

Exactly what is chiropractic? How does chiropractic work? Can chiropractic help my headaches? Believe it or not, after almost 25 years of practice I still regularly hear these questions.

Many of our patients go to chiropractors for a variety of complaints, confident that they will find the relief they seek, but have no real idea how it all works. Much of how healthcare works is a mystery to the average patient. In this article I will try to demystify chiropractic.

Chiropractors are thought of as “bone doctors” by a lot of the public. However, it would be more accurate to say that chiropractors are “nerve doctors.” This is because while we manipulate the bones of the body, we do so to affect a change in the nervous system. While chiropractors manipulate all the bones and joints of the body, I am going to restrict this discussion to the spine.

The primary therapy, though certainly not the only therapy, chiropractors use is manipulation. In this therapy we use the bones of the body as levers to create a change in how joints are aligned or move. In some circumstances the joints move too little and this is referred to as hypomobility or fixation. When they move incorrectly it is called aberrant motion. If they move too much it is referred to as hypermobility. All these scenarios, and their associated neurological impacts, are various manifestations of what chiropractors refer to as “subluxation.”

When a healthy joint moves it correctly stimulates the nerves that surround it. When a joint moves inappropriately it causes various reflexes to occur which can have a profound effect on health. The case most people are familiar with is when an individual injures their neck or back. They have pain, muscle spasms and loss of motion. This is a result of the various reflexes that occur when the area is injured. In some cases, the injury may cause pain to radiate into their arm or leg. This may be due to a “pinched” or irritated nerve. However, when the arm or leg pain is not that sharp, it may be due to the irritated ligament. This is called referred pain and is similar to the left arm and jaw pain people have when they have a heart attack. In that case, the pain is not due to a problem in their arm, rather it is referred from the heart.

Another less well known effect of these subluxations is the development of a somatovisceral reflex. “Somato” refers to the muscle, ligamentous, and skeletal portions of the body and visceral refers to the organs of the body. In this type of reflex, abnormalities of the spinal column cause a reflex change in the function of the organs of the body.

Perhaps the most common somatovisceral reflex I see is that associated with the stomach. Chiropractors routinely see patients with complaints of gastroesophageal reflux disorder (GERD), heartburn, stomach gas, and indigestion who respond well, and often immediately, to spinal manipulation. This is because these structures receive their nerve supply from the mid-back and these patients often have spinal subluxations in this area. When they are treated with chiropractic manipulation the nerve function is improved and

their symptoms abate. That is not to say that all patients with these disorders improve with manipulation. Some do not. But a large percentage of these patients do receive significant relief through spinal manipulation.

Chiropractic works because of the chiropractor's knowledge of the function of the nervous system and the doctor's application of that information in all their diagnostic and treatment approaches.

When a chiropractor examines a patient, they are looking at how that patient's body is functioning neurologically. This includes their posture, gait, strength, sensation, and organ function. Simultaneously, the chiropractor is also trying to ascertain if any of the patient's other physical complaints, such as headache, upset stomach, nausea, etc., are due in part or whole to spinal dysfunction or another organic disease.

Whether the doctor uses soft tissue techniques, such as massage, trigger point therapy, and muscle releasing techniques, or physiological therapeutics such as ultrasound, electric muscle stimulation, traction, and therapeutic exercise, or even nutritional approaches, the decision making process always includes how that modality will affect the nervous system.

While this has been only a superficial explanation of how chiropractic works, I hope it answers some questions. The fact that chiropractic is an effective therapy option is no longer in debate. Research has demonstrated chiropractic's superiority in the treatment of many conditions. Chiropractic is now widely accepted by the medical community many of whom refer to chiropractors regularly. For more information on chiropractic you can look on the following web sites: www.acatoday.com , www.fcer.org , www.nbce.org , or www.drleokenney.com .

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