

Chiropractic Medicine

What is chiropractic medicine?

Chiropractic medicine is a form of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). Trained specialists, called chiropractors, diagnose, treat, and prevent conditions of various joints, such as low back pain involving the spine.¹ They use their hands and/or small instruments to apply a controlled and sudden force to a joint. The goal is to reposition parts of the body that are not in their proper place. This improves the way the body works.

The term “chiropractic” comes from the Greek words cheir (hand) and praxis (practice). It describes a treatment done by hand.¹ Chiropractic medicine has become more popular. It was the fourth most common CAM used by adult patients in 2007.²

The practice is based on a few core concepts:¹

1. Your body has an ability to heal itself.
2. The healthy functioning of the body’s nerves, bones, joints, and muscles are closely related.
3. Chiropractic medicine helps the body to become balanced, so it can maintain ideal function.

Why is it done?

Patients seek treatment because of different types of pain such as low back pain, neck pain, and headaches.³ Chiropractic care can help treat these types of symptoms. Your primary care team may find that chiropractic medicine, with or without other treatments, can help you manage your pain.

When two bones that form a joint do not work together properly, it is called a subluxation. Subluxations can cause pain, discomfort, and decreased mobility because they often prevent the nervous system from working properly.⁴

Will chiropractic medicine help me?

Research findings on manual therapies (which includes chiropractic medicine) were reviewed in 2010.⁵ The review was updated in 2014.⁶ The reviews found that manual adjustments may be helpful for several conditions. These include back pain, different types of headaches, neck pain, disorders of the rotator cuff (muscles and tendons in the shoulder), other joint conditions in the arms and legs, and the effects of whiplash. Chiropractic medicine may be helpful for other conditions as well. More high quality studies are needed to prove that it helps other conditions.

There is no doubt many patients find great relief from chiropractic adjustment. While some patients experience relief of their pain, not everyone responds as well. If your symptoms do not improve after several weeks of treatment, it is likely that chiropractic therapy is not the best option for you. You can then see your primary care clinician for additional evaluation.



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How do I find a qualified chiropractor?

Certified chiropractors usually have a bachelor's degree followed by four years of professional chiropractic study.¹ To become licensed, they must pass a board exam.⁷ Ask your primary care physician, spine specialist, or physical therapist which chiropractor he or she would recommend. Find a chiropractor who is interested in your individual needs and goals.

What are the risks?

Chiropractic adjustment is safe and usually pain free if it is done by a trained and licensed chiropractor. Complications are rare. Possible risks include herniated disc, compression of nerves in the spine, and a certain type of stroke after neck manipulation.¹

You should not seek chiropractic adjustment if you have severe osteoporosis, numbness, tingling or loss of sensation in an arm or leg, cancer of the spine, an increased risk of stroke, or an unstable spine.¹

What should I expect?

Your chiropractor will likely place you in different positions in order to treat target areas. The chiropractor will use her or his hands to apply a controlled and sudden force to a joint. You will likely hear a popping noise. This is a release of gas in the joint. It is similar to when you crack your knuckles.

Some people may experience some side effects such as headaches, fatigue, or mild pain in the parts of the body that were treated. These should be temporary and disappear within 24 hours.¹

References:

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4. Kaptchuk TJ, Eisenberg DM. Chiropractic: origins, controversies, and contributions. *Arch Intern Med*. 1998;158(20):2215-2224.
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The information in this handout is for general education. It is not meant to be used by a patient alone. Please work with your health care practitioner to use this information in the best way possible to promote your health.



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