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NEW STUDY SUGGESTS CHIROPRACTIC CARE REDUCES OVERALL HEALTH CARE EXPENDITURES

A study that was very recently published (October, 2004) in the Archives of Internal Medicine (1), aimed to ascertain the effect of systematic access to chiropractic care on the overall, and neuromusculoskeletal-specific, consumption of health care resources within a large managed-care system.

The study, which was a 4-year retrospective claims data analysis, was sponsored by American Specialty Health (ASH) of San Diego and conducted by the independent health services research organization Health Benchmarks Inc. The authors compared more than 700 000 health plan members with an additional chiropractic coverage benefit and 1 million members of the same health plan without the chiropractic benefit.

The study found that members with chiropractic insurance coverage, compared with those without coverage, had lower annual total health care expenditures (\$1463 vs \$1671 per member per year, $P < .001$).

Having chiropractic coverage was associated with a 1.6% decrease ($P = .001$) in total annual health care costs at the health plan level.

Back pain patients with chiropractic coverage, compared with those without coverage, had lower utilization of -

- plain radiographs (17.5 vs 22.7, $P < .001$),
- low back surgery (3.3 vs 4.8, $P < .001$),
- hospitalizations (9.3 vs 15.6, $P < .001$), and
- magnetic resonance imaging (43.2 vs 68.9, $P < .001$).

Patients with chiropractic coverage, compared with those without coverage, also had lower average back pain episode-related costs (\$289 vs \$399, $P < .001$).

The authors concluded,

“Access to managed chiropractic care may reduce overall health care expenditures through several effects, including -

- (1) positive risk selection;
- (2) substitution of chiropractic for traditional medical care, particularly for spine conditions;
- (3) more conservative, less invasive treatment profiles; and
- (4) lower health service costs associated with managed chiropractic care.

Systematic access to managed chiropractic care not only may prove to be clinically beneficial but also may reduce overall health care costs.”

An accompanying editorial in the same edition of the Archives of Internal Medicine (2) states,

“Chiropractic is certainly one of the most popular therapeutic modalities encompassed by complementary and alternative medicine. In the well-known survey by Eisenberg et al, 11% of respondents had used chiropractic in the preceding year. Visits to chiropractors account for most visits to practitioners who provide complementary and alternative medicine and represent the most common complementary and alternative medicine intervention employed by older adults. Chiropractors are now recognized as qualified practitioners by a growing number of health insurance companies and receive referrals from a considerable number of physicians practicing in other fields of expertise. Every state recognizes or requires examinations administered by the National Board of Chiropractic Examiners before licensing chiropractic professionals and defines continuing education criteria for license renewal. In the apt words used by Meeker and Haldeman, chiropractic is now ‘a profession at the crossroads of mainstream and alternative medicine’.”

References:

1. Legorreta AP, Metz RD, Nelson CF, Ray S, Oster Chernicoff H, DiNubile NA. Comparative analysis of individuals with and without chiropractic coverage: patient characteristics, utilization, and costs. Arch Intern Med 2004;164:1985-92.
2. Ness J, Nisly N. Cracking the Problem of Back Pain: Is Chiropractic the Answer? Arch Intern Med 2004;164:1953-1954.