



# SCIATICA



Sciatica has been described in medical texts for centuries, yet it remains one of the most commonly misunderstood sources of pain. While early treatments were often crude, modern understanding now recognises sciatica as a complex interaction between the spine, nervous system, muscles, and lived experience. Today, integrative approaches that support both the body and nervous system offer a more compassionate and effective path toward relief.

## A NERVOUS SYSTEM PERSPECTIVE ON SCIATICA

While sciatica is often described in terms of muscles, discs, and posture, it is, at its core, a nervous system condition.

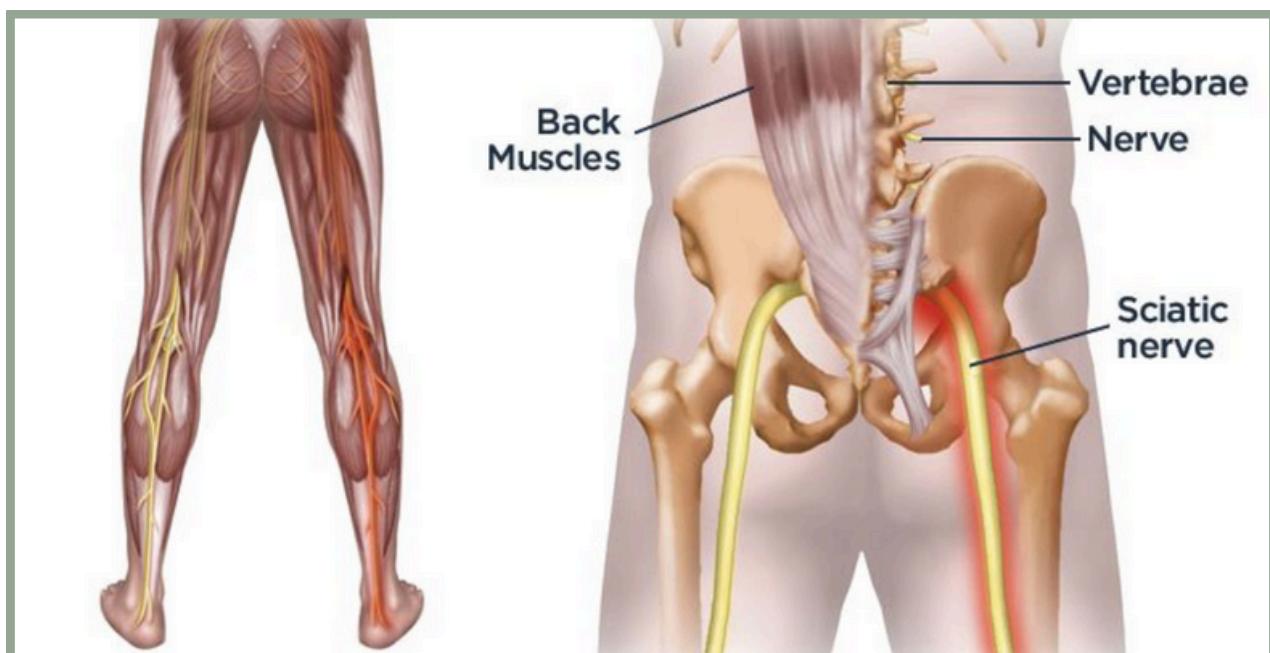
The sciatic nerve is part of an intelligent communication network that carries information between the brain, spinal cord, and lower body. When this pathway feels threatened — through compression, inflammation, prolonged tension, or emotional stress — the body may respond with pain, tingling, burning, or weakness as a protective signal, not a failure.

In many cases, the body is not “broken,” but responding protectively. Muscles tighten to protect vulnerable areas, posture adapts to avoid discomfort, and movement becomes cautious. Over time, these protective patterns can amplify symptoms, even when the original trigger has passed.

This is where nervous system-based approaches, such as Spinal Flow, can be profoundly supportive. By working gently with the spine and its gateways, Spinal Flow helps the nervous system feel safe enough to soften protective tension, restore communication along nerve pathways, and allow the body’s natural healing intelligence to emerge — without force.

Yoga and mindful movement then become more effective, supportive, and sustainable.

In 2005, the Journal of Neurosurgery: Spine estimated that more than 5 percent of the adult population in the modern world suffers from sciatica, and over a lifetime, an individual has a 40 percent probability of experiencing it. But here's the good news: in many cases, a mindful, targeted yoga practice can help you overcome the pain.



By definition, sciatica is tenderness and pain anywhere along the sciatic nerve, typically showing up on one side of the body.

There are two sciatic nerves—one for each leg. These are the longest nerves in the human body. Each originates from several nerve roots that exit from the spinal cord, then thread through apertures in your sacrum and merge to form the main body of the sciatic nerve. The sciatic nerve passes between layers of the deep buttock muscles (gluteus medius and gluteus maximus), through to the deep muscles of the back of the thigh, and then down through the outer edge of your leg to your foot.

## **BURNING AND TINGLING IN THE BACK OF THE THIGH ARE SIGNS OF SCIATICA.**

Sciatica often presents with a range of sensations that may fluctuate with posture, movement, and daily activities.

Symptoms can include:

- Pain anywhere along the sciatic nerve pathway: in the lower back, buttock, back of the thigh, and/or calf.
- Fatigue, numbness, or loss of feeling in your legs and/or feet.
- An electric, tingling, burning, pinching, or pins-and-needles feeling known as paresthesia.
- A weakness that can cause your knees to buckle when you stand up from sitting.
- Foot drop: a condition in which you are not able to flex your ankles enough to walk on your heels.
- Reduced reflexes in your Achilles tendon and knee.

### Find the Cause of Your Sciatica

The presence of sciatic pain often leads doctors to look for a herniated disk in the lumbar spine, which may be pressing against the sciatic nerve. This is a significant problem, and it's especially important to have your disks checked out by a doctor if you are experiencing pain in your mid-lower back, painful electric shocks down your sciatic nerve, and/or tingling, burning, weakness, or numbness in your legs or feet. These can be signs that an acute herniated disk is pinching the nerve, which is a bigger problem than sciatic pain alone.

Sciatica can also be influenced by a small but significant muscle deep within the hip – the piriformis. In many cases, this muscle becomes involved when the body is attempting to protect the sciatic nerve as it passes through the pelvis.

The piriformis is one of several deep hip rotators that assist with walking, stabilising the pelvis, and turning the thigh outward. Because of its close relationship to the sciatic nerve, tension or guarding in this muscle can contribute to nerve irritation, particularly when the body feels under strain, fatigued, or stressed.

Importantly, the piriformis is not always “tight” because it is short – it is often protective. When the nervous system perceives threat or instability, this muscle may contract to shield the nerve beneath it. In these cases, aggressive stretching can increase symptoms rather than relieve them.

This pattern is commonly referred to as piriformis syndrome.

## **WHEN SCIATICA INVOLVES THE LUMBAR SPINE**

The source of your sciatica is a herniated or bulging disk, a yoga practice that progresses from gentle poses to basic foundational asanas will align, lengthen, and strengthen your lower back. A herniated disk does not always require surgery, and yoga can help you manage and reduce the problems caused by the herniation, sometimes reducing symptoms associated with the herniation.

## **HOW TO TELL IF THE PIRIFORMIS MAY BE INVOLVED**

You may notice some of the following patterns if the piriformis is contributing to sciatic discomfort:

- A burning, tingling, or pins-and-needles sensation along the back of the thigh, calf, or outer edge of the foot
- Discomfort that increases with prolonged sitting and eases slightly with standing or gentle movementSensations that travel toward the heel or toes
- Difficulty walking comfortably on heels or toes
- A feeling of deep tightness or aching in the buttock or hip region

These signs can overlap with spinal causes of sciatica. If symptoms are persistent, worsening, or accompanied by increasing weakness

or numbness, medical assessment is recommended. For this reason, supporting nervous system regulation is often as important as addressing the muscle itself.

## **BEFORE YOU BEGIN: AN IMPORTANT NOTE ON SAFETY**

When working with piriformis-related sciatica, the goal is not to force release, but to invite softening through safety.

Stretching and strengthening can be helpful, but only when the nervous system feels safe. For some bodies, diving straight into stretches — especially deep hip openers or strong twists — can aggravate symptoms rather than relieve them.

Pain is not a sign to push through. It is a signal to slow down, soften, and listen.

If you are experiencing acute pain, sharp nerve sensations, increasing numbness, weakness, or changes in bladder or bowel control, please consult a medical professional before practicing yoga or any movement therapy.

Many people find that beginning with Spinal Flow sessions, breath awareness, rest, or very gentle movements allows the spine and nervous system to settle first. From this place of regulation, yoga postures can then be approached with greater ease, effectiveness, and safety.

Always move slowly. Pause often. If any posture increases pain or nerve symptoms, come out immediately and rest.

Your body knows the way — it does not need to be forced.

## THE BASIC PIRIFORMIS STRETCH: HALF SPINAL TWIST

A gentle half spinal twist (ardha matsyendrasana) can offer a mild stretch to the piriformis and surrounding hip muscles when approached slowly and with awareness.

Rather than seeking depth, allow the posture to be supportive and contained. Use props generously, and adjust the position so there is no sharp pain, nerve sensation, or pulling down the leg.

Remain in the pose for several slow breaths, or longer if it feels useful and steady. If symptoms increase at any point, gently come out of the posture and rest.



How can you tell if the problem originates in the piriformis?

Here are a few indicators:

- Pain and a pins-and-needles sensation down the outside of your calf to the web space between the little and fourth toes.
- Difficulty walking on your heels or on your toes.
- Burning in the back of your thigh and calf down to your heel, with stiffness in your legs. (Note: In some cases this can signal a problem in the spine instead of the piriformis.)
- Pain from sitting, accompanied by a tingling sensation at the back of your thigh. The pain may be relieved by standing, but you still experience numbness in all of your toes even when standing.

- Buttock and sciatic pain from exercising or sitting for long periods of time, with or without sensations of numbness, weakness, or tingling. While the pain may appear during standing activities, it gets worse when you sit down.

Stretching the piriformis too strongly can aggravate sciatic pain. Progress gradually over time, allowing the nervous system to relax before expecting the muscle to release.

If the source of your sciatica is pressure on the nerve due to a short, tight piriformis, focus on stretching this muscle. Your approach should be gentle and progressive, since overworking the piriformis may lead to spasms and deep buttock pain, which may or may not, be accompanied by sciatic pain.

## PREP FOR SPINAL TWIST

Sit on the corner of a folded blanket with your knees bent and your feet on the floor in front of you. Take your right foot under your left knee and around to the outside of your left hip. Your right knee should point straight forward.



For the mildest hip stretch, place your left foot on the floor to the inside of your right knee, so that the left foot is roughly in line with your left hip; for a stronger stretch, place your left foot to the outside of your right knee. It's likely that your left sit bone is now lighter on the floor than your right. Lean onto your left sit bone to balance the weight between the two hips; this is the beginning of the stretch.

Steady yourself by holding your left knee with your hands, and from this balanced foundation, inhale and lengthen upward through your spine. If the stretch is too intense or if you feel pain radiating down your leg, increase the height of the padding under your hips until the stretch is tolerable.

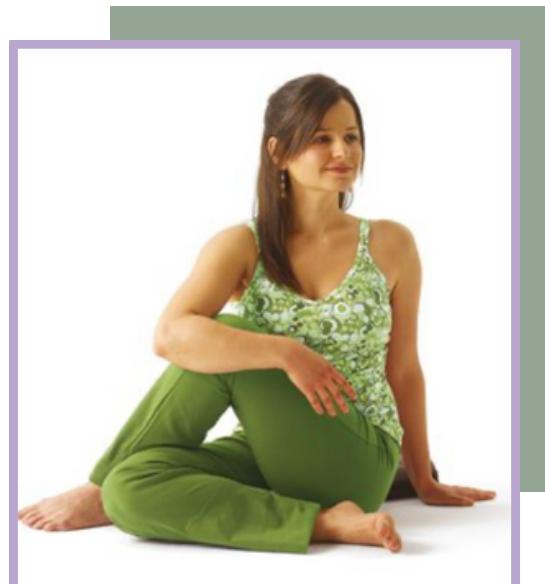
If you don't feel a stretch in your left hip, gently pull your left knee across the midline of your body toward the right side of your chest, keeping your sit bones equally grounded, and resist your thigh slightly against the pull of your hands. This action will help keep your sit bone grounded and increase the stretch to the piriformis.

Remain for several slow, steady breaths, or longer if it feels supportive. Stay for a few calm breaths, listening closely to your body. As your piriformis muscles stretch out over time, gradually decrease the height of your blankets until you can sit on the floor.

## SIMPLE SEATED TWIST

In the full version of ardha matsyendrasana, your upper body turns toward the upright knee. To help your upper body turn fully, place your left hand on the floor behind you; continue to hold your left knee with your right hand. Keep your heart lifted and keep the natural inward curve in your lower back. Use your inhalation to lift, lengthen, and expand; use your exhalation to twist without rounding your back.

Now you can deepen the action on the piriformis by increasing the resisted abduction of the thigh, while releasing any tightness in the groin. As you twist, use your hand on your left knee to gently draw or hug that knee toward your chest. Let your inner thigh or groin relax, allowing it to soften and melt downward toward the sit bone.



As you draw the knee toward your chest with resistance, your thigh bone laterally releases out at the hip, pressing against the piriformis and encouraging it to release.

The twist deepens as you draw your knee into your elbow or take your upper arm to the outside of your knee. At this point, as you press your knee against the arm to leverage a deeper twist, the pose becomes more active in the hip and less effective as a piriformis release. If you're suffering from piriformis syndrome, you certainly don't want to tighten this muscle further, so it's best not to try to go so deeply into the twist!

The standing twist is a milder standing version of the stretch half seated twist.

Place a chair against the wall.



To stretch your right hip, stand with your right side next to the wall. Place your right foot on the chair, with your knee bent to roughly 90 degrees.

Keep your standing leg straight, and steady your balance by placing your right hand on the wall. Lift your left heel up high, coming onto the mounds of the toes, and turn your body toward the wall, using your hands for balance.

As you exhale, lower your left heel to the floor, maintaining the twist

Allow your right hip to descend, keeping your hips relatively level. Hold for several breaths. As you twist, keep the spine long and the breath smooth. Avoid rounding or pulling forcefully with the arms. The intention is to create space and ease, not leverage.

If the twist feels active or gripping in the hip, reduce the depth or return to a simpler version. In cases of piriformis-related sciatica, less rotation is often more effective.

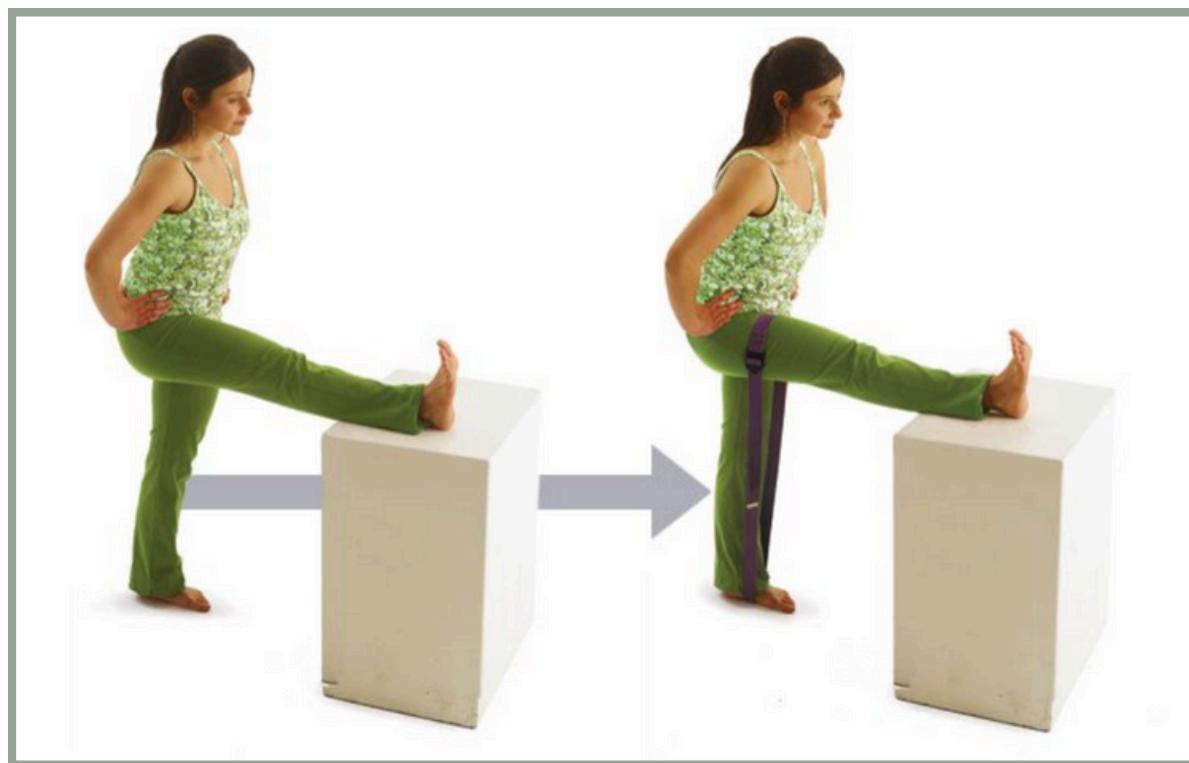
## **MORE STRETCHES FOR SCIATICA**

The backs of the thighs (your hamstrings) being stretched also play an important role in relieving sciatic pain, because tight hamstrings can gang up with a tight piriformis to constrict the vulnerable sciatic nerve. Sciatic pain caused by a tightening of the hamstrings and surrounding muscles often comes from activities such as driving for long periods, especially when the car seat encourages a slumped or rounded posture, or during athletic activities. In these cases, take a rest stop or a break, and try the following hamstring stretches for the back of the thigh.

The backs of the thighs – the hamstrings – play an important role in sciatic discomfort, not because they are always short, but because they often tighten in response to prolonged sitting, altered posture, or nervous system guarding.

When hamstrings remain tense, they can contribute to increased pull along the sciatic nerve pathway. For this reason, hamstring stretches can be helpful – when approached gently and without force.

Stretching should never create sharp pain, nerve sensations, or pulling down the leg. The intention is to invite length and ease, not to chase flexibility.



## STANDING HAMSTRING STRETCHES

Place one foot on a support such as a chair, bench, or low table, keeping the height at or below hip level. The standing leg remains grounded and steady, while the lifted leg is straight but not locked.

Engage the front of the thigh gently to protect the knee, allowing a soft micro-bend if needed. Ensure the hip of the raised leg is releasing downward rather than lifting or rotating outward.

Rather than folding deeply, hinge slightly at the hip while keeping the spine long and the chest open. You may feel a stretch along the back of the thigh or calf, but there should be no pulling, tingling, or nerve sensations.

Remain for several slow, steady breaths. Release gently and repeat on the other side if it feels comfortable to do so.

A smaller range of movement is often more effective for sciatic discomfort than deep forward folds.

If hamstring stretches increase sciatic discomfort, reduce the range of movement or pause stretching altogether. In some cases, allowing the nervous system to settle first – through rest, breath awareness, or Spinal Flow – is more supportive than stretching.

Passive hamstring stretches may be beneficial when the body feels calm and supported. Use props generously, maintain a long spine, and avoid rounding forward.

Stay attentive to sensation. Stretching should feel steady and easeful, not sharp or intense. If discomfort arises, gently come out of the posture and rest.

When it comes to sciatica, nervous system regulation supports muscle release – not the other way around.

## 3 HELPFUL HIP OPENERS

In general, sciatic pain is helped by poses that passively stretch the hip with the thigh externally rotated, but not from poses such as butterfly (baddha konasana) which actively rotates the thigh outward and thus tighten the deep hip rotators.

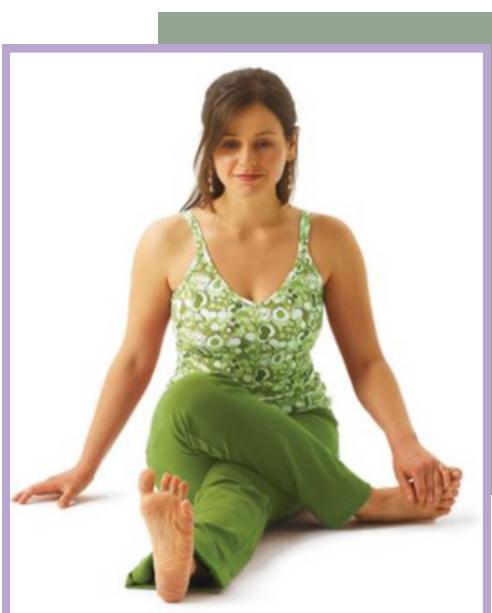
Deep hip openers can be supportive for some people with sciatica, but they are not essential for healing. These postures work at a deeper level of the hip rotators and should only be approached when the nervous system feels calm, settled, and receptive.

Depth does not equal progress. Comfort, steadiness, and a sense of safety are far more important than how far the body moves into a pose.

### MODIFIED COW'S FACE POSE

Cow's Face Pose (Gomukhasana) offers a passive stretch to the deep hip rotators when approached with patience and adequate support.

Sit on the floor with the legs extended in staff pose (dandasana). If sitting upright feels difficult, elevate the hips on a folded blanket. Bend one knee and cross it over the other, allowing the knees to stack only as far as feels natural and pain-free.



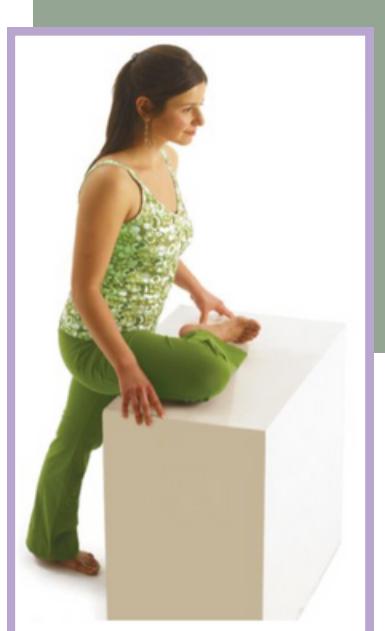
Support the body generously. If the lower knee lifts, locks, or feels strained, place a folded blanket or towel beneath it. The intention is to feel contained and supported, not stretched to an edge.

Remain upright, or fold forward slightly at the hip crease if — and only if — the sensation feels easeful and stable. There should be no sharp pain, nerve sensations, or pulling down the leg.

Hold for several slow breaths, then gently release and change sides.

If Cow's Face Pose feels intense, unstable, or aggravating, it is best omitted. Deep hip openers are optional. Healing does not depend on accessing maximum range of motion.

## KING PIGEON HIP STRETCH



King Pigeon Pose (*raja kapotasana*) is one of the deepest hip-opening postures and should be approached with particular care when working with sciatica.

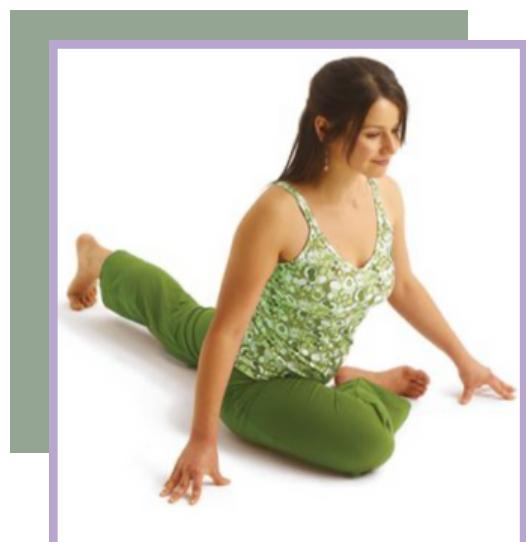
Begin on hands and knees and bring one knee forward, allowing the shin to angle naturally rather than forcing it parallel to the front of the mat. The back leg extends gently behind you, with the hips supported and level.

Use props generously. If the front hip does not reach the floor comfortably, place a folded blanket or bolster beneath it to reduce strain

Remain upright or fold forward only if the sensation feels grounding and supportive. There should be no pain in the knee, no sharp sensation in the hip, and no increase in nerve symptoms.

Stay for several slow breaths, then come out slowly and mindfully.

If pigeon pose feels overwhelming, unstable, or causes symptoms to increase, it is not appropriate for your body at this time.



In cases of active sciatica or piriformis-related nerve irritation, deep hip openers can sometimes increase guarding rather than relieve it. If this occurs, gentler alternatives or nervous-system-based approaches such as Spinal Flow are often more supportive.

Trust your body's response. If a posture does not feel right, leave it out.

Allow your healing to unfold in its own wise time."

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Living with sciatica can feel frustrating, unpredictable, and at times overwhelming. It is important to remember that healing is not linear, and progress is not measured by how far you stretch or how deeply you move into a pose.

Relief often comes through patience, consistency, and nervous system support, rather than intensity.

Yoga, when practiced mindfully, can help restore mobility, confidence, and trust in your body. Spinal Flow complements this process by working at the level of the spine and nervous system, helping the body feel safe enough to release long-held patterns of protection.

Above all, know this:

You are not broken.

Your body is responding intelligently.

With the right support, space, and care, it can soften, recalibrate, and heal.

Move gently. Breathe deeply. And allow your healing to unfold in its own time.