

## TAKING CARE OF YOUR SPINE

Patients often ask me what *they* can do to help with the treatment of their spinal problems, and what they can do to maintain the health of their spines on an ongoing basis. I will try to pass on some of the things that I've learned over the 24 years that I've been involved in this profession.

One of the most critical components to good spinal health is motion. If I had to single out *the* most important aspect of a healthy spine, that would be it. A healthy spine is a flexible spine. And not just overall flexibility, but flexible in the sense that every bone in the spine is able to move through a full, normal range of motion. In fact, finding the areas of the spine that are not moving properly is the #1 goal of my examinations, and is what I feel for during every treatment I perform. And restoring proper spinal joint motion is exactly what a chiropractic adjustment does so well.

So stretching your spine regularly is a very helpful thing. Your spine moves in a lot of different directions, so it's important to stretch in a lot of different directions: forward, backward, side to side, and twisting right and left. Ideally this should be done for all 3 areas of your back (neck, mid-back, and lower back). Yoga is an excellent way to regain and maintain good spinal flexibility.

Practicing good posture is another thing you can do to help maintain a healthy spine. The most common postural distortion is slouching, with shoulders rounded forward, and head poking out in front. This dramatically affects your ability to breathe normally, and puts a tremendous amount of stress on the muscles that have to support your head in that position. Try exaggerating that slouching posture, and try to take a deep breath. Then pull your head and shoulders up and back, and try again. Feel the difference? And your head is heavier than you might think...about the same weight as a bowling ball. No wonder the muscles of your neck and upper back become tight and sore supporting that!

Another key component to spinal health is the strength of the supporting muscles of the spine, especially your "core" muscles. Think of the normal curvature of your lower back: When your core muscles are weak, gravity causes this curve to be exaggerated, leading to the typical slouched, protruding-stomach posture. This causes excessive and uneven pressure on the discs (the "cushions" between the vertebrae) and the facet joints (the parts of each vertebra that glide against the ones above and below them). Over time, this leads to bulging or herniated discs, bone spurs, and degenerative arthritis in the spine.

The solution is to strengthen the abdominal muscles...both the front (rectus abdominus) and side (internal and external oblique) muscles, as well as the lower back muscles (lumbar spinal erectors). This acts as a "girdle", surrounding and supporting your lumbar spine, allowing it to function as it was designed to function. Space does not permit me to discuss the best exercises, but feel free to ask me when you're in for a treatment.

Finally, diet can play a critical role in maintaining a healthy spine. Besides mechanical stress, which we've already discussed, free radicals and inflammation contribute greatly to the deterioration of your discs, and the development of arthritis and bone spurs in the spine. This can best be remedied by eating a diet rich in antioxidants (fresh fruit and vegetables), high in omega-3 fatty acids (wild-caught fish and fish oil supplementation), and low in omega-6 fatty acids (fat from domestic animals, including dairy fat). This is because omega-6 fats *cause* inflammation throughout your body, and omega-3 fats *reduce* inflammation throughout your body.

So there you have it. Pay attention to those 3 things, and you'll be making a huge impact on the health and happiness of your spine!