

Common Myths

In spite of its long recognition by the medical community and the government as a safe, proven and effective treatment, many people today still have misconceptions about chiropractic care.

Daniel David Palmer, who is known as the father of chiropractic, bore the brunt of criticism for creating this branch of medicine's healing arts. Despite Palmer's early successes in treating patients with a myriad of ailments through spinal manipulation, chiropractic adjustments were not readily accepted by the medical community. In fact, the established medical community back in the late 19th century worked hard to discredit him, and had a hand in convincing authorities to indict Palmer for practicing medicine without a license. He was sentenced to 105 days in jail and ordered to pay a \$350 fine.

The established medical community's assault on the chiropractic profession continued even as late as the 1970s, when a group of chiropractors sued the American Medical Association and several other medical organizations for disseminating untrue and damaging information about their profession. The plaintiffs alleged that the AMA and others deliberately lied in order to destroy the chiropractic field because they viewed it as a threat, or competition, for their health care dollars. The court agreed with the chiropractors and called the AMA's actions "lawless" and unfounded. The case was eventually heard in the United States Supreme Court, which upheld the original verdict against the AMA.

Much has changed since that landmark decision, and today, the medical community has come to recognize the value of chiropractic care. Today, more than a century later, hundreds of thousands of patients routinely receive competent care-and relief from their suffering-from the nation's more than 60,000 doctors of chiropractic.

Here's a look at some of the more common misconceptions about chiropractic care.

Chiropractors treat back pain and little else.

Nothing could be further from the truth. While chiropractic adjustments can be especially helpful in relieving pain for facet joint injuries, osteoarthritis, and sacroiliac joint dysfunction, scores of patients with chronic headaches, sinus problems, high blood pressure, ear infections, leg pain, arthritis, and many other illnesses have reported significant relief after chiropractic therapy. Chiropractors do more than manipulate the musculoskeletal parts of the body, and are capable of providing a myriad of services that include acupuncture, electric muscle stimulation, exercise programs and instruction, heat/cold therapy, herbal therapy, lifestyle and nutrition counseling, manipulation under anesthesia, massage, physical rehabilitation, physiotherapy, stress management, traction, and ultrasound.

Chiropractors prescribe medications to relieve pain and perform surgery, when needed.

Chiropractors believe that many ailments can be corrected if the body's interrelated bone, nerve and vascular systems are in balance, allowing the body to heal itself. A branch of the healing arts concerned with disease processes, chiropractic care is a recognized form of therapy that focuses on improving your overall health and well-being-without the use of drugs or surgery.

Those who undergo spinal manipulation are at high risk of injury.

In general, proper chiropractic treatment of your body's lumbar, or lower back, region, involves very little risk, and the rewards can be significant. In fact, a recent study by the Rand Corporation found that a serious adverse reaction from cervical (neck) manipulation may occur less than once in 1 million treatments. The American Chiropractic Association believes those odds are even greater-about one in every 2 million treatments-the same odds of dying in a commercial airline crash. A more recent article in the Canadian Medical Association Journal found only a 1-in-5.85-million risk that a chiropractic adjustment of the neck may result in vertebral artery dissection.

Chiropractors are not viewed as being in the medical mainstream.

The medical community today formally recognizes the value of chiropractic care, and medical doctors routinely acknowledge chiropractic care as a conservative treatment option for patients with lower back pain. Moreover, many medical doctors recognize a chiropractic diagnosis and accept it as the first line of treatment for functional disorders of the entire musculoskeletal system. The prestigious Texas Back Institute (TBI), the largest freestanding spine specialty clinic in the country, once included only surgeons and other medical doctors among its staff. In the late 1980s, the Institute hired its first doctor of chiropractic. Today, close to half of the Institute's patients see a chiropractor first when beginning their treatment. The National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, and the successful Complementary and Alternative Medicine Center at the National Institutes of Health have established chiropractic internship programs.

Chiropractic care is generally unsafe and ineffective.

Numerous studies throughout the world have shown that chiropractic treatment, including manipulative therapy and spinal adjustment, is both safe and effective for back pain. In 1994, the federal Agency for Health Care Policy and Research published its Clinical Practice Guidelines, which asserted that spinal manipulation was effective in reducing pain and speeding recovery among patients with acute low back symptoms without radiculopathy (nerve roots exit the spine and enter the body; if one of these roots is sick or injured in the area where it leaves the spine, it is called a radiculopathy). A 1996 study in the journal *Spine* echoed that study, and found that patients who sought chiropractic care were more likely to feel that treatment was helpful, more likely to be satisfied with their care, and less likely to seek care from another provider for the same condition, compared to those who sought care from medical doctors.

Cervical manipulation can cause a stroke.

A 2003 study published in the journal *Neurology* asserted that chiropractic treatments were the culprit in a patient's stroke, claiming that a cervical adjustment led to a vertebral artery dissection (VAD). According to the American Chiropractic Association, the study is fraught with design flaws and needlessly alarms the public about a safe and effective form of treatment for neck pain and headaches. The ACA claims that VAD is a rare type of stroke associated with many other commonplace activities such as talking on the telephone, swimming, stargazing, overhead work, hair shampooing, and even sleeping. In fact, according to the ACA, a recent biomechanical study found that the forces transmitted to the artery during cervical manipulation are less than one-ninth the force necessary to stretch or otherwise damage a normal vertebral artery. "Based upon this study and other recent evidence, many experts now believe that it is physically impossible for a competently performed neck manipulation or adjustment, as provided by a trained doctor of chiropractic, to cause a vertebral artery dissection unless the artery already has a significant pre-existing weakness," according to the ACA.