

Complimentary and Alternative Medical Care for Headaches

It is our goal that the headache sufferer has fewer headaches, better to control when they come and overall a better quality of life. If the patient believes that Complimentary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) is helping to reach that goal then we support it 100%.

The patient must understand that providers at Pacific Rim Headache Center work from the model of evidence-based or what some people call “Western Medicine.” Evidence-based medicine is what the name implies. We get our beliefs about what causes headaches and what treats them from scientific research. For us to have confidence in the therapies that we recommend, those therapies must have gone through rigorous, placebo-controlled (to prove that it is not random chance) studies to demonstrate that they are safe and effective.

Most CAM therapies are not based on scientific research but other belief systems, such as old, traditional Chinese medicine. This does not mean that we don't think they work, but they have not had scientific proof. Some CAM therapies, such as acupuncture, have had some positive scientific proof of their effectiveness in treating headaches and we can embrace them much easier. There are also a few supplements which, when taken daily, seem to help prevent headaches. There is now an entire section of the American Headache Society looking at CAM for headache treatment and more studies should be coming out over time.

Regarding Chiropractic treatments, we support the patient seeking such care, once again, if the patient thinks it is benefiting their headaches. The patient must be aware, just like with some of the medications that we prescribe, there are rare serious adverse reactions to aggressive neck manipulation and because of those risks; we don't recommend that type of treatment. We find that many of our patients, who visit Chiropractors, have rewarding experiences and the hands-on care seems to be a positive thing and we support that benefit wholeheartedly.

However, we do not agree with most Chiropractic diagnoses. In the Chiropractic belief system, most diseases are thought to come from problems if spine alignment. This has not been proven through science, and it seems to be inconsistent with what we know about headaches in evidence-based medicine. Sometimes when a patient sees a Chiropractor and he/she takes an X ray of their neck and shows them the atlas bone out of alignment or the lost of normal curvature the patient starts to believe that either we didn't care enough to look for such problems or we are not bright enough. The truth is, we do not believe that these things are relevant to what causes headaches or helps in fixing them so we do not look for them. But again, we do not discourage patients from seeing Chiropractors and would encourage them to do so if it was helping.

Naturopathic Medicine is another area that often works from a very different belief system than we do. While we may agree with them on many things, good diet, possibility of select supplements helping, there are other areas in which we disagree.

Evidence-based medicine does not agree with concepts such as “adrenal failure” or the breakdown of the body’s protective membranes as the cause of headaches. We also don’t accept as accurate many of the blood, saliva and hair tests that naturopathic physicians do, because those tests have not been substantiated through scientific research. However, as I alluded to, there are many things a patient can benefit from by visiting with a Naturopath.

I do give a final word of warning to patients because I care deeply for them. The world’s oldest profession was probably selling “snake oil” rather than, as they say, prostitution. Just like the airways are filled with simple remedies for obesity, hair loss and other common problems, there are some which promise simple headache cures. Just like with obesity, the so-called headache cures start out by giving a very simplistic explanation of what causes headaches and then supplements, magnets, or other gadgets that suppose to cure the headaches. They usually claim 100% success rates.

Around the world it has been shown that about 80% of headache patients are helpable. Unfortunately, as hard as we may try, 20% do not respond to treatment. If someone had a 100% cure the headache world would beat a path to their door. I personally would charter a bus and take all my patients there and would happily to go out of business if no one else had headaches. But, as they say, what sounds too good to be true usually isn’t. I warn patients to beware of these claims and treatments because they can waste a lot of money and time using fake therapies that don’t help. We all hope and pray that some day they will be a simple remedy for headaches, which works for everyone. Who is to say, but maybe that cure will come from CAM but it hasn’t thus far.

J. Michael Jones, MPAS-C