

Healthy Living

Patient Information from the American Chiropractic Association

How Safe Is Chiropractic Care?

Chiropractic: A Safe Treatment Option

Chiropractic is widely recognized as one of the safest drug-free, non-invasive therapies available for the treatment of back pain, neck pain, joint pain of the arms or legs, headaches, and other neuromusculoskeletal complaints. Although chiropractic has an excellent safety record, no health treatment is completely free of potential adverse effects.

The risks associated with chiropractic, however, are very small. Many patients feel immediate relief following chiropractic treatment, but some may sometimes experience mild soreness or aching—similar to what they experience after some forms of exercise—headaches and tiredness. Current literature shows that minor discomfort or soreness following spinal manipulation typically fades within 24 hours.¹

In addition to being a safe form of treatment, spinal manipulation is incredibly effective, getting patients back on their feet faster than traditional medical care. For example, a 2010 study in the medical journal *Spine* found that patients with acute low back pain who received spinal manipulation achieved equivalent or superior improvement in pain and function when compared with other commonly used interventions, such as physical modalities, medication, education, or exercise, at short, intermediate and long-term follow-up.

Neck Adjustments

Neck pain and some types of headaches are treated through precise cervical manipulation. Cervical manipulation, often called a neck adjustment, works to improve joint mobility in the neck, restoring range of motion and reducing muscle spasm, which helps relieve pressure and tension. Patients typically notice a reduction in pain, soreness, and stiffness, along with an improved ability to move the neck.

Neck manipulation is a remarkably safe procedure. While some reports have associated upper high-velocity neck manipulation with a certain kind of stroke, or vertebral artery dissection, recent evidence² suggests that patients



are no more likely to suffer a stroke following a chiropractic neck treatment than they are after visiting their primary care medical doctor's office—and concluded that vertebral artery (VBA) stroke is a very rare event,⁴ and that this type of arterial injury often takes place spontaneously, or following everyday activities such as turning the head while driving, swimming, or having a shampoo in a hair salon.

Patients with this condition may experience neck pain and headache that leads them to seek professional care—often at the office of a doctor of chiropractic or medical doctor—but that care is not the cause of the injury. The best evidence indicates that the incidence of artery injuries associated with high-velocity upper neck manipulation is extremely rare – about 1 case in 5.85 million manipulations.³

To put this risk into perspective, if you drive more than a mile to get to your chiropractic appointment, you are at greater risk of serious injury from a car accident than from your chiropractic visit.

It is important for patients to understand the risks associated with some of the most common treatments for neck

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and back pain—prescription nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)—as these options may carry risks significantly greater than those of manipulation. According to a study from the American Journal of Gastroenterology, approximately one-third of all hospitalizations and deaths related to gastrointestinal bleeding can be attributed to the use of aspirin or NSAID painkillers like ibuprofen.⁴

Furthermore, surgery for conditions for which manipulation may also be used carries risks many times greater than those of chiropractic treatment. Even prolonged bed rest carries some risks, including muscle atrophy, cardiopulmonary deconditioning, bone mineral loss and thromboembolism.⁵

A comprehensive review of scientific evidence related to neck pain treatments found at least as much evidence supporting the safety and effectiveness of common chiropractic treatments, including manipulation, as for other treatments such as prescription and non-prescription drugs and surgery.⁶

If you are visiting your doctor of chiropractic with upper-neck pain or headache, be very specific about your symptoms. This will help your doctor of chiropractic offer the safest and most effective treatment, even if it involves referral to another health care provider. If the issue of stroke concerns you, do not hesitate to discuss it with your doctor of chiropractic. Depending on your clinical condition, he or she can forego manipulation, and instead can recommend joint mobilization, therapeutic exercise, soft-tissue techniques, or other therapies.

Research Ongoing

The ACA believes that patients have the right to know about the health risks associated with any type of treatment, including chiropractic. Today, chiropractic researchers are involved in studying the benefits and risks of spinal adjustment in the treatment of neck and back pain through clinical trials, literature reviews and publishing papers reviewing the risks and complications of neck adjustment.

All available evidence demonstrates that chiropractic treatment holds an extremely small risk. The chiropractic profession takes this issue very seriously and engages in training and postgraduate education courses to recognize the risk factors in patients, and to continue rendering treatment in the most effective and responsible manner. ■

References:

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