

Could a Neck Adjustment Lower Your Blood Pressure?

A New Study Implies a Link Between Hypertension and Spinal Alignment

By LARA NAAMAN AND IMAEYEN IBANGA

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Though doctors are unsure of what causes blood pressure to increase, a new study suggests that a specific type of neck adjustment may reduce hypertension for some of the 65 million Americans battling it.

The University of Chicago study, published in the Journal of Human Hypertension this month, looked at the possibility of a connection between a spinal realignment and a decrease in blood pressure.

"We set up a double-blind study to really look and see if in fact this procedure was affecting high blood pressure," said University of Chicago Medical Center hypertension specialist George Bakris.

The results were intriguing. The patients who received the chiropractic adjustments saw their blood pressure drop an average of 17 points -- a dip that usually takes two blood pressure medications to achieve.

"My blood pressure dropped tremendously," said Denise Nieman, who had neck pain before participating in the study.

Why It May Work

The idea behind the realignment is that the C-1 vertebra, located at the top of the spine, operates like a fuse box in the body. When it's twisted, it can pinch arteries and nerves at the neck's base, which not only causes discomfort but also affects blood flow.

"When the spine is misaligned, it can affect all types of things, all types of disease, conditions," said chiropractor Marshall Dickholtz Jr.

So for patients like Nieman, whose X-rays showed her C-1 out of alignment, the special chiropractic adjustment lowered the pain and her blood pressure simultaneously.

The Limitations

While the study presents some interesting ideas, it has its limitations, according to "Good Morning America" medical editor Dr. Tim Johnson.

"[There are] a lot of unanswered questions. But I'm telling you, this catches our attention because of a significant drop in blood pressure. It absolutely deserves more study," Johnson said.

A larger study has been commissioned; in the original study only 50 patients were treated, of which only 25 got the real adjustment, while the others received a fake one. Afterward there was only an eight-week follow-up.

Besides determining which patients would require X-rays to determine whether the procedure could help them, the procedure requires very special chiropractor training, Johnson said. And no one knows for sure how long the neck adjustments or decreased blood pressure will last.

"The truth is we really don't know that vertebra at the top of the neck is in a critical area where the brain stem, the lower part of the brain, is involved with regulation of blood pressure. It's theoretically imaginable that changing the anatomy of that area may have effect on regulating blood pressure," Johnson said.

Johnson said people with neck pain and hypertension should visit their primary care physician first and not substitute the doctor's visit with a trip to the chiropractor.

"I wouldn't consider the chiropractor to be the primary care [doctor] for people with high blood pressure. They should absolutely go to their doctor," he said. "But in talking to their doctor if they are having some neck problems, they might want to entertain this idea."

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