

The Telegraph

My bouts of sciatica drove me to despair. Here's how I finally cured it

After years of chronic back pain, these four exercises have transformed my health



Zoe is in the unlucky 5 per cent with chronic lower back pain and intermittent sciatic pain Credit: Andrew Crowley for The Telegraph



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The beginning of the worst lower back trouble of my life - the most chronic, dispiriting, obstinate discomfort; the first real taste in my bones of middle and old age - began roughly six months into my pregnancy. I was 41. At the time, I attributed it to having to sleep on my side: pregnant women are told this reduces risk of stillbirth. But as time wore on, the baby was born, and life resumed its normal levels of activity, my lower back went from bad to worse.

Struggling with pain

At previous junctures, I had struggled with lower back pain but a week of bum-lifting exercises, plus plenty of walking, had sent it packing. But over the past year, with the pain focused in the lower left of my back, nothing has shifted it. I am no slouch. My average daily steps before, during and - once I recovered from my C-section - after pregnancy come to more than 10,000. Many weeks see a daily norm of around 13,000 steps, which is about six miles. I walk up numerous hills most days, now often while pushing a buggy. I swim in the often freezing waters of the Hampstead Heath ladies' pond year-round three or so times a week and have done so for a decade.

And yet there I found myself, desperate to find relief as I lay in bed, exhausted. It's bad enough, at any time, not being able to get comfortable enough to sleep, constantly jabbed and nagged at by a pain whose cause you cannot locate and therefore relieve. But with a new baby, snatching sleep when you can is vital. Not to be able to get comfortable when sleep is so desperately needed, no matter how many pillows are squeezed

between your knees, or ice packs taken from the freezer, is the stuff of nightmares and despair. In the end, between ice, Voltigel (painkiller gel) and more ibuprofen than is recommended, I would get to sleep and wake up feeling pain-free.

Wear and tear on my back

This would last until I had my first proper sit of the day, either with the baby, inevitably hunching over her to feed, or with my laptop, as I didn't take any time off from work. I'd feel like I'd just climbed Everest, with a feeling of painful wear and tear that made me feel miserably old at 42. And then would begin my cycle of stretching, standing, walking - slight relief - then sitting again, which would last in various forms, albeit punctuated by at least one long walk, all day. But even that walk wasn't entirely pain-free, as the back pain from earlier translated into a feeling of stiffness.

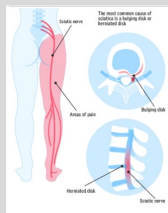
Sometimes, this infernal ache in the lower left of my back spreads beyond that area, into the sciatic nerve. That sharp electric pain then fires down my buttock and into the front of my thighs. If the ache of a useless lower back is bad enough, the piercing discomfort of sciatica - an umbrella term for referred pain from a pinched sciatic nerve - is insanity-making.

My desperation to find a cure I was desperate. Nothing I did was working: not the exercises I remembered from previous physio for a shoddy lower back, and not the numerous deep tissue massages that were taking such a chunk out of my bank account.

The usual way to treat lower back pain is to stretch the hip flexors and strengthen the glutes, which are meant to bear the brunt of the weight of your body, not your back. And, of course, to lose weight. These measures work for most causes of back pain, but not, this time, for me (dramatic weight loss, which might well help, still feels impossible). I needed to do something else. Lower back pain is incredibly common. In the United Kingdom, 60-80 per cent of people will experience lower back pain at some point; those who experience it severely as a chronic condition are around 5 per cent, according to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). Much of this is caused by stagnant lifestyles and poor posture. Tens of millions of working days are lost due to back pain.

Sciatic nerve pain

Many people experience the feeling of sciatic nerve pain, but long-term sciatica caused by the pinching or irritation of the sciatic nerve as it leaves the spinal cord affects around 5 per cent of people with back pain. Clearly, I am in the unlucky 5 per cent with chronic lower back pain and intermittent sciatic pain.



Crucially, treating my issues as localised, short-term effects of hunching or sitting does not work. Nor do sloppy home-based exercises. In the end, it was a massage therapist who came to the rescue.

A boot camp for your back

She pointed me in the direction of Hazel Amper, of the Amper Lab in Primrose Hill, north London, which runs a boot camp of intensive strengthening of the core and glutes, along with - as I would soon find out - an emphasis on retraining the brain to use the right muscles in walking, sitting, standing and exercising. The Lab is a tiny outfit with just three Reformer Pilates machines, overseen by the luminous, energetic physiotherapist Hazel and a single colleague, a truly lovely young woman called Akata Sud, whose job is to take clients through the boot camp.

Hazel's boot camp idea is this: people come in pain, and despair, and after 10 sessions (which cost from £600) are different people. Pain is gone, the right muscles have been woken up and, crucially, thanks to "neurological retraining", they keep being used instead of the wrong ones. Her success is famous the district over, and her lab is a constant do-si-do of people from children to the elderly grateful not to have to rely on doing exercises at home.

Relief at last

Hazel gave me a once-over and as she kneaded my back, she explained that the causes of back pain are nurture, nature or both (as in my case). With nature: the structure of the spine is not quite right. There's hypermobility, or one leg is longer than the other.

Pregnancy, menopause...

All that creates a spine without enough

"Nurture is sitting all day - when you're sitting, you can't use other muscles, especially glutes. You can only use the glutes when the leg is behind you, but by the time you start walking, they've turned off, and what gets activated instead are front thigh muscles and lower back. "Bad posture, stress and tension, anything that takes you into flexion - this is nurture.

What we want is for you to straighten up." I had told her I try to stand up straight and I had told her I try to stand up straight and I walk a huge amount every day. She could see that was true in my superficially upright posture and my rock-hard calves. After examining me, she said that the source of my woes was my hypermobility: a bendiness defined by joints that "don't quite know what they're doing".

Why some of us are more prone to back pain

Unfortunately I was born this way. I never crawled; just went straight to walking. My core and glutes have always played second fiddle to my bendy, swaying hips and lock-prone, knocking knees. My weight has always been lugged by the wrong muscles - especially in the hamstrings and calves - and the result is that my glutes almost don't work, producing devastating strain on my lower back. It's not just the muscles; the whole area has been compressed by years of bad posture and over-adjustment for weak core and glutes, Hazel explains.

The added downward drag of extra belly weight, made much worse by the baby, has further

reduced the space in which the vertebrae of the lower back can operate, making bulging discs more likely.

On top of this, Hazel explained that my bouts of sciatica had been years in the making. "In the beginning, it might be, 'Oh, got a bit of a tight muscle in my back?

But by then, the shape of the spine had already changed. You might get an exaggerated curve in the lower back, which squashes the space. The tummy starts sticking out. The muscles at either side of the spine get shorter, the thigh muscles get tighter and the muscles at the front of the tummy and bum get weaker. There's tightness down the front of the thigh. All this compresses the lower back even more, the space gets smaller, and eventually, the structures inside the spine get affected, which can be seen as a permanent fixture on the X-ray."

Breaking the cycle of doom

This is what Hazel and I refer to as the "cycle of doom" responsible for my chronic back pain.

"When the core and glutes are activated, you don't need to use all the other areas. If they aren't, you'll be trying to stabilise yourself using the wrong muscles. So you will have a tight neck, tight jaw, tennis elbow, tight lower back, tight thighs, knee pain, plantar fasciitis [pain on the ball of the foot]... loads of 'itises. Then the brain starts to see this as normal and configures you wrong. It means you get used to walking in that way and always activate the

wrong muscles. The weakness and tightness continue, the neurology keeping the magic alive, making a habit of it."

A few weeks in, this causes soft-tissue injuries, but years in, "You're looking at arthritis, inflammation, bone rubbing on bone." Any of these can cause spasms in the surrounding muscles, similar to the ones that kept attacking me at night.

Learning to stretch

Kat and I get to work, with short 30-minute sessions beginning with deep thigh and side stretches, and then focusing on core activation and glutes. We always began with a few deep breaths followed by a clenching of my insides, as if holding in wee, and the instruction to zip my core in towards my back. We did 30-second planks. I had improvement in core strength within days. The glutes were worked through one- and two-legged bridges, pushing back against the Reformer Pilates machine, and a range of other glute-pushing exercises using the stirrups on the machine, set to gradually heavier weights.

My goal was to be able to sit through a forthcoming transatlantic flight to Boston with the baby on me without being in hell. This was achieved. But soon after I landed, the pain returned. Without the near-daily routine on the Reformer Pilates under supervision, my brain and muscles fell back into decades-old habits.

Usually, the boot camp is followed immediately by top-ups to keep it all going properly until the patient is ready to sustain their new posture. Hazel says that 95 per cent of patients find their pain sorted permanently this way. In my case, the timing of my trip was fatal. So when I returned to London, I limped back to Hazel, who, exceptionally, put me on to a second round of boot camp.

The pain hasn't receded as fast this time and it has become clear how severely my hypermobility, combined with those old habits of walking with locked knees, my chin poking out first while I walk, my core utterly unengaged and my glutes asleep, have damaged my back.

The verdict

In the three months since the first boot camp, my core has remained strong. The problem is my glutes and posture, and that is where we have zeroed in. I love lying on the Reformer Pilates machine, my heels on the bar, and pushing or lifting. "Squeeeeeeze those glutes!" urges Kat, until I quiver, and it works. I also love the loops I do with my feet in stirrups lying on my side - these are instant glute-quiverers. I have learnt this: no quiver, no relief. It is amazing how badly the body wants to fight effort, especially in bits of it that have been dormant for years.

At home without a Reformer I also have a daily routine for working the glutes and core: a series of simple cat-cow

stretches to loosen up the back before leaning against the wall with my back up pressed against it and legs in squat position, sucking in my lower abdomen. This is a good double whammy: tiring on the glutes and the core.

I hold this for two minutes. I also like to lie on my back, bend a knee and cross it over the other, hook my hands under the thigh connected to the foot on the floor, and pull.

This is delicious agony for hamstrings that, when too tight and not working properly, puts added strain on the back. Then it's both knees up and feet on the floor for a series of low bridges, which is where you mimic the glute quivering enabled by the machine's loops. And I always do a plank, with elbows on the floor.

So if like with me your lower back woes stem from weakness in glutes first, and core second, then there are good ways you can target these without access to a Reformer Pilates machine - though most towns now have studios with the machines and I strongly recommend classes that use them for hardcore strengthening of core and bum.

Here are four exercises that will boot up your glutes and provide relief to your lower back. On top of that, learning to walk properly is key. Remember: chin in, then it's tummy, pelvis, and soft heel that rolls out. Practice may not make perfect but it sure can help.