

Frequently Asked Questions about Chiropractic

The American Chiropractic Association (ACA) receives many questions about chiropractic. Below are answers to the most commonly asked questions.

What conditions do chiropractors treat?

Chiropractic is a health care profession that focuses on disorders of the musculoskeletal system and the nervous system, and the effects of these disorders on general health. Chiropractic care is used most often to treat neuromusculoskeletal complaints, including but not limited to back pain, neck pain, pain in the joints of the arms or legs, and headaches.

How do I select a doctor of chiropractic?

You can locate a doctor of chiropractic (DC)—commonly referred to as a chiropractor or chiropractic physician—by browsing the ACA Find a Doctor page, www.acatoday.org/DocSearch.

Does chiropractic treatment require a referral from an MD?

No, a patient does not need referral by an MD before visiting a doctor of chiropractic. Chiropractors are first contact physicians, and are so defined in federal and state regulations. Following a consultation and examination, the doctor of chiropractic will arrive at a diagnosis under chiropractic care, or refer the patient to the appropriate health care provider.

Is chiropractic treatment effective?

Scientific evidence proving that the chiropractic care works is overwhelming. Over the past 20 years, many controlled and independent research studies have shown again and again that chiropractic care is safe and effective for treating low back pain, neck pain, headaches and other conditions relating to the spine*. Based on these scientific studies, the consensus is that chiropractic care is the treatment of choice for most spinal problems.

** The extent to which a person can benefit from care varies depending on their problem and how long it has existed.*

Can you explain the philosophy behind chiropractic?

Doctors of chiropractic believe in a holistic (“total person”) approach to healing, which typifies the new and changing attitude towards health. It is based on the concept of “maintaining health” versus “treating disease.” Chiropractic philosophy includes:

- recognition that dynamics exist between lifestyle, environment and health
- understanding the cause of illness in order to eliminate it, rather than simply treat symptoms
- recognition of the centrality of the nervous system and its intimate relationship with the capacities of the human body
- a patient-centered, hands-on approach focused on influencing function through structure
- focus on early intervention, emphasizing timely diagnosis and treatment of conditions that are wholly functional and reversible

Is chiropractic treatment appropriate for children?

Yes, children can benefit from chiropractic care. Children are very physically active and experience many types of falls and blows from activities of daily living as well as from participating in sports. Injuries such as these may cause many symptoms including back and neck pain, stiffness, soreness or discomfort. Chiropractic care is always adapted to the individual patient. It is a highly skilled treatment, and in the case of children, very gentle.

Are chiropractors allowed to practice in hospitals or use medical outpatient facilities?

Doctors of Chiropractic provide care in hospitals and other multidisciplinary health care facilities and often use outpatient clinical facilities (such as labs, x-rays, etc.) for their non-hospitalized patients. Hospital privileges were first granted in 1983.

A few notable examples of chiropractic integration into today's health care system include the chiropractic department at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., and the care provided to veterans, active-duty military personnel, and Medicare patients.

Do insurance plans cover chiropractic?

The majority of all insured American workers have coverage for chiropractic services in their health care plans. For example, the federal government's Office of Personnel Management offers chiropractic coverage for federal employees in both the Mail Handlers and BCBS benefit plans. In addition, there is a chiropractic benefit in Federal Workers' Compensation, and chiropractic care is available to members of the armed forces at more than 40 military bases, and is available at nearly 30 veterans' medical facilities.

What type of education and training do chiropractors have?

Chiropractors are educated as primary contact health care practitioners, with an emphasis on musculoskeletal diagnosis and treatment. Educational requirements for doctors of chiropractic are among the most stringent of any of the health care professions. The typical applicant at a chiropractic college has already acquired nearly four years of pre-medical undergraduate college education, including courses in biology, inorganic and organic chemistry, physics, psychology and related lab work. Once accepted into an accredited chiropractic college, the requirements become even more demanding — four to five academic years of professional study are the standard. Because of the hands-on nature of chiropractic, and the intricate adjusting techniques, a significant portion of time is spent in clinical training. In total, the chiropractic curriculum includes a minimum of 4,200 hours of classroom, laboratory and clinical experience. The course of study is approved by an accrediting agency which is fully recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.

Is chiropractic treatment safe?

Yes, chiropractic treatment is safe and effective. While any form of health treatment contains a degree of inherent risk, there is little danger in chiropractic care when administered by a licensed practitioner. To assure competency, all states require that DCs be board-qualified, licensed, and regulated according to stringent criteria. Statistics show that patient risk is substantially lower for chiropractic because the use of prescription drugs and surgery are not used.

How is a chiropractic adjustment performed?

Chiropractic adjustment or manipulation is a manual procedure that utilizes the highly refined skills developed during the intensive years of chiropractic education. The chiropractor typically uses his/her hands to manipulate the joints of the body, particularly the spine, in order to reduce pain, and restore or enhance joint function. Chiropractic manipulation is a highly controlled procedure that rarely causes discomfort. The chiropractor adapts the procedure to meet the specific needs of each patient. Patients often note positive changes in their symptoms immediately following treatment.

Is chiropractic treatment ongoing?

The hands-on nature of the chiropractic treatment is essentially what requires patients to visit the chiropractor a number of times. To be treated by a chiropractor, a patient needs to be in his or her office. In contrast, a course of treatment from medical doctors often involves a pre-established plan that is conducted at home (i.e. taking a course of antibiotics once a day for a couple of weeks). A chiropractor may provide acute, chronic, and/or preventative care thus making a certain number of visits sometimes necessary. Your doctor of chiropractic should tell you the extent of treatment recommended and how long you can expect it to last.

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. The noise is caused by the change of pressure within the joint that results in gas bubbles being released. There is no pain involved.