

Caring for your Spine

Self Assessment

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SELF-ASSESSMENT

People are encouraged to take more responsibility for taking care of their health and monitoring their health. National organizations are encouraging physicians to educate and motivate their patients to perform periodic self-assessments so that they can become more familiar with their bodies and help detect early problems. Early detection leads to timely intervention and greater potential for a favorable outcome.

The purpose of many self-assessment approaches is to detect a life threatening disorders such as cancer or heart disease. Additional emphasis needs to be placed on screening for conditions that can lead to chronic pain and/or disability. Spine disorders should be at the top of the list because of the potential for chronic pain and disability.

There are numerous types of self-tests that can be performed to detect early evidence of spinal cord and spinal nerve compromise. There are simple procedures for assessing spinal flexibility. Individuals who are already aware of their spinal problems are not off the hook. They also need to perform periodic self-assessments to rule out progression of their problem, to detect early evidence of complications and to screen for new problems.

Signs and Symptoms Which Should not be Ignored

There are many bodily signs and symptoms that should prompt attention. It is impossible to provide a compressive list, but symptoms associated with potentially more serious conditions are noted below some of which are related to the spine.

General Health

- Loss of hearing
- Disturbed or impaired vision
- Chest pain/discomfort with or without radiating pain
- Unusual bleeding or discharge of the genital, urinary or GI tracts
- Change in bowel or bladder habits
- Sore that does not heal
- Persistent cough or hoarseness
- Difficulty swallowing
- Faintness and dizzy spells
- Rapid change in a wart or mole
- Shortness of Breath

Spinal Health

- Progressive limitation of spinal flexibility
- Persistent or recurrent radiating extremity pain
- Extremity numbness or tingling
- Extremity weakness or incoordination
- Loss of balance
- Progressive difficult walking
- Exertional muscle fatigue/weakness
- Increasing positional back pain
- Shock-like sensation along the spine or extremities with head or spinal movement
- Change in bowel or bladder habits

How to Monitor Spinal Health

There are two reasons why spinal screening tests are valuable. They provide a quantitative baseline of performance for which to measure change. They help the participant learn more about their body and physical capacity. Most neurological compromise in the spine occurs gradually secondary to compression of spinal nerves or the spinal cord associated with degenerative changes. The signs and symptoms are often intermittent and subtle during the early stages of development. Muscle weakness may initially present as performance-induced fatigue, thus, the benefit of isolated self-assessment of muscle performance. When spinal nerve compression does occur it usually occurs first on one side.

Flexibility: Become familiar with your neck and low back flexibility. Periodically assess spine flexibility. There are six primary planes of movement that can be checked in the neck or low back. They are flexion, extension, right and left rotation and right and left lateral bending. Let your physician know if there is a progressive loss of flexibility.

Coordination: Periodically assess your fine motor coordination. An easy way to do this in the upper extremities is to turn both hands palms up. Touch the tip of the thumb to each finger of the same hand one at a time. Go back and forth. You should be able to do this with relatively equal dexterity and speed on the right and left sides. You may perform a little better on your dominant side, which is normal. You can assess fine motor coordination in the legs by patting the ball of the foot lightly against a surface as fast as you can. You should be able to do this with relatively equal precision and speed on both sides. Some individuals will find they are able to perform a little better on their dominant leg. Inform your physician of any loss of coordination.

Balance: One way to check balance is to perform a heel-to-toe walk holding on an imaginary line on the floor as if you are on a tightrope. You should not attempt to perform this without assistance. If you have difficulty or find that this task has become more challenging let your physician know. Another simple test is to stand on one leg for 15 seconds. Then switch to the other. If you have difficulty or find that either test has become progressively more difficult inform your physician. A loss of balance leads to increased risk for falling.

