

A Systematic Review Comparing the Costs of Chiropractic Care to Other Interventions for Spine Pain in the United States

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This is a comprehensive study designed to compare health care costs for patients with spine pain who received chiropractic care v. care from other health care providers. The search included studies published in English between 1993 and 2015. The search uncovered 1,276 citations and 25 eligible studies:

- 12 of the studies were from private health plans
- 7 of the studies involved clinical outcomes studies
- 6 of the studies involved worker's compensation

KEY POINTS FROM THIS ARTICLE:

- 1) "This review identified 25 cost comparison studies published in English since 1993 that were related to chiropractic care for spine pain in the US."
- 2) "Spine pain is one of the most common and costly causes of health care utilization in the United States, with 61% of patients seeking care from a medical physician (MD or DO), 28% from a chiropractor, and 11 % from both a medical physician and a physical therapist."
- 3) "Chiropractors in the US treat spine pain almost exclusively, with the most common indication for care being low back pain (68%), followed by neck pain (12%), and mid-back pain (6%)."
- 4) "Only 3% of office visits to medical physicians are related to spine pain."
- 5) "Chiropractors have more confidence in their ability to manage spine pain than medical physicians."
- 6) "Patients with spine pain report higher levels of satisfaction with chiropractic care than care from a medical physician."
- 7) Chiropractors may offer a more cost-effective approach to managing spine pain as a consequence of:
 - Lower fees for office visits
 - Use of x-rays rather than more advanced diagnostic imaging
 - Lower referral rates to spine specialists or surgeons [implying chiropractors are achieving good clinical outcomes]
 - Reduced need for medications, injections, and surgery

8) This study was huge, with the number of members/episodes included in groups receiving chiropractic care ranging from 97 to 36,280.

	Chiropractic Care	Other HealthCare Provider Cost
Cost Range	\$264 – 6,171	\$166 – \$9,958
Mean Cost [average]	\$2,022	\$3,375
Median Cost [value in the middle]	\$712	\$1,992

9) “In eleven (92%) studies, health care costs were lower for patients whose spine pain was managed with chiropractic care.”

- “Overall, 11/12 (92%) studies in private health plans reported that health care costs were lower for members whose spine pain was managed by chiropractic care, by a mean of 36%.”
- The authors note that the only study reporting higher health care costs with chiropractic care may be explained as chiropractors billing more but being paid a smaller amount.

10) These authors note that it is important to understand that “indirect costs (e.g. lost productivity) account for a majority of the total costs of spine pain, and that they were “generally lower for patients receiving chiropractic care.”

[Important, implying that chiropractic care keeps back pain patients working or gets them to return to work more quickly.]

11) “In general, the findings in this review suggest that health care costs may be lower when spine pain is managed with chiropractic care in the US, even if such differences are sometimes attributable to sociodemographics, clinical, or other factors rather than healthcare providers.” **[Key Point]**

12) “These findings echo that of a review published in 1993 that examined studies in which LBP was managed by spinal manipulation, chiropractic care, other interventions (e.g. physical modalities, medications, exercise) throughout the world (e.g. Australia, Canada, Egypt, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sweden, United Kingdom, and US). Based on the favorable short-term clinical improvements and lower costs of care reported in those studies, the previous review concluded that health care costs could be reduced if a higher proportion of patients with spine pain received chiropractic care rather than other interventions, and recommended a greater integration of chiropractors into the publicly financed health care system in Ontario, Canada.” **[Key Point]**

- “However, that recommendation was never implemented, and publicly financed coverage of chiropractic services was subsequently eliminated in Ontario to alleviate budget deficits.”
[Cliché: penny wise—pound foolish; public policy is often determined by lobby efforts of vested interests.]
 - “Other studies have reported similarly favorable clinical or economic results [from chiropractic care] in both Canada (i.e. Calgary, Ottawa) and the US (i.e. Boston).”
- 13) “Overall, cost comparison studies from private health plans and WC plans reported that health care costs were lower with chiropractic care.”
- 14) The “cost comparison studies suggest that health care costs were generally lower among patients whose spine pain was managed with chiropractic care.”