

CLINICAL SKILLS: EXAMINATION OF THE SPINE

There are 6 main concepts that need to be remembered for ALL of the regional examination of the musculoskeletal system:

1. **Position** – always position your patient as you would like to examine them before you begin
2. **Look** – inspect and observe the patient and around the patient's bedside
3. **Feel** – for example, feeling a joint to see if it is hot or swollen
4. **Move** – actively (the patient moves the joint) then passively (you do the movements for them)
5. **Function** – can the patient move their joints in order to complete day to day tasks?
6. **Special tests** – if applicable
 - **Wash hands**
 - **Introduce yourself**
 - **Ask permission to examine the relevant part of the body**
 - **Expose the patient – ideally in underwear only, at least exposing the joint of interest and the joints above and below this**
 - **Reposition the patient – standing up at first**

Position:

- Patient standing up

Look:

- Front, sides and back
- For normal cervical kyphosis, thoracic lordosis and lumbar kyphosis
- For scoliosis
- Question mark sign in Ankylosing Spondylitis

Feel:

- The spine of each vertebra
- The paravertebral muscles
- The sacroiliac joints

Move:

- **Actively:**
 - Ask patient to touch their toes as you put two fingers on 2 vertebrae. They should significantly move apart as the patient bends forward.
 - Assess lateral flexion
 - Assess cervical movements:
 - Touch ear to shoulder (lateral flexion)
 - Look up (extension)
 - Look down (flexion)
 - Look left (rotation)
 - Look right (rotation)
- **Passively:**
 - Ask patient to sit down and cross arms
 - Rotate the patient's torso to look left and right - assesses thoracic rotation

Function:

- Already assessed

Special testing:

- Stretch test:
 - Ask patient to lie down. Lift up a straight leg and dorsiflex the foot. This may exacerbate pain from a nerve root entrapment or irritation

To conclude the examination:

- Thank the patient
- Tell them they can get dressed now
- Offer to examine the joint above and the joint below
- Consider neurological examination of the limb examined

The complete examination of the musculoskeletal system includes:

- [Examination of the hand and wrist](#)
- [Examination of the elbow](#)
- [Examination of the shoulder](#)
- [Examination of the spine](#)
- [Examination of the hip](#)
- [Examination of the knee](#)
- [Examination of the ankle and foot](#)