

## Caring for the Mature Spine Helping Seniors Enjoy Their Golden Years

by Dr. Richard A. Saladino



**A Universal Concern**  
*In the United States, a senior citizen is defined as someone able to retire with full Social Security benefits at age 65.*

Regardless of whether you have reached that age yourself, or have parents and grandparents who fit into that category, it is important to understand and appreciate the unique health problems faced by seniors—along with possible health solutions—to help serve, honor and respect those who have spent much of their lives supporting the younger generation.

### FEAR OF FALLING

I vividly remember a television commercial that aired years ago about an elderly person who, after falling down, cried out, "Help! I've fallen, and I can't get up!" When I first saw the commercial as a young man, I must admit I found it somewhat humorous. But I have learned that seniors do not think that commercial is funny at all. Why? The reason is that most seniors have a very real fear of falling—and a much deeper fear of not being able to get up afterward. Falls are inevitable, but by staying active and physically fit, seniors can keep their spines flexible, and at the same time, maintain their strength and coordination.

### THE MATURE SPINE

Seniors lose height in their intervertebral discs as they age because the cartilage dries out and degenerates. The spinal vertebrae (there are 26 total) get compressed and lose mass. The facet joints become arthritic. The characteristic "widow's hump" often exaggerates—especially in former office workers, accountants and bookkeepers, who spent most of their daily lives hunched over at desks.

Compression fractures commonly result in elderly patients not being able to touch their head to the pillow when

lying on their back in bed. Shoulder and neck can be altered, including a stiff restricted neck and limited shoulder motion, loss of flexibility, poor posture (skeletal misalignment and imbalance), and weak muscles (strength loss) may result. This aging process—often combined with past traumas—results in what we as chiropractors call "subluxations."

### KEEPING THE SPINE IN SHAPE

Believe me, restoring joint mobility and nerve function through chiropractic adjustments really works! One of the most gratifying patient encounters I have ever had occurred at a senior facility when a patient handed me his walker and said, "Doc, I want to give this to you...because I will not be needing it anymore!"

Doctors of chiropractic can monitor a senior's range of motion and help improve spinal restrictions caused by subluxations and muscle imbalance through periodic chiropractic visits. Exercising while in the swimming pool is highly recommended as a form of daily exercise. The buoyancy of the water insures that no trauma to the joints occurs, while producing a good form of exercise to the whole body.

By concentrating on neck and lower back exercises that improve flexibility, posture and strength, the senior can dramatically enhance the chiropractic care he/she is receiving. And remember, myself as well as other doctors of chiropractic, practice non-force techniques that are preferred for the more severely compromised spines that have arthritis, osteoporosis and any developmental anomalies.

### STAYING YOUNG

All in all, not a very pretty picture! So, what are the solutions? Simply put, seniors need to stay active as long as they possibly can. They should attempt housework, yard work and hygienic practices daily. However, a good rule of thumb to remember is, "If it hurts to do it, don't do it!" The toughest patients are the ones who lie around in bed and lose almost all interaction with others. For that reason, I recommend against

seniors having a television set in their bedroom. If they want to watch television, they should go out to the den or living room and interact with the family (or other residents if in a nursing home).

Seniors in independent or assisted living facilities should be encouraged to attend the daily exercises offered by the activities director. In my opinion this should not be optional, it is essential. For seniors who exercise on their own, they should keep a log or journal that tracks progress from week to week. They also should be encouraged to share it with an "accountability partner" for support and positive feedback.

Many seniors take far too many prescriptions and over the counter medications for their various pains and con-

ditions. Sadly, a potential side effect from ingesting so many medications is that it causes the patient to become extremely disoriented, which can lead to dizziness and periodic falls. Less pain and fewer health problems lead to fewer drugs and their accompanying side effects.

Finally, the foods seniors eat are very important. A diet emphasizing vegetables, fruits, nuts, whole grains, lean meat and cold-water fish is ideal for people of all ages. Vitamin D supplements are also promising, in conjunction with calcium/magnesium, to combat metabolic bone disease that often affect seniors. Be on the lookout for future articles in the *Ledger* regarding these subjects.

*Dr. Richard A. Saladino received his Bachelor's Degree of Science in Biology and Chemistry from the State University of New York at Albany. He received his Doctorate from Palmer College of Chiropractic in Davenport, Iowa.*

*He is Diplomate of the National Board of Chiropractic Examiners. He is a long-standing member of the Florida Chiropractic Association, and has been an active practicing Chiropractic physician since 1988.*

*Dr. Saladino is now internationally recognized as a Chiropractic Expert by the American Board of Medical Examiners. He has lectured at many colleges and institutions, and would be happy to educate you with regards to any health matter in order to meet your needs.*

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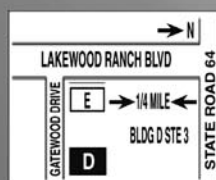
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