



Going Against the Migraine, Choosing Chiropractic for Headache Relief

By Bobby Maybee, DC

“Headaches are more frequently caused by spinal stress than any other condition.”

– Journal of Occupational Trauma

Few conditions pain me more to see a patient go through than migraine headaches. I can't tell you how many times I've had to roll up my sleeves and get to work with all the lights off because some poor woman or man has had to hide in the dark for the last two days due to headache. Or how many times I've had to keep the trash can nearby because the nausea has brought a patient to the edge of losing her lunch over and over for months. It pains me because I know there are others out there suffering who would never think to consult a chiropractor for their migraine, even though in my experience it has been quite easy to fix with just my hands. Migraines affect about 15% of the US population. Many of these cases are managed by medication, but some patients do not tolerate migraine medication due to side effects or prefer to avoid medication for other reasons. (1). In some cases, the medication does little to nothing to benefit the patient. With these cases, a safe and demonstrably effective alternative should be provided to the public to offer relief, particularly due to the debilitating effects of migraine headache. One often overlooked treatment option is spinal manipulative therapy (SMT), which is performed by many professionals, particularly Doctors of Chiropractic.

Chiropractic treatment of migraines has demonstrated positive outcomes for sufferers. These outcomes have been published in peer reviewed scientific journals, giving merit to the effectiveness of the therapy. What this means, in essence, is people who do not choose chiropractic as a safe and drug-free treatment for their migraines because they “don't believe in chiropractic” are making an emotional decision and ignoring the scientific data available. A study published in the Australasia Chiropractic and Osteopathic Journal showed statistically significant improvement in migraine frequency, pain intensity, and medication use when compared to baseline. (2) When those patients were followed up with 6 months later, they continued to show significant improvement.

Another study published in the Journal of Manipulative and Physiologic Therapeutics confirmed previous studies showing that many people have significant improvement with SMT for migraine headaches. (3) This significant improvement was especially noted for patients who indicated stress as a trigger for their migraine headaches.

Finally and most significantly, in the Journal of Headache Pain, a systematic review of research for treatments of migraine found that SMT performed by a chiropractor might be equally effective as propranolol and topiramate in the prophylactic management of migraine. (1)

When we start to allow the known research to tell a story, we see that Chiropractic care is an excellent drug-free, natural option for treating migraines. And SMT can be as effective, or even more effective, than two migraine medications! Especially for those people whose migraines are triggered by stress.

Another advantage to consulting with a Doctor of Chiropractic concerning headaches is getting a proper diagnosis. Three types of headache; Migraine (which is the rarest), Cervicogenic (coming from the neck), and muscle tension headache can all be misdiagnosed. In my experience, many, many people who think they have a migraine, and even have migraine like symptoms, don't have a migraine at all, but have a cervicogenic or muscle tension headache instead. Or they have migraines that are complicated by muscle tension or spinal dysfunction. So it is imperative to get a proper workup by a professional who specializes in musculoskeletal conditions only... A chiropractor!

In my practice, the spinal manipulative therapy is combined with other natural approaches to maximize effectiveness of treatment. This includes evaluating and correcting posture, identifying and eliminating environmental triggers, and teaching stress reduction and flexibility exercises. When all of these things are combined, we have a really concrete approach towards effective management and relief of migraine pain. So much so, that the Journal of Manipulative and Physiologic Therapeutics published the following, **“Spinal manipulation seemed to be as effective as a well-established and efficacious treatment (amitriptyline), and on the basis of a benign side effects profile, it should be considered a treatment option for patients with frequent migraine headaches.” (4)**

If you know of anyone who is suffering from migraines or any other headaches, it may be time to give chiropractic a try. Even if they don't “believe” in chiropractic, that's fine. It's not a religion; the therapy is supported by sound research. Even if they don't like having their “neck popped”, that's okay too, there are alternative ways to provide SMT without “popping” the neck. Consultations with me are always complimentary so that we can see if chiropractic care is right for you before we begin treatment.

(1.)

[Manual Therapies for Migraine: A Systematic Review](#)

J Headache Pain. 2011 (Feb 5)

Migraine occurs in about 15% of the general population. Migraine is usually managed by medication, but some patients do not tolerate migraine medication due to side effects or prefer to avoid medication for other reasons. Non-pharmacological management is an alternative treatment option. We systematically reviewed randomized clinical trials (RCTs) on manual therapies for migraine. The RCTs suggest that massage therapy, physiotherapy, relaxation and chiropractic spinal manipulative therapy might be equally effective as propranolol and topiramate in the prophylactic management of migraine

(2.)

[A Twelve Month Clinical Trial of Chiropractic](#)

[Spinal Manipulative Therapy for Migraine](#)

Australasia Chiropractic and Osteopathic Journal 1999 (Jul): 8 (2)

32 participants showed statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) improvement in migraine frequency, VAS, disability, and medication use, when compared to initial baseline levels. A further assessment of outcomes after a six month follow up (based on 24 participants), continued to show statistically significant improvement in migraine frequency ($p < 0.005$), VAS ($p < 0.01$), disability ($p < 0.05$), and medication use ($p < 0.01$), when compared to initial baseline levels.

(3.)

[A Randomized Controlled Trial of Chiropractic Spinal Manipulative Therapy for Migraine](#)

J Manipulative Physiol Ther 2000 (Feb); 23 (2): 91–95

The results of this study support previous results showing that some people report significant improvement in migraines after chiropractic SMT. A high percentage (>80%) of participants reported stress as a major factor for their migraines. It appears probable that chiropractic care has an effect on the physical conditions related to stress and that in these people the effects of the migraine are reduced.

(4.)

[The Efficacy of Spinal Manipulation, Amitriptyline and the Combination of Both Therapies for the Prophylaxis of Migraine Headache](#)

J Manipulative Physiol Ther 1998 (Oct); 21 (8): 511–519

There was no advantage to combining amitriptyline and spinal manipulation for the treatment of migraine headache. **Spinal manipulation seemed to be as effective as a well-established and efficacious treatment (amitriptyline), and on the basis of a benign side effects profile, it should be considered a treatment option for patients with frequent migraine headaches.**