

# RETHINKING OUR APPROACH TO PAIN



It's time to change the way we approach pain. The services of doctors of chiropractic, along with other non-drug forms of pain management, can be an important part of the solution to the opioid epidemic gripping the United States. While medication may be necessary for some patients, there are cases—particularly those involving chronic pain—where a more conservative approach may alleviate pain and even lessen or eliminate the need for prescription painkillers.

The American Chiropractic Association (ACA) believes people in pain need better access to drug-free options such as chiropractic services. ACA has worked for years to raise awareness of conservative treatments such as chiropractic as a first line of defense against pain.

## A Problem of Epidemic Proportions

Inadequate pain management coupled with the epidemic of prescription **opioid overuse** and **abuse** has taken a severe toll on the lives of tens of thousands of people in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), as many as **one in four** patients who receive prescription opioids long term for non-cancer pain in primary care settings struggle with addiction. Every day, more than **1,000** people are treated in the ER for misusing prescription opioids.

Deaths involving opioids have quadrupled since 1999; in 2014 alone, more than **14,000** people died from overdoses involving the drugs. That same year, another **2 million** people abused or were dependent on opioids.

Beyond the risks of addiction and overdose, prescription drugs that numb pain may convince a patient that a musculoskeletal condition is less severe than it is or that it has healed. This misunderstanding can lead to overexertion and a delay in the healing process...or even **permanent injury**.

The problem of prescription drug overuse and abuse reaches beyond the general population. New research suggests that the rising prevalence of chronic pain and opioid use by U.S. combat military personnel is cause for serious concern.

The study, published online as a research letter in *JAMA Internal*

*Medicine*, is accompanied by an editorial recommending that the goal should be nothing short of a **“cultural transformation”** in how pain is managed.



## Rising Recognition of the Value of Non-Drug Approaches to Pain

There is a growing body of research that validates the effectiveness of chiropractic services, leading many respected health care organizations to recommend chiropractic and its drug-free approach to pain relief. The *Journal of the American Medical Association*, in a 2013 patient page on low-back pain, suggested patients consider chiropractic treatment before resorting to surgery. In 2015, the Joint Commission, the organization that accredits more than 20,000 health care systems in the U.S. (including every major hospital), recognized the value of non-drug approaches by adding chiropractic to its pain management standard. Most recently, in March 2016, the CDC, in response to the opioid epidemic, released guidelines for prescribing opioids that also promote non-pharmacologic alternatives for the treatment of chronic pain.

## WHAT IS CHIROPRACTIC?

Chiropractic is a health care profession that focuses on disorders of the musculoskeletal system and the nervous system, and the effects of these disorders on general health. Chiropractic services are used most often to treat neuromusculoskeletal complaints, including but not limited to back pain, neck pain, pain in the joints of the arms or legs and headaches.

Doctors of chiropractic (DCs) – often referred to as chiropractors or chiropractic physicians – practice a hands-on, drug-free approach to health care that includes patient examination, diagnosis and treatment. Chiropractors, best known for their expert use of spinal manipulation, have broad diagnostic skills and are trained to recommend therapeutic and rehabilitative exercises, as well as to provide nutritional, dietary and lifestyle counseling.

DCs may assess patients through clinical examination, laboratory testing, diagnostic imaging and other diagnostic interventions to determine when chiropractic treatment is appropriate or when it is not appropriate. Chiropractors will readily refer patients to the appropriate health care provider when chiropractic care is not suitable for the patient's condition or the condition warrants co-management in conjunction with other health care providers.

In many cases, such as with low-back pain, chiropractic care may be a patient's primary method of treatment. When other medical conditions exist, chiropractic services may complement or support medical treatment by relieving the musculoskeletal issues associated with the condition.

### Education, Licensure, Physician Status

Doctors of chiropractic in the United States, like medical doctors, are subject to boundaries established in state practice acts and are regulated by state licensing boards. Further, their education in four-year doctoral graduate school programs is nationally accredited through an agency that operates under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education. After graduation, they must pass national board exams before obtaining a license to practice.

DCs are designated as physician-level providers in the vast majority of states and federal Medicare program. The essential services provided by DCs are also available in federal health delivery systems, including those administered by Medicaid, the U.S. Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense, the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program, federal workers' compensation and all state workers' compensation programs.



## Conservative Care First: A Common Sense Approach

ACA encourages patients and health care providers to first exhaust conservative forms of pain management, when appropriate, before moving on to riskier, potentially addictive treatments such as opioids. To this end, ACA delegates met in Washington, D.C., in 2016 and adopted a policy statement proposing a solution to the dual public health concerns of inadequate pain management and opioid abuse. ACA's policy statement supports:

- 1** The investigation of non-pharmacologic interventions for pain treatment across a variety of patient populations and health-care delivery settings
- 2** The promotion of evidence-based non-pharmacologic therapies within best practice models for pain management
- 3** The improvement of access to providers of non-pharmacologic therapies
- 4** Interprofessional education to augment the training of pain management teams
- 5** And public health campaigns to raise awareness of drug-free treatment options for pain syndromes.



The American Chiropractic Association is the largest professional association in the United States representing doctors of chiropractic. ACA promotes the highest standards of ethics and patient care, contributing to the health and well-being of millions of chiropractic patients. On behalf of its members, ACA lobbies for pro-chiropractic legislation and policies, promotes a positive public image of chiropractic, supports research, provides professional and educational opportunities for doctors of chiropractic, and offers leadership for the advancement of the profession. To find a doctor of chiropractic near you, visit

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