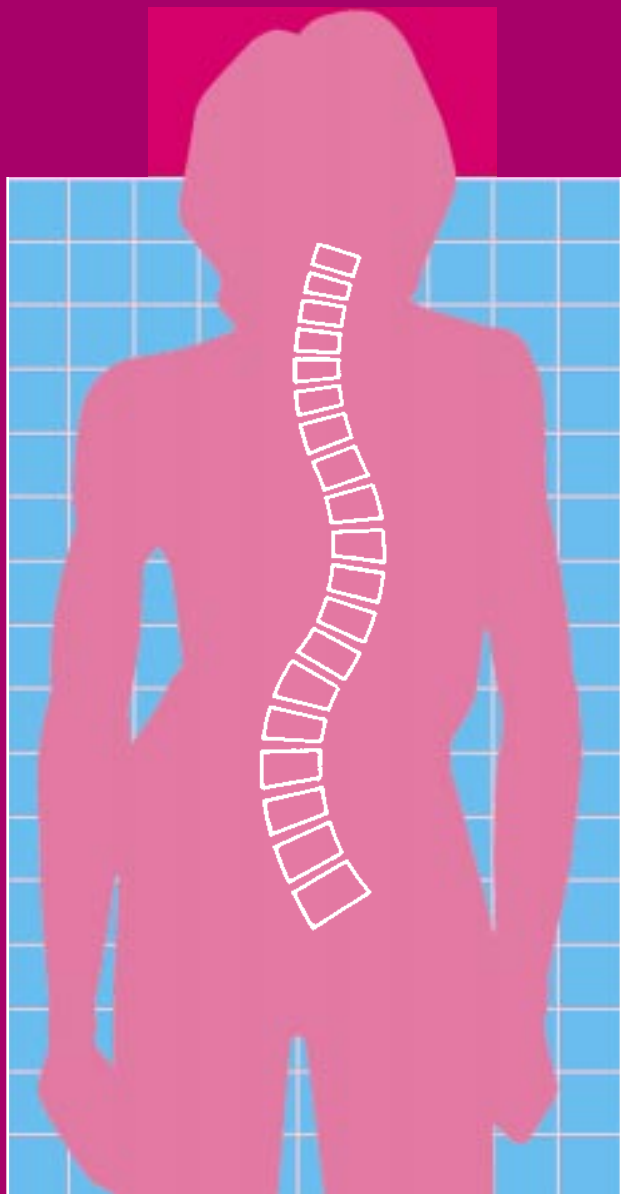


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*What Young People and Their  
Parents Need to Know About*

# **SCOLIOSIS**

*A Physical Therapist's Perspective*



*American Physical Therapy Association*

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## About APTA

**T**he American Physical Therapy Association is a national, professional organization representing nearly 70,000 physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and students throughout the United States.

APTA serves its members and the public by increasing the understanding of the physical therapist's role in the health care system and by fostering improvements in physical therapy education, practice, and research.

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### Acknowledgements

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## SCOLIOSIS

(“sko - lee - O - sis”)

Did you know... ?

- From 5 to 10 of every 100 young people from ages 9 to 14 will develop scoliosis.
- Most cases of scoliosis are mild and do not need any treatment except for regular exams.
- A few cases do need treatment so that other problems will not develop in later years.
- The best way to find and control scoliosis is to look for it often during the years when your bones are growing the fastest.

To find out more, read this booklet. It will tell you:

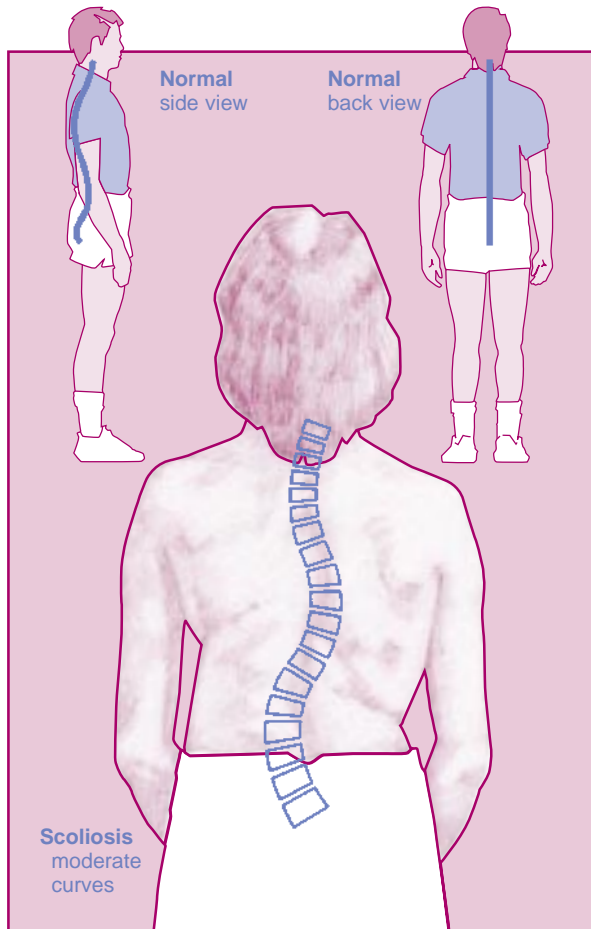
1. What scoliosis is.
2. Who gets it and when.
3. Why you should be checked often for it.
4. What your parents should look for at home.
5. How you are checked for scoliosis at school.
6. How scoliosis is treated.
7. How it takes a team effort to find and control scoliosis.
8. Scoliosis terms commonly used.
9. Where to get more information.

## What Scoliosis Is

Your spine has three slight curves—one in the neck, one in the upper back, and another in the lower back. These curves are normal and can be seen from a side view. From a back view, your spine should appear straight. If your spine has a side-to-side curve, the curve is called *scoliosis*.

The curve may be very small—*mild*. It may be bigger—*moderate*. Or it may be sharp—*severe*.

Scoliosis is not poor posture and is not caused by the way you carry objects. Scoliosis is not a disease. You cannot catch scoliosis from someone else and you cannot prevent it. For most people who have scoliosis, the causes are not known.



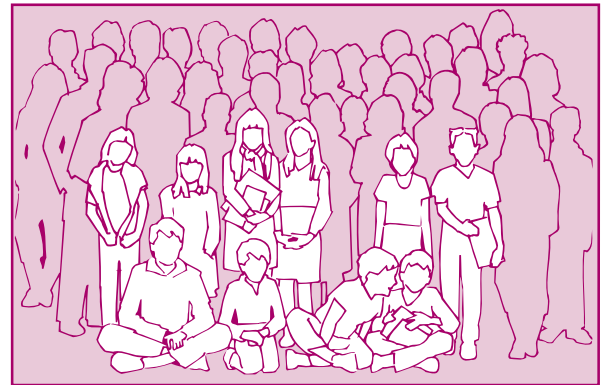
## Who Gets It and When

Both boys and girls can develop scoliosis. About the same number of boys and girls develop the *mild* form. *Moderate* or *severe* scoliosis is more common in girls than in boys.

Up to 10 in 100 young people will develop at least a mild case of scoliosis. Only a few of these mild cases will become moderate or severe.

Scoliosis happens more in some families than in others. It also occurs more often in people with cerebral palsy, polio, muscular dystrophy, or spina bifida.

Scoliosis usually develops during the years when the bones are growing the fastest—from ages 9 to 14 years. It is often first detected when the young person is around age 11.



## Why You Should Be Checked Often for Scoliosis

You will almost never feel any pain when scoliosis is first developing, so regular checks are very important. If scoliosis is detected early, you can receive treatment that may control the condition and prevent other problems.

If the curve increases, you eventually may have back pain, lose flexibility, and appear bent over. You also may be more likely to develop arthritis, respiratory infections, and heart problems as you grow older.

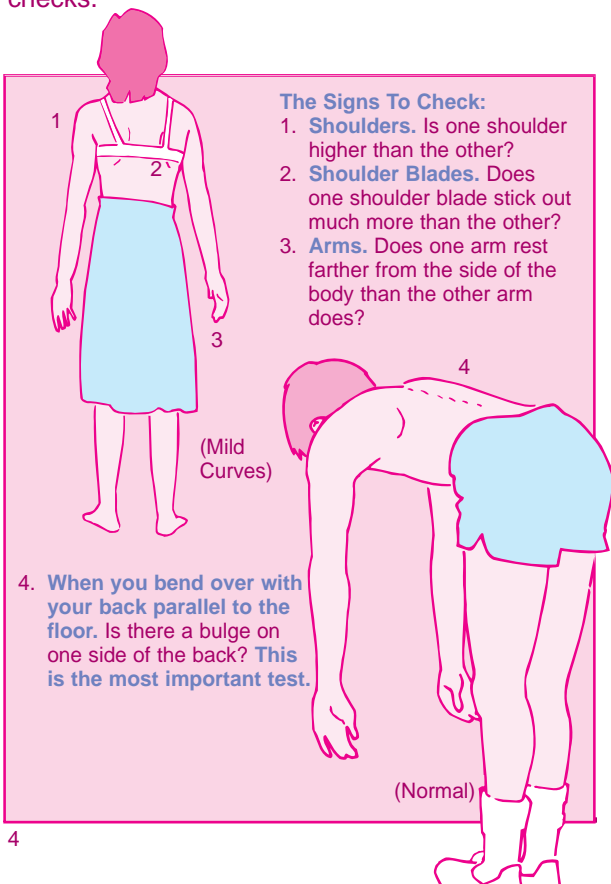
## What Your Parents Should Look for at Home

Your parents can be a big help in checking for early warning signs of scoliosis. They can see some signs when you are wearing clothes—your pantlegs or skirt hems may look uneven. But the earliest signs can be seen only with a clear look at your back.

Checking at home should start when you are 9 years old and should take place every 6 months until you are 14 years old.

Even if you have one or more of these signs, you do not necessarily have scoliosis. But to be sure, your parents should call your doctor or clinic to ask if a further exam is recommended.

**When you're having a regular health check-up...** ask your health care provider to check for scoliosis. Physical exams for school, sports, or summer camps are good times for scoliosis checks.

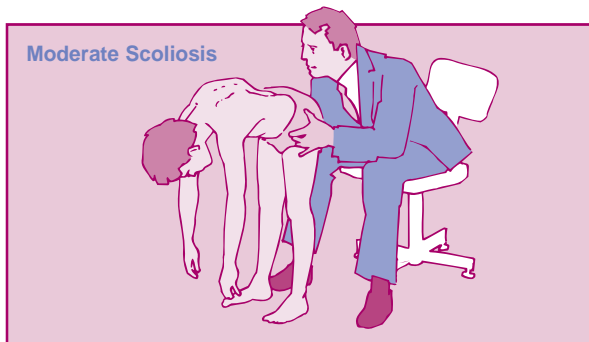


## How You Are Checked for Scoliosis at School

In some schools, students are checked (screened) for signs of scoliosis. The screening takes less than one minute.

Here is how you are screened.

- Girls and boys are checked separately and privately.
- Boys are asked to strip to the waist. Girls are asked to pull up or take off their shirt or sweater. They may wear a bra, bathing suit top, or halter.
- While standing, you are checked for the same signs your parents looked for at home.
- You are asked to bend forward with your back parallel to the floor—the *Forward Bending Test*. Your back and ribs are checked.



The screening program often has three steps:

1. A physical education teacher checks all students and lists those who may have poor posture or abnormal spinal curves. Most students do not go beyond this step.
2. A school nurse or physical therapist does a second screening of only those students on the list.
3. Letters go home to parents whose children need a further exam.

If your school sends home a letter saying you may have an early sign of possible scoliosis, you should have a checkup by your family doctor or health care clinic as soon as possible.

## How Scoliosis is Treated

If your doctor agrees that you show signs of having scoliosis, your back may be X-Rayed to measure the *degree of curve*. Ask to see your X-Rays.

Treatment is individual. You may not receive the same treatment as your classmate or neighbor. Keep in touch with your health care provider to learn what is best for you.

**Mild curves...** may stay the same, get better by themselves, or get worse. They should be checked, usually every 6 months. Checkups make prompt treatment possible if the curve shows signs of getting worse.

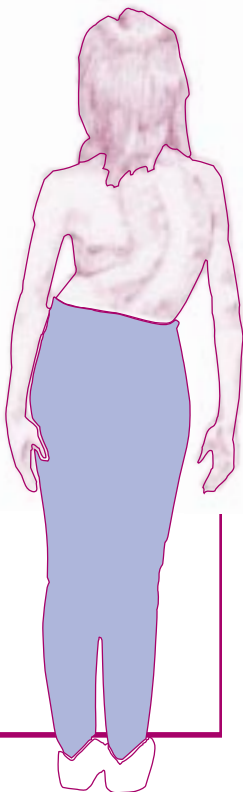
If you have mild scoliosis, a physical therapist or other health care provider may give you exercises to improve your flexibility and strengthen the muscles that support your spine. Exercises are *not* a treatment and do *not* prevent or cure scoliosis. However, most forms of treatment are more successful on flexible spines than on rigid ones.

**Moderate Curves...** or a curve that is getting worse rapidly, may need a **back brace or a scoliosis jacket together with exercises**. You may take part in most sports and other normal activities when you wear jacket or brace.

Another treatment is **electrical stimulation**, which has been successful for certain types of scoliosis. This treatment is still being studied.

**Severe curves...** may need surgery. Surgery usually can be avoided if the condition is detected and treated early.

Prompt detection and early treatment usually can control scoliosis, even though there is no “cure.” Avoid people who claim “miracle cures.”

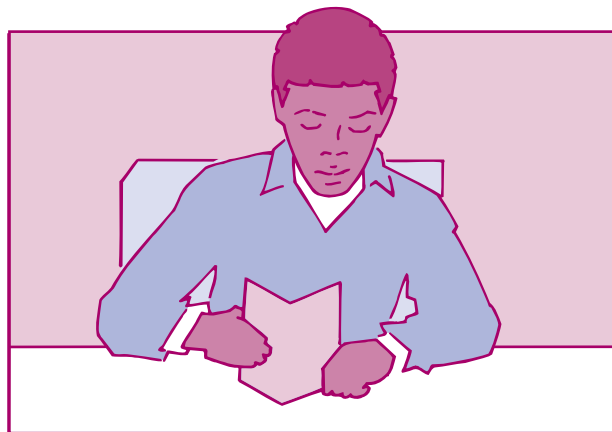


## It Takes A Team Effort to Find and Control Scoliosis

...and *you* are part of this team.

### You—the Young Person

- Help with home checks and take part in school screening.
- If you have scoliosis, learn more about it and its treatment.
- Cooperate with treatment to get the best possible result.
- Ask questions about anything you don't understand.



### Parent

- Do home checks.
- Ask for scoliosis checks during regular physical exams.
- Have your child take part in school screening.
- If your school suggests a further checkup, arrange it promptly.
- If you have doubts about the diagnosis or suggested treatment, ask questions and consider getting a second opinion.
- Speak openly about scoliosis with your child to relieve fears and encourage cooperation.

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Plus some or all of these professionals...

**Physical Education Teacher...** does posture checking and scoliosis screening at school.

**School or District Nurse...** may do a second screening at school... notifies parents of results.

**Primary Health Care Provider** (doctor or other provider)... diagnoses scoliosis... monitors minor curves... refers young person to orthopedist if curve gets worse.

**Orthopedist...** does followup X-Rays... prescribes treatment... does surgery in severe cases.

**Physical Therapist...** trains and consults with school staff... may do school screening... works with doctors and other providers... shows young people which exercises to do and how to do them... helps young people solve problems in wearing braces or jackets comfortably.

**And Others...** as needed in your case.

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## Other Terms You May Hear

1. **Classification.** Over four-fifths of scoliosis cases are **idiopathic scoliosis**—curves that have no known cause. The rest are either **osteopathic** (resulting from a bone abnormality) or **myopathic** (resulting from a disease in the muscles) or **neuropathic** (related to a neurological condition).
2. **Types of curves.** A **functional** curve is flexible and changes or goes away when the person bends sideways. A **structural** curve doesn't go away when the person changes position.
3. **Locations of curves.** A **lumbar** curve is in the lower part of the spine. A **thoracic** curve is in the upper part of the spine. A **thoracolumbar** curve is a longer curve that goes from the upper to the lower part of the spine.

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## REMEMBER...

- You can find scoliosis early, if you know exactly what to look for.
- Check often for signs of scoliosis between ages 9 and 14 years, when growth is rapid.
- Take part in your school's screening program if available.
- Ask your primary health care provider to check for scoliosis during regular checkups.
- Take action promptly if your school tells you that you may have signs of scoliosis.
- With early checking and early treatment, a mild scoliosis can stay mild and not affect you later in life.
- Treatment is available to help control scoliosis.
- Find and treating scoliosis is a team effort. *You are a key member of the team!*

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## Where To Get More Information

**The Scoliosis Association, Inc.**  
One Penn Plaza  
New York, New York 10119

**The National Scoliosis Foundation, Inc.**  
72 Mt. Auburn Street  
Watertown, Massachusetts 02172

**Scoliosis Research Society**  
430 North Michigan Avenue, Suite 800  
Chicago, Illinois 60611

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*Prepared as a public service by the*



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