

Coping with coccyx pain

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Cite: Miles, J. Coping with coccyx pain. In: Maigne JY and Doursounian L (eds) Coccyx Disorders. Proceedings of the First International Symposium on Coccyx Disorders, Paris, 2016. pp 87-92.

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INTRODUCTION

Although coccydynia should be curable, many people have to endure it for years while searching for treatment, or when treatment is not fully effective. This paper is about how to cope with the condition as comfortably as possible. Avoiding pain by the methods below may allow you to avoid or reduce the use of drugs. Masking the pain with drugs may allow you to sit for longer, but that can make the underlying problem worse. Many of the suggestions come from visitors to www.coccyx.org.

Every time you sit down you are aggravating the pain, so the solution is to sit as little as possible, and walk, stand, lean, kneel, squat or lie. But we are expected to sit down to work, to eat, to travel, to relax. You can't go out for a meal with friends and stand up all the time. Coccydynia therefore makes it painful or difficult to carry on a normal social or working life.

People have different requirements, so it is important to experiment to find out what works for you in different situations. If necessary, change or modify your clothes, furniture or lifestyle. Do what is best for yourself, and ignore the reactions of other people. You may feel embarrassed to stand when others are sitting, or carry a coccyx cushion with you. You will imagine that everyone is watching you, but you have to ignore this feeling. The first time is the hardest. If you take it as natural, everyone else will as well.

COMFORTABLE POSITIONS

One of the most difficult situations is when you are in a room full of people and everyone else sits down. If you don't want to leave, one solution is to find a chair and stand behind it with your hands on the back of it. Tell people that you are more comfortable standing.

If you do sit down, make sure you have the best chair for you, and a suitable cushion. Usually leaning forward and resting your arms on a table helps. Don't stay sitting too long - make an excuse to get up from time to time. You can use a silent vibrating timer to remind you every 20 minutes or so.

Some clothes can make the problem worse, such as tight jeans. Loose, stretchy clothes that do not squeeze your buttocks together are the most comfortable.

CUSHIONS

The great majority of patients find that a coccyx cushion with a cut-out (either wedge-shaped or flat [Fig 1]) is much more comfortable than a ring or doughnut cushion. You may have to experiment to find out whether a firm or soft cushion suits you better.

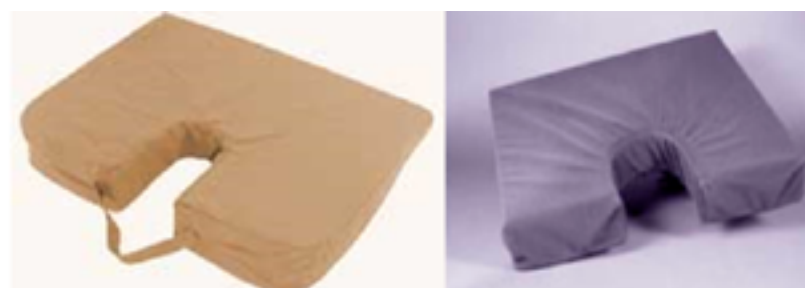


Figure 1. Coccyx cushions with a cut-out.

CHAIRS

There are many different types of chair recommended by coccydynia patients, to avoid putting pressure on the coccyx. Some achieve this by having a shorter seat than normal, so that the coccyx can hang over the back of it, such as the chairs in [Fig 2].



Figure 2. Canvas stool, Director's chair and Hag Credo chair.

Others have a cut-out or open channel to relieve pressure, such as those in [Fig 3]. And for relaxing, there is the Cleopatra position, as shown in [Fig 4].



Figure 3. Hara chair, Putnam's kneeling chair and coccyx cut-out chair.



Figure 4. The Cleopatra position

KNEELING

Kneeling on a padded armchair or sofa turned backwards gives you somewhere to lean, and allows you to watch TV, read, etc. while avoiding all pressure on the coccyx. Try different chairs to find one that suits you.

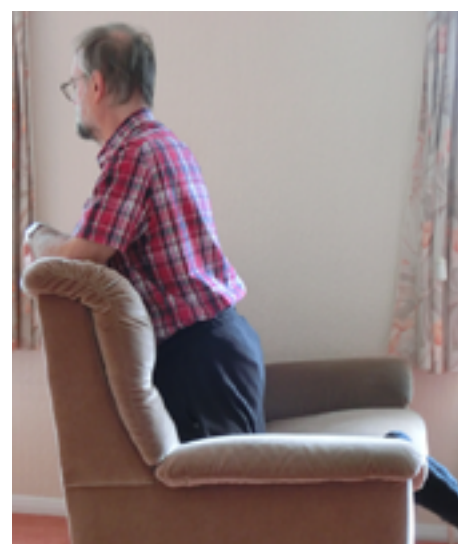


Figure 5. Kneeling on a padded sofa

LYING DOWN

Most coccydynia patients can't lie on their backs, and some find it uncomfortable to lie on one side. Putting a cushion between the knees may help when lying on one side. Having a comfortable mattress – or adding a foam mattress topper – also helps.

If you need to lie on your front, there are several solutions. You may be able to manage this lying flat on a bed, with your head turned to one side. Putting a pillow under your body can make this easier. If that's too uncomfortable, one possibility is the commercially available Ostrich chair [Fig 6], though this may not be comfortable enough to sleep on. It is also possible to modify a camp bed for this purpose, by making holes for the arms and the face.



Figure 6. Ostrich chair and modified camp bed and mattress

WORK

Many designs of sit/stand desk are now available, as standing part of the time at work has recently been suggested as being healthy for all employees. Before I retired, my employers were good enough to buy a sit/stand desk for me to use, and I brought a camp bed into my office. I switched between standing, kneeling, lying and sitting.

A couple of coccydynia patients have bought a massage table to allow them to read and type while lying face-down [Fig 8].



Figure 7. Sit/stand desk and sit/stand keyboard tray and computer shelf



Figure 8. Massage table used for working while lying face down.

LEISURE

Keeping fit and healthy and getting out to enjoy yourself are important in keeping your spirits up. It also gives an opportunity to do things with family and friends. Depending on your condition, you may be able swim, walk, jog, play tennis, badminton, squash, golf, or other games. Avoid anything that makes your pain worse.

If you can sit for a short while, you don't have to give up eating out. If a restaurant has a bar, stand and have a drink while you're waiting for the food. Check the chairs in the local restaurants to find the ones you can manage best. Some people prefer padded chairs, some prefer restaurants with booths and benches where you can bring your feet up. Buffet service reduces the time that you have to sit. Plan ahead and make sure that everyone with you understands what you're doing and why before you go.

If you're going to the cinema with family or friends, get them to sit at the end of a row where you can stand or lean. Some cinemas have double seats where you can take off your shoes and bring your legs up beside you. Of course it's best to pick a time when it's not crowded.

TRAVEL

Coccyx pain sufferers often find driving particularly painful. There are several reasons for this. Car seats force you to lean back, with your knees higher than your bottom, so that all of your weight is put around your coccyx. Then there are bumps, corners, and the fact that you have to push with your legs to drive. So your coccyx is under pressure, hammered from below, and pulled around.

If possible, avoid driving - get someone else to drive or use a taxi, and lie down on the back seat. Some people have gone so far as to get a camper van with a bed in the back. If you have to drive, use a coccyx cushion. The type that is wedge-shaped will help to make the seat more level. If a cushion raises you too high up, or puts the curve of your back in an uncomfortable position, you can modify the car seat by cutting out a section of it under the coccyx.

It's easy to stand on trains, if your feet don't hurt too much. If you are going to sit, get a seat with a table and lean across the table. Some buses have an area where you can stand.

Travelling by air, you will have to sit during take-off and landing, so take a coccyx cushion. The rest of the time, take any opportunity to stand at the end of the aisle. Explain to the cabin staff that it is uncomfortable for you to sit. If the plane is not full, you may be able to lie down across a row of seats.

COPING WITH OTHER PEOPLE

If someone invites you to take a seat while you are waiting, you can take an interest in the view out of the window, or the pictures on the wall, or ask where the toilets are. If you are expected to sit down to talk to someone, then it is more difficult. To avoid long explanations to strangers, you can just say 'I've got a back problem - it hurts to sit down'.

But relatives, friends and work colleagues are entitled to more of an explanation. It may be hard at first to explain things, but life is easier once you have done it. Unfortunately some may be unsympathetic because they can't see anything wrong. This is very hard to cope with when you're struggling to carry on with your life despite the pain.

At work you may need to provide evidence such as a note from a doctor about your condition.

COPING WITH DOCTORS

Unfortunately there are some doctors who don't understand coccydynia, and offer nothing more than painkillers or even say it is all in your mind. You need to deal with this attitude to get proper treatment:

- Stand up! Don't let the doctor (or the receptionist) see you sitting. Often we sit down to be polite, or out of embarrassment, and put up with the pain. But this gives the impression that your problem can't be that bad. So explain that it hurts to sit, so you prefer to stand whenever possible. Doing this makes it much more difficult for the doctor to dismiss your problem.

- Take a trusted relative or friend along with you into the consulting room. This makes it difficult for the doctor to brush you off. If you need to explain why you have brought someone else along, be honest: say that you have found it difficult to persuade doctors to take your problem seriously, and you have brought your friend or relative along for support.

- Insist that the doctor carries out a proper examination of you to try to find the source of the pain, or refers you to an orthopaedic specialist.

- If your doctor orders an x-ray or MRI scan, ask them to instruct the radiographer to obtain a clear view of the coccyx. Very often a doctor will order a lumbro-sacral x-ray or MRI, and the coccyx is not included on the image at all.

- If you have trouble getting effective treatment, see the www.coccyx.org website, where there is a list of specialists in many countries who treat coccydynia.