

Celebrate Wellness!

Scoliosis

What exactly is “scoliosis?” Do you have it? Do your kids? What can you do to protect yourself and your family? Here are some facts and tips, courtesy of the Virginia Chiropractic Association.

Some people use the term scoliosis to refer to almost any abnormality in the spine; but in fact, only certain spinal curvatures qualify to be called true scoliosis. Small variations in posture can cause mild to moderate spinal curvatures, but only spinal curvatures that exceed 10 degrees on x-ray actually qualify as “scoliosis.”ⁱ True scoliosis is a rare condition that’s more common in females, typically presenting in adolescentsⁱⁱ; and it involves a lateral bending of the spine with rotation of several spinal bones (vertebrae). Some curves are reversible, meaning that a twisted or bent area of the spine temporarily disappears when -- for example -- a heel or shoe lift is used on one leg. Non-reversible curves -- that is, curves that persist on neutral x-rays as well as on bending studies -- present a different set of challenges for the patient and doctor.

Scoliosis is often initially painless, making it especially challenging. Patients -- especially adolescents -- tend to focus their attention on what actively bothers them, and less so on “silent” problems. Left unchecked, severe scoliosis can cause significant and permanent physical deformities. These physical limitations can have consequences ranging from social implications, to more serious situations that can compromise breathing and cardiac (heart) function. The earlier the intervention, the better.

Scoliosis is commonly seen as a structural issue, just like the leaning tower of Pisa. Attempts to brace the spine are similar to teeth braces which strive to slowly push bones back to a more desirable position. In the spine, the bones are meant to move, not simply to hold one posture. Spinal bones are meant to move in concert, both forward and back, from side to side, and twisting. When one bone or section doesn’t move, other areas will pick up the resulting mechanical stresses.

The most common form of scoliosis is idiopathic adolescent scoliosis. Idiopathic, though impressive-sounding, is a medical term for “of unknown cause.” Since medicine is a science that relies on causes in order to prescribe solutions, an “idiopathic” diagnosis typically results in palliative or experimental care. Leading experts on scoliosis suggest that idiopathic adolescent scoliosis is actually a neurological maturation problem where one side of the body is out of sync with the other. Based on that theory, doctors of chiropractic focus their treatment on the nervous system when faced with idiopathic adolescent scoliosis. Mechanical stimulation of the joints through spinal manipulation as performed by a chiropractic doctor provides neurological stimuli to affected joints. Proprioception refers to the central nervous system’s ability to: 1) determine where your body parts are in space, and 2) coordinate those body parts in a smooth and integrated fashion. In conjunction with hands-on spinal care, postural exercises and training are critical to giving the nervous system a “nudge” to help both sides mature at a relatively symmetrical rate. Active exercises provide feedback to the central nervous system; and when done correctly, may help the body’s proprioceptive systems wake up to a correct interpretation of what is straight, versus imbalanced. Electrical muscle stimulation may also have a role, though it is no substitute for a combination of active hands-on care focused on affected joints, plus active exercise/postural rehabilitation.

Though some patients will need bracing to limit curve progression, and though others may need surgical intervention, doctors of chiropractic focus on conservative approaches to human ailments. Have your spine checked by a chiropractor; and bring your entire family. Even small defects in spinal motion -- defects that are no where near the “scoliosis” definition -- can respond well to the hands-on expertise of a doctor of chiropractic. Though older understandings of chiropractic may refer to bones out of place, modern chiropractic focuses on spinal motion, nervous system function, and your body’s ability to function at full capacity. Most chiropractors agree that the way in which they “move bones” isn’t nearly

as important as the implications of interfacing with the nervous system’s power to influence health and healing. In this way, doctors of chiropractic may be able to help you reach your full potential whether you’re a young person with a spinal curve, a senior athlete striving to attain new heights, a mom or mom-to-be, or just the average Joe or Jane who wants to live, well.

i http://www.amerchiro.org/content_css.cfm?CID=2189

ii <http://www.srs.org/professionals/education/adolescent/idiopathic/>



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