



Women's Health

How Chiropractic Supports Women's Health through the **Stages of Life**

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How Chiropractic Supports Women's Health through the **Stages of Life**

The anatomy and physiology of women is multifaceted and complex. From infancy into girlhood, puberty into childbearing years and then mid-life into post-menopause, females engage in an ongoing continuum of changes in their bodies and with their hormones.

Doctors of chiropractic (DCs) have been supporting women's health for well over a century to help women naturally address the changes that happen in their bodies over a lifetime.



Birth

Beginning with birth, long-standing statistics from the Journal of the American Osteopathic Association imply that 80% of newborn babies have suffered some sort of physical insult during birth that may not be easily recognized.¹ Those born breech, with the use of forceps or via cesarean section have an even higher risk. DCs can examine and adjust babies from cranium to pelvis to optimize neuromusculoskeletal dynamics to help facilitate a well-functioning pain-free start in life.

Colicky babies are also a common occurrence. They aren't just babies that cry a lot. Studies have shown clinical evidence of vestibular dysregulation in the brains of infants with colic. Chiropractors address the issue by means of gentle treatment to support the joints and relax muscles of the neck. The suboccipital region (at the base of the skull and upper neck) has been cited as a particular area of focus.²

For mothers and babies dealing with suboptimal breastfeeding, a case series published in JMPT found that with chiropractic adjustments, all study participants improved and 78% of infants were able to be exclusively breastfed after two to five visits in a two week time period.³ A case series also studied mothers' difficulties and concluded that chiropractic management in conjunction with ultrasound therapy was beneficial in addressing the postpartum issue of blocked ducts and difficulties breastfeeding.⁴

Childhood and Puberty

From toddlers to school-age, children are developing and increasingly engaged in a variety of activities that can affect the neuromusculoskeletal system. Learning to walk, growing pains, tumbles and falls, rough-housing during play, heavy backpacks, text neck from cell phones and school sports can all contribute to creating imbalance or inciting injury. These formative years of growth are also the peak time to watch for signs of scoliosis, which is more prevalent and occurs with more pronounced severity in girls.⁵

Chiropractors evaluate the spine and extremities of active growing kids to catch alignment issues before they have a chance to become a problem. DCs can also detect early signs of scoliosis, as well as monitor the curve and counsel on interventions.

In addition, DCs serve as a resource to provide guidance on a variety of other issues that may affect young women. For example, girls are more apt to suffer from bladder infections due to their unique anatomy and short urethra. Therefore, imparting education surrounding hygiene, avoiding irritating chemicals in the bathtub, general bathroom techniques for girls (always wiping from front to back) and offering nutritional recommendations for bladder health that can diminish risks for infection is highly recommended. Bladder infection often may correlate with back pain or other symptoms. DCs can help patients determine the potential underlying causes of any new symptoms and work with other specialists, if needed, to ensure that patients receive laboratory studies and antibiotic treatment if indicated.

As girls reach puberty (typically between the ages of 10-15), their weight distribution changes through the hips, buttocks and bust. In addition, their feet, arms and legs may grow in advance of the rest of the body. All of these changes can alter biomechanics and make pubescent girls feel clumsy as they are forced to get used to a new body dynamic. Chiropractic care can maximize joint function throughout the spine and extremities and can also help children through the very real aches and pains that can occur with rapid spurts of growth and development.⁶







Adolescence

In adolescence, when the onset of menses (menarche) occurs, it can bring with it a variety of new issues for young women including the need for more education about how the cycle works and what is considered normal or abnormal. Though it may seem embarrassing for adolescents at first, they should be encouraged to talk openly with their parents or guardians and health providers about their cycles and ask questions. DCs understand the hormonal shifts that are taking place and can explain the cycle in a very understandable way.

Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) is also an issue for many women. According to Mayo Clinic, three out of every four women experience some type of PMS symptoms that can include both physical and mental elements.

Physical symptoms may include: joint, back or muscle pain, headache, fatigue, fluid retention, abdominal bloating, breast tenderness, bowel changes, acne flares and uterine cramps. Emotionally, women may feel: anxiety, mood swings, irritability, crying spells, appetite changes, food craving, insomnia and poor concentration.⁷

A clinical trial published in JMPT concluded that a relatively high incidence of spinal dysfunction exists in PMS sufferers compared to non-symptomatic women. This is suggestive that spinal dysfunction could be a causative factor and that chiropractic care may offer a natural non-invasive therapeutic approach for women prone to PMS.⁸

Menstrual-induced low back pain is also a very common finding in women, which makes sense given that nerve paths from the reproductive organs traverse through the low back and sacral areas (the triangular bone at the base of the spine that sits between the pelvic bones). DCs strive to keep optimum function in the joints of the low back and pelvis and also work with patients to implement lumbar stabilization exercises into their routine, which research has shown to improve the pain and disabling discomfort that some women suffer during menstrual-induced low back pain.⁹ DCs can also advise on nutritional strategies to diminish symptoms. Staying well hydrated, for example, can contribute greatly to help reduce the severity of common PMS symptoms.

Childbearing

For women striving to get pregnant, DCs are a vital part of the care team as women experience the journey of fertility, pregnancy and delivering a healthy baby. According to the American Pregnancy Association, “Investing in the fertility and pregnancy wellness of women who are pregnant or trying to conceive is a routine matter for most chiropractors.”¹⁰

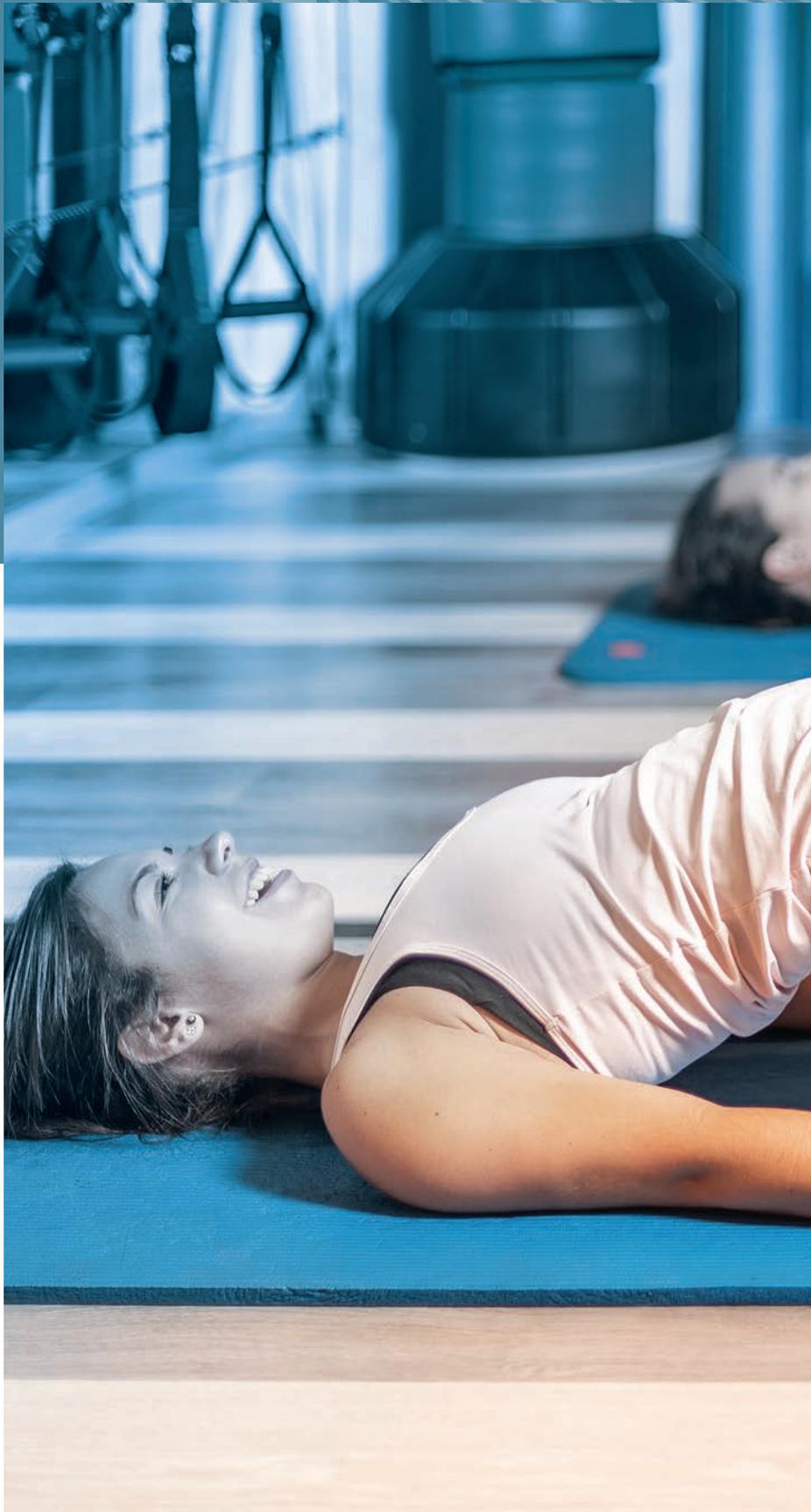
It has been reported in studies in JMPT and Obstetrics Gynecology respectively, that nearly 50% of all pregnant women experience back pain during their pregnancy and up to 75% of women have back pain during labor.¹¹

For pregnant women, chiropractic works to optimize joint function and its effect on the neuromusculoskeletal system which may result in:

- **Maintaining a healthier pregnancy and posture**
- **Controlling symptoms of nausea**
- **Reducing labor and delivery time**
- **Relief of back, neck or joint pain**
- **Promoting an uncomplicated delivery¹²**

In addition to improving mobility, DCs can play a significant role as part of the prenatal care team by providing advice regarding proper nutrition, exercises during pregnancy and positioning for sitting and sleeping to support the spine and pelvis. After the birth process, DCs strive to improve joint mobility to the mother’s low back and pelvis and offer strategies for strengthening the soft tissues that were altered during pregnancy.





The Profound Impact of the Pelvic Floor

One of the most profound changes that can happen after childbirth and as women head into mid-life is losing the integrity of the pelvic floor. It is the result of weakness in the body's core musculature which can result in pelvic floor instability.

The muscles and connective tissues of the pelvic floor serve to support and protect the vital organs in the pelvis, such as the bladder, large intestines and reproductive organs and they are necessary in the control of bowel, bladder and sexual function. Along with core muscles in the torso, the pelvic floor muscles also help the body to absorb outside pressures that can be created from jumping, lifting or coughing for example. Weakness in these very important muscles can lead to unpleasant outcomes such as urinary leakage, painful sex, bowel dysfunction or even prolapse of the uterus.¹³

Most people don't think about their pelvic floor muscles until they have a problem 'down there.' As women search for natural solutions outside of medications or surgeries, DCs help patients by keeping optimum movement in the joints of the low back and pelvis and they also educate patients about specific exercises to strengthen the pelvic floor and keep it strong, such as Kegel exercises, which are highly important after childbirth and as our bodies change in mid-life.

Kegels work the deep muscles of the pelvis that allow us to start and stop urine flow, tighten the vaginal area and control the anal sphincter. The exercises can be performed at home laying down, sitting or standing and easily made part of your daily routine. It is important, however, that women fully understand how to target very specific muscle groups and ensure they are performing Kegels correctly. DCs can verbally instruct women on how to target the necessary areas and start an at-home plan outlining the frequency and duration to perform the exercises.

Studies have offered a widespread recommendation for women to not neglect exercising the pelvic floor and shown evidence that pelvic floor muscle exercises help women with sexual function and stress urinary incontinence.¹⁴ In addition, pelvic floor muscle training has no adverse effects and has been used to prevent and treat uterine prolapse.¹⁵



Your 30's and Beyond

As women head into mid-life, more physiological changes occur as hormones diminish. Perimenopause can begin for some women as early as the thirties. Gaining weight, losing muscle mass, hot flashes and other symptoms that may be experienced through perimenopause and postmenopause are common. Systemic changes can start to manifest, such as with bone density loss leading to osteoporosis. Stress can also take on more dimension as women become 'empty-nesters,' start losing their own parents or become primary caregivers for aging parents.

Addressing strength and posture issues to support stamina and prevention is very important as women go through the stages of menopause. With the risks associated with hormone replacement therapy, more women are striving for natural solutions to support a smooth mid-life transition. DCs can help women enjoy a healthy and positive transition by maintaining optimum joint function, monitoring bone density, offering exercises to help keep bones strong, providing stress reduction strategies and recommending nutrition that will strive to balance hormones and address many of the symptoms that are encountered that impact a woman's journey throughout every stage of life.

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