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Spine & Sports: Why go to a chiropractor?

The public consensus is that that chiropractors deal with back pain. This surely is true, and if you've got back pain, then the chiropractor is a logical option. But, chiropractors often address all musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions. Muscles, tendons, ligaments and the fascia connective tissues are all part of the MSK system. MSK conditions in general consume a large chunk of healthcare dollars. Indigestion and pneumonia are not MSK conditions, for example, but sciatica and tennis elbow are. Headaches and lower back pain each drain health-care dollars, and are also costly in lost work time from debilitation.

Why a chiropractor? As licensed doctors, chiropractors or doctors of chiropractic (DC) have the duty to examine and diagnose your condition. DCs are also skilled hands-on providers trained to treat MSK conditions. They clearly are the most trained in providing joint manipulation. Specifically, high-velocity-low-amplitude (HVLA) joint manipulation is what chiropractors do best. While anyone can learn to do HVLA manipulation, to do it really well and perform it effectively and safely takes years of training and practice. HVLA joint manipulation can be powerful medicine in many cases, but not for everyone, and not all the time. Alone it has its limitations, and believing it cures all ills is a fairy tale. Thus, modern chiropractic care combines manipulation with hands-on soft tissue procedures, exercise training, nutrition and ergonomic advice, as well as other modalities such as therapeutic ultrasound, low-level laser therapy, foot orthotics and sport taping, for example. This creates a package of care for all MSK conditions, from headaches to foot pain.

Finding a DC with this broader set of skills requires a little research. Check web sites and ask around. While there remains a percentage of DCs who refuse to enter this broader clinical realm, most DCs blend joint manipulation with other modalities, including some form of soft tissue therapy, at best. Some obtain post-graduate certifications as well as specialist "diplomate" degrees in areas such as nutrition, neurology and sports medicine.

Most importantly, a DC with good clinical skills has the capacity to provide a thorough physical examination and astute diagnosis. Also, they can help direct your care with other providers. This can reduce the odds of getting duplicate care or unnecessary care. Done well, chiropractic medicine is a perfect complement to primary care medicine. In other words, the MD can focus on his or her specialty, internal medicine, and not be burdened with the variety of MSK conditions that are orthopedic in nature but don't require surgery, but instead would benefit from a hands-on approach to both diagnosis and treatment. This is also a viable protocol for cases that need coordinated care by pain management specialists, PT-rehab providers or others. This type of system is in place in many locations across the U.S., including right here at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital's Medical Back Pain Program in Plymouth. Their medical director is a chiropractor and they employ other DCs in the clinic and emergency department.

The modern chiropractic profession offers safe and effective care. It's a logical first place to start when you have a MSK condition. For more information, see the American Chiropractic Association web site, www.acatoday.org.

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