

Physical Therapy's Role in Maintaining a Healthy Spine

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As we age, regular exercise plays an increasingly prominent role in reducing the risk of developing spine-related problems. For those in or approaching the golden years, it's important to live an active lifestyle that focuses on healthy posture, function and movement.

It's normal to experience some functional decline as our bones and intervertebral discs age over time, but that doesn't mean that aches, pains and joint stiffness should go unaddressed. And yet, a good portion of senior citizens in the United States are living with spine-associated pain: A European Spine Journal study found that back and neck pain are top complaints among about 20 to 25% of the population over 70 years old.

Some of the keys to caring for your spine—and ensuring your ability to participate in a full and active lifestyle—include following a safe and effective exercise program and maintaining your general health and well-being. Whether these are steps you're actively taking or not, it's a good rule of thumb to schedule an appointment with a physical therapist to address the current—and future—health of your spine.

Following a thorough evaluation of your medical history and activity level, a physical therapist is trained to identify physical impairments such as deficits in strength and mobility and to relate the impact these impairments have on your spine. The information gathered is used to address any functional limitations you might have and to design an at-home exercise program to keep your spine healthy. Specific manual therapy interventions provided by the physical therapists will also allow individuals to move more freely with less pain and more comfortably transition to an exercise program. In addition to manual therapy, targeted exercises to strengthen targeted areas and postural modifications, back and neck stretches are important for improving flexibility, joint function and range of motion and for preventing spine-related injuries.

With the right modifications and interventions, it's possible to live an active and healthy lifestyle while lowering your chances of back and neck injuries and pain as you age. By actively maintaining the health of our spines, we're rewarded with the ability to move about freely, bend with flexibility and stand upright—functions that are easy to take for granted.