[IMAGE]

Good Spinal Health Key to Feeling Great

Movement Enhances Your Quality of Life.

By Donald Petersen Jr.

While we usually talk about the spine as a single part of the body, it’s much more than that. Your spine allows you to do almost everything you do. Proper spinal function allows you to do things well - and most of the time, pain-free. Poor spinal function forces you to do things poorly or not at all, not to mention the agony spinal distress can cause.

Consider for a moment everything you did today. Almost every movement you made, from getting out of bed in the morning until you got back into bed at night, required your spine to work in very complex ways that you’ve probably never thought twice about. Not only did your spine perform delicate mechanical functions, but it also facilitated the majority of your nerve function, another aspect of proper spinal function that most people never
consider ... until there’s a problem.

Woman performing Yoga. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark **Your Spine**

Your spine consists of 26 bones, called vertebrae, which run from the "atlas" your head sits on to your "coccyx" or tailbone. These vertebrae essentially stack one on top of the other in your vertebral column, floating on intervertebral discs. Every other bone in your body is attached in some way to your spinal column.

When you move, your spinal column moves in some combination of four ways: Man bending forward. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark **FLEXION**

- flexion - bending forward;
- extension - bending backward;
- lateral bending - bending from side-to-side;
- rotation - twisting.

If your spine were just one solid bone, it couldn't perform any of the variety of body movements; but as a stack of 26 bones, your spinal column can twist and bend to accommodate your every activity. This is accomplished by each spinal segment doing its job. When your spine moves, each movement of your vertebrae is choreographed through the rest of your body via a wonderfully designed system of muscles and ligaments that work together.

Man bending backward. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark **EXTENSION** Your spine also has 31 pairs of spinal nerves that exit at some point from your spinal column. These delicate spinal nerves can become irritated, or inflammation can occur, when your spine fails to function properly. These irritations or inflammation are thought to impact the nerve flow to the vital organs throughout your body.

In a healthy spine, each vertebra moves just a little each time you bend or twist. Even when you use your arms and legs, your spine plays a role. When you walk, your spine rotates just enough to allow your feet to move forward without tripping on the ground. The nerves inside and around your spine are protected and function comfortably when your vertebrae move within their normal range.

Man rotating his back. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark **ROTATION** Should one or more of your vertebrae fail to move (hypomobility), other vertebrae would have to move more than they should (hypermobility) in order to compensate and still allow your body to perform the function it needs. When this happens, the muscles and ligaments connected to your spine can become fatigued and cause you pain. This abnormal movement of your vertebrae will also cause pressure and irritation to your spinal nerves. Should this abnormal movement continue over an extended period of time, more chronic ailments would develop. Your muscles, ligaments, vertebras, discs and organs attached to your spinal nerves would all be adversely affected. These deviations from normal often can be easily corrected with specific spinal manipulations and some helpful guidance on proper exercise.

Man bending his back from side-to-side. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark **LATERAL BENDING**

Listening to Your Body

If you're listening, your body usually will warn you when your spine is not functioning normally. This warning will come in the form of pain, discomfort, stiffness or a lack of function in your spine or extremities. Rather than address the problem, some people ignore their body's warnings by taking pain relievers. Others just ignore the pain until their body adapts to the discomfort and the pain goes away. The body puts the spine in a state of spasm to protect the delicate nerves and allow the inflammatory process to

subside. Removing the pain often causes more problems because the body's protective mechanism has been removed. It's similar to pulling out the wire under the dashboard of your car when a warning light comes on. The light is no longer visible, but the problem remains and will continue to get worse.

Pain is your body's way of telling you there's a problem. Reducing the pain doesn't necessarily address the problem. A problem ignored is a problem that will only become worse. The time to act is when you first begin to feel pain or discomfort, before it becomes chronic and much more serious.

In the case of nonsurgical spine ailments, the most qualified health care provider is the doctor of chiropractic or "chiropractor," as they are sometimes called. Doctors of chiropractic are trained in an eight-year program of undergraduate and professional college study that includes a clinical internship. Their clinical and educational focus is specifically oriented toward spine-related ailments. The profession has elected to remain a nondrug, nonsurgical approach to dealing with spinal ailments.

Maintaining Good Spinal Health

As with all parts of your body, there are things you can do to maintain a healthy spine. Here are four of the best:

Nutritional Supplements - Vitamins, minerals and herbs can provide the essential nutrition needed for your diet and lifestyle. Proper nutrition is essential, particularly for women and seniors. Your doctor can help you decide your body's supplemental requirements.

Posture - How you sit, stand, walk and sleep does matter. You train the muscles that ultimately impact your musculoskeletal system. Correct posture enables your body to function more effectively and more efficiently. Being aware of your posture can improve your spinal health and make you more attractive.

Flexibility - Your body develops under the law of demand and supply. Whatever you demand from your body, the body will develop to supply. If you run a mile a day, your body will strengthen muscles, lengthen tendons and enhance your air intake so the run will become easier and faster. You should take time each day to flex your spine in all four directions: forward, backward, side-to-side and twisting both ways. By doing so, you will maintain the movement of each vertebra. This also is a good way to determine if you have a loss of spinal function.

Spinal Checkups - Just like your teeth, your spine needs to be examined to determine if spinal dysfunction is present, particularly after stressful events, accidents or overworking the spine and musculature. Seniors, active adults and growing children should be examined at least quarterly. Doctors of chiropractic can perform spinal examinations quickly to determine any malfunction of the spine.

Quality of life is defined as your ability to do the things that make life a joy to live. Proper spinal function affects everything your body does. As you can see, there are a number of things you can do to help maintain good spinal hygiene.

When you do experience pain, recognize that your body is communicating a problem and address that problem immediately. Just as your teeth need regular brushing and a regular appointment with your dentist, your spine needs good nutrition, posture, flexibility and a periodic spinal checkup. It's the way to your highest quality of life.

Donald Petersen Jr. is the president and publisher of MPA Media, which produces To Your Health and a variety of other media resources on natural health and wellness, including trade publications for the chiropractic and acupuncture professions.

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