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A tennis ball to help pain? Believe it or not, it works

By **Steve Cunningham**
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A common type of muscular-skeletal pain is Piriformis Syndrome, better known as "pseudo" sciatica.

In cases of piriformis syndrome (pronounced pir- i-form-is) the piriformis muscle pinches the sciatic nerve that runs deep within the buttocks resulting in numbness or sharp-tingling pain sensations along the nerve pathway.

These sciatic nerve sensations can extend into the buttocks and continue downward to the back of the leg and possibly to the outside of the foot. Piriformis syndrome is sometimes confused with "true" sciatica, which is caused by disk herniation in the lower lumbar region of the spine. There is some evidence that true sciatica is less common than piriformis syndrome, but because they share similar symptoms, your doctor may suggest imaging tests to help distinguish between these two conditions.

The first sign of piriformis syndrome can be pain or a feeling of heaviness or tightness in and around the outer hipbone or in the center of the buttocks. As the condition worsens, sharp pain and discomfort can radiate from the buttock down the leg. The frequency of pain and the severity of discomfort vary from person to person.

Repetitive activity such as running or walking can aggravate the piriformis. The condition is common in runners and walkers. It also occurs in individuals who sit in front of their computers for extended periods of time. Driving a car for long periods of time can also aggravate the condition and even a short commute to work can be torment.

Proper stretching before and after exercise as well as adequate recovery time between workouts will help prevent sciatica nerve entrapment. If you find yourself sitting for extended periods of time, it is helpful to get up and take short walking breaks every 20 minutes. Adding yoga to your routine can help and, in addition, give you a sense of focus and relaxation. You may also want to try massage therapy, acupuncture, or physical therapy which are often helpful and effective for piriformis syndrome.

One self-help technique can be performed at home with a tennis ball.

Believe it or not, those old tennis balls you have lying around the in the basement can be a very useful effective self-care tool to aid in prevention and management of piriformis syndrome.

To use the tennis ball technique, you should lie down on your back with your knees slightly bent (in a 30 to 45-degree angle) with you're feet planted comfortably on the floor. Next, place the tennis ball under your buttock area slightly on the inside of your outer hipbone. Gently relax into the tennis ball remembering to take deep relaxing breaths. You should experience mild to moderate discomfort, which is a sign that you are doing it correctly.

The discomfort means that you are releasing trigger points that are pockets of tension and toxic build-up in the muscle. By activating these trigger points in the muscle with the pressure of the tennis ball you are

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allowing fresh blood and nutrients back in to the muscle. If you do not experience any sensitive areas of tension under the ball, try slight movements of the tennis ball in different areas until you find one of the several tender areas. Take care not to let the tennis ball move under your spine or tail bone.

Once you have found a trigger point, continue to relax and let the ball do its work under each spot for 15 to 20 seconds. You can take short breaks and repeat four or five times. Daily use of this tennis ball exercise is most helpful. When you have the hang of this, you can try a modification to this self-care exercise. With your feet planted on the floor, slowly move your knee and leg to the outside of the floor with the ball in place and pause for a few seconds. Then can slowly return your leg to its starting place. Repeat this variation for two to four minutes taking breaks when necessary. Always use the tennis ball on the opposite side to balance out the other piriformis muscle. Again, you should expect to experience some mild to moderate discomfort, which means that you are in the right area.

If you experience severe pain, try using a more gentle approach with the ball. If severe pain continues, it is a good idea to consult your medical doctor or health care provider to rule out other conditions before continuing with this exercise.

The good news is that with a little persistence following the self care tennis ball exercise, piriformis syndrome can be greatly alleviated.

Steve Cunningham is a certified and licensed muscular therapist and bodyworker and practices at the Center for Acupuncture, 1646 Massachusetts Avenue in Lexington Center, MA. Steve specializes in myofascial pain and sports-related injuries. For more information, please email: fascial_worker@earthlink.net.

Health Disclaimer: Any information about the condition and treatment of myofascial pain or injuries is not intended to be a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Consulting your physician or medical health provider is always recommended.

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