

# THE ABC'S OF HEALTH PROMOTION AND DISEASE PREVENTION IN CHIROPRACTIC PRACTICE

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## ABSTRACT

*Objective: To describe the importance of health promotion techniques and use of active disease prevention techniques as part of chiropractic practice through a selective review of literature using a mnemonic device.*

*Discussion: There is evidence that doctors of chiropractic use some health promotion techniques in practice such as instruction on exercise, dietary advice, smoking cessation recommendations and the encouraging of preventive chiropractic visits. Healthy People goals for the nation suggest that providers encourage preventive services, work toward better access to care and stress disease prevention. However, information on how this can be routinely done in chiropractic practice is fragmented. This article suggests ways to implement health promotion into the everyday management of the chiropractic patient.*

*Conclusion: Health promotion and disease prevention can be easily performed in chiropractic practice. The nature of the chiropractic supportive or maintenance visit gives doctors a unique platform on which they can launch full-scale health promotion efforts on their patients. (J Chiropr Med 2003;2:107-110)*

**Key indexing terms:** Health Promotion; Disease Prevention; Chiropractic; Wellness

## INTRODUCTION

Health promotion can be defined as the assessment and implementation of education and other methods designed to motivate a person, or persons, to adopt a behavior that is conducive to health. (1) As early as 1990, Coulter encouraged the chiropractic profession to make a shift in the current paradigm toward more promotion of health. (2) While not all doctors of chiropractic see themselves in the role of a health promoter, there is evidence that the profession, as a whole, integrates health promotion and disease prevention into the practice of chiropractic. Smith and Carber surveyed U.S.

chiropractors and found a significant amount of health promotion in chiropractic practices. (3) They stated, "The position of the chiropractic profession is that prevention and health promotion are integral to chiropractic care and most DCs agree."

The nature of chiropractic as a science that promotes prevention visits can be seen as a reason why the profession believes it is based in health promotion. The belief that chiropractic maintenance care has a preventive value, in many cases, motivates the doctor of chiropractic to recommend this type of care to their patients. (4) It is by this very nature that the chiropractic physician is well suited for delivery of health promotion and disease prevention efforts in a general format. Follow-up or supportive care visits may serve as a foundation for the assessment of needs, delivery of health education messages and other prevention strategies aimed at getting the patient to adopt a more healthy behavior. This article will detail some simple strategies that the clinician can use in day-to-day practice to help patients realize better overall health using a 4-step intervention process.

## DISCUSSION

The American Chiropractic Association, the Association of Chiropractic Colleges and other groups within the profession have suggested a direction for the profession toward greater health promotion and disease prevention. (5,6) Currently, an assessment of what chiropractic colleges are doing in the area of teaching health promotion to their students is underway. (7) What this will reveal is yet to be determined. However, chiropractic integration into the public health system of the United States has been slow. (8) A small group of doctors belong to the American Public Health Association (APHA) and a special interest section on chiropractic was established in the 1990s. This is important since the APHA is the largest organization in the world dedicated to disease prevention and health promotion efforts. Health promotion should be an integral part of chiropractic practice.

For the profession of chiropractic to be successful at health promotion and disease prevention, there must be some direction from national associations and the chiropractic college systems. Playing a role in the overall

health of the patient and, indeed, the community, can bring about additional credibility to the profession and the individual doctor as well. Meeker and Haldeman, in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* indicate the profession to be at a crossroads between mainstream and continuance of an "alternative medicine" status. (9) They conclude, "In today's dynamic health care milieu, chiropractic stands at the crossroads of mainstream and alternative medicine. Its future role will probably be determined by its commitment to interdisciplinary cooperation and science-based practice." One can contend that the use of screenings, needs assessment and health promotion techniques to allow a patient to make a better choice is part of the process of interdisciplinary cooperation and can build credibility for the provider and the profession.

In the last 100 years, our lives have been threatened, not so much by the infectious diseases of our great-grandparents but rather by chronic diseases. The Healthy People 2010 guidelines show the top 3 risk factors for the primary causes of death in Americans to be 1) lack of exercise, 2) cigarette smoking and 3) poor dietary choices. (10) Health promotion efforts can begin with these 3 variables in the patient's life. While a multitude of factors go into why a person chooses a certain lifestyle or behavior, the health belief model of health promotion suggests that 1 important aspect of any modification in behavior is a "cue to action" by a physician. (11) Through prompting a patient to make a change in an unhealthy behavior at least 1 can plant a seed for change. How does 1 know what behavior needs modifying? How does 1 know what to advise? A simple 4-step process can be applied through alphabetical assignment of strategies. The ABC's of health promotion and disease prevention (Table 1) is as follows.

"A" is for *assessment*. During intake paperwork or a review of systems one should ask about lifestyle habits. "Do you smoke?" "How many packs per day?" "How many servings of fruits and vegetables do you eat per

day?" "Would you say you have a regular exercise program?" "About how many times per week do you exercise for at least 30 minutes?" These questions take only a few seconds to answer and many clinicians are probably asking them already. These questions give baseline data on how the patient's lifestyle is going. It may show risk factors that the clinician could help the patient modify. Assessment is the starting point for knowing who in the practice needs to consider behavior change. And screening for such things as hypertension, diabetes or excessive weight can follow.

In addition to simple intake paper work, health risk appraisals or health risk assessment surveys can be used and be obtained through various organizations including the National Cancer Institute, The American Heart Association and The Carter Center at Emory University. Some intake forms are available from office supply catalogues that ask several survey questions as well. While more time consuming for the patient and the clinician, they will provide more detail and insight regarding the patient's lifestyle and risk factors.

There is some controversy as to whether the doctor of chiropractic serves in a primary care capacity. (12) Visits to chiropractors are usually for neuromusculoskeletal problems. (9) However, primary care can be the management of a wide variety of conditions through chiropractic, dietary modification, encouraging health promotion or disease prevention strategies like smoking cessation or referral to the family physician for a condition that may require medication to stabilize. Evidence exists that demonstrates many doctors of chiropractic to be doing just that. (3,13)

As doctors of chiropractic become more mainstream in their approach to patient care there will likely be more continuity of the health message as it is delivered by the family physician or doctor of chiropractic. As each delivers a similar message to prompt behavior change the patient will be more encouraged to modify behavior. However, some studies suggest medicine is doing a poor job of health promotion. Studies indicate that less than half of all patients who smoke get smoking advice from their medical physicians. (14) *The Nation's Health* reported in March of 2003 that only 60% of patients who smoked in a large survey had been told to quit smoking by their doctor. (15) Thus, a need for health promotion in this area by the doctor of chiropractic and the medical physician alike is demonstrated.

The "B" in the model is *benefits* to lifestyle modification toward a healthier life. The clinician should stress to the patient the benefits of a voluntary change in their be-

**TABLE 1**  
**MNEMONIC FOR HEALTH PROMOTION AND DISEASE PREVENTION EFFORTS IN CHIROPRACTIC PRACTICE: THE ABC'S OF HEALTH PROMOTION AND DISEASE PREVENTION**

A	ASSESSMENT OF PATIENTS HEALTH STATUS OR NEEDS
B	BENEFITS STRESSED TO THE PATIENT THAT COME FROM BEHAVIOR CHANGES
C	CHIROPRACTIC PREVENTATIVE VISITS AS A PLATFORM FOR DELIVERING A HEALTH MESSAGE
S	STAY THE COURSE MESSAGES GIVEN TO PATIENTS SO RELAPSE DOES NOT OCCUR

havior. Simply walking or exercising a few hours a week can significantly reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, back pain, and possibly, some cancers. (16–19) If patients who know the benefits and can be shown how this could be easily implemented, they are more likely to consider such a change in behavior. Again, it is stressed that a myriad of factors go into whether a person adopts a healthy behavior or doesn't. That is a subject matter greater than the scope of this article. However, clinicians must begin to stress the need for such changes since lifestyle factors are responsible for much of the morbidity and mortality of chronic disease.

Benefits from lifestyle modification and behavior change can be stressed verbally, through brochures or summaries of articles published in medical journals. A combination of communication methods should be employed and anything the patient can take with them to review later will remain as a cue to act. In today's culture, the Internet, television and most newspapers readily publish reports on the benefits of exercise and positive lifestyle changes. The clinician would be supporting those directly through the communication of the health promotion message.

"C" stands for *chiropractic care*. According to the Institute of Alternative Futures (IAF), in a report on the chiropractic profession in 1998, as much as 35% of the chiropractic physician's income can be attributed to chiropractic preventative care. (20) This maintenance care is a part of many chiropractic practices. (4) These visits give the doctor of chiropractic the unique opportunity to deliver and reiterate the health promotion message to a patient. According to this report, the clinician who implements health promotion and serves as a "coach" toward wellness will thrive in the 21st century while those who ignore this effort will struggle.

In addition to the importance of chiropractic "wellness" treatment as a means for patient communication on health, the visit for preventive chiropractic is important for spinal health as well. Although little scientific data exists on the long-term health benefits of a preventive adjustment to the spine, the profession has stressed check-up care for its duration. Patients believe this to be of benefit and have stated so with their choice for this type of care in numbers that the IAF believes to be a significant portion of the average DC's income. This fact should not be ignored.

A good example of a communication piece available for use in the chiropractic office is the brochure from the National Institutes of Health through the National Cancer Institute called "*Time to Take Five: Eat 5 Fruits and*

*Vegetables a Day.*" (21) This multi-color brochure is designed to explain the reduction in cancer risks associated with increased consumption of fruits and vegetables. It gives step-by-step instruction on how to increase consumption and what constitutes a serving so that patients realize self-efficacy in reaching a goal of 5 per day.

Encouraging exercise 3 times per week can be done by suggesting walking or even specific instructions on strength and flexibility by attending a gym program. YMCA, local community centers and are clubs may offer a variety of choices for the patient who wants to enhance fitness. Even specific instructions allowing a patient to do their own yard work, with appropriate limitations, may provide worthy and needed exercise. The doctor of chiropractic's role should be to support the desire of the patient to remain active and cue them to act in cases where some reluctance may exist. While no person can change the mind of another, the doctor of chiropractic can play a primary role in guiding the patient into a better pattern of behavior that is conducive for health. Sometimes this could involve the referral to another provider for assistance.

Smoking cessation is a difficult task to accomplish for most hard-core smokers. Perhaps a drug to reduce craving for nicotine is needed. Appropriate referral to a family physician would enhance the chances for patients success and establish a common goal of patient wellness that increases the credibility of the profession and the individual chiropractic physician as well. In some cases, a smoking cessation program may be appropriate. Referral to an accepted program could help the patient as well. It is important for the doctor of chiropractic to build a resource base for referral of such services and this, in turn, can facilitate referrals from such programs as well.

For the doctor of chiropractic who emphasizes an orthopedic-based practice only, the referral of an osteoporosis patient for evaluation of bone density and secondary consideration of a remineralization drug from the family physician would be another appropriate disease prevention effort in which primary care is emphasized.

Finally, the "S" is to remind patients to "*stay the course.*" Positive health behaviors are a process that involves a life choice to try and remain healthy or regain health.

This should be encouraged as a life-long process. Occasionally, that means the clinician will have to remind

the patient of this and encourage a patient to get back on track after they have relapsed into an old, unhealthy habit.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of this article is to demonstrate how the doctor of chiropractic can do simple health promotion. Additional educational experience in the area of health promotion may be needed should the clinician feel the need. Secondary, graduate level programs in health promotion exist that can further enhance the doctor of chiropractic's educational background in this area and should be encouraged by the profession to further the profession as one dedicated to the health of the general public.

In all, a simple approach to chiropractic health promotion efforts can be utilized in most offices that will encourage the patient to adopt more healthy lifestyles, facilitate referrals from other primary care providers and assist in the reduction of morbidity and premature mortality from our society's most chronic, yet preventable, diseases. Thus, meeting the goals of health promotion in extending the years of healthy life for the patients we serve.

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