

Spine is the lifeline!

Interview with Dr H S Chhabra, medical director, Indian Spinal Injuries Center

Dr H S Chhabra is secretary Governing Body member, chief of Spine Service and medical director, Indian Spinal Injuries Centre. He obtained his master's in Orthopaedics from Safdarjung Hospital, New Delhi. He is the president of International Spinal Cord Society (ISCoS), president elect of Association of Spine Surgeons of India (ASSI); member secretary of Spinal Cord Society (Indian Chapter); secretary of Association of National Board Accredited Institutions (ANBAI); executive member of Asian Spinal Cord Networking (ASCoN); and Governing Body member of Regional Spinal Injuries Centres of Punjab, UP and Cuttack. He is also a faculty and guide for DNB Fellowship in Spine Surgery accredited by National Board of Examination, Ministry of Health, Government of India.



How can a person doing agricultural work and farm labor take care of their spine?

I would start by sharing two things for people in agricultural work. One is how to prevent back pain and the other is how to prevent injuries as agricultural injuries are quite common. Most spinal injuries occur in semi-urban or rural settings. Back pain is the second-most common ailment after the common cold. Women in rural areas have to walk long distances to fetch water and lift fodder for the cattle. If we look at the reports, in the US, a major cause of loss of man hours to the industry is due to back pain. It is very important for all of us to know how to prevent back pain so that it does not affect us. Back pain is like an epidemic, so widely spread.

In technology and machine-led work, problems with the back have risen as there is little ongoing physical labor to keep the worker in shape. What do you have to say on this?

The reasons for back pain are different in urban and rural areas. In urban areas, the sedentary lifestyle owing to desk jobs, long working hours, and incorrect postures and lack of exercise are key reasons for back-related issues. On the other hand, in rural areas, although back pain is an issue, the reasons are different. First, the people work so hard that they don't take care of their back; and second they lift such heavy loads. It is advisable for people following that type of routine to do

some warm-up exercises for the back before doing the physical labor. This reduces the need for medication too.

For rural counterparts, the way one lifts the loads is crucial. If we try to lift a load stretching our hand from a distance, the lever arm, being stretched, exerts pressure on the back, as compared to lifting the load once one is close to it, bends the knees, and then lifts. Also one should keep away from lifting heavy loads once the muscles are fatigued. To keep our back healthy, the day's work should be planned in a way that we do all the heavy work in the middle of the day once the body is warmed up. Being in a sustained state for a longer time increases pressure on the back, e.g., standing for a long while, lifting loads, or walking long distances. Taking a break for a few seconds and stretching your limbs helps in this regard.

In case of a spinal injury, what should be the course of action?

The spine is essential for many essential bodily functions. It gives the body structure and support and allows you to move about freely and bend with flexibility. The spine is also designed to protect the spinal cord, a column of nerves that connects the brain to the rest of your body, allowing you to control your movements and several autonomic functions. Any injury in the spinal cord will affect the functions either temporarily or permanently. If all the cells are damaged, this is termed as a complete injury. Since spinal cord cells cannot regenerate on their own, the patient will remain in a state of paralysis. If there is neck injury, both hands and feet are affected, it is a state of tetraplegia. Similarly, a partial state of paralysis is paraplegia.

There are increased number of accidents and chances of injury on motorized and non-motorized two-wheel vehicles. A wide spectrum of injuries can be sustained in this case, ranging from bruises to critical injuries affecting the head or spine. We should be aware of certain red flags that indicate that specialized advice and care are needed. In case an injury leads to unconsciousness, extreme pain in the head or spinal cord, and reduced or no control over urine and stool, a doctor's visit is necessary to rule out the presence of any serious injury. In areas where there are no specialized services available or services are remotely located, telemedicine can have great potential. Telemedicine can help bridge the gap between the caregiver and care seeker. This requires the creation of a network, which will take time. On the other hand, one feasible solution is for local health service providers to be capacitated to identify basic emergencies and help stabilize patients and accordingly move the patient to a specialized center. In case the injury is not critical, care can be provided by the local caregivers, which includes applying cold packs, prescribing anti-inflammatory tablets or injections and ointments, and maintaining mobility. Bed rest is not advised these days as it is counterproductive when there is no critical injury.

Please give us insights into the working of the International Spinal Cord Society and Association of Spine Surgeons of India where you have held key positions of president and president elect respectively.

The Association of Spine Surgeons of India and the International Spinal Cord Society are bodies that work to develop what can be done to build awareness and treatment of spinal injuries at a national level. These bodies have come up with their strategic plans to further strengthen their efforts. It is the need of the hour to train professionals and create awareness on how to prevent and treat injuries of the spine. There are several myths, including the need for bed rest and that spinal surgeries are unsuccessful. Only 2–3 percent of patients need surgery; others can be given treatment and cured. We have made many e-learning modules where patients and their relatives can self-learn about ailments and their prevention and care.

What is your message to keep the spine healthy?

My message to everyone is based on the dictum, "Prevention is better than cure," because in case there is injury, there is no reversal, and the patient can only be rehabilitated to undertake some of the routine things. There are some small steps that can be followed to keep ourselves safe from such mishaps, including wearing helmets and seatbelts while driving, avoid making children sit in the front while on two-wheelers, and prevent injuries resulting from diving and falls.

I would recommend maintaining a healthy lifestyle, including the way we sit, stand, and bend. If we include some small exercises, including a brisk walk in our daily routine, we can make a lot of difference.

(This is an edited and translated excerpt of Dr H S Chhabra's radio interview with Pooja O. Murada, director, Communications, S M Sehgal Foundation)