

The Most Frequently Asked Questions of Scoliosis Specialists

There are many conditions in which scoliosis may occur and some of these are quite rare. Given that 80 to 85 percent of scoliosis falls into the adolescent idiopathic category (AIS), the information given in this FAQ section, and indeed the website in general, relates to that condition. (See About Scoliosis on the website). The figures quoted and the treatments mentioned below refer to the management of AIS in the teenage years.

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Does scoliosis affect my general health?

Scoliosis does not cause any significant problems for the rest of the body. It does not affect the way in which the nerves, the heart or other internal organs work. Thoracic curves larger than 60 degrees may have a small impact on lung function but this is not noticeable, even when exercising. Very large curves (more than 100 degrees) can cause a reduction in lung function that may limit the ability to exercise.

Is scoliosis painful?

Many of those with scoliosis get minor backache. It is normally felt at or near the middle of the curve and it tends to come on after a long day or after vigorous sport. It improves with rest and it does not interfere with normal activities. Most often medication is not required. Discomfort may also be experienced in the area of the apex of the curve if the curve is developing rapidly. This is understandable because the tissues are being put on stretch.

If there is a clear complaint of pain this is a "red flag" and the matter should be investigated. There is no simple laboratory test whereby the diagnosis of idiopathic scoliosis can be established. As explained on the website About Scoliosis, the diagnosis is one of exclusion.

Clinical medicine is an art based on the laws of probability. If a spinal curve is really painful then the diagnosis is unlikely to be adolescent idiopathic scoliosis, at least in the teenage years.

Will scoliosis stop me playing sport?

No. Many of those with scoliosis excel at sport. Some are even national champions at their game. Scoliosis does not weaken the back. With rare exceptions there are no limits to playing all sports.

Are there some jobs that I won't be able to do?

As for sport, there are no major limitations. However, it is probably better to avoid jobs involving very heavy physical labour. Some employers, such as the military or the police, may require specialist reports before allowing someone with scoliosis to join.

Can exercise cure scoliosis?

There is no scientifically-proven exercise therapy that will make a structural scoliosis 'go away'. If this were so, there would be published papers in front-line, peer-reviewed medical journals supporting this form of treatment and such is **not** the case. However, it is to be noted that exercises aimed at improving trunk muscle strength are useful in managing the backache/back pain associated with scoliosis in adult life.

What exercises can help with slight scoliosis?

Many exercises that look at truncal control, strengthening and flexibility are of benefit. Dedicated scoliosis exercises are provided through a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist trained in the area. Unfortunately, there is no such directory which makes it tricky to find out who these people are.

General body conditioning through swimming, martial arts, dance, gymnastics, circuit/strength training, rowing, rock climbing etc. are usually more fun and engaging for children/adolescents and young adults.

Why is scoliosis treated?

For thoracic scoliosis, the main reason for treatment is to improve the person's appearance. That is, the person's back looks bad now or is going to look bad over time. For thoracolumbar and lumbar curves the principal indication for treatment is to bring the spine back into balance with normal or near normal distribution of forces on the lower lumbar spine to minimise wear and tear changes in later life. In the lower spine, poor alignment of the discs will lead to accelerated wear. This is a bit like poorly aligned car tyres wearing out faster.

What treatment works?

Two things and two things only have been shown to be effective in the management of scoliosis – bracing and surgery. There are many claims put forward by various branches of complementary and alternative medicine in the management of scoliosis and these claims are widespread on the internet. If a given treatment is scientifically-proven to be beneficial then supporting evidence will be found in front-line, peer-reviewed, international medical journals. The medical profession has a responsibility in these regards and it is a responsibility which is carefully guarded.

When is a brace used?

Bracing has a proven role in scoliosis. It is generally used in those who have at least 18 months of growth left and have a curve between 25 and 40 degrees. Some curves won't be suitable to brace. Some teenagers refuse to wear a brace and this is more often seen in boys than girls. A brace will need to be worn for between 16 and 20 hours per day until the person has stopped growing. It will come off for sport, bathing and the like.

Bracing has been shown to be effective in controlling progression of the curve in up to 80 percent of patients where the method is used.

There is no role for bracing after growth has ceased.

When is surgery needed?

Rarely – about 1 in 1,000 adolescent girls has a curve which comes into the surgical category. There are many idiopathic curves which, for one reason or another, are not suitable for bracing and surgery may be the best option for these curvatures.

What is the aim of surgery?

The aim is to reduce the degree of the scoliosis and improve the person's appearance whilst retaining as much mobility in the spine as possible.

What happens in surgery?

The scoliotic part of the spine is straightened and fused, using anchors (screws, hooks or wires) connected to metal rods (stainless steel, titanium or chrome cobalt). The implants (anchors and rods) act as an internal splint. The fusion comes about over a number of months after surgery as each bone joins to its neighbour. During the operation, the surgeon places bone graft along the scoliosis. This graft stimulates the vertebra to fuse to each other. The fusion occurs slowly and the bone graft needs to mature before it can absorb major mechanical stresses.

How much can the curve be straightened?

This varies, depending of the curve type and flexibility and other factors. As a guide, most curves can be corrected by 65-70 percent. For example, a 50 degree thoracic scoliosis could be corrected to less than 20 degrees. It is rare to be able to straighten a curve completely, nor is it necessary. An excellent cosmetic result can be achieved in most cases. By contrast, curve correction by surgery in congenital scoliosis is much less, usually in the order of 25-30 percent because the curves are more rigid.

Can the rib prominence be fixed?

The rib prominence is caused by the backward rotation of the ribs. With modern techniques the spine is derotated and with this correction of rib rotation takes place. If rib rotation is still prominent, sections of the ribs can be removed to flatten the prominence. This procedure is called costectomy and is done at the same time as the scoliosis operation. It does not lengthen the recovery time.

What are the dangers associated with surgery?

Scoliosis surgery is complex and challenging. It requires an experienced team of surgeons, anaesthetists, nurses and other staff. As with any surgery there are risks but these are usually small. Your surgeon will discuss these with you in detail.

How do you protect the spinal cord?

Any surgery around the spine has a risk of injury to the spinal cord or the nerves leading from it. The surgeon is extremely careful to protect them. Before the operation, neurological tests are done to ensure there are no abnormalities. An MRI scan of the spine is also usually done to make sure the cord is normally formed. During the operation it is usual to monitor spinal cord function by electrical tests. This way, the surgeon knows that the nerves are working normally. If necessary, a "wake-up" test may be carried out towards the end of the operation. In this manoeuvre the anaesthesia is lightened to a point that the patient can obey a command to move fingers and toes. Once satisfactory movement has been observed the anaesthesia is deepened again. The patient has no memory of the event.

Is it better to wait until I stop growing before having scoliosis surgery?

Generally not. Growth does not cause scoliosis but it certainly makes it worse. So, it is better to straighten the spine and fuse it before you stop growing rather than wait. Surgery will usually make you several centimetres taller as the curved spine has been straightened.

Can you feel the implants under the skin?

In thin people it is sometimes possible to feel parts of the implant. This will usually be between the shoulder blades.

Are the metal implants used in spinal surgery safe?

At present, there have been no confirmed cases of definitive systemic toxicity in humans due to chromium, nickel or titanium exposure as a result of spinal surgery implanted metal. Clearly, the potential health effects of chronic low-level systemic metal exposure are a concern. Spine Society of Australia members have contributed almost half of the current worldwide literature in this field and, amongst others, their research is ongoing to ensure that the safety of spinal surgery is more completely understood for current and future patients.

Can the implants be removed?

Yes. The implants are acting like a jelly mould or scaffold. They are holding the spine in the corrected position until the fusion is solid. This normally takes about 6 to 12 months. After this point, the implants aren't really needed. They can be removed, but only if they are causing problems like pain, or prominence. Infections around the rods can also occur, sometimes years after they were put in. For information on this topic see Removal of Correction Rods on our website.

How long does the operation take?

This depends on the severity of the scoliosis and the type of surgery planned. The typical scoliosis operation would take between 3 and 5 hours.

How long will I be in hospital?

The hospital stay depends on many factors. Most patients are in hospital for approximately one week. At discharge patients are walking independently and able to look after all their activities of daily living.

What will I be given for pain after the operation?

You will be on a drip that gives a controlled dose of morphine or a morphine- like drug (opiate). Sometimes, epidural infusions are used. After a few days, the pain is less and tablets or liquid analgesics are started. You will go home on these. Most patients have stopped taking medication within a few weeks.

When will my stitches come out?

Most often, dissolving stitches are used so there is nothing to remove except the overlying dressing. The dressing remains in place for about 10-14 days after the operation.

When can I go back to sport?

Contact/collision and high impact sports are to be avoided. Your surgeon will advise you on those sports which will be safe for you to play and when you can commence doing so.

When can I go back to school?

Most teenagers are back to school within four weeks after leaving hospital. Experience shows that it is safe for a patient to return to school when the mother thinks her child is up to it. At the beginning, part-time attendance may be in order.

Is scoliosis caused by carrying heavy school bags?

A categorical no. There is no scientific evidence whatsoever that AIS is caused by carrying heavy objects such as school bags, or by playing any particular sports.

Why do people get scoliosis?

The term idiopathic literally means a condition that occurs without any associated abnormality. For most children and adolescents with scoliosis a cause is never found. We do know that it is much more common in girls and that it runs in families. There is certainly a genetic tendency to develop scoliosis. This continues to be the subject of basic research. For more information see About Scoliosis on our website.

Do gynaecological disorders such as a retroverted uterus or fibroids cause lumbar pain in subjects with and without scoliosis?

It is important to distinguish between lumbar pain, that is pain in the hollow of the back and the lower part of this hollow, and pain which occurs over the sacrum and tailbone. Back pain is a very nondescript and sometimes misleading term. Gynaecological disorders do not cause lumbar pain. However, lumbar pain may be experienced in the early stages of labour. The dilatation of the cervix in the early stages of labour is linked with the lumbar pain.

In the male, inflammation of the prostate gland is not uncommon in younger men and occasionally lumbar pain is attributed to prostatitis. When patients with this complaint are questioned carefully, almost invariably the pain they experience is over the lower part of the sacrum and coccyx which is termed the peri-anal area.

How do I go about getting a second opinion on the management of my child's curve?

If a parent takes their child to see a specialist in any discipline and is not at ease with the advice given then the correct and best way to handle the situation is to say to the specialist that you would like a further opinion. Doctors always welcome this suggestion and will often suggest it themselves, sensing that a parent is having difficulty coming to terms with the advice offered. There is an old saying in medicine, and old sayings are usually sound – beware a doctor who does not welcome a request for a second opinion. If a parent is apprehensive about asking for a second opinion then the family doctor can forward the request on the parent's behalf. The position parents find themselves in is easily understandable. For example, if surgery is advised it is they, not the child, who have to make the decision. Further, if the child has a scoliosis this is a condition about which they nearly always know little if anything and this heightens their concerns. It is quite a different situation from, say, appendicitis which is a relatively common condition and the public at large appreciates this is a surgical emergency.

If a parent has difficulty in understanding the advice given at the initial consultation it is usually a good idea to ask for some further written information about the disorder or for a pertinent website address and then to return for another consultation at a later date. It is most important that a parent does not go off on a tangent

and seek a further opinion without informing the specialist who was first contacted. Indeed, this would be professionally quite discourteous. For scoliosis there are relatively few surgeons in any one city dealing with this problem and one needs to be sure that the person from whom a second opinion is sought is also a specialist in the field. The original specialist should write to the specialist from whom the second opinion is sought and provide the relevant clinical information, including his/her opinion.

Now, to the point which the public finds difficult to appreciate but which is most important. The specialist from whom the second opinion is sought communicates with the first specialist consulted and not directly with the parents. This is particularly important if, for one reason or another, the two opinions are quite different. This situation is uncommon and needs to be handled carefully. Hence, the guidelines detailed. Not infrequently the two specialists will discuss the problem by telephone and this is always helpful. It is then the responsibility of the first specialist consulted to relay the second opinion to the parents in the clearest of terms and also to pass on this information to the family doctor. If these guidelines are followed then the outcome is usually quite satisfactory. The guidelines for consultation as outlined apply throughout the medical profession and for patients in all age groups.

Adult Degenerative Scoliosis

Adult degenerative scoliosis is very prevalent and not a resource covered through the paediatric information on our website. It is rare for it to be a disability and unusual for it to need surgery. A plain radiograph is useful for confirmation of what is a clinical diagnosis. Referral to a deformity or orthopaedic spine surgeon can be useful for finding out information.

The Danger of Botox/ Platelet Rich Plasma or other Injections in Scoliosis

Botox has irreversible effects on muscle end plates, and can lead to long term weakness.

The practice of injecting Botox, Platelet Rich Plasma and other agents requires strong evidence, and injections into anyone under the age of 16 years should go before the Therapeutic Goods Administration demonstrating both safety and efficacy, and then properly trialled as an experimental procedure with long term follow up. This would be a registered trial that has governance and ethics approval through a children's hospital with strict adherence to protocols.

Fringe practitioners injecting substances into children and adolescents with scoliosis should be reported to the Medical Board of Australia and the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency.

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