

MEDICINE

This simple stretch is your DIY way to relieve back pain

By Barbara Hoffman

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Flossing your nerves? If it sounds like a stretch, well, it is. An exercise you can subtly do at your desk, where most of us are marooned these days, is an effective way to ease sciatica and other pains triggered by nerves that bunch up or get caught on muscle or scar tissue.

"Basically, when a nerve gets entrapped, it can swell," says physiatrist Jason W. Siefferman, MD, director of pain medicine at the **NYU School of Medicine**. Nerve flossing, also known as gliding, uses slow, repeated movements to free up the nerve and stretch it, making it more resilient and easing discomfort.



Physical therapist Daniel Fleck demonstrates the gentle flex-and-point motions that make up nerve flossing and help treat sciatica and hamstring pain.

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"It's kind of like stretching a muscle," Siefferman says. "As part of a comprehensive plan, it can be a very helpful technique."

Daniel Fleck, a physical therapist at Manhattan's **High Performance PT** office, says his patients benefit from the technique, whether they're suffering from sciatica, carpal tunnel syndrome or hamstring injuries.

For leg pain, he has patients sit down and, stretching out one leg at a time, slowly point their toes while bending their heads in the same downward direction. Then they'll switch, flexing their toes and, at the

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same time, bending their heads back. This should be repeated, slowly, 10 times, once a day.

"Most physical therapists use [flossing], and if not, shame on them," Fleck says. "Just as we stretch our muscles, we need to mobilize the nerves."

At no point, he and Siefferman say, should these movements be painful. Nor is nerve flossing recommended for people with spinal injuries or malignant tumors. As with any new program, check with a medical professional first to see if it's right for you.

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