

Scoliosis Information Sheet

What is scoliosis?

Scoliosis is an abnormal curve of the spine (backbone). With scoliosis, the spine isn't straight. Instead, the spine is crooked and curves to the side. If the spine is very crooked, the ribs or hips may stick out more on one side than the other side. Also, one shoulder may be lower than the other. Scoliosis may begin in childhood but often is not noticed until the teenage years. In most cases, the exact cause of scoliosis isn't known. It seems to run in some families. Scoliosis is more common in girls than in boys.

How can I tell if my child has scoliosis?

In California it is mandatory for schools to check for scoliosis. A child's own physician should also examine for scoliosis at regular check-ups. If scoliosis is suspected from a school screen, doctors will reexamine the spine by looking at it in different positions. Sometimes x-rays are needed to help show the extent to which the spine is curved and to determine anticipated future spinal growth. These two factors allow doctors to decide on a plan of treatment.

Does scoliosis cause any problems?

In most people, the curve in the spine is so small that it causes no problems. Scoliosis doesn't usually cause back pain. In severe cases, the curve may restrict the amount of space available for the lungs and heart to work.

How is scoliosis treated?

In most cases, no treatment is needed. Once identified, doctors check the spine regularly to make sure the curve isn't getting worse. Sometimes a brace is worn to keep the spine from curving. Newer braces are light and less bulky than old braces. Most braces fit under the clothes and are not visible. Manipulation of the spine cannot improve scoliosis nor prevent its progression.

Is surgery necessary?

If a brace doesn't stop the spine from curving, surgery may be needed to prevent serious consequences. During surgery, the bones in the spine may be moved and joined together to strengthen the spine, or a rod may be placed in the spine to straighten it. Surgery is usually successful and can be performed safely.

- *Some of this information was adapted from the American Academy of Family Physicians Patient Information handout, entitled, "If Your Child has Scoliosis" (May 1996).*