

STRAIGHT FACTS ABOUT SCOLIOSIS

Scoliosis can cripple a child. But early treatment can work wonders.

A protruding shoulder blade. A tilted head. One hip or shoulder higher than the other. To an untrained eye, the signs of scoliosis may look like bad posture. But to a doctor, these symptoms can warn of potential trouble.

Scoliosis usually makes its presence known during the growth spurt between ages 10 and 15. This spine-curving condition forces the vertebrae to assume an "S" or "C" shape. As the spine grows sideways, it pulls the rib cage with it. Finally, the ribs become angled in such a way that they begin to stick out the back. If the condition is allowed to progress, the ribs can begin to crowd the lungs and heart, causing breathing problems.

Detecting scoliosis

During the early stages of scoliosis, there's rarely any pain or other signs. "Children with advanced cases can look perfectly normal to the untrained eye," explains **Dr. Mark Spoonamore**,

an orthopedist who specializes in spine surgery. "The condition is virtually impossible for parents to detect, especially if the child is heavy or muscular."

Children in early adolescence should be screened for scoliosis each time they visit their doctor. If the spine curves less than 20 degrees, the condition is usually watched, but rarely treated. Only three in 1,000 cases reaches the point where a brace or surgery is necessary.

Treatment depends on the child's age, future growth expectations, and degree of curvature. "If a 19-year-old has a 35-degree curve, no treatment may be necessary," says Spoonamore. "But for an 11-year-old at the beginning of his growth spurt, treatment should be started for the same problem."

Treatment has come a long way from the days when scoliosis patients had to wear braces that held them rigid from chin to hips—or have surgery that

required an incision down the entire backbone or across the chest.

Today, lightweight, underarm braces are available to stop a moderate curve from becoming worse. Virtually invisible under clothing, they're used until the patient's growth spurt subsides. When the curvature is located higher in the spine, however, a full-torso brace may be necessary.

If the curve exceeds 45 degrees, surgery may be the best answer. "At this point, the curvature will probably continue to worsen throughout adulthood," explains Spoonamore.

Unlike the old days, modern scoliosis surgery requires only a few tiny incisions beneath the arm. Using a slender tube called an endoscope equipped with a miniature camera and tiny surgical tools, doctors remove the donut-shaped cushions between the vertebrae.

Straightening the curve

Next, they graft particles of bone removed from the patient's ribs to fill in the resulting spaces. Then they slip a long rod into screws they've inserted into the vertebrae. The procedure is comparable to using a pole to straighten a tree that's grown crooked. During the next few months, the grafts fuse to the vertebrae, locking the spine into perfect position. In about a year, patients are often as flexible and strong as any teenager who hasn't had spinal surgery.

For referral to a physician specializing in scoliosis, call toll free 1-877-UCI-DOCS.

Treatment for severe scoliosis has come a long way from full body braces and long incisions down the spine.



Scoliosis Symptoms

- Uneven shoulders
- Protruding shoulder blades
- Uneven waistline
- Elevated hips
- Leaning to one side
- A hump on the child's back