

STOP Back Pain: World Spine Day's Call to Action



Many people frequently experience stiffness and body aches, but if you find yourself facing these issues often, it may be advisable to seek professional assistance to address your poor posture.

Common situations in daily life, such as an improperly set up workspace, constantly bending over smartphones or tablets, and engaging in repetitive movements like bending and twisting while taking care of children and managing a busy household, can all contribute to these problems.

Regrettably, these habits can lead to a range of aches and pains that intensify over time, eventually resulting in chronic musculoskeletal discomfort. Janice Chan Vey Lian, Deputy Director at the Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the International Medical University (IMU), emphasizes the significance of addressing these issues in conjunction with World Spine Day 2023, an annual event held on 16 October aimed at raising awareness about spinal health. She sheds light on ways to alleviate and prevent back pain, using the acronym S.T.O.P., and provides these tips to “stop” backpain.

S = Sit Up Straight and Stretch!

The main factors involved are poor posture and lifestyle habits, as we are often not conscious about our posture and the way we carry out daily tasks, from the way we use digital devices to how we lift and/or bear heavy things. In many instances, this is compounded by pandemic-related disruptions such as studying/working from home as well as changes in our lifestyle and career that we were not well-prepared for. To help prevent musculoskeletal pain, we need to be mentally aware of our posture. As simple as it sounds, sitting up straight and stretching regularly can help.

T = Take a break

The theme for World Spine Day 2023 is ‘Move Your Spine’. While most people already understand that they need to move regularly, this needs to translate into action so Janice advises setting a timer for scheduled reminders to get up and move your spine.

O = Organise

Try some of these tips from Janice to organise your home and work space for better posture:

- Adjust the height of your computer screen to eye level using books or sturdy boxes

- Enlarge the view and brightness of your screen so you can see and read without having to lean forward
- Use a chair with good back support, placed at a height that allows your feet to rest flat on the floor with knees bent at a 90-degree angle
- Use a stool to avoid squatting while gardening or bathing babies
- Place needed items within easy reach to minimise bending and/or twisting at the waist. For example, parents of babies and young children can sit on the bed to change diapers instead of standing and bending over at the waist
- Manage heavy loads by packing lightly and/or using a bag made of a lighter material.
- Distribute weight evenly. As a general rule, Janice advises carrying less than 10% of our body weight, evenly distributed across both shoulders. Backpacks (when worn properly) allow both shoulders to bear the weight or switch sides regularly when carrying a handbag or tote
- Carry smaller or lighter loads and make several trips rather than lifting one large, heavy load
- Use the correct posture – lift using your knees, place frequently used items as close to you as possible, and place heavy items on higher levels
- Learn proper fitness and exercise techniques by enlisting the help of a trainer; if needed, ask their advice on how to modify your workout to prevent strain or injury

P = seek professional help

No quick fix for backpain

“Many people who see a chiropractor have problems like scoliosis and back pain. We help to identify likely problems and recommend ways to improve spine health. These may include alignment of the spine, helping to improve your range of movement, optimising the way you perform your daily tasks, or changing the way your working space is organised to reduce overall strain on your body and prevent injury,” explained Janice.

She also advised, “Many people are looking for a quick solution but it must be understood that most types of musculoskeletal pain are built up over time hence it will take time to address these problems. The good thing is, these changes need not be drastic or expensive. I always advise small adjustments that are immediate and sustainable which you can do right now, with what you have around the house.”

Lastly, she added, “The most important thing is for patients to communicate their problems, needs and expectations for treatment. Many times, patients are reluctant to speak up and this will impact the outcome, so my number one advice would be: Make sure you are clear about what you want and if you are not sure, keep asking.”

When it is time to see a chiropractor

Among younger adults, scoliosis is a common complaint while for older patients it is usually back pain. Overall, many people come with unspecified back pain, especially those who have suffered with it for a long time and have not found sufficient relief from other options. A chiropractor can help to address long-standing problems like these and improve overall well-being.

How can a chiropractor help (and is it the same as a physiotherapist) – A chiropractic specialist can help to relieve a wide range of musculoskeletal pain. These may include alignment of the spine, helping to improve your range of movement, optimising the way you perform your daily tasks, or changing the way your working space is organised to reduce overall strain on your body, and prevent injuries. Chiropractors focus more on musculoskeletal problems while physiotherapists are more often involved in rehabilitation and training. Both of these practices may also function concurrently, depending on the needs of the patient.

Finding a chiropractor – Chiropractors are registered and recognised by the Ministry of Health Malaysia, and all licensed practitioners will soon be listed on the official portal of the Traditional and Complementary Medicine Division.

What to expect from their first session – The chiropractor will conduct a medical history assessment which will include psychosocial questions to get a better idea of your personal and work life that may have an impact on your musculoskeletal health. You will be given a medical gown and the chiropractor will conduct a physical examination. This includes observing the way you walk and testing your range of motion. The chiropractor will also conduct some tests to stress and evaluate the joint for any restrictions.

Based on the physical examination, the likely causes will be identified and addressed. Your medical history will also be taken into account, as certain chronic conditions could impact the type of interventions.

What to bring when seeing chiropractor – You may bring along anything related to your medical history that might give your chiropractor insights into your medical history such as recent blood tests or scans.

How many sessions are needed – The number of sessions as well as the frequency would depend on the individual’s need. In acute situations, such as after an accident or sports injury, the goal is recovery so the sessions would be more frequent. Others may need to have their sessions spaced out over a longer period.