



Chiropractic and Cancer Care

Chiropractic can benefit cancer patients as part of an integrated care plan.

By Diana Price

IF YOU ARE A cancer patient facing treatment and are considering an integrated approach to your care, chances are you may have heard that complementary modalities like acupuncture and mind-body medicine can improve your overall wellness during treatment. You may also be seeking support from a dietitian or may have considered naturopathic therapies. But have you considered including chiropractic care? The fact is, chiropractic can play a valuable role in an integrated care plan.

What Is Chiropractic?

Chiropractic is a health care specialty that has as its primary focus conditions of the musculoskeletal and nervous systems. According to Jeffrey A. Sklar, DC,

medical director of chiropractor services at Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the idea is that injuries or dysfunction related to the musculoskeletal and nervous systems can affect overall health. “When the nervous system is free of interference from misalignment in the spine, the body’s functions can be carried out at optimal levels,” he says.

Patients seek chiropractic care for a variety of health concerns, often related to pain in the back, neck, or joints. Doctors of chiropractic (DCs) approach their work with patients in the same way that other primary care providers do: they take a complete health history, perform a thorough examination, order any necessary testing, and then set a

treatment plan. Treatment often includes hands-on manipulation or chiropractic adjustments.

Rick McMichael, DC, immediate past president of the American Chiropractic Association, says the specialized hands-on approach chiropractic offers can provide patients welcome relief from pain and overall improvement in function and wellness. “By adjusting the bones of the spine very gently and specifically or by working with the soft tissues—muscles and ligaments—to bring balance back to the musculoskeletal system, we can help patients with their gait and their postural balance and just help them function more efficiently.”

Though the perception may be that chiropractic is about single, powerful



DOCTORS OF CHIROPRACTIC

Doctors of chiropractic undergo three to four years of premedical undergraduate study, generally in the sciences, and then attend an accredited four-year chiropractic college. Upon completing their education, they—like medical doctors—undergo intensive national board exams prior to being licensed by the state in which they practice.

Most important for DCs treating cancer patients, Dr. Sklar says, is that they have access to the most recent diagnostic information about the patient, including body scans and blood work. “There are specific protocols to treatment. Moreover there are specific techniques that may be indicated to use as well as techniques that would be counterproductive to the patient’s healing.”

adjustments, Dr. McMichael stresses that chiropractic is in fact often quite gentle, is based on a whole-person approach, and is often most effective when administered over a period of regular visits. “Chiropractic is not about getting one visit and you’re fixed,” he says. “It’s more like therapy or dietary change. It’s a natural approach to bring balance back to the body and improve function—and the body needs a little time to make those changes. As that happens, pain levels begin to reduce and you start to have more energy and feel better generally. Over



FINDING A DOCTOR OF CHIROPRACTIC

There are several ways to find a DC in your area. The American Chiropractic Association (ACA) has a “Find a Doc” feature on its website (acatoday.org) that allows users to enter a city

and a state and then lists ACA-member DCs in that area. Dr. McMichael says that referrals from family and friends are also helpful, as are referrals from your medical doctor.

When meeting for the first time with your DC, he says, “be sure that you feel the doctor is willing to take time to really evaluate you closely—to look at you and your health concerns as a whole and set the best care plan for you.”

time, your body resets neurologic pathways, motion becomes more balanced, you function better, and pain levels remain reduced longer.”

Chiropractic and Cancer Treatment

Chiropractic can also be an effective tool to help cancer patients cope with side effects of treatment and any underlying discomfort due to musculoskeletal issues. “There are many benefits for cancer patients who receive chiropractic care,” Dr. Sklar says. “Very often the stress of the diagnosis of cancer alone is powerful enough to cause muscle tightness that creates pain and decreases spinal motion.” In addition, he says, side effects from chemotherapy, such as neuropathy, headaches, nausea, joint stiffness, muscle aches, and painful changes in muscle tissue from radiation therapy, can also be managed by chiropractic.

Like many complementary modalities, chiropractic ideally functions as part of

an integrated care plan designed to support a patient’s wellness so that he or she can receive optimal treatment results. “Doctors of chiropractic don’t treat the cancer,” Dr. McMichael says. “They help patients be as strong as they can be to respond to specific oncology treatments, and they help patients reduce pain and improve function so that their body responds as strongly as possible.”

To ensure that chiropractic care is integrated in an overall care plan in a safe and effective manner, both Dr. Sklar and Dr. McMichael stress the importance of communication between the DC and the other members of the patient’s health care team. At CTCA, for instance, Dr. Sklar says, “the chiropractic department works with each oncologist’s team and meets with team members regularly to ensure that the physician has seen the most recent reports on every patient under chiropractic care.”

Communication among team members

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR CHIROPRACTIC VISIT

- **Share your complete medical history.** Make sure your DC knows your medical history and your health status and takes the time to go over what you've been going through, examines you closely, and looks over past testing. Dr. McMichael says, "If they've studied all those things, they'll be able to use their education and experience to set a treatment plan that's right for you."
- **Communication is key.** Both Dr. Sklar and Dr. McMichael stress the importance of communicating any concerns and questions with your DC. "Many patients are concerned about feeling pain from the treatment," Dr. Sklar says. "But it is uncommon for a treatment to cause pain. Communication during the treatment is paramount. I make it a practice to check in with my patients to see if they are uncomfortable in any way. In most cases, you can avoid discomfort by keeping the dialogue open during treatment."

Dr. McMichael agrees, saying, "Be sure to ask your DC questions about any concerns you have, like *Will this hurt? Will you be careful around these specific areas?* You should be comfortable expressing your fears and concerns."



Dr. Sklar with patient

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is vital, especially because there are some circumstances during cancer treatment in which chiropractic may be contraindicated. Dr. McMichael says, "A chiropractic treatment plan could exclude certain types of treatment depending on a patient's unique problems. For instance, if you had some bone deterioration in an area of your spine, you would certainly not want any type of forceful manipulation in that area. Or, if a patient has a thrombosis problem in an extremity as a result of medicinal treatments or the condition itself, you wouldn't want to be doing a lot of soft tissue work in that area." These and any other issues can be avoided, he says,

by ensuring that the DC maintains a good understanding of the patient's health status, is provided with all diagnostic testing (scans and X-rays, for example) throughout, and is in communication with other members of the health care team.

Dr. McMichael says that chiropractic has a strong tradition of putting patients' needs first. "Something chiropractic patients have historically said is that we listen to them; we keep them in the center; we treat them as a person, not as a number or condition." For this reason chiropractic can be an ideal component of an integrated, whole-person approach to cancer treatment. **CFThrive**