

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Steven L. Smith, DC

Chiropractic for Gastrointestinal Disorders

When most people think of chiropractic, they think of correction of back, neck and shoulder pain. While these are certainly common reasons to seek chiropractic care, they're not the only ones chiropractic addresses.

As an example of the many ways chiropractic care improves well-being, Dr. Smith explores the relationship between spinal dysfunction and gastrointestinal (GI) disorders, particularly inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). Wondering how adjustments to the spine can ease pain in the gut? Read on to learn about the surprising relationship between these seemingly disparate parts of the body.

What's IBD?

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) is an umbrella term for Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis and other less common inflammatory intestinal conditions. These diseases acutely affect quality of life. Symptoms include cramping and spasms, diarrhea, vomiting, rectal bleeding and weight loss.

While the exact cause of IBD is unclear, many researchers believe that it is an autoimmune disease, meaning that the immune system fails to recognize certain tissues and cells and targets them as if they were pathogens.



Various autoimmune conditions often occur alongside IBD, such as arthritis and liver disease. There is no cure for IBD, explains Dr. Smith — instead, it is often managed through dietary changes. Medication and surgical removal of the large intestine is the conventional medical approach for severe cases.

The Musculoskeletal Link

You may be surprised by the common association between IBD and back and joint pain, but roughly 30 percent of IBD patients suffer from concurrent musculoskeletal syndromes (*Scand J Gastroenterol* 2001;36:1307-13).

The autoimmune traits of IBD can affect organs and systems, causing other inflammatory symptoms. Called *extraintestinal manifestations* of IBD, these symptoms may appear before, during, or after flare-ups of gastrointestinal symptoms.

Dr. Smith explains to patients that examples of extraintestinal manifestations of IBD include arthritis and sacroiliitis (inflammation of joints in the pelvis).

In a study of these manifestations, computer topography (CT) scans revealed sacroiliitis in almost one third of IBD patients (*Clin Imaging*



1995;19:258-62).

In general, musculoskeletal manifestations of IBD are more common with Crohn's compared to ulcerative colitis, and with more advanced cases of IBD (*World J Gastroenterol* 2003;9:2300).

In some cases, one underlying autoimmune condition causes painful inflammation in both the back and the bowels. One of these, *ankylosing spondylitis*, is a form of arthritis that can lead to complete fusion of all *vertebrae*, the bones of the spine. As many as 60 percent of those suffering from ankylosing spondylitis also have bowel inflammation (*MedGenMed* 2007;9:55).

Bowel Problems Cause Back Pain

Scientists continue to investigate the mechanisms behind extraintestinal manifestations of IBD. At this time, the general consensus points to the *intestinal mucosa* as the link between IBD and other areas of inflammation.

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Mucosa is the lining of the intestines that secretes enzymes and antibodies. The mucosa protects the body from harmful microorganisms, plus absorbs nutrients and water. As a key aspect of the body's immune system, the intestinal mucosa may set off autoimmune responses throughout the body when it is affected by inflammation.

Other connections between IBD and back pain are simply mechanical. Increased pressure on the spine when straining to defecate can cause inflammation and pain, as can lack of normal back support from an abdomen weakened by IBD.

Additionally, back pain may be referred from internal organs. This is because less robust sensory pathways from the organs to the brain can make inflammation seem to be in the muscles when it's actually in a nearby organ (*Clin J Pain* 2008;24:199-203).

Chiropractic Can Help

The doctor addresses a variety of physical complaints by identifying and correcting common areas of dysfunction in the spine called **vertebral subluxations**.

An exciting study reveals that vertebral subluxations are common in IBD sufferers. Researchers speculate that vertebral subluxations trigger problems in the immune system as well as digestive difficulties via chronic nerve compression. When a group of 17 Crohn's disease patients received chiropractic care, 12 experienced long-term, stable remission of GI symptoms (*J Vert Sublux Res* 2003;4).

Other research trials support the power of chiropractic to ease GI problems. A review of 83 consecutive patients with digestive pain who sought care at one chiropractic clinic revealed that three months of care led to less severe and less frequent pain. Of these, 37 patients experienced enough relief to downgrade their medication for GI symptoms. None reported adverse effects from chiropractic care (*Clin Chiro* 2009;12:28).

Many parents turn to chiropractic for their children's digestive complaints as well. Chiropractic has a well-founded reputation for safely relieving infant colic more effectively than conventional medicine (*Explore* 2011;7:168-74).

Spinal adjustments even help premature newborns to quickly attain healthy gut function. Investigators tracked the progress of 350 premature infants admitted to a neonatal intensive care unit. Of this group, 162 received spinal adjustments. These babies had a significantly reduced occurrence of gut symptoms, as well as a significantly lower length of stay, compared with babies in the control group (*Chiro & Man Ther* 2011;Epub).

How Chiropractic Works

In this chiropractic office, the doctor assesses patients for vertebral subluxations and corrects them with gentle yet effective maneuvers called **chiropractic adjustments**. These adjustments realign the bones, relieving musculoskeletal discomfort, sometimes immediately.

Removing vertebral subluxations also

eases unnatural pressure on the nerves that radiate from the spinal cord — pressure that may be responsible for GI problems, asthma and a range of other health concerns.

The chiropractic lifestyle includes more than adjustments — it is a holistic approach to drug-free well-being that focuses on prevention. As a part of the chiropractic lifestyle, patients receive nutritional counseling, physical fitness recommendations, and advice on ergonomics and stress management.

If you or someone in your family suffers from inflammatory bowel disease or another gastrointestinal condition, consider adding chiropractic to your care plan. Call today to schedule a consultation.

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