1-1). This pain may be present for a few days or weeks. We call that “acute” low back pain. When pain has lasted more than 12 weeks and shows some signs of being an ongoing problem, we call it “chronic” low back pain. Making a distinction between acute and chronic pain can sometimes be helpful to doctors but the causes are often the same and making a distinction isn’t always necessary. It may be more appropriate to think of back pain as an ongoing part of the human condition, with periodic flare-ups and some happier times when the pain is not so bad or even gone. Fortunately, the really bad flare-ups tend to be few and usually go away—even without treatment—in a few weeks or months.

Are there other names for back pain?

An old-fashioned term for back pain is “lumbago.” This word does not really have any special medical meaning. It is just a catchy way of describing the nagging pain we have already mentioned. Other terms for back pain often suggest explanations for the pain, whether or not they have been shown to

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apply in a particular person's situation. This kind of thinking causes a lot of people to refer to their back pain as arthritis or back strain. They may also speak of having their backs "go out," a description that implies some sudden misalignment of the spine as a cause of pain. We will see later how hard it is to understand back pain, and we will see that these descriptions may not always apply.

Figure 1-1. This book primarily focuses on low back pain—nagging or aching pain in the lower spine, from the belt line to the tailbone.

Back Pain: Costs to Society

- Over 70% of the American public suffers at one time or another
- Back pain is the most common cause of disability for those under age 45
- Evaluation and treatments cost billions of dollars

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Is sciatica a type of back pain?

Essentially, yes. Some people with back pain will have discomfort that shoots or “radiates” down the leg, often all the way into the foot or toes. This radiating pain is called “sciatica” (Figure 1-2). When people have sciatica it is often due, as discussed in later chapters, to irritation of one of the large nerves leading into the leg. It is this type of pain that many people refer to as a “pinched nerve.”

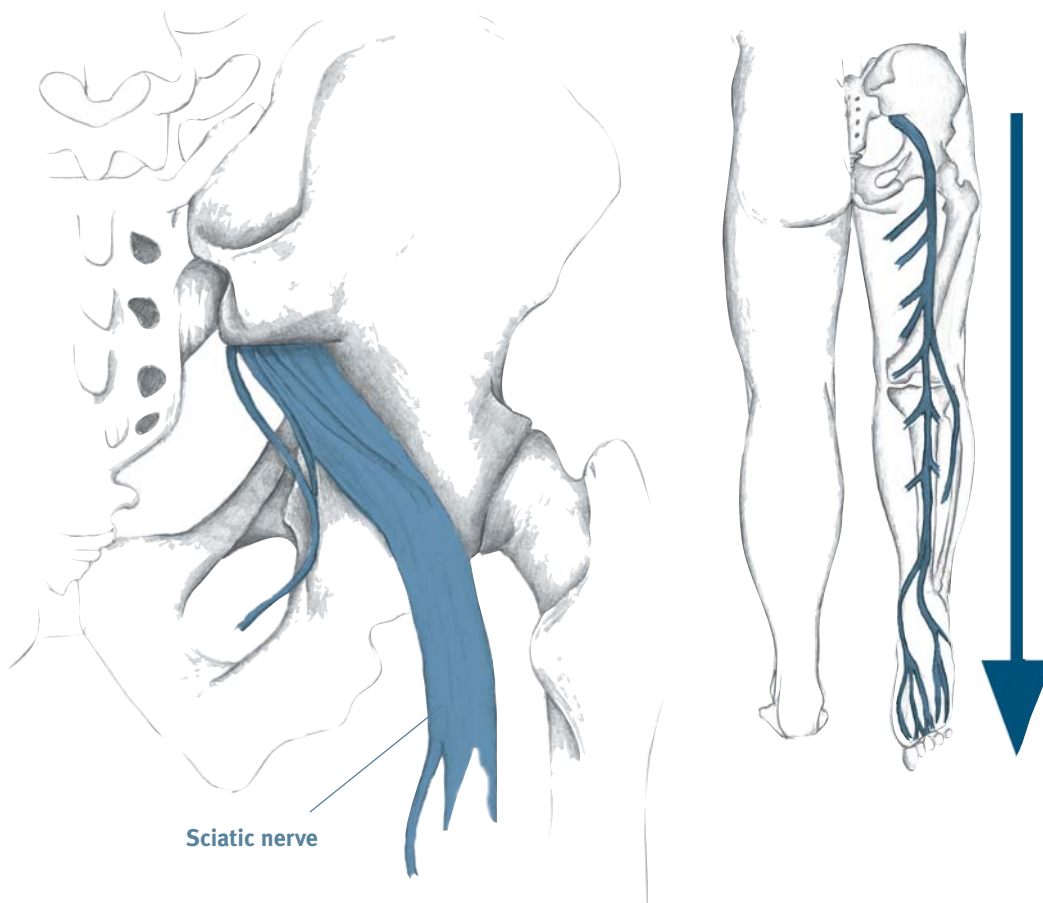


Figure 1-2. Pain that shoots or “radiates” down the leg is called sciatica. Sciatica is often due to irritation of one of the large nerves leading into the leg.

