

SPINAL DEGENERATION : PART OF THE AGING PROCESS ?

"Joints don't break down with age alone, but rather with disuse, misuse, or no use. It just so happens as we get older we have more and more opportunity to do less and less". Murray Allen, M.D.

Despite medicine's best efforts, degenerative joint disease, also known as osteoarthritis, continues to be one of our society's most common - and tragic - degenerative diseases. By age 30, about one third of the population will show osteoarthritic changes on spinal x-ray, and by 70 years of age degenerative joint disease is almost universal.

The prevalence of osteoarthritis has led to two widespread misconceptions. Many people attribute back or neck pain to the presence of spinal degeneration. Similarly, many believe spinal degeneration is a normal and inevitable aging process. Both these traditional beliefs are now starting to be questioned as more, and better, research is expanding our knowledge of this condition.

Although recent medical research has identified a possible genetic component to certain forms of osteoarthritis in certain individuals, spinal degeneration is still considered largely a "wear and tear" condition. In the simplest terms, the spine is comprised of vertebra separated from one another by discs (analogous to cushions or sponges). As we age, these discs undergo subtle biochemical changes resulting in a loss of thickness and cushioning ability. Evidence now suggests these biochemical alterations in the disc may be a product of chronic undernourishment due to faulty spinal mechanics, rather than an inevitable part of the aging phenomenon. Faulty spinal mechanics is primarily the result of accidents, microtrauma and postural distortions. Trauma and abnormal posture produces malalignment of the spine, further contributing to spinal wear and tear.

The major significance of spinal osteoarthritis, however, lies in its effect on the nervous system. Studies show even minor changes in spinal configuration - the beginning stages of the degeneration process - result in compromise of the spinal cord and associated nerve function. As the arthritic changes progress in severity so does nervous system compromise. The potential implications of this are enormous, as science confirms the nervous system controls every tissue, organ and system in the body. For example, evidence shows there is a direct connection between the nervous and immune systems.

The process of spinal degeneration may not be an inevitable part of aging. This is evident from the fact many older people have healthy, well-preserved discs and no sign of disc or joint degeneration. Yet severe degenerative change can be seen in young adults if there has been trauma or prolonged, abnormal spinal stress, such as the result of postural distortion and malalignment.

Chiropractic care can significantly benefit osteoarthritis sufferers by gradually improving movement in dysfunctional joints and through restoring normal spinal curves and alignment. In addition to relieving pain, chiropractic may also assist in preventing further degeneration from occurring. The most important contribution chiropractic care can have to spinal health, however, may lie in prevention. Through maintaining optimum joint movement and spinal alignment, regular chiropractic care can help prevent spinal degeneration from starting in the first place.

An ounce of prevention...

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