

Piriformis Syndrome

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Have you started to experience pain in your hip or down your leg while beginning or advancing your fitness program? This pain may be stemming from the piriformis muscle in your hip. This muscle can cause local buttock pain or pain down your leg if it is irritating your sciatic nerve. One of the causes of this issue is overuse or sudden change in walking, running, or a lifting program. The best treatment for piriformis syndrome is stretching and strengthening of the hip musculature. Changes may also need to be made in your training regimen to take stress off of this muscle; however, good results can be achieved by simply implementing a good stretching and strengthening program. It is always a good idea to address any symptoms you might be having early on, the longer you wait the harder it is to resolve the problem.

Common Causes

The piriformis muscle is a small muscle in the hip that runs from the sacrum to the outer hip bone. If the piriformis muscle becomes tight or cramps, it can put pressure on the sciatic nerve, resulting in pain in the buttock or down the leg (sciatica). Typically, the pain increases when the muscle contracts, when sitting for an extended time, or with direct pressure on the muscle.

Shortening of the muscle and compression of the nerve is the most common cause of piriformis syndrome, but overuse of the gluteal and other muscles in the hip can also cause muscle spasms of the piriformis. Other factors of this syndrome include: poor body mechanics and poor alignment of lower extremities (foot, ankle, and knee).

Stretching and Strengthening

Stretching and strengthening are the best treatments for piriformis syndrome. This muscle rarely gets stretched, so a simple stretching routine can often work wonders. To stretch the right piriformis: lay on your back, bend knees and cross your right leg over your left so that your right ankle rests on your left knee in a figure four position. Bring your left leg towards your chest by bending at the hip. Reach through and grab your left thigh to help pull your left knee towards your chest. Holding this stretch for a minimum of 30 seconds and repeating for 3 repetitions per day should be enough to get you started. If possible stretch the muscle while it is warmed up.

It is also important to make sure you are flexible throughout your lower extremities to relieve some of the biomechanical stress that may be placed on your hip musculature. Some of the

important muscles to stretch would be the hamstrings, quadriceps, gastrocnemius and soleus muscles. Deep tissue foam rolling is also a very good option to reduce fibrotic patterns in these muscles which can lead to dysfunction.

Making sure you are strong in the appropriate musculature to take the biomechanical strain off of your hip muscles is also very important. The best way to strengthen this musculature is by performing closed chain (feet on the ground) exercises concentrating on keeping the proper form. Some examples of these exercises include: squats, lunges, and step downs. When starting a strengthening program it is important to have someone assess your form so you do not aggravate other issues. Starting with 2-3 sets of 10-15 repetitions of each strengthening exercises 3 times per week should be enough to get you started.

Another issue that may need to be addressed with piriformis syndrome is your biomechanics. Sometimes proper footwear, inserts or orthotics can make a huge difference on the forces at your hip. Along these lines proper training is also important, as mentioned before, overuse is one of the major causes of this syndrome and getting guidance for proper training is a piece you do not want to leave out.

Physical therapists are trained to diagnose and treat your condition. I would encourage you to talk to a PT if you think you are dealing with piriformis syndrome so the correct diagnosis can be applied and the correct treatment can be prescribed.