Case Study: client with sciatica

Zoe Myall, MFHT, shares a case study that highlights how she helped to improve the quality of life of a 59-year-old male client with sciatica

My client first came to see me in August 2017, suffering from sciatica running down his right leg. He said it had begun in April of the same year. Pain had started in his hip and had then spread and now he was feeling it most of the time.

An MRI scan had shown three protruding discs in the lumbar region of his spine but he told me his specialist did not think this was enough ‘to cause the trouble’.

He had a forthcoming appointment with an NHS physio for the following week and explained he had previously suffered sciatica in his early 20s.

The NHS explains on its website that sciatica is ‘when the sciatic nerve, which runs from your hips to your feet, is irritated’.

‘Sciatica can be felt in the bottom (glutes), in the backs of the legs, feet or toes,’ it explains. And it says it may feel painful, like a ‘stabbing, burning or shooting pain, tingling, like pins and needles, or numb or weak’.

The website explains that sciatica can be accompanied by back pain. It says that this ‘usually isn’t as bad as the pain in the bottom, legs or feet’, and that symptoms are described as potentially being worse when moving, sneezing or coughing. However, it is advised not to sit or lie down for long as that can prevent recovery.
First treatment and assessment

In the first treatment with my client, I did an evaluation to see where pain could be felt. I performed gentle MFR (myofascial release) stretches to the back using no oil and worked with oil on both hamstrings. No pain was present when working into the glutes, so it didn’t appear that the piriformis muscle was causing the issue. However, tenderness was felt in the top of the right hamstrings and into the TFL (tensor fasciae latae) hip muscle.

There was also tightness in the backs of both knees on extension when I asked my client to perform an assisted lying supine hamstring stretch. I also found tightness in both quads and IT (iliotibial) bands. PIR (post-isometric relaxation) hamstring stretches were performed to try to help release the tension.

Follow-up treatment

My client returned two weeks later. He said the sciatica had felt ‘easier’ the day after the treatment. I worked into the tightness again in the right hamstrings and behind the knee. I also applied gentle pressure to the hamstring muscle above the knee while he was lying prone, then asked him to slowly lower his leg to help relax and stretch the muscle. He found this eased the tightness.

He later explained that four years previously he had ruptured the back of his right knee after a long-distance cycle ride (this was diagnosed via an MRI scan at the time). I wondered if this, perhaps, could be a contributing factor to the issue.

Being self-employed and spending a lot of time driving, the sciatica had begun to cause an issue for him when getting in and out of his van or putting socks, shoes or trousers on.

In between treatments with myself he had an NHS physio for a while, and then went to see a private physio, as well as trying acupuncture treatments. He was also under GP care and had been prescribed painkillers for the sciatica.

With his consent, I contacted his regular physio at the time, so that we could discuss his treatment plan and ensure we were working together to get the best results.
Breakthrough

During another early appointment with myself, I began examining his back further and found issues in the QL (quadratus lumbarum) on the right side, which seemed to be connected to the sciatic pain down his right leg. Upon working on the QL, the pain down his leg seemed to ease following treatments. I also investigated the base of his right foot where I found the fascia in the base of the foot was quite tight.

Working on the base of the foot eased the tightness in the fascia which in turn eased the sciatic pain.

I also advised my client of a number of back, hip and hamstring stretches which I felt could help and which he said considerably eased the tension and pain (see pictures below). The stretch that he found, in his case, eased his discomfort the most was the cat stretch.

In addition, I had tried Kinesio taping at one point to facilitate a section of the right hamstring muscle. I have had good results from using Kinesio taping with other clients and in other circumstances but in this case, the tape did not seem to make a difference.

On the seventh treatment with me, both myself and my client began to see some real improvement. He progressed to a point where he said the pain was at a 1 or 2 out of 10 most days and on some days he said he had no pain at all.

Conclusion

A year and a half on, my client now comes to see me once every 4-6 weeks to keep on top of the issue and to see how his quality of life has improved is fantastic. He barely has any issues with sciatica now. He used to play a lot of badminton which he sadly had to give up due to the sciatica. He tells me he is now ready to pick up his badminton racquet and play again which is very promising news.
Suggested stretches

Note: Hold all stretches for between 20-30 secs but build up to this slowly if you have any discomfort when stretching.

Cat stretch

This stretches the muscles in the back, particularly the latissimus dorsi and lower back. To do the stretch, start on your hands and knees. Keeping your hands in contact with the floor, slowly sit back onto your heels, keeping your arms extended and your head down, until you feel a stretch in your back.
**Taking the knee across the body**

Lie on your back and bend your left leg. Use your left hand on the outside of the left thigh to slowly take your left knee across your body until you feel a stretch in your hips and lower back. You can outstretch the opposite arm or keep it down alongside your body. Hold the stretch, then repeat on the other leg.

**Hip and lower back stretch (hugging knee to chest)**

Lying on your back, bend your left knee and then hug your knee into your chest. Hold the stretch, then repeat on the other leg.
**Hip, glute, and adductor stretch**

Lying on your back, bend both knees. Then, place your right ankle on your left thigh. This stretch is not comfortable for everyone so an alternative hip stretch could be taking your knee across your body instead (see above). Once you have placed your ankle on your thigh, take your right hand through the gap you have made and hold on behind your left thigh. Take your left hand on the outside of your left thigh and bring your left leg towards you until you feel the stretch. Hold, then repeat on the other leg. (Do not put pressure behind the knee).
Lying hamstring stretch

Bend both knees, then take your left leg in the air, extend the leg, and hold on behind the thigh (not the behind the knee), then bring your leg gently towards you until you feel a stretch. Hold, then repeat on the other leg. You can use a therapy band or scarf behind your leg to help bring the leg towards you if you cannot reach behind your leg.

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