

Headache

What Is Chiropractic Care?

There's nothing mysterious about chiropractic. It's a natural method of health care that treats the causes of physical problems rather than just the symptoms. Chiropractic is based on a simple but powerful premise: With a normally functioning spine and a healthy lifestyle, your body is better able to heal itself. That's because the spinal cord, which is protected by the spine, is the main pathway of your nervous system. It controls feeling, movement, and function throughout your body.

Your chiropractor's education includes at least six years of training in the sciences and health care, leading to a Doctor of Chiropractic (DC) degree. He or she works to restore your health and guides you in a personalized approach to overall wellness – through spinal care, exercise, good nutrition, and stress management.

How Does a Chiropractor Treat Headaches?

Your doctor of chiropractic is uniquely qualified to restore the health of your spine to relieve the pressure that is causing your headaches.

Spinal Adjustments

After locating any misaligned vertebrae in your neck or spine, your chiropractor manually applies gentle pressure and repositions the vertebrae. These adjustments can help ease your headaches by restoring alignment, improving mobility, and relieving pain and stiffness.

What Causes Headaches?

Headaches often begin in your spine. Poor posture or injury can force your spinal vertebrae out of alignment, pressuring nerves and blood vessels. When nerves send painful signals to surrounding neck muscles, those muscles tighten up and a headache may begin. Other headache triggers include stress, caffeine, smoking, allergies, alcohol, some diseases, and nutritional deficiencies.

Can Chiropractic Care Help Me?

Your chiropractor looks at your overall health – focusing not only on your spine but also on your lifestyle. This integrated approach helps determine the best treatment for your headaches.

History

To help identify the cause of your problem, you and your chiropractor will discuss your symptoms, your family health history, and your lifestyle, such as diet and physical activities.

Physical Exam

Physical, orthopedic, and neurological tests can reveal the condition of your spine. Static and motion palpation tests check for factors related to headaches, such as stiffness, pain, swelling, and restricted range of motion.

X-rays

As “blueprints” of your neck and back, x-rays can pinpoint misaligned bones or reveal other problems such as fractures or arthritis. Additional tests will be done, if necessary.

Diagnosis

Based on the examination and findings, your chiropractor may recommend an individualized treatment program for your neck or spine to help reduce the frequency and intensity of your headaches. If needed, your chiropractor will also consult with other medical specialists about your condition.

What Can I Do To Prevent Headaches?

Smart Support

Whether sitting, standing, or lying down, keep your spine aligned. Talk with your chiropractor about simple exercises you can do to strengthen your neck. You may also be able to prevent some headaches by avoiding caffeine, alcohol, and cigarettes. Control your stress by making time to relax each day.

Spinal Checkups

Just as you need regular dental exams, you also need regular spinal exams. Chiropractic care is one of the best ways to help prevent spinal problems that could cause headaches. Your doctor of chiropractic can help you and your family maintain healthier lives with less headache pain.

Related Treatment

Your chiropractor may recommend other types of treatment to help relieve headaches by decreasing muscle tension and swelling, or increasing your circulation. These treatments may include moist heat, ice packs, trigger point therapy, or traction. Your chiropractor can discuss these with you.

Headaches

Everyone has had a headache at one time or another. It is one of the most universal of ailments and affects men, women and children alike. Americans spend millions of dollars yearly – on everything from over-the-counter remedies to extensive professional care – to get relief, often grasping desperately at even the most temporary kind of help.

Types of Headaches

Among the seemingly endless varieties of headache, some of the more common are tension, migraine and sinus headache. All types, however, can be mild or severe, temporary or persistent, and the pain associated with them can vary enormously from dull to sharp, from throbbing to pressure-like and pounding, or any combination of these. Headache location can vary, too, with sinus headaches typically situated on the face or over the eyes and tension headache more commonly felt at the back of the head and neck. But, while some headaches can be localized to a particular head area, others can be generalized to the entire head.

Causes of Headaches

Some headaches have a definite and obvious cause – overindulgence in food or drink, or lack of adequate sleep. Migraine headache, on the other hand, is thought to be blood-flow related although its exact nature is not completely understood. But there are literally hundreds of causes of headaches. Some among them include:

- ?? Fever
- ?? Infection
- ?? Sinus congestion
- ?? Muscular spasm
- ?? Irritated nerves
- ?? Menstrual tension
- ?? Organic disease
- ?? High blood pressure
- ?? Eye problems
- ?? Brain disorder

This list of causes is by no means comprehensive. It is merely intended to show that headache is a very complex condition and can be due to many different causes, some of which may be of a serious nature.

Chiropractic Care

The chiropractic physician can offer considerable relief for headache victims but it is essential that he or she make a complete and thorough evaluation of the headache first to differentiate among the possible causes underlying the condition. An accurate history, examination and specialized tests must be performed – a procedure for which the chiropractic physician is expertly trained.

In many headache episodes extreme muscular spasm and tension exists in the neck area with resultant alteration of the normal flexibility of the head and neck. Nerves which exit at the base of the skull are especially prone to such irritation which is particularly evident in persistent tension headaches.

Chiropractic treatment can be effective in relieving the tightness and muscular spasm which accompanies headaches. Gentle manipulative therapy or “adjustment” of the head and neck area can restore flexibility and minimize nerve irritation and the pain of headache. The chiropractic physician can also advise the headache victim about proper nutrition and care of the postural aspects of the head and neck. These are important factors in many headache cases.

However, the thorough evaluation of any headache is the essential first step in treatment. If examination reveals the head and neck area are involved, manipulative therapy can often provide significant relief.

If you suffer from headache, a chiropractic consultation, should be seriously considered.

Chiropractic and Common Headache

Headache induces Americans to visit health care practitioners 18 million times each year (DuBose et al. 1995). Of alternative therapies, chiropractic, used by about 10 percent of the U.S. population, is a favorite in the treatment of headaches (Eisenberg et al. 1993) and its effectiveness for treatment of headaches is increasingly supported in some studies. Data from a recent RAND Corporation (Coutlet et al. 1996) reviews the effectiveness of spinal manipulation on migraine and tension headaches, supporting chiropractic.

Studies Support Use of Chiropractic for Headaches Relief

Twenty-seven percent of Americans who turn to alternative therapies do so for relief from headaches (Eisenberg et al. 1993). Research indicates that chiropractic treatment may relieve chronic pain from tension headaches that impairs many Americans' ability to experience and enjoy life. Support is also increasing for sufferers of migraine and cervicogenic headaches. Chiropractic treatment of the cervical spine may be helpful for sufferers of cervicogenic headache, as well as migraine and tension headache sufferers (Vernon et al. 1992).

According to the data, chiropractic treatment may reduce headache severity and frequency and decrease use of over-the-counter medication. The growing database on chiropractic and headaches has allowed overviews of the available literature to be published, including an update by Howard Vernon, DC and a systematic review by the RAND Corporation (1995).

Tension Headache Diminished by Manipulation

In a randomly controlled clinical trial by Boline et al. (1995), treatments of cervical manipulation were compared with treatments of the prescription medication amitriptyline. Four weeks after both therapies were completed, the group receiving manipulation was far better off: from baseline, chiropractic manipulation subjects had a 32 percent reduction in headache intensity, 37 percent reductions in frequency and in over-the-counter medication use, and a 16 percent increase in functional status. The amitriptyline group had less than a 6 percent improvement in each area from baseline. In addition, the chiropractic manipulation group was spared the drug's unpleasant side effects including dry mouth and fatigue.

In a case series study on tension headache by Droz and Crot (1985), 332 patients received an average of 8.6 chiropractic treatments. Results indicate that 80 percent of patients had excellent (pain-free) and good (almost pain-free) outcomes with 10 percent reporting a 75 percent decrease in pain.

In 1995, a band of fibrous connective tissue was discovered between the rectus capitis posterior minor muscle and the dura matter (Hack et al. 1995). When this tissue is tense, the resulting traction on the spinal dura may cause headache pain. Because chiropractic manipulation may decrease tension in the suboccipital muscles, spasm of the connective tissue between those muscles and the dura matter could be relieved.

Manipulation for Cervicogenic Headache

Neck pain is always a starting point for the cervicogenic headache, unlike tension or migraine headache, where neck pain may or may not be a factor. Nilsson (1995) estimated that about 17.8 percent of frequent headache sufferers have cervicogenic headache, and according to a recent study by Martelletti et al. (1995), cervicogenic headache "probably results from various local pain-producing factors such as intervertebral dysfunction with a secondary neurologically activated headache crises." To study the effectiveness of chiropractic treatment on cervical dysfunction, Martelletti et al. treated 36 cervicogenic headache sufferers three times a week for four weeks with spinal manipulation, and found that both during the treatment and for four weeks after treatment ended, Total Pain Index (TPI) and Drug Consumption Index (DCI) were significantly lowered when compared to baseline.

In a 6-week pilot study on chronic headache of cervical origin, Whittingham et al. (1994) found that headache frequency, duration, and severity significantly decreased in 24 out of 26 patients who were treated with spinal manipulation.

Migraine and Chiropractic

Migraine headaches may also be relieved through chiropractic treatment. A randomized control trial by Parker et al. (1978, 1980) of 85 migraine sufferers showed that chiropractic patients, in comparison with patients receiving manipulation by an M.D., or having mobilization performed by an M.D. or physical therapist, had a 40 percent reduction in the frequency of migraines and a 43 percent reduction in pain intensity. Wight (1978) found that 65 out of 87 migraine sufferers improved

after weekly spinal manipulation, with an average reduction of between 34 and 81 percent in the number of headaches in the year following treatment. A randomized clinical trial investigating chiropractic treatment of migraine headache is currently being conducted at Northwestern College of Chiropractic.

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