[IMAGE]

What Your Spine Says About Your Health

By Perry Nickelston, DC, FMS, SFMA

You may have heard the saying, "the eyes are the window to the soul." There is another saying in the world of chiropractic, "your spine is the window to your health." How can the condition of your spine divulge so much information about overall health? Your spine is the central support column of your body and its primary role is to protect your spinal cord. Think of it like the foundational frame of a house holding everything together. If the frame becomes dysfunctional many problems will begin to manifest themselves. The house begins to develop cracks, shifts, and structural problems. When your spinal foundation becomes dysfunctional you develop aches, pains, injuries, and other health related issues. The good news is you can do a simple spinal health checklist to determine if you may benefit from the expert intervention of a chiropractor or other healthcare professional. Becoming familiar with simple spinal anatomy, structure and function will help empower you to take control of your health.

Your spine is composed of 24 bones (vertebrae); 7 in the neck (cervical spine), 12 in the middle back (thoracic spine), 5 in the lower back (lumbar spine) and the base tailbone (sacrum). Your soft spinal cord is encased inside these 24 moveable hard vertebrae to protect it from injury. Your spinal column has three natural curvatures making it much stronger and more resilient than a straight design. There are cervical, thoracic, and lumbar curves designed with precise angles for optimum function. However, these curves are different than the abnormal curves associated with scoliosis and postural distortions. You may remember getting screened in school or your doctor for scoliosis when they had you bend over and touch your toes. This was an early checklist for spinal abnormalities. Through life’s stresses, genetics, trauma, injuries, and neglect the spine can develop dysfunctions in these curvatures and the body must compensate by changing posture as a protective mechanism.

image - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark What are some of the compensations your body develops and what can they tell you about spinal health?

Rounded Shoulders: This is a very common postural distortion resulting from more sedentary lifestyles. Hunching over in front of a computer screen hours on end simply feeds this dysfunction. This poor posture pattern adds increased stress to the upper back and neck because the head is improperly positioned relative

to the shoulders. Common effects are headaches, shoulder, pain, neck pain and even tingling and numbness in the arms because of nerve compression by tight muscles.

Uneven shoulders: One shoulder higher than the other is indicative of a muscular imbalance or spinal curvature. You probably see this one on most people where one shoulder is migrating up towards the ear. Stand in front of a mirror and you can easily see if this asymmetry is present. You may also notice that one sleeve is longer than the other when you wear a shirt. This asymmetry is a common precursor for shoulder injuries, headaches, neck pain, elbow injuries and even carpal tunnel syndrome (tingling in the hands).

Uneven hips: Hips that are not level are like the foundation of a house that is not level. You begin to develop compensations further up the body so you remain balanced when walking. You develop altered spinal curvatures, shoulder positions, and head tilts. Your body has one primary purpose of maintaining symmetry and balance and it will do it whatever way is necessary. Signs of unbalanced hips may manifest in abnormal shoe wear typically on the outside edges and pants will fit unevenly in the leg length.

When you visit a chiropractor for a spinal evaluation some of the things they will search for during your evaluation are underlying signs of spinal damage that you can't see. Spinal x-rays are a safe and effective way to get look at your spine for damage or potential problems. Just like a dentist takes an x-ray of your teeth to see if you have cavities or problems with the bones below gum line. If problems are detected, corrective or preventive measures can be implemented to help your body function at optimum.

Degenerative Disc Disease (DDD): This is not a real disease in the terms of how we think of them. DDD is term used to describe degeneration and excessive wear on the soft tissue disc structures between the spinal bones. It may come with age or from biomechanical asymmetries in movement causing excessive wear from overuse. Sort of like uneven treads on a car with imbalanced tires, one may be worse than the other. Although the degeneration cannot be reversed, once discovered there are strategies your chiropractor can implement rebalancing exercises and therapies to help prevent further damage.

Osteoarthritis: The breakdown of the tissue (cartilage) that protects and cushions joints. Arthritis often leads to painful swelling and inflammation from joints rubbing together. The increase in friction causes a protective pain response and excessive swelling where the body attempt to add artificial cushioning via swelling.

Herniated disc: A herniated disc is an abnormal bulge or breaking open of a protective spinal disc or cushioning between spinal bones. Patient's may or may not experience symptoms with a herniated disc. Disc diagnosis is conformed via a special imaging study called an MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) which observes soft and hard tissue structures. You cannot see or confirm a suspected disc herniation via normal spinal x-rays.

Spinal stenosis: The narrowing of the spinal canal the open space in the spine that holds the spinal cord. Stenosis is a more severe form of arthritis that typically causes radiating (referred pain down the arms or legs) from an irritated or compressed spinal nerve.

If you experience spinal pain, tingling, numbness, weakness, muscles spasms or swelling near your spine or arms and legs consult a healthcare professional. These are all warning signal signs from your body that something is wrong and needs your attention. Pain is how your body communicates its function with you. A car has dashboard warning lights that tell you when the car has a problem. If you chose to ignore the signals bad things are going to happen. Your body has its own warning light system. Start checking for the warning lights. Ignore them at your own risk. See your chiropractor for a proper assessment and any concerns.

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