

NATURAL HEALTH

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Align Your Spine: Chiropractic Care Helps Relieve

By Matthew Solan

WE OFTEN TURN TO CHIROPRACTORS as a last resort when back pain becomes unbearable. A better strategy is to incorporate a chiropractic visit as part of your regular care and prevent the agony in the first place. You may also notice some unexpected side benefits like better posture, fewer headaches, and more energy.

BACK FIRST. Chiropractic treatment focuses on your spine--the information superhighway where every second four billion signals travel from your brain through your central nervous system (housed in the spine) to command your body's movements and functions. Since spinal problems usually manifest in the back as misaligned vertebrae or compressed discs, for example chiropractic care is especially effective in treating back pain. In 2006, a study published in *Clinical Orthopaedics in Related Research* reviewed 43 trials and found that in 30, chiropractic therapy was more (or as) effective and safe at improving lower back pain than massage, analgesics, bed rest, or drugs.

WHOLE-BODY HEALING. During treatment, a chiropractor uses physical manipulation (known as chiropractic adjustment) along and around the spine's joints and muscles to release blockage and promote a stronger flow of energy. (Most manipulation techniques involve a quick thrust--using hands or special instruments--to move a bone back into its natural position.) "Treatment frees up the nervous system, removing interference and allowing the body to function at its maximum capacity," says Chad M. Schwander, D.C., owner of Jefferson Family Chiropractic in Jefferson, Iowa. As a result, chiropractic therapy can promote greater flexibility and range of motion, increased energy, and a stronger immune system.

STRESS RELEASE. Chiropractors can also relieve stress, adds Todd Sinett, D.C., author of *The Truth About Back Pain* (Perigree Trade, 2009) and owner of Midtown Integrative Health & Wellness in New York City. "Because we really take time with each client and have a hands-on approach, we can help you relax. Touch can add to the emotional component of healing," he says.

COMPLEMENTARY CARE. If your pain requires medication or injections, you'll need to see an orthopedic doctor, says Sinett, adding that orthopedic doctors and chiropractors often work together to make sure you're getting the right level of care.

SURPRISE BENEFITS. People who see a chiropractor for back pain often discover other ailments (headaches, poor digestion, and numbness) disappear. For Rosalee Severson, 68, her on-and-off ear ringing vanished when she went to Schwander's clinic for back pain. "Just improving my neck's range of motion cleared it right up," she says. "It was like I got a two-for-one deal."

WHAT TO EXPECT. Your initial visit begins with a general orthopedic exam. Then you lie on a table fully clothed, and the spine's joints and muscles are adjusted and rotated as needed. There is no "cracking," although you may hear an occasional popping, which is simply nitrogen gas escaping from the joints, the same as when your knuckles crack. Most insurance plans cover chiropractic care. Find practitioners through the American Chiropractic Association (amerchiro.org).

TRY THIS: Loosen stiff neck and shoulder muscles with this simple exercise that helps correct spinal misalignment:

1. Lie down and place a rolled up towel under your neck so the back of your head and shoulders are grounded. You want to create a normal healthy neck curve, so make adjustments to get the right height and thickness (about the diameter of a softball).
2. Stay in this position for ten to 15 minutes.
3. Do this daily to "teach your body how to properly position the neck so the upper spine can flow more freely," says Chad Schwander, D.C.

LEARN MORE: Read about other natural methods to reduce pain and improve your posture at naturalhealthmag.com/bodywork.