

FACT SHEET — TREATMENT OPTIONS

Chiropractic for Back Pain

What chiropractic involves, the evidence base, and realistic expectations

Chiropractic is a form of manual therapy focusing primarily on the diagnosis and treatment of mechanical disorders of the musculoskeletal system, with particular emphasis on spinal manipulation. Chiropractors are regulated by the General Chiropractic Council (GCC) and must be registered to practise in the UK.

What chiropractors do

Assessment	Clinical history, postural analysis, orthopaedic and neurological examination, and assessment of spinal movement and joint function.
Spinal manipulation (adjustment)	The signature technique of chiropractic — a high-velocity, low-amplitude thrust to a specific spinal joint. Produces the characteristic "click" or "pop" (cavitation of the joint). Well-evidenced for acute low back pain.
Mobilisation	Gentler repetitive movements to restore joint range of motion.
Soft tissue therapy	Massage and trigger point work.
Exercise and rehabilitation	Most modern chiropractors integrate exercise prescription and rehabilitation into their practice.
X-ray and imaging	Some chiropractors use plain X-ray in their assessment. Routine X-ray for non-specific back pain is not recommended by NICE and exposes the patient to unnecessary radiation.

The evidence

Spinal manipulation has good evidence for short-term pain reduction in acute low back pain. NICE guidelines recommend spinal manipulation as one component of manual therapy for back pain. The evidence is weaker for chronic back pain and for conditions beyond the musculoskeletal system.

Safety

Lumbar spinal manipulation is generally safe when performed by a qualified chiropractor on appropriately screened patients. The most common side effects are temporary soreness after treatment. Serious adverse events are rare. Cervical (neck) manipulation carries a small but recognised risk of vertebral artery injury and should be discussed with your chiropractor.

Contraindications to spinal manipulation

Spinal manipulation should not be performed in the presence of: spinal metastases or tumour; spinal infection; cauda equina syndrome or rapidly progressing neurological deficit; severe osteoporosis; fracture; inflammatory arthritis in active flare; or bleeding disorders. A responsible chiropractor screens for these before treatment.

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