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A Pain in the Butt

You are enjoying a nice summer morning run/walk, ramping up your distance, feeling great about where you are in your training and then suddenly you start feeling an ache in your lower back/buttock area that progressively worsens with each strike of your foot on the pavement. The pain starts affecting your training and requires you to take days off. It just won't go away. Even after a few days, the lingering pain stops you from lacing up your shoes and getting back on the road.

Everyone has felt some level of lower back pain in their life. Whether it is a short-lived ache or debilitating pain, back problems can be frustrating and severely limiting. The causes of lower back pain are numerous, as the area includes multiple joints, muscles, tendons, ligaments, and nerves. In runners, one common reason for lower back pain is sacroiliac joint dysfunction.

The point where your pelvis (hips) meets your lower spine is the sacroiliac joint. It is located at the bottom of the spine and the top of the buttocks. If you palpate this area on both sides at the very bottom of your back, you will feel a bony bump, which is the upper portion of the sacroiliac joint and a common area of pain. This joint is different than other joints like the knee, hip, or shoulder, in that it is not very mobile. At most, the joint moves about 2 mm to 4 mm. It acts as a shock absorber, distributing forces from the lower body, and aids in pelvic movements and leg swing. Due to its limited movement, any small restrictions at the joint can cause pain.

Dysfunction can occur if you misstep and the hip jams into the pelvis. Pain also may occur after running/walking down hills for long periods of time or overstriding with your running/walking gait. Muscle imbalances in the lumbar spine and core muscles can also contribute to pain if the joint is not moving correctly. Sometimes, pain develops for no identifiable reason. The pain can be described as dull, achy, sharp, sore, throbbing, stabbing, or numbing. It will typically start at the top of the joint at the lower back/upper buttocks and can radiate into the butt, thigh and, at times, down to the knee. Impact activities such as running, jumping, and walking will increase the pain. Extension and rotation of the spine will also increase the pain. The pain can be debilitating, even during slight movements, and can be present for days to weeks or even months, so early diagnosis and treatment is important.

As mentioned previously, the lower back is a complicated area and there can be many reasons for pain. A sports medicine physician can help in a correct diagnosis and treatment plan to resolve your symptoms. Early treatments consist of anti-inflammatories and acetaminophen as well as ice or heat. Typically, a provider will recommend you ice the area for the first week of pain and then transition to heat after a week if pain persists. In many cases the most beneficial treatment is with physical therapy and chiropractic care to mobilize the joint and correct any muscle imbalances in the lower back and pelvis. A physical therapist can also evaluate your running gait to correct any abnormalities in your stride that put you at risk for sacroiliac joint dysfunction or other injuries. In severe cases, injections into the joint may be an option.

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This is not a diagnosis that requires surgical intervention. You can try to exercise through the pain if you are not too uncomfortable, as exercise typically will not cause any further damage to the joint. However, if you continue to exercise and pain persists, you may be promoting further mechanical abnormalities, leading to other pains and injuries. Recognizing the symptoms of sacroiliac joint dysfunction and treating it early is important to getting you back on track with your exercise and training.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding an injury or pain, please reach out to one of our experienced sports medicine physicians at Corewell Health Medical Group Orthopedics at (616)267- 8860. You can also find more information about our orthopedic program and providers on our [website](#).
