

An Osteo-What?

by [Christina Elston](#)

Healthy isn't something you are or aren't. It's a hundred little things: eating a banana, walking in the park, putting a bandage on a boo-boo, playing tag, reading up on ways to keep you and your family well and safe. It's a balance between living well and taking care, and you can start right where you are.



If you've ever seen the letters "D.O." – rather than "M.D." – after a doctor's name and wondered what they meant, you're not alone. I'll admit that I knew precious little about what a "Doctor of Osteopathy" did before my recent conversation with Dr. Eric Dolgin, D.O., who

practices in Santa Monica.

An osteopath, according to Dolgin, has all of the same training as a traditional M.D., plus 300 to 400 hours additional in osteopathy. And about 80% of osteopathic doctors practice just like M.D.s.

But those who do use osteopathy to treat their patients hold to a few common principles:

- The structure and function of the body are intimately related.
- The body is a unit and contains everything it needs to heal itself.

So rather than looking at a single part of the body and treating what is wrong there, osteopaths treat the body as a whole. "Osteopathy is about evaluating and treating the health," Dolgin says.

The practice was founded in the 1800s by a Civil War surgeon named Andrew Still, M.D., who decided there must be a better way to treat illness than through purging and leaching (common then). It is the only system of medicine created in the West.

Treatment itself, however, is difficult to describe. "People really do have to experience it for themselves," Dolgin says.

Basically, an osteopath uses his hands to feel the body's structure, motion of tissues and flow of fluids and detect problem areas. The doctor then positions the body and gently applies a precise amount of force to promote movement of the bodily fluids, eliminate dysfunction in the motion of the tissues, and release compressed bones and joints.

For instance, Dolgin explains that in babies with colic, there is usually pressure on a certain nerve at the base of the skull. By relieving that pressure they can treat the cause.

Average treatment takes about 30 minutes, and he says that infants do very well. "The 2-year-olds are trouble for any physician," says Dolgin, who trained at the Osteopathic Center for Children in San Diego. "Sometimes I have to chase the kids around my office to treat them. I have to administer the treatment while they're moving, and that takes some knowhow."

Osteopaths treat a number of problems including:

- Plagiocephaly (misshapen head)
- Nursing problems
- Digestive problems
- Asthma
- Ear infections
- Learning disabilities
- Autism
- Failure to thrive

They even tackle some tough issues, such as ADHD. And Dolgin says there are tremendous benefits to treating ADHD osteopathically. "We can get down to the structural cause of the problem," he explains, adding that if treatment is successful, kids don't need medication and enjoy overall better health. "If we treat them for one thing, generally a lot of other things improve. We get the whole structure working properly."

And Dolgin says he enjoys dealing with these more challenging problems. "My practice is full of patients that other physicians can't help," he says. "I love the idea of being able to treat things that other people can't."

And though I hadn't heard much about it, osteopathy is the fastest growing medical profession in the country according to Dolgin, who says that by the end of the decade, one of every five medical school graduates will be an osteopath. "Every year," he says, "there's more and more interest."