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How Alternatives Measure Up

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Can alternative or complementary types of bodywork—including physical therapy, massage, chiropractic, craniosacral therapy, acupuncture and yoga—help people with height issues? There's no lack of anecdotal claims to that effect.

The problem, says Sam Wiesel, head of the orthopedics department at Georgetown University School of Medicine, is that "nobody's done any real scientific studies, prospective studies, to demonstrate that."

Lisa Upledger, a chiropractor and a practitioner of craniosacral therapy at the Upledger Institute in Florida, responds differently. An offshoot of osteopathy, craniosacral therapy, she explains, is a school of hands-on bodywork that focuses on the membranes and fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord.

Craniosacral work, Upledger says, releases chronic contractions of the fascia and connective tissue. "I've had patients come back and say, 'I'm taller now than I was before,'" Upledger reports. "One woman in her forties put on almost an inch," she adds.

Other complementary approaches that may benefit people who have lost height include the Feldenkrais method, which teaches "awareness through movement" and involves "kinesthetic communication . . . through gentle touching and movement." Says Becci

Parsons, a Feldenkrais instructor in Seattle, "After almost every Feldenkrais lesson, most people get up from the table and say, 'I feel six inches taller.'"

However, neither the Feldenkrais nor craniosacral approach is geared toward helping people become taller. Any height gain is incidental to the main goals of improving health and ease of movement.

Chiropractic may also be able to stop or reverse height loss. Jerome McAndrews, national spokesman for the American Chiropractic Association, emphasizes that the back "is a highly complex, dynamic system." Scoliosis, an S-shaped curve in the spine, can "cause a shortening in stature," McAndrews says, which spinal manipulation can correct.

"You see elderly people walking in the mall," McAndrews said, "who have a hump in their back and seem to be starting at the floor. Inside of a week I have taken patients like that and returned them to an upright posture."

But Anthony Rosner, director of research and education for the Foundation for Chiropractic Education and Research, and a biochemist with a Harvard PhD, says that while chiropractic can help with many back problems, "there has been no hard data that you can stand behind" proving that chiropractic reverses height loss.

—Bob Guddin

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