

# Chiropractic: Safe and Effective Health Care

## Answering your questions about neck adjustment

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Chiropractors are committed to providing effective care in the safest manner possible. There is considerable research into many aspects of chiropractic care that support its effectiveness for problems such as headache, and neck and back pain. Chiropractic has a strong safety track record and is widely accepted as a drug-free, surgery-free therapy for reducing pain, soreness and stiffness, and improving mobility.

No health treatment is completely free of potential adverse effects – even common non-prescription pain relievers carry a risk. Fortunately, adverse effects associated with chiropractic adjustment are usually minor and short-term. During their entire professional lives most chiropractors will not have a single case of a patient who experiences serious adverse effects to treatment.

**What is a neck adjustment and how do I benefit from this procedure?** A neck adjustment (also known as a cervical manipulation) is a precise procedure, usually applied by hand, to the joints of the neck. Your chiropractor has received extensive training to perform this procedure. Neck adjustment works to improve the mobility of the spinal discs in the neck to restore range of motion, and increase movement of the adjoining muscles to relieve pressure and tension. Patients typically notice a reduction of pain, soreness and stiffness, and improved ability to turn and tilt their head.

**What training do chiropractors have?** Chiropractic education in Canada is an intensive four to five year full-time program following the completion of university studies or graduation from CEGEP in Quebec. All chiropractors must pass national qualifying examinations and be provincially licensed in order to practice in Canada. Chiropractors are trained to take a medical history and assess your condition before making a diagnosis and proposing a treatment plan. Since your neck is an important part of the spine, a neck adjustment may be prescribed. Your chiropractor is trained to determine if this procedure is right for you. He or she may decide to use massage, ultrasound, or other therapies to treat your condition.

**Is neck adjustment safe?** Yes, it is. The most recent research into the safety of neck adjustment confirms the safety of this procedure.<sup>1</sup> Neck adjustment is performed well within the normal turning range of the head. There is less movement than it takes to look over your shoulder. It is skill – not strength – that is needed to perform a safe, effective adjustment. Most patients experience immediate relief following an adjustment, however, some may experience temporary pain, stiffness or slight swelling. In rare situations, patients may experience symptoms such as dizziness, local numbness, or radiating pain. If this happens to you, it is important to tell your chiropractor who can help you manage any effects of treatment.

**I am worried about the risk of stroke from having my neck adjusted.** The findings in the current research literature agree that adverse events such as stroke or stroke-like symptoms associated with neck adjustment are very rare.<sup>2</sup> For example, a medical review published in 2002 looked at 73 studies of chiropractic care and found no serious complications reported in any of them.<sup>3</sup> Millions of neck adjustments are performed safely and effectively every year in Canada.

<sup>1</sup> *Internal forces sustained by the vertebral artery during spinal manipulative therapy*, Herzog W, Journal of Manipulative and Physiological Therapeutics, Oct. 25(8):504-10, 2002.

By way of comparison, neck adjustment is significantly safer than other commonly used health remedies. For example, long-term use of non-prescription pain relievers and the use of birth control pills both carry a far greater risk of serious complications than neck adjustment.<sup>4</sup>

**What are the risk factors for stroke?** There are many risk factors for stroke including blood clotting problems, hypertension, smoking, high cholesterol, heart problems, and trauma such as blows to the head from accidental falls or sports injuries.

Strokes or stroke-like symptoms are also associated with normal everyday activities such as cradling a phone between your ear and shoulder during a prolonged conversation, having your hair washed at a beauty parlour, dental procedures, painting a ceiling, and turning your head while driving. These strokes from ordinary neck movements occur without warning in some people for no apparent reason. The reasons for this are not understood and research continues into why in rare cases, some people are susceptible when most are not.

Your chiropractor will take a careful history of your health, your recent activities, and any unusual symptoms you may have before deciding whether an adjustment is right for you.

**How do chiropractors know who should not have a neck adjustment?** Chiropractic treatment guidelines provide clear advice on when not to perform a neck adjustment. Ask your chiropractor for a copy of the patient handout on treating neck pain to understand how you can actively participate in ensuring the safety and effectiveness of your treatment.

**Why is there a popping sound when a joint is adjusted?** Adjustment of a joint may result in release of a gas bubble between the joints that makes a popping sound – it's exactly the same as when you "crack" your knuckles. It is not painful. It is caused by the change of pressure within the joint resulting in gas bubbles being released.

**Why would neck adjustment have an effect on anything other than neck pain or headache?** Pain or discomfort in one area of the body may be linked functionally to discomfort arising from another area. That is why treating a problem in one part of the body may relieve symptoms in another part. If you look at a model of the spine, you can see that the spine is an interconnected structure. Adjustment at various points along the structure may be needed to help reduce stress on other parts of the spine and relieve discomfort.

**Are all neck adjustment techniques equally safe?** Chiropractors are taught a variety of adjustment techniques and there is no evidence to suggest that any of these techniques are less safe than the others. Chiropractic techniques that are applied appropriately are effective and safe.

<sup>2</sup> Chiropractic Manipulation and Stroke: A Population-Based Case-Control Study, Rothwell DM, Bondy SJ, Williams JI, Stroke, May 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Chiropractic: A Profession at the Crossroads of Mainstream and Alternative Medicine, Meeker WC, Haldeman S, Annals of Internal Medicine, February 5, 2002, Vol. 136, No. 3.

<sup>4</sup> American College of Gastroenterology

<sup>5</sup> Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, Clinical Practice Guideline 2004



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