



July 17, 2010 – Grand Rapids, MI

## Back Pain and Your Piriformis

“I threw out my back.”

“I have bulging discs.”

“I have lower back pain that shoots down my leg.”

I get those questions and more related to pain below the belt all the time, so it was very opportune that I was reminded of it by an article in a journal from the *American College of Sports Medicine* (1). In this message, I'll talk about what the piriformis muscle is, why it causes problems, and what you can do about it.

### Piriformis: A Pain in the Butt

Every runner and many walkers know about this muscle. If you get a sharp pain in your butt that seems to radiate down the back of your leg, it's most likely the piriformis causing the problem. This is a very small muscle deep in your hip that connects the top of your femur to your spine. If you rotate your thigh outward or move your leg sideways away from your body, the piriformis helps do that. It also lies on top of the sciatic nerve. In fact, in some people, including yours truly, the sciatic nerve runs through the piriformis muscle. I think you can anticipate the problem—if the piriformis spasms or swells up, it can pinch the sciatic nerve. And then you get pain.

The pain that results can be deep in your buttocks. It may also cause tingling to occur up your lower back, but mostly, you'll feel a pain that shoots down the back of your leg. Most people refer to it as sciatica. That's mostly true, but it isn't due to a bulging disc or weak lower-back muscles; it's due to this small muscle. By the time you write or call me, you're in a world of hurt.

The problem isn't so much the inflammation of the piriformis muscle—it's what it makes you do that's the problem. You'll try to push yourself through the pain, and that's okay, but if you don't relieve the pain with over-the-counter pain relievers, you'll change the way you move to compensate for it. Instead of walking or running upright, you'll start listing to the side of the pain. Before you know it, you're stooped one way or the other, and you've made the problem worse.

### The Solution

The solution requires two approaches. The first is to get the swelling and inflammation under control, and the second is to stretch that muscle to quit the spasming. Personally, I use ibuprofen as an anti-inflammatory and pain reliever to start with. Some people prefer not to use medications so in that case, using glucosamine, methylsulphonylmethane (MSM), and high-EPA fish oil can help reduce the inflammation as well. That will only relieve the symptom. It doesn't fix the problem.

To fix the problem, you have to stretch the piriformis muscle. This one is fairly easy—you can do it sitting down. Sit in a straight-backed chair with both feet on the ground. Take your right foot and place it on your left knee; if you viewed it from above, it would look like a figure 4. What if you can't get your foot on top of your knee because you're not flexible enough? Cross it anywhere along the lower leg that works—even if you just cross your ankles. Then slowly lean forward until you feel the stretch in your butt and lower back. No bouncing! Just lean forward and hold for 15 to 30 seconds. Then using your hands, push your upper body upright. That relieves the pressure on your lower back. Repeat with the other foot and knee. Do that two or three times a day, gently but firmly. That

will loosen up that piriformis muscle as well as stretch your lower back. I've given people the directions over the phone, and they could feel it immediately.

But you're still not done. You don't have to do it immediately—you can wait until the pain is controlled—but you have to work on stretching the hamstrings, the quads, and then strengthening your core muscles. Your lower back health is directly related to your core. You ignore it and you'll pay, especially if you sit in front of a computer screen slouching as too many of us do.

What if it doesn't seem to work and you still have a pain in the butt? You'll have to find a physical therapist or chiropractor who is certified in Active Release Techniques, a deep-tissue massage. My chiropractor in Grand Rapids, Eric Lambert of Discover Chiropractic, is certified in ART. It wasn't pleasant, but he broke up the connective tissue enough so that the nerve is no longer attached with scar tissue to the muscle. And I keep stretching, so it's no longer a problem.

## Heart Health Webinar

There are still spaces available in both the Sunday and Wednesday webinars on *Heart Health*. Here's what I'm going to cover:

- The Heart – Functional Anatomy
- What Happens During a Heart Attack
- Elevated Cholesterol
- Decreased HDL-Cholesterol
- High Blood Pressure
- Congestive Heart Failure
- Arrhythmia
- Mitral Valve Prolapse

For each condition, I'm going to give you lifestyle approaches, including diet, exercise, and supplementation. We all have a heart and if it stops, so do we. This is one webinar you don't want to miss.

## The Bottom Line

Sometimes the smallest things can have a major impact on our lives. The piriformis is just a small muscle, but it can have a major impact on your ability to move freely. Your heart is only the size of your fist, but if it isn't working properly, your quality of life is dramatically impacted. Take care of both, and you can meet each day physically ready for the challenges life presents.

What are you prepared to do today?

**Dr. Chet**

**Reference:** 1. ACSM Certified News. 2010; 20(2):5-6.

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