Life-Threatening Complications of Spinal Manipulation

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Spinal manipulation entails high-velocity, low-amplitude manual thrusts to spinal joints that extend slightly beyond their physiological range of motion. It is a therapeutic technique often, but not exclusively, used by chiropractors who tend to believe that it is not associated with relevant risks. This opinion is contrasted by the findings of systematic reviews, which summarize several hundred cases of serious complications after spinal manipulation, mostly of the upper spine. Chiropractors rightly point out that many of these instances relate to events that happened decades ago. Thus, it is relevant to ask whether life-threatening complications still occur or whether therapists have now learned how to avoid such effects.

Spinal manipulation has recently been associated with dissection of the vertebral and internal carotid artery, resulting in strokes and at least 1 death. Other recent instances relate to epidermal hematoma, intracranial aneurysm, cauda equina syndrome, contusion of the spinal cord, myelopathy and radiocolopathy, as well as palsy of the long thoracic nerve. Case series from the Ukraine, Sweden, and Germany have contributed 49, 21, and 10 further patients, respectively, who suffered life-threatening events after spinal manipulation. Retrospective surveys carried out with doctors in California, Ireland, and Great Britain brought a total of 145 further series cases to light that would otherwise not have been documented in the medical literature.

None of these reports lends itself to defining incidence figures. The best way to arrive at such information is to prospectively study large samples of consecutive patients. Five such investigations have been published, and none prospectively study large samples of consecutive patients. The best way to arrive at such information is to the medical literature.

Where does this leave us when trying to critically evaluate the safety of spinal manipulation? We know that serious complications do exist. We also know of plausible explanations of how spinal manipulation might lead to serious adverse events; eg, sudden rotational and hyperextension head movements can cause a traumatic dissection of the extracranial arteries. The incidence of life-threatening complications, however, is unknown, and previous estimates have all been based on assumptions which may or may not be true. The true risk might well be minor, but in matters of patients’ safety we require certainty. The only logical conclusion is that large, prospective studies are needed which are designed to generate reliable incidence figures even of rare events. To ignore this need is to neglect the best interests of our patients.

References


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**KEY WORDS:** manipulation, spinal injuries
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Stroke. 2001;32:809-810
doi: 10.1161/01.STR.32.3.809

Stroke is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231
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Print ISSN: 0039-2499. Online ISSN: 1524-4628

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:
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