

Seeing a chiropractor for the first time

The GCC cannot help you select which chiropractor to see, but we have identified some questions that you may want to ask before you see a chiropractor for the first time.

Please ensure the chiropractor you plan to see is registered with the GCC by checking the GCC register at <https://www.gcc-uk.org/advanced-search/>. All GCC-registered chiropractors have been through a process to check that they are properly qualified. Anyone who calls themselves a chiropractor but isn't registered with the GCC is committing a criminal offence.

You may want to ask your GP or friends and family for recommendations about individual chiropractors. While recommendations can be valuable, it is important to find a chiropractor who can meet your specific needs.

Before starting treatment, it may be useful to ask the chiropractor you plan to see a few questions about how they work, the clinic they work at, and the techniques they use.

1. If I am not sure if I should see a chiropractor for my condition, what should I do?

If you are unsure whether a chiropractor can help your condition, you may wish to arrange a free, no obligation discussion. This may be over the telephone or at the chiropractor's clinic. This will enable you to find out whether chiropractic treatment can help your condition. You should ask whether the chiropractor commonly treats your condition.

If you then decide to book a treatment consultation, at that first consultation the chiropractor will assess your condition and then go on to explain their treatment recommendations. You don't have to agree to the treatment the chiropractor recommends then and there - if you are not happy to go ahead or if you want more time to reach a decision just say so.

2. What happens on a visit?

A visit to a chiropractor is similar to other healthcare appointments. When you attend the first consultation the chiropractor will take a detailed case history and carry out a physical examination of you. This will help the chiropractor to establish a working diagnosis for your condition and to reach a view about the best course of care for you.

Before you agree to go ahead with the recommended treatment, the chiropractor should explain it to you, along with the likelihood of that treatment helping your condition and any risks associated with the treatment (including any side effects that you might experience).

If the chiropractor does not think they can help improve your condition, they will tell you that and may suggest that you be referred to another healthcare professional.

3. Will I be treated in a private room?

Chiropractors treat patients in different settings, such as a private or group practice, multi-disciplinary group practice, and other healthcare facilities.

Most chiropractors will treat you in a private room. Some chiropractors use an open plan room with several treatment tables and patients in there at once. If you would prefer to be treated in a private room that is something you will want to check the chiropractor can offer, before you book any treatment.

4. Does the chiropractor only see one patient at a time?

Many chiropractors only see one patient at a time. Some chiropractors treat several patients at the same time - which could mean they will leave the room multiple times during the treatment, while you wait. When choosing a chiropractor you should consider what treatment setting you are comfortable with.

5. Will I have to get undressed?

You may be asked to remove your clothing but you will always be allowed to keep your underwear on. A gown should be provided for you to wear, if you wish. If you are not comfortable undressing, you should explain this to your chiropractor before your first treatment – they can then advise you on suitable clothing to wear to the clinic to enable them to examine and treat you. You may also like to request a chaperone – you should do that in advance of your visit, or take a friend or family member with you who can act as your chaperone.

6. Will I have to sign up for several sessions or a treatment plan?

When your chiropractic treatment starts, the chiropractor will devise an initial short plan of care. That plan of care will include the chiropractor re-assessing your progress regularly. Treatments may take place one or more times per week. Most patients will see improvements in their condition within just a few weeks. Following the initial care plan, many patients will not need further treatment.

The national (NICE) guidelines for low back pain advise that after 6-9 treatments you should be feeling significantly better. If you don't feel significantly better within a few weeks after starting treatment, your chiropractor should be discussing other care options with you, or seeking to refer you to another healthcare professional. You should be cautious if a chiropractor recommends a lengthy (3-, 6-, 12- month) care plan after just 1 or 2 visits.

Although most patients can expect to see improvements within a few weeks of starting chiropractic treatment, patients who have complex conditions, or whose work means their condition is likely to recur, or who have very long-term problems may require a longer-term care plan. How long they need to be treated for will depend on how quickly their condition responds to treatment. That is something the chiropractor is unlikely to be able to judge at the start of treatment.

You can decide to stop treatment at any time you like. You will not be expected to pay for treatments you have not received.

7. What distinguishes one type of chiropractic technique from another?

There are many different chiropractic techniques. Some chiropractors perform joint manipulation using only their hands, while others use various instruments. Additionally, some chiropractors treat using quick but firm manipulation, while others have a lighter touch. Chiropractic treatment is largely driven by the individual preferences of both the chiropractor and the patient but adjustment choices are made for clinical reasons.

8. Will I need to have x-rays?

There are strict guidelines in place about taking x-rays. Your chiropractor should only recommend that an x-ray is taken if there is a valid clinical reason for doing so. Some chiropractors take x-rays either to check that the patient does not have any serious health conditions affecting their spine, such as a fracture or tumour, or to help them decide where to adjust the spine.

In most cases of non-traumatic musculoskeletal low back pain, an x-ray is not needed.

If your chiropractor recommends an x-ray, ask them to explain why they need it to treat you.

Some chiropractors can take x-rays in-house but others may need to refer you somewhere else to have an x-ray done, which they will need to look at before they start your treatment.

9. What if the treatment doesn't seem to help?

At the start of your care, your chiropractor should have told you what improvements they hope to achieve and when these might happen. The chiropractor will monitor your progress at each visit.

Some conditions may only improve after a few treatments. If you do not experience the expected improvements, your chiropractor should re-assess you, so that they can decide whether to change their treatment approach, or whether you should be referred for further investigation or treatment by a different healthcare professional. If your chiropractor thinks you may need to see another healthcare professional they will ask for your consent to refer you, and to communicate with that healthcare professional about your treatment.

10. Will I be able to take time to consider whether or not to have further sessions or treatment?

Yes. The chiropractor's role is to deliver their recommended course of care to you, but it is your decision whether or not to accept their treatment recommendations. Your consent is needed for any treatment to take place, and you should know and understand what you are consenting to.

11. What are the costs?

Costs vary depending upon the location and the nature of the clinic.

If you have not visited the chiropractor before, they will need to assess your condition before they start treatment. The assessment and the first treatment may be charged for separately, or the charge may be combined, so do check what is included in the initial visit fee before you go ahead. Fees should be clearly explained in advance and you should not be required to pay significant up-front fees.

Chiropractic isn't widely available on the NHS, but the NHS do fund chiropractic treatment in some areas within the UK. Most people who have chiropractic treatment pay for it privately and it is covered by some health insurance schemes.

12. How can I be sure the treatment is safe?

Chiropractic is generally very safe when performed correctly by a trained and registered chiropractor. Chiropractors are trained to ensure that any treatment you receive is a safe and appropriate treatment for you.

It is common to experience side effects from treatment, such as mild - moderate aches and pains, stiffness and tiredness but these side-effects are usually mild and generally pass in a few days. More serious side effects are very rare, but have occasionally been reported following spine manipulation. If you have a pre-existing medical condition, that may increase certain risks - which is why your chiropractor takes a detailed medical history and examines you prior to treatment. It is important that you give the chiropractor accurate information about your medical history. The chiropractor is obliged to treat anything you tell them as confidential, in the same way a doctor is. Any particular risks that may be relevant to you should be explained by the chiropractor before you consent to treatment.