



Spinal Care Treatment Options: The Benefits and Risks

All health care treatments carry the possibility of complications, so you should know your options and the associated risks and benefits. The following information is provided to assist you in making an informed decision regarding your care.

1. Chiropractic Manipulation

Benefits: Twenty-four controlled research studies over the past 15 years have revealed that chiropractic care and the use of chiropractic manipulation is the most effective method of care for spinal cases.¹ A 1993 Canadian report overwhelmingly supported the safety, effectiveness, and scientific validity of chiropractic.² And in 1994 the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services also endorsed manipulation.³

a. Effectiveness: Chiropractic care is more effective than medical treatment for spinal cases.^{4 & 5} In fact, chiropractic patients return to work 4 times sooner than medical patients.^{6 & 7}

b. Cost: Medical care for spinal pain costs between 4 and 10 times more than chiropractic care. ^{6 & 7}

c. Patient satisfaction: Of the millions of patients who receive chiropractic treatment every year, the Gallup organization found that nine out of ten felt the treatment was effective.⁸ In addition, chiropractic patients were three times more satisfied with their chiropractic care than with treatment by family medical doctors for similar conditions.⁹

Risks: Damage can occur to the arteries of the neck. Such damage has led to or contributed to serious complications, including permanent impairment, stroke and death. Research reveals that strokes, permanent impairment or death occur in 2 cases per million treatments. **Thus, there is a .0002% risk of permanent impairment, stroke or death.**^{10 & 11} Even more rare is disc herniation. Researchers estimate less than 1 case per million treatments. **Thus, there is less than a .0001% risk of disc herniation.**¹²

2. Over the Counter Drugs

Benefits: Over the counter drugs can be used in mild and moderate cases to temporarily reduce pain.

Risks: Short term use of over the counter drugs usually causes no significant problems, although side effects such as nausea, vomiting, rashes, and dizziness may occur. Over the counter drugs are not recommended for long term use. Aspirin or ibuprofen can cause stomach irritation and ulcers. ³ And some patients who have used aspirin substitutes on a long term basis have developed end-stage kidney disease requiring life-long dialysis treatment.¹³

3. Prescription Medicines: muscle relaxants and pain relievers

Benefits: Short term use of prescription pain relievers can temporarily reduce pain and could be used in severe cases. But the short term use of muscle relaxants has been shown to be questionable.¹⁴

Risks: Short term use of prescription drugs usually causes no significant problems, but side effects such as nausea, drowsiness, vomiting, rashes, and dizziness may occur. No research supports the long term effective use of these drugs. Long term use could cause a number of significant complications that vary from drug to drug.

4. Hospitalization

Benefits: Hospitalization is unnecessary and ineffective for back problems.^{15 & 16} Chiropractic care provides more effective long- and short term benefits than hospital treatment.⁴

Risks: Hospitalization increases one's chance of exposure to communicable diseases and malpractice. Research by Harvard Medical School found a **1% risk of serious injury** (10,000 cases per million) due to medical negligence during a hospital admission.¹⁷

5. Physical Therapy

Benefits: Chiropractic manipulation is more effective than physical therapy for back problems.^{2, 3, & 5}

Risks: No serious consequences when applied by a professional under the direction of a chiropractic or medical doctor.

6. Surgery

Benefits: A patient should always get a second opinion before consenting to spinal surgery. Only 1% of spinal cases (like fractures, dislocations or certain nerve damage cases) can benefit from surgery, and surgery can cause more problems than it solves.³ Approximately 20% to 30% of all low back spinal surgeries (laminectomies) are reported to be unsuccessful.¹⁸ In contrast, chiropractic has been successful for the treatment of patients previously diagnosed as needing disc surgery.¹⁹

Risks: Surgery for neck pain results in paralysis in 15,000 cases per million. **Thus, there is a 1.5% risk of paralysis.**²⁰

7. Massage



Benefits: Massage may reduce pain and relax muscles in the short term.³ It has not been proven to speed the recovery of back problems. Chiropractic is significantly more effective than massage therapy for back problems. ²¹

Risks: None known when applied by a professional under the direction of a chiropractic or medical doctor.

8. Osteopathic Manipulation

Benefits: Although a small percentage of doctors of osteopathy do practice manipulation, most have become medical care providers and have left spinal manipulation to the chiropractic profession.

Risks: The risks are the same as chiropractic manipulation, according to Scott Haldeman, D.C., M.D., Ph.D.

9. Acupuncture

Benefits: Acupuncture produces poor results for back pain.^{3, 22, & 23}

Risks: Possible infection from the use of needles. When applied by a professional under the direction of a doctor, there is a very rare chance of significant problems.

10. Bed Rest

Benefits: Bed rest may reduce pain, but should not exceed 2 to 3 days. Bed rest is not recommended as the sole treatment method for spinal problems.

Risks: Exceeding 3 days of bed rest slows recovery and weakens the muscles and bones of the spine -- which can lead to chronic back problems.^{3 & 24}

11. Exercise

Benefits: Exercise is an integral component of any successful rehabilitative spinal program. When performed properly, exercise can improve the strength and endurance of spinal muscles and reduce pain.^{3, 25, 26, & 27}

Risks: Under the supervision of a doctor or therapist, no material risks. However, when performed improperly, exercise can complicate and worsen a spinal condition.³

12. No Treatment

Benefits: Some minor spinal pains might go away without treatment. However, because pain is the last symptom to appear and the first to disappear, pain is not an accurate indicator of the need for treatment.²⁸



Risks: Delaying treatment can result in irreversible damage, such as reduced mobility and increased scarring of spinal tissues. It can turn a simple case into a complicated condition that will be more costly to treat and will yield less favorable results.²⁸

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