# "Sciatica left me almost disabled"

**After years of pain from slipped discs and sciatica Joanna Barrett, 46, from Brighton, discovered a non-invasive cure**

Three years ago I was lugging our very large cat to the vet. It was a long walk with the basket and his two stone weight pulling on one side. At home that evening, my back was in agony. Suddenly, I couldn't move an inch.

My husband, Errol, called an ambulance and paramedics gave me morphine before shipping me off to hospital. Doctors said I'd undoubtedly slipped a disc and had classic sciatica, with numbness down one leg and pins and needles in my toes. My spine was bent like the letter S where the discs had slipped out and my right hip was higher than my left.

For five days I lay flat on my back, while being pumped with anti-inflammatories. It was embarrassing, as I couldn't even go to the bathroom – I hated losing that dignity – and was frightened, not knowing when or if my back would get better. Doctors said they'd discharge me once I could get to my bathroom. Keen to be home, with the help of sticks I yelped and winced to the bathroom, then was discharged with a Zimmer frame, two sticks and an appointment to see a physiotherapist in six weeks' time. It seemed an unbelievably long wait.

I felt I'd aged 40 years overnight. I needed to get out and about for my work as a property developer, but I could barely move. Luckily, we have an en-suite bathroom within crawling distance, so I stayed in the bedroom for six weeks, on painkillers, waiting for my physio appointment. When I finally got there, it seemed pretty basic. I was given stretches, which I could just about do, but after six sessions I still couldn't stand for more than 10 minutes or walk 50 yards without being in agony.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

*The sciatic nerve measures approximately the diameter of a finger*

I decided to see an osteopath. She insisted on an MRI scan to see the exact damage, which was two slipped discs. I saw her twice weekly for a few months but was no better. So for 12 months I tried allowing my back to heal itself.

Simple things like making the bed or doing the laundry were out and I had to swap to internet food shopping as I couldn't carry anything, walk far, drive or even be a passenger for long. My whole life had changed. I now felt depressed, anxious, vulnerable and fearful about if I'd ever get better.

My GP suggested that I see an orthopaedic surgeon and consider spinal surgery. The thought of having an operation on my back horrified me, but I attended the consultation clutching my MRI scan and told the surgeon my history. He explained that nine in ten people who slip discs recover – but one in ten don't. I was that one in ten. He said I needed surgery to remove both discs then fuse the spine or I'd never get any better. He couldn't guarantee a completely pain-free life afterwards, but felt there was a good chance. Of course, I was terrified.

Errol suggested seeking another opinion from an osteopath he'd seen at the Sussex Back Pain Clinic. I'd seen one osteopath without much success, but I agreed to see one more before committing to surgery. This time, the osteopath told me about a new American machine he was using, IDD therapy (Intervertebral Differential Dynamics therapy). Information about it on the internet sounded amazing, but my health insurers wouldn't cover the cost, so I paid £1,500 for the six weeks of treatment, once every other day, tapering down to twice weekly.

The principle of IDD therapy is like old-fashioned traction, but whereas that stretches the entire spine, causing a inflammatory response, this precisely targets damaged areas. Stretching the damaged area causes a vacuum, and the two things combined allow space for discs to be sucked back into place, while the increased blood circulation and oxygen to the area starts healing it. The machine consists of a bed you're strapped into with a computer at one end. The operator programmes in height, gender, weight and the discs to be targeted. Once strapped in, I could feel my spine being stretched – rather a nice feeling, because the trapped nerves were released. After each session I sat for 20 minutes with an ice pack on my back to 'set' the work.

After the first few sessions I had a few flare-ups and told the operator that maybe I'd need surgery after all. He explained that a little inflammation is normal – and added that if I needed surgery, he would eat his trainers with a knife and fork! Halfway through treatment my back greatly improved and I could easily manage the 5-10 minutes of daily exercises to stretch my back and strengthen my abdominal muscles.

The effects of IDD therapy are cumulative and you carry on healing even after treatment is over, but I was warned not to attempt jogging or aerobics, and to be posture aware. Boy, was I aware! Even though I was finally pain-free and able to move, I was nervous of walking, moving or picking things up.

Unless you've had a back problem, you take for granted simple things like filling a kettle, but with slipped discs you're hyper aware – the smallest things can put you back to square one. I was told that two years after IDD, I should be 100 per cent better. I'm just a few months off that now and loving the freedom of being able to make my own bed, go to the shops, sit for car journeys or just take a long walk. I am far more careful with my back now though, and ensure I lift things correctly – no lifting and twisting, and certainly no carrying the cat!

As told to Gill Cox Photos Sciencephotolibrary.com

## Sciatica – THE FACTS

### What is it?

The sciatic nerve is the body's largest, running from the base of the spine down the back of the thigh to the knee where it divides into branches. Sciatica usually only affects one leg, causing pain in the buttock, down the back of the leg right into the foot. As well as pain, sciatica can cause numbness, tingling and muscle weakness in the affected leg and may be accompanied by low back pain.

### What causes it?

Pressure on the nerve, most often caused by a prolapsed disc in the lumbar region (lower back). It can also be caused by conditions such as osteoarthritis. If there's loss of sensation around the buttocks and genitals, weakness in the leg and foot or difficulty with the bladder or bowel, this requires urgent medical attention as it can be caused by a rare condition known as cauda equina syndrome.

### What's the treatment?

Often the problem rights itself within six weeks. GPs can offer referral to a physiotherapist, painkillers and anti-inflammatory drugs. If those fail to solve the problem, spinal surgery may be suggested. Osteopathy is occasionally available on the NHS, but usually people have to pay. IDD therapy is currently only available from a few UK osteopaths. Joanna was treated by the Sussex Back Pain Clinic (sussexbackpainclinic.co.uk, 01273 725667).