

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Steven L. Smith, DC

## Why to Get a Chiropractic Evaluation After a Motor Vehicle Collision

*If you've ever been in a fender bender, you were probably more concerned about damage to your car than damage to your body. After all, the airbags didn't deploy and you felt okay. You might have been a little stiff the next day, but that's no big deal, right?*

*Wrong, warns Dr. Smith. Even if you received a medical examination, spinal injuries could still have ensued, which only a doctor of chiropractic may detect. Symptoms might not appear for weeks, months — or even years — later.*

A common result of car accidents, whiplash is an umbrella term for injuries caused by sudden flexion followed by extension of the neck. Researchers have found that this chain of events triggers a complex set of distortions throughout the spine (*Chin J Traumatol* 2009;12:305-14).

Whiplash also triggers sprains and strains. A sprain occurs when the sudden hyperextension of the neck tears ligaments that support spinal bones (vertebrae). Strains occur when muscles and tendons are hyperextended. Extreme cases of whiplash can herniate discs between vertebrae and damage nerves.

### Always Get a Chiropractic Evaluation

If you are in a collision, depending on the severity, you may go to the emergency room or see a medical doctor. While you might receive painkillers to mask the pain, medication does nothing to remedy the underlying problem. This is why it is critical to have a chiropractic evaluation in addition to any medical exams you receive.

Whiplash often forces spinal bones (vertebrae) of the neck out of alignment. These misalignments, called **vertebral subluxations**, interfere with the nerves that radiate from the spinal cord. Dr. Smith detects and corrects vertebral subluxations with precise and gentle **chiropractic adjustments**. These maneuvers relieve spinal stress and ease the myriad of disorders related to vertebral subluxations.

Chiropractic is a proven therapy for whiplash. In a variety of studies following whiplash patients, up to 93 percent of those receiving chiropractic adjustments showed improvement (*J*



*of Ortho Med* 1999;21:22-5).

A review of 27 investigations reveals that chiropractic care is particularly effective in alleviating pain and improving range of motion in the neck following whiplash injuries (*Work* 2010;35:369-94).

### Sooner Is Better

It is important to get checked by a chiropractor, like Dr. Smith, as soon as possible after a motor vehicle accident. There are two reasons for this:

First, it is essential to identify all injuries before settling with insurance companies. Since the effects of whiplash are not always evident right away, a prompt chiropractic exam is crucial to avoid paying out-of-pocket for debilitating symptoms that may emerge later.

Secondly, evidence shows that prompt care is more effective than delayed care for whiplash. In one study, 67 percent of patients experienced improvement in their symptoms if they received care for whiplash within three months of injury.



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In contrast, only 48 percent of those who began therapy more than three months after injury improved (*Arch Orthop Trauma Surg* 2009;129:973).

### **Better Late Than Never**

Although it is preferable to seek chiropractic care immediately following a motor vehicle accident, it is vital that anybody who has ever been in a motor vehicle collision receive a chiropractic evaluation — regardless of how much time has passed.

### **“Minor” Accidents Can Cause Major Injuries**

Just because a collision occurs at a low speed and causes minimal damage to the vehicles doesn't mean it has not seriously impacted the spines of those involved. In fact, most cases of whiplash occur at vehicle speeds below 14 mph (23 kph) (*J Bone Joint Surg Br* 2009;91:845-50).

What's more, research shows that motor vehicle crashes at speeds as low as 2.5 mph (4 kph) may cause injury, even if vehicular damage is nonexistent (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 1998;21:629-39).

A study presented at the Stapp Car Crash Conference examined people in simulated rear-impact collisions at 9 mph (14 kph). Participants instinctively tensed their muscles to absorb the impact. However, they did not react until their necks (cervical spines) were flexed due to the G-force of their heads.

The average adult head weighs 10 lbs (4.5 kg) and can experience forces of 17 G at the speed used in this experiment. That means the head exerts 170 lbs (77 kg) of force on the neck. And this is when the crash occurs at speeds less than 10 mph!

### **Delayed Onset of Symptoms**

Even if you feel only mild pain after a car accident — or no pain at all — severe effects of whiplash can develop much later.

Studies comparing drivers who were in rear-end collisions found that those who had suffered whiplash from the accident were more likely to experience headaches, back pain, shoulder and neck pain, fatigue and sleep problems seven years afterwards (*J Clin Epidemiol* 2001;54:851-6).

### **More Than a Pain in the Neck**

The obvious effects of a whiplash injury are pain and stiffness in the neck, but a range of other symptoms are also possible. For instance, chronic headaches are common.

A survey of 3,358 patients who suffered whiplash identified symptoms including low-back pain, fatigue, dizziness, numbness and nausea (*Ann Rheum Dis* 2005;64:1337-42).

Mental and emotional disturbances associated with whiplash include poor concentration, sleep disturbances, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (*Emerg Med J* 2002;19:499-506).

### **What Else to Do**

In addition to chiropractic care, the doctor may recommend additional interventions to help you recover from whiplash.

For instance, the doctor may suggest that you use an ice pack to ease pain and reduce muscle spasms.

In most cases, immobilizing the neck with a cervical collar is not necessary and can actually slow recovery. On the other hand, normal activity helps muscles heal with less stiffness.

Stretching or strengthening exercises are also proven effective. Ask the doctor to instruct you on the exercises that are best-suited for your individual situation (*Cochrane Database Syst Rev* 2005;3:CD004250).

### **Minimize Your Risk**

There are ways to reduce your risk of whiplash injury. Car design is constantly evolving to improve safety. Ideal cars combine a strong seat frame with a soft seat to absorb the force of the torso in an accident.

If possible, choose a newer car. One review of nearly 2,000 car accidents showed that the newer the car, the less likely passengers were to suffer spinal injuries (*Traffic Inj Prev* 2009;10:560-6).

No matter how old your car is, simply adjusting the head restraints high enough to align with the back of the head protects the neck in case of an accident. The restraint should be close to your head to minimize head and neck motion during a crash (*Spine* 2002;27:34-42).

### **Know Your Rights: Talk to the Doctor**

Many accident victims mistakenly assume that their insurance company can dictate what type of care they receive or even choose their doctor. This is not the case. If you have been in an accident, schedule an appointment to talk to the doctor about your rights and your care options.

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