



BACK AND NECK PAIN:

Whom Should You See First and Why?

By Dr. John Cintineo

How many times have you awakened with severe back pain? Maybe you were a bit overzealous in the yard over the weekend, or maybe you over did it while playing golf, tennis, softball or your favorite weekend activity. Perhaps, you had the unfortunate experience of being involved in a motor vehicle accident and both your neck and back are aching. Whatever the

trigger was, this episode is bad – the worst yet – and you can barely get out of bed. While the past episodes may have gotten better on their own, you know this time is different. Besides the spinal pain, your arms and/or legs are tingling. Now the questions begin: Whom do I call – my primary care doctor; an orthopedic surgeon; a chiropractor? Will I need X-rays, an MRI or other tests?

Here's a guide for how to best triage any type of spine injury or condition whether it is acute or chronic. With any spine related pain, it is critical that you are properly evaluated and diagnosed by a trained spine specialist. Correct diagnosis is paramount in order to get good results with whatever treatment is ultimately recommended.

Doctors of Chiropractic are mechanical

spine pain specialists. They, myself included, are primary care providers for the spine. In the same way that you would visit your primary care physician as a starting point when you don't feel well and they would refer you to a specialist, if necessary, your first call when you are experiencing back or neck pain should be to a "properly trained" chiropractor.

A properly trained chiropractor is a specialist in the evaluation, diagnosis and management of mechanical spine pain. His or her initial goal is to accurately diagnose your condition so that a proper treatment plan can be established for your specific condition. The process of diagnosis will include a comprehensive consultation, an examination which will include orthopedic, neurologic and muscle testing and, in most cases, X-rays of your spine. Remember that the treatment method of chiropractic is spinal adjusting so the importance of X-rays in the evaluation process is twofold. First, X-rays give us the ability to assess the structural

integrity of your spine. X-rays will show us any areas of degeneration, weakness or instability. In this case, a picture is worth a thousand words! Second, X-rays will also demonstrate if there are any contraindications to receiving spinal adjusting therapy. You wouldn't want a surgeon operating on you without having an X-ray or MRI first, would you? In the same way, you would not want a chiropractor adjusting your spine without first seeing what's there.

Your chiropractor also needs to have a close relationship with the right MRI center – one that will take the proper slice thicknesses for his patients even if they don't do it for other doctors. Proper slice thickness is critical so that disc pathology, including bulges and herniations, are not missed. The next important question is whether the chiropractor is credentialed to read his films? If yes, does he, or does he rely on the radiologist's report? Does he have a relation-

ship with a neuroradiologist (a radiologist who specializes in the spine) who he can review films with if there is a questionable finding? MRI quality and slice thickness can vary greatly from facility to facility so it is critical that your chiropractor uses the best MRI center and a board-certified neuroradiologist to assist in the proper diagnosis of your condition.

Once your condition is properly diagnosed through evaluation and imaging, a custom treatment plan can be established for your specific condition to get you on the road to recovery. A conservative treatment plan may include chiropractic adjusting therapy, spinal decompression and/or modalities, which may include electrical muscle stimulation, traction, myofascial release (massage), ultrasound, cold laser and heat or cold therapy.

Physical therapy may also be included in a conservative program to strengthen and stabilize the muscles that





only will it not help, it may make the condition worse because you are exercising an area that is misaligned and possibly mechanically unstable. The correction of mechanical spine pain also goes a long way to reducing dependence on pain medication (opioids) and ultimately the possibility of addiction.

Within my multi-specialty practice is a full-service outpatient orthopedic physical therapy center as well as acupuncture and massage therapy. The multispecialty structure allows us to provide both chiropractic and physical therapy services to our patients based on their specific condition. Our physical therapy department also receives direct referrals from many local primary care physicians as well as several of the top local orthopedic surgeons for pre and post-surgical orthopedic rehabilitation. In my practice, some patients receive only chiropractic care, some

only physical therapy and some receive both. Each patient's treatment plan is customized based on his or her evaluation, diagnosis and goals.

How can you tell if a chiropractor is properly credentialed? The simplest way is to ask to see their Curriculum Vitae (CV). A CV is a document that focuses on the doctor's accomplishments and credentials as a professional. This document is key in understanding the knowledge base and experience the doctor has and allows the potential patient to make an informed choice for receiving the best care possible for his/her condition. As an example, my CV can be viewed at www.uschirodirectory.com (Search Cintineo).

Finally, your chiropractor should have a team of specialists he works with and can refer to if necessary. These specialists should include a neurologist, an orthopedic surgeon, a pain management physician and a neurosurgeon. If a referral is necessary, your chiropractor should have an open line of communication with these specialists to discuss your care.

In the same way that "it takes a village to raise a child," in many cases, it takes a team of specialists working together to get the best results for your spine pain.



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support your spine but only after the mechanical issues are addressed. There is a misconception that chiropractic adjustive therapy and physical therapy are similar forms of treatment. The truth is they are complementary services. If you have a mechanical spine issue, chiropractic is the only treatment that will correct it. You can do all the physical therapy (exercise) you want for a mechanical spine issue and not