

CHRONIC PAIN

Can Chiropractic Care Ease Neck Pain? What Recent Science Says

Evidence is growing on how chiropractic care fits into effective neck pain treatment.



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After years of debate about whether chiropractic care actually helps neck pain, three recently published, major studies offer some of the clearest evidence yet: For people with recent neck pain, spinal adjustments can

reduce discomfort by up to 40 percent within just a few weeks, especially when paired with exercise, thoughtful clinical screening, and early treatment.

With [seven in 10 adults](#) experiencing neck pain at some point, it is one of the most common reasons people seek care. Most of us have felt it: that dull ache after a long day at the computer or the sudden stiffness when we turn our head. However, the question isn't whether your neck will hurt; rather, it's what will actually help when it does.

What Research Shows About Neck Pain Relief

A systematic [review](#) and meta-analysis published in May found that spinal manipulative therapy, a common chiropractic technique that uses quick, precise movements to restore normal joint motion, can significantly reduce pain, improve neck movement, and ease day-to-day tasks for people with acute nonspecific neck pain. The review analyzed eight randomized controlled trials involving 965 participants, offering one of the clearest looks yet at how effective spinal manipulative therapy can be for recent-onset neck pain.

Most patients saw the biggest gains in the first two to six weeks, with pain scores dropping by an estimated 20 percent to 40 percent. Mild soreness sometimes occurred afterward, but serious complications were rare.

Key Findings at a Glance

| Category | Result | Details |
|------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Pain relief | 20%–40% improvement | Based on average patient reports |
| Neck rotation | About 10 degrees increase | Improved range of motion |
| Side effects | Mild soreness | Typically fades within 24 hours |
| Best outcomes | With exercises | Combined treatment improves recovery |
| Timing | Early treatment works best | Chronic pain may respond more slowly |
| Improvement rate | 70%–80% improved | 20%–30% saw little or no change |

EPOCH HEALTH

Source: Efficacy and safety of spinal manipulative therapy in the management of acute neck pain: a systematic review and meta-analysis. (2025). Diao, Y., et al. Systematic Reviews, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-025-02855-7> CC BY 4.0

Why Timing Matters

If your neck pain began recently, chiropractic care has a strong chance of helping quickly.

The evidence seems strongest for acute neck pain, meaning discomfort that’s new or has flared up within the past few weeks. In those early stages, spinal joints can stiffen, muscles can tighten, and nerve sensitivity can

increase. A well-performed adjustment may interrupt that cycle, signaling to the nervous system that it's safe to move again.

Chronic neck pain, by contrast, tends to involve more than stiff joints. Over time, poor posture, including leaning forward at a computer, strains the muscles that support the neck and upper back. That ongoing tension can make the nervous system more sensitive to movement. For these longer-term cases, the recent review noted that chiropractic adjustments work best when combined with exercise, posture retraining, and other movement-based therapies.

“Chiropractic adjustments have been shown to help with mechanical neck pain, along with improvements in range of motion and stiffness,” Joseph Betz, president of the International Chiropractors Association, told The Epoch Times.

Do Different Techniques Make a Difference?

Chiropractic adjustments come in a few different styles. Some involve a quick and precise movement, while others are slower and gentler. Another systematic [review](#) and meta-analysis published in January found that people tend to experience similar improvements regardless of which method is used.

What appears to matter most is whether the chiropractor chooses the right style for the person and targets the exact joint that is not moving well.

Common Adjustment Styles You May Encounter

Chiropractors adjust the neck in several ways depending on the cause of stiffness and your comfort level. Here are some of the most common styles you might experience:

- **Quick Manual:** A small, controlled movement that restores motion, sometimes with that familiar popping sound. It is often used when the neck is stiff in one specific spot.
- **Gentle Stretching:** Slow and smooth movements that ease into better motion. A good option for people worried about sudden movement.

- **Tool-Assisted:** A tiny, precise tap delivered by a handheld device such as an Activator to help the joint move. This can be useful for those who prefer a lighter approach or have medical conditions that limit twisting.

“Patients come in with stiff, painful necks, and these treatments are consistently effective,” William J. Lauretti, a chiropractic professor at Northeast College of Health Sciences, told The Epoch Times. “It’s exciting to see the research catching up with what we already observe in the clinic.”

What’s Actually Improving After an Adjustment?

A separate systematic [review](#) published in July measured neck movement before and after typical chiropractic adjustments and saw clear changes in how the neck moved and felt. Most people showed immediate gains in neck rotation and flexibility, often within minutes of the adjustment.

Researchers noted that these improvements aren’t about bones “moving back into place.” Instead, they likely reflect rapid shifts in how the brain and spinal cord interpret stiffness and movement. When an adjustment restores motion to a restricted joint, it may help reset the body’s sense of position and safety, easing protective muscle tension and improving coordination.

In other words, adjustments appear to fine-tune communication between joints, muscles, and the nervous system. That recalibration can reduce the brain’s perception of threat in the area, allowing muscles to relax and normal motion to return.

How Chiropractic Care Stacks Up Against Other Treatments

Chiropractic care isn’t the only nondrug approach for neck pain. Treatments such as physical therapy, massage, and guided stretching can also help ease stiffness and improve mobility. Research has found that chiropractic adjustments work about as well as these other hands-on methods, with the

most significant improvements seen when manipulation was combined with strengthening exercises.

Some studies found that combining spinal manipulation with targeted neck exercises produced the best results.

“There’s still a misconception that chiropractors only adjust the spine and nothing else,” Lauretti said. “The truth is that most chiropractors today use a wide range of approaches—from physical therapy and stretching to soft-tissue massage. We’re trained to diagnose a patient’s problem, give perspective on functional issues, and guide them through movement-based care.”

Treatment Comparison for Neck Pain

| Treatment Type | Main Benefits | Common Risks | When It Works Best |
|---|--|--|--|
| Chiropractic (spinal manipulation) | Improves mobility and reduces pain | Temporary soreness, very rare risk of artery injury | Acute neck pain from a stiff joint |
| Physical therapy | Strengthens muscles and improves posture | Slower results, requires consistency | Recent or chronic neck pain with over-active muscle weakness or posture strain |
| Massage and soft-tissue therapy | Relaxes tight muscles | Relief may be short-lived without exercise | Muscle tension or stress-related stiffness |
| Medications (NSAIDs or muscle relaxants) | Fast symptom relief | Stomach upset, drowsiness, and long-term side effects | Short-term flare-ups that disrupt sleep or daily function |
| Injections (steroid or nerve block) | Reduces severe inflammation | Invasive, temporary effects, higher risk with repeated use | Significant inflammation or nerve pain when other care hasn't helped |
| Surgery | Corrects structural nerve compression | Long recovery, higher complication risk | Structural problems not improved by conservative care |

Source: Manipulation or Mobilisation for Neck Pain. (2010). Gross A., et al. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, <https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD004249> CC BY 4.0

Understanding the Risks

No medical treatment is risk-free, and spinal manipulation is no exception. The May meta-analysis reported mostly mild side effects, usually limited to temporary soreness or a headache lasting less than a day.

Serious complications such as artery injury leading to stroke are extremely rare. The American Heart Association [reviewed](#) the concern of arterial injury and noted that manipulation is not proven to cause artery damage directly, although screening is important.

Patient safety starts well before the first adjustment.

“There are several measures to make sure adjustments are done safely,” Reza Shakeri, a California-based chiropractor, told The Epoch Times. “We perform orthopedic and neurologic testing, and imaging like X-rays or MRIs helps identify any contraindications. When those steps are followed, chiropractic care is much safer than most people think.”

Experts also noted that chiropractic care should be evaluated by the same standards as other medical treatments.

“When judging the safety profile and effectiveness of treatments, it’s important to hold all treatment approaches to the same standards,” Lauretti said.

What Patients Should Ask

If you’re considering chiropractic care for neck pain, experts recommend asking a few simple questions before your first adjustment:

- Is your pain recent or chronic? Manipulation works best for new, uncomplicated neck pain.

- What will you do besides adjustments? Ask about stretching, posture tips, and exercises you can do at home.
- How will you check for risks? Your provider should take a full health history and explain any concerns.
- What should you expect afterward? Mild soreness is common; severe or persistent symptoms are not.

When treatment is tailored to the person and communication is clear, most people tolerate adjustments well and notice improvement within a few visits.

What You Do Between Visits Matters

Hands-on care can help restore motion, but what you do during the rest of your week plays a big role in how well those gains stick. Research shows that simple strengthening and mobility exercises for the upper back, neck, and shoulder blade muscles can reduce stiffness and help prevent flare-ups. These movements support the areas that work hardest to keep your neck stable throughout the day.

Simple Exercises That Strengthen Your Neck

Try these gentle options [recommended](#) in clinical exercise research:

Chin Tucks

- Sit tall and draw your head straight back, creating a small “double chin.”
- Hold for five to 10 seconds and repeat eight to 12 times.
- This helps counter forward-head posture that strains the base of the skull.

Shoulder Blade Squeeze

- Pull shoulder blades down and back as if you are sliding them into a back pocket.
- Hold for five seconds and repeat 10 to 15 times.
- This improves upper back support so the neck doesn't overwork.

Upper Back Extension Over a Chair

- Place your hands behind your head and gently arch your upper back over the top of a chair without dropping your head backward.
- Hold 10 to 15 seconds and repeat two to three times.
- This eases rounded shoulders that can contribute to neck tension.

If anything feels sharp or alarming, stop and check with your provider.

Everyday Habits That Support Healing

What you do throughout the day matters as much as exercise. Small posture and movement habits can reduce strain on the cervical spine and surrounding muscles.

- Keep screens at eye level to avoid prolonged forward-head posture.
- Take short movement breaks to prevent stiffness in the neck and shoulders.
- Apply light heat before stretching to loosen tight neck muscles.
- Relax your jaw and avoid clenching, which creates tension through the head and neck.
- Practice slow belly breathing to help reduce neck tension driven by stress.

These actions help reinforce the message your body receives during treatment. Strengthening and posture-friendly movement help your nervous system stop guarding the neck. Over time, those gains can mean fewer flare-ups and more confidence in everyday motion.

Takeaway

For recent, nonspecific neck pain, chiropractic spinal manipulation is a safe, evidence-supported option with a good chance of helping restore comfortable movement. If your pain has lasted longer, combining adjustments with exercise and posture changes offers the best plan for improvement. With appropriate screening and clear communication, many people with recent neck pain improve within the first few weeks and return to daily life with less pain and discomfort.



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