

Whiplash

Chiropractic – support for an invisible injury

Your pain and misery as a result of a whiplash injury might not feel any better if you were told that there is no immediate evidence of injury to the bones of your neck on your X-rays. However this is often the case, because initially nothing may show up on an X-ray unless the accident was very severe. Symptoms can take months or even longer to appear. The problem may be in the muscles and ligaments, which do not appear on an X-ray.

Chiropractors treat problems with your joints, bones and muscles, and the effects they have on your nervous system. Working on all the joints of your body, concentrating particularly on the spine, they use their hands to make gentle, specific adjustments (the chiropractic word for manipulation) to improve the efficiency of your nervous system and release your body's natural healing ability. Chiropractic does not involve the use of any drugs or surgery.

Changes to normal neck movement

Rather than just a simple sprain to the muscle and ligaments of the neck, research shows that during a road traffic accident involving a rear-end shunt, the neck curves in an abnormal S-shape which grossly alters normal neck movement.

Normally, the joints at the back of your neck glide over each other and are self-lubricated, but a whiplash injury forces them together, damaging the surrounding area, which includes nerves, muscles, ligaments and discs.

There are tiny receptors in the ligaments around the neck called proprioceptors. These relay information to your brain about the position of the joints. If these ligaments have been damaged due to whiplash, you may experience dizziness or light headedness as well as:

- neck pain
- headaches
- arm pain
- fatigue
- poor concentration

Your BCA chiropractor may advise you to use ice on your neck in the days following the injury.

Not just car accidents

Whiplash injuries are also known as acceleration/deceleration injuries and need not be the result of car accidents. A slip or fall can give you a whiplash-type injury. In fact you do not have to hit your head or neck - a sudden movement, especially if it is repetitive, may cause injury. Welders, for example, may suffer whiplash-type symptoms as a result of 'nodding down' their masks more than 50 times in a day.

Getting all the joints working together

Your BCA chiropractor may decide to take a special series of X-ray films called flexion/extension views to show any abnormal movement that would help diagnose a problem in your neck.

After taking a medical history, he/she will examine you carefully to assess whether your neck is moving properly. This involves examining the muscles, nerves, joints, ligaments and tendons. Then your treatment will begin with often gentle, specific adjustments to your neck. This will decrease pain and restore normal movement to the area, aiming to ensure that each joint is working at its best.

As well as manipulative treatment, some chiropractors use rehabilitation techniques which may include Swiss balls and hand/eye co-ordination exercises to retrain those receptors that may have been damaged through a whiplash injury, as well as doing supervised neck strengthening exercises.

There was no pain straight after the accident – why has it started hurting now?

The pain from a whiplash doesn't have to happen immediately after a trauma; often your body can compensate in the short-term for injuries and it is not until weeks or even months later that the pain develops.

I was involved in a high speed accident, and I seem to be fine, but my friend had an accident at 10mph and had severe pain. Why?

Tiny receptors in your neck make sure that when it is stretched very quickly, an immediate muscle spasm will sometimes protect it from harm. However, if the neck is stretched more slowly, the receptors don't recognise that there is a problem, and the protective mechanism doesn't kick in, leaving you open to injury.

Rest doesn't seem to have made it any better. Why not?

It is important to rest for a short period whilst tissues are inflamed. It then becomes equally important that you move your neck, to ensure that, if scar tissue develops, it remains flexible. Chiropractic treatment helps restore appropriate movement in your neck as quickly as possible.

References:

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Members of the British Chiropractic Association (BCA) abide by a strict code of ethics and the association only accepts members who have graduated from an internationally recognised college of chiropractic education after a minimum of four years full-time training. The BCA ensures its chiropractors maintain high standards of conduct, practice, education and training. Like medical practitioners and dentists, all chiropractors are registered by law.

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