

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Katie Gravesen, DC

What Do Symptoms *Really* Mean? Part I: Spinal & Musculoskeletal Disorders

Webster's Dictionary defines the word "symptom" as "subjective evidence of disease or physical disturbance" or "something that indicates the existence of something else."

However, modern culture has strayed from this definition, instead regarding symptoms as the first stage of illness. Dr. Gravesen is extremely concerned about this common misconception, which results in a "disease-focused" attitude toward healthcare, rather than a "prevention-focused" approach that promotes wellness.

A New Outlook

The traditional "disease-focused" Western methodology of health care teaches that symptoms are the first sign of illness. Dr. Gravesen and other holistically minded professionals uphold the opposite point of view: symptoms are often the final mark of infirmity. And a wealth of scientific research supports this revolutionary outlook.

Following is a sampling of studies confirming that symptoms are delayed in many diseases — and what Dr. Gravesen is doing to help patients prevent these health complaints *before* the onset of symptoms.

Spinal Dysfunction

Symptoms associated with *vertebral subluxations*, dysfunctional areas of the spine where movement is restricted or bones (vertebrae) are slightly misaligned, often occur in the disorder's latter stages.

Vertebral subluxations are linked with an increased risk of osteoarthritis, back pain, neck pain, sciatica, carpal tunnel syndrome, intestinal problems, headache, asthma and ear infections. And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

Ongoing research suggests that vertebral subluxations also inhibit the nervous system. Nerves exit the spinal cord between vertebral bones; consequently, researchers theorize that dysfunction in the spine may hinder nerve flow to vital organs and structures throughout the body.

Like anything else, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure when it comes to vertebral subluxations. That's why Dr. Gravesen focuses on preventing spinal disorders *before* the onset of symptoms. This is accomplished through regular chiropractic checkups involving examinations to detect vertebral subluxations in their earliest stages, before they wreak havoc on the spine and body.

Dr. Gravesen then corrects these dysfunctional areas with safe, gentle maneuvers called *chiropractic adjustments*. A wealth of scientific research shows that chiropractic adjustments effectively alleviate vertebral subluxations and associated health complaints.

Spinal Arthritis & Disc Disease

Research indicates that spinal osteoarthritis is not necessarily associated with symptoms of pain or dysfunction, especially during its early stages. In addition, spinal disc herni-

ation or degeneration is frequently without symptoms (*Spine* 2003;28:582-8).

Doctors of chiropractic ward off spinal osteoarthritis and disc degeneration by correcting vertebral subluxations, keeping the spine mobile and fostering healthy joint cartilage. Chiropractors also recommend specific dietary modifications, supplements and exercises — all aimed at preventing spinal decay before symptoms begin.

Overuse and Repetitive Motion

Injuries related to overuse or repetitive motion inflict trauma to joints, bones, muscles and connective tissue (ligaments, tendons and fascia). Tennis elbow, shin splints and pitcher's shoulder are all examples of sports related overuse injuries. Work related overuse injuries, commonly associated with repetitive strain, include carpal tunnel syndrome, from keyboard use; neck pain, from improper workstation ergonomics; and back pain, from repetitive lifting.

It's easy to imagine how trauma to the structures affected by repetitive strain accumulates long before the onset of pain.



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To avert overuse injuries before symptoms occur, doctors of chiropractic ask patients about their work and recreational activities. By listening to patients, chiropractors identify overuse injury risks — then construct strategies to prevent repetitive strain and related symptoms.

Whiplash

Whiplash injury can take months — even years — to produce symptoms. Chiropractors are concerned about the lack of public awareness regarding this phenomenon, which health-care professionals term *delayed onset whiplash associated disorder (DOWAD)*.

DOWAD is a common cause of neck, head and shoulder pain. Unfortunately, many sufferers fail to take proper steps to stave off this disorder. Instead of scheduling a chiropractic checkup immediately following involvement in a motor-vehicle collision or neck jolting amusement-park ride, they put their health at risk by falsely assuming that “everything will be OK.”

When DOWAD symptoms appear years after an accident, many individuals fail to associate the past trauma with their current complaints — especially if the collision was minor, the vehicle was unharmed and the patient experienced no initial discomfort.

However, whiplash doesn't have to involve high-speed or high-impact collisions to spur vertebral subluxations and related disorders. According

to the Spine Research Institute of San Diego, Calif., most injuries occur at six to 12 miles per hour. Even accidents at speeds of less than five miles per hour can elicit whiplash.

Whiplash-induced vertebral subluxations spark biomechanical shifts in the spine, including a reversal of the neck's normal curve. Unchecked, these spinal alterations grow more severe, predisposing patients to a variety of pain syndromes — some of which may take years to manifest.

Following whiplash, muscles surrounding the spine tighten to protect the neck from additional injury. This phenomenon, called “splinting,” triggers muscle tension in the neck and shoulders, eventually resulting in relentless pain. Many whiplash sufferers also develop a condition called post-traumatic headache, associated with abnormal feedback from the brain (*Pain* 2001;92:319-26).

It's imperative to have a chiropractic checkup *whenever* you are involved in a motor vehicle accident — even one that seems like “no big deal.” Although immediate intervention is preferable, it's never too late. If you did not visit a chiropractor after a previous accident, do so now. Even a fender-bender that occurred 30 years ago and produced no symptoms may have spurred the subtle spinal shifts that provoke DOWAD.

Foot Pain

An increasing number of individuals are reporting symptoms of plantar fasciitis, a painful foot disorder char-

acterized by inflammation in the band of connective tissue along the sole of the foot (plantar fascia).

Again, symptoms of this debilitating disorder are slow to appear. Experts believe that the fascia becomes taut long before it produces pain.

Chiropractors focus on preventing this disorder, before the onset of symptoms, by identifying risk factors and eliminating them. What are these warning signs? According to a study that compared 50 patients with plantar fasciitis with 100 subjects without foot pain, the top three causes of plantar fasciitis are: 1) limited range of ankle motion toward the outside of the body (dorsiflexion) or “flatfeet,” 2) excess weight and 3) standing for long periods of time (*Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery* 2003;85).

Focus on Prevention, Not Symptoms

From childhood, most individuals are taught that symptoms of pain or illness are the body's way of telling us it's time to seek help from a health-care professional. Actually, symptoms are the body's last-ditch attempt to get our attention. In our frenzied-pace society, we've learned to disconnect from our bodies and ignore the subtle signs they send, indicating the early presence of disease. We are encouraged not only to wait until the onset of symptoms but also until those symptoms are so severe we can no longer put up with them.

This chiropractic office challenges patients to shift their way of thinking about symptoms. Focus on prevention by keeping regular chiropractic wellness checkups. If you haven't had a chiropractic checkup recently, commit to taking charge of your health and schedule one today — for yourself and everyone else in your family!



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