Sciatica in Winter: Does Cold Weather Make Back and Leg Symptoms Worse?

Written by Richard D. Guyer, MD [1]

If you live anywhere there is winter, you know that the cold can feel like it is seeping into your bones. Do cold temperatures really make your sciatica worse?

Most people with sciatica say firmly that winter makes it worse. But is that just anecdotal or are there solid reasons why your sciatica acts up when the mercury goes down?

About Sciatica
Sciatica [3], a type of radiculopathy, is caused by compression of one or more of the five sets of nerve roots in your lower back; the lumbar region of your spine. These nerves run from the lower spine down under your buttock and then down through each hip into your legs. Several conditions can compress these nerves at one or more spots along the way leading to pain, numbness, or weakness in the lower back, buttock(s), or leg(s) on one or both sides.

Results of a Large Research Study
Cold weather can affect sciatica because it affects many types of pain. A large study conducted in Sweden and published in the International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health surveyed almost 135,000 male construction workers.¹ The researchers found that the men who worked in low temperatures reported higher incidences of neck and low back pain compared with those working in higher temperatures. A similar survey in Finland produced the same findings.²

Weather Changes and the Spine
Discomfort may increase because your muscles stiffen up in the cold. The spine's muscles may become tight and tense. Added tension can make the pain worse and may increase your risk of a muscle strain or a sprain.

- **Barometric Pressure**
  Air pressure drops before a storm or when the temperature changes drastically. These changes affect the nerves of the lower back that may already be overly sensitive.

- **Physical Stress**
  While you may not be into downhill skiing, you may have to shovel the snow in your driveway and shoveling can wreak havoc on even a healthy spine. Alternatively, maybe you need to haul a bag of rock salt or sand or help push a car out of a snow drift. There is also the chance that you could slip on an icy walk and twist your back, or worse, fall.

So if you live where there is a cold winter, what can you do to reduce sciatic pain?

**Keep Warm**

- Wear warm clothing and dress in layers. A few thin layers of clothes can keep you warmer than a single thick layer.
- Keep your lower back warm. Tuck your shirt into your pants to make sure that your back doesn't get a cold draft when you reach for something and then put a sweater on over that.
- At night, a couple of blankets or an electric blanket on your bed can help keep your muscles from tightening.
- Keep your home as warm as you can.
- Run your car for a few minutes to preheat it before you drive.


**Wear Good Shoes or Boots**

- Your winter footwear should have treads to help prevent slips and falls. You could buy a set of cleats that can fit over your shoes for surefooted walking in icy weather.

**Stretch:** Before you go out to shovel the walk, loosen your muscles and joints. Take a few minutes to stretch [4] and to warm up inside before you go outside.

- **Do It the Right Way:** If you shovel snow, go slowly and don't overload your shovel. Lift with your legs, not your back and move smaller shovelfuls of snow rather than one or two big heavy ones. Don't twist your back while lifting the shovel. Face the direction you are going to throw the snow.
- **Ask for Help:** If sciatica is bothering you, ask someone else to do the shoveling.

**Keep Active:** Winter is the time when you want to stay on the couch, but keeping in shape is the best way to help your sciatica. Try not to gain weight during winter and try to keep up with your exercise program.

---

**Footnotes:**

**References:**


---

**Source URL:** http://www.spineuniverse.com/conditions/sciatica/sciatica-winter-does-cold-weather-make-back-leg-symptoms-worse

**Links:**