

SCOLIOSIS

YOUR BACK

The shape of your spine, like the shape of your body, is just a little bit different from everybody else's. Although you've probably been told before to "stand up straight", your backbone is not perfectly straight. Nobody's is. A normal spine has front to back curves, curving out at the top, and in at the bottom. But if the spine curves too much, or if it curves from side to side, that's not normal. It can cause serious problems.

If the spine curves out too much at the top, into a humped or rounded shape, it's called "kyphosis". If it curves in too much at the bottom, it's called "lordosis". If it curves from side to side, it's called "scoliosis".

WHAT IS SCOLIOSIS?

The spine of a person with scoliosis, seen from the back, may take the shape of a letter S, or a tall, skinny letter C. Besides bending from side to side, it will also twist, or "rotate", towards the front of the body. That pulls the ribs out of place, making one side of the back higher than the other. It may even change the shape of the breastbone.

HOW DOES IT HAPPEN?

Some babies are born with spinal defects that cause their backs to grow unevenly. Others may have had injuries, nerve or muscle diseases, or other illnesses which affect the growth of the spine. Some adults have scoliosis now because they had polio as children. But in most cases, the cause of scoliosis is unknown. For some reason the back simply doesn't grow straight. That's called "idiopathic" scoliosis.

Scoliosis isn't caused by anything a child or a parent did or did not do. It isn't caused by poor posture, or carrying your books under one arm all the time, or throwing a baseball only with one arm.

WHO GETS IT?

Idiopathic scoliosis usually appears during the growth spurt of the adolescent or "teen" years. Younger children may also get it. Of every 100 children screened for scoliosis, 6-10 will have some unusual curving of the spine. Only 2 or 3 of them will need to see a doctor about it. Boys and girls run an equal risk of developing scoliosis, but it tends to get worse more often in girls; therefore girls have a greater need for treatment.

HOW DO YOU FIND OUT IF YOU HAVE IT?

If a child has scoliosis, the primary health care provider may notice an unusual curve in the spine during a regular exam. The child or the parents may notice that clothes don't fit right-a dress or pants may hang unevenly because one shoulder or hip is higher than the other. But during the teen years, young people often don't see a doctor for regular exams.

They may shop for clothes by themselves, and parents may never see what their backs look like without clothes on. Because the problem can easily go unnoticed, Minnesota has a school spinal screening program, so scoliosis and other possible serious problems can be found early. Young people in grades 5-9 are the most likely to develop scoliosis and if detected early they can be more easily treated.

WHY SEE A DOCTOR?

A screening is a way of finding possible problems early, when they can be treated most effectively. But it isn't a medical examination. It won't tell you for certain if there's a problem, or how serious it is. That's why anyone who may have a problem should see a doctor after the screening. The doctor may find that the problem is only slight, and ask the person to come in regularly for awhile to see if there's been any change in the curve of the spine. An x-ray, taken while the patient is standing up, will help the doctor see if there's been a change.

If the spinal curve is already fairly severe, the doctor may send the person to a provider who specializes in scoliosis treatment. If the curve is severe enough, the person may have to wear a brace, or in some instances surgery may be required. The doctor can help decide what's best for each patient.

It is much better to discover scoliosis in its early stages. If you have any questions about scoliosis or about screening, ask your school nurse or your doctor.

Normal spine

Scoliosis