

What Is Scoliosis?

Fast Facts: An Easy-to-Read Series of Publications for the Public

Scoliosis (sko-lee-O-sis) is a disorder in which there is a sideways curve of the spine, or backbone. Curves are often S-shaped or C-shaped. In most people, there is no known cause for this curve. This is known as idiopathic (id-ee-o-PATH-ik) scoliosis.

People with milder curves may only need to visit their doctor for periodic exams. Some people who have scoliosis need treatment.

Who Has Scoliosis?

People of all ages can have scoliosis. The most common type is idiopathic scoliosis in children age 10 to 12 and in their early teens. This is the time when children are growing fast. Girls are more likely than boys to have this type of scoliosis.

Scoliosis can run in families. A child who has a parent, brother, or sister with idiopathic scoliosis should have regular checkups by the family doctor.

What Causes Scoliosis?

In most people with scoliosis, the cause is not known. In some cases, there is a known cause.

Doctors classify curves as:

- Nonstructural, which is when the spine is structurally normal and the curve is temporary. In these cases, the doctor will try to find and correct the cause.
- Structural, which is when the spine has a fixed curve. The cause could be a disease, injury, infection, or birth defect.

How Is Scoliosis Diagnosed?

Doctors use a medical and family history, physical exam, and tests when checking a person for scoliosis. An x ray of the spine can help the doctor decide if a person has scoliosis. The x ray lets the doctor measure the curve in degrees (such as 25 degrees) and see its location, shape, and pattern.

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