



Headaches: The Spinal Connection

Doctors of chiropractic, such as Dr. John Ferguson at Ferguson Family Chiropractic, think of pain as the body's way of signaling a deeper health concern. They don't consider pain an isolated problem requiring a drug solution. Like a car's dashboard warning light, pain alerts you to issues needing attention.

The Big Cover Up: What's Wrong With Painkillers



Treating pain with medication is like taping over a car's warning light – you no longer see the warning, but the problem remains and will only further deteriorate without attention. Doctors of chiropractic always investigate why the "warning light" is on – probing for the origin of pains, rather than simply masking symptoms.

For many people, migraines and other headaches are chronic pain conditions, leading them to medication as a solution. Your doctor at Ferguson Family Chiropractic urges patients not to be fooled into believing that painkillers can "solve" the problem.

What's wrong with painkillers? Medication does nothing to correct the underlying instigator of pain. In addition, pain relievers are loaded with side effects – from gastrointestinal erosion to kidney disease. And, ironically, painkillers often cause more headaches, inciting the very problem they were designed to prevent.

The Root of Headaches May Not Be in the Head

Your doctor at Ferguson Family Chiropractic finds that the root of many headache sufferers' pain lies not in the

head but in the spine of the neck (cervical spine). Headaches are often an indication of a hidden condition called **vertebral subluxations** – a long name for a common, clear-cut problem. Vertebral subluxations result from misaligned spinal bones (vertebrae) in the spine. When this disorder affects the spine of the neck (cervical spine), it can spark chronic pain and limited mobility.

People of all ages are susceptible to vertebral subluxations. They can be triggered by simple sources, such as stress, muscle tension or a minor fall, or by a traumatic injury, such as whiplash or muscle strain. But are vertebral subluxations really connected to headaches? One recent study of more than 5,000 headache sufferers determined that about 40 percent of incidences start in the cervical spine (*Wien Med Wochenschr* 1994;144:102-8).



More Research Links Vertebral Subluxation With Headaches

At the Center for the Study of Spinal Health in Toronto, researchers further documented the anatomical connection between cervical-spine subluxations and headaches. The

study's 47 patients, who were aged 18 to 55, sought help at a chiropractic outpatient research clinic. They suffered from either tension-type headaches or migraines, which were consistently accompanied by neck pain.

X-rays showed that a staggering 97 percent of all patients exhibited significantly abnormal mobility in at least one segment in their cervical spines. What's more is that 43 percent exhibited abnormalities at four or more segments.

Normally, the cervical spine has a gradual "C-shaped" curve. Vertebral subluxations and loss of mobility can make maintaining a proper neck curve impossible. Not surprisingly, 77 percent of all sufferers had a marked reduction, absence or reversal of their normal neck curve. Eighty-four percent had at least two major fixations of cervical bones.

The researchers concluded that both groups had "high occurrences" of neck pain during headaches, tender points in the upper neck, greatly reduced or absent cervical curves and joint dysfunction in the upper and lower cervical spine.

"These findings support the premise that the neck plays an important, but largely ignored role in the manifestation of adult benign

headaches." (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 1993;16:428-31).

Chiropractic Care Addresses the Underlying Cause of Headaches

Fortunately, there's good news: Doctors of chiropractic successfully correct vertebral subluxations with safe, gentle and precise maneuvers. These maneuvers, which are called **chiropractic adjustments**, restore movement and alignment to the dysfunctional vertebrae.

Scientific research shows that chiropractic adjustments slash neck pain and headaches. One recent report collected data from nine studies during a 32-year period from 1966 to 1998. The 683 patients in the analysis suffered from various types of chronic head pain.

Findings showed that chiropractic care was as effective as prescription medication for tension-type headaches and migraines and more effective than massage (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2001;24:457-66).

Exercise + Chiropractic = A Winning Combination

Chiropractic care combined with moderate exercise may be even more effective than chiropractic care alone for headache relief. In one study, 200 patients with chronic headaches spent six weeks in one of four groups: chiropractic care, exercise, both chiropractic care and exercise or a no-care control group. Follow-up assessment occurred after three, six and 12 months.

Researchers measured for a change in headache frequency, intensity and



duration, medication intake, pain on neck movement, upper cervical joint tenderness, neck flexibility and posture.

After one year, the group with the highest number of patients who enjoyed a reduction in neck pain and headache frequency and intensity was the combined therapy group. The researchers concluded that "manipulative therapy and exercise can reduce the symptoms of cervicogenic headache, and the effects are maintained." (*Spine* 2002;27:1835-43.)



Cause and Effect

So the relationship between vertebral subluxations and headaches is clear, but how do those nasty subluxations actually cause head pain? Two major connections stand out.

The First theory has to do with the muscles. Tendons and muscles connect cervical-spine vertebrae to muscles of the head, neck and back. Vertebral subluxations in the neck alter muscle dynamics, in turn spurring muscle tension and pain. These misaligned cervical vertebrae can initiate a chain reaction that disrupts muscle function in the head, spawning pain.

The second theory has to do with the nerves. The spinal cord contains nerves that emerge between vertebrae and transmit information to and from the body and brain. Vertebral subluxations may inhibit transmission between these nerves, the spinal cord

and the brain. Neck or upper-back vertebral subluxations may actually disrupt nerve flow to the brain.

Researchers speculate that, rather than one theory being correct and the other incorrect, both events occur simultaneously.

Why Wait?

Just as you wouldn't want to wait for painful cavities to visit the dentist or for vision problems to visit the optometrist, why wait for painful vertebral subluxations to visit the chiropractor?

During regular chiropractic checkups, doctors of chiropractic focus on ways to prevent head pain altogether. Have you put off your chiropractic checkup? Schedule an appointment today before the onset of head pain.

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