

Women Sustain Greater Whiplash Injuries

By James L. Holding, DC, CCSP,
Holding Chiropractic
Sports Injury Clinic

If you are a woman and you've been rear ended in a car accident did you know you are far more likely to sustain a whiplash injury than a man by a ratio of 2:1? A recent study comparing gender in whiplash injuries concluded, "This population is more likely to be injured under whiplash loading."

Women are also more likely to suffer chronic (long lasting) symptoms from such accidents, especially with low-speed rear impacts. A study found that once injured, women are between 2-2.3 times more likely than males to have chronic symptoms. Fortunately another study also found that women who visit a doctor of chiropractic shortly after injury have better outcomes than those who wait.

Although auto accidents are considered the most common cause of whiplash injury, they can also be caused by a sudden unexpected movement such as a blow to the head, a fall from a horse, a fall on the stairs, a sports injury or even attempting to recover your balance after slipping on a wet floor or icy sidewalk.

In an automobile accident the body is initially thrust forward but the head stays behind, as the car is literally pushed out from underneath the occu-

pant, then as the head is forced backward the muscles and ligaments that support normal spinal alignment are torn. Suddenly the car stops, and the head is thrown violently forward tearing additional muscles and ligaments. Injuries to the neck can occur in both directions. Researchers have found it only takes a small force (as little as 4 mph.) to cause injury to the lower neck, which is why even very low speed accidents can cause injury.

Women sustain worse injury than men for a number of reasons. First, researchers have found that female necks allow for greater range of motion in the lower facet joints than in men. In females the back portion of these same facet joints in the lower neck has less protective cartilage than in men and when ligaments get stretched or torn it allows for painful bone on bone contact in the facet joints. And facet joint pain is believed to be the single most common cause of chronic neck pain after a whiplash injury. This injury causes pain in the back of the neck and across the shoulders, which, not surprisingly, are two of the most common symptoms of whiplash injury. Headache is the third most common symptom, and surprisingly, fatigue is one of the most reliable signs of injury after trauma.

Ligament injury may also occur more easily in women than men due to

hormones and genetics. Also, men generally have more muscle mass than women, which can offset some of the physical stress to the joints caused by trauma.

Following a whiplash, joint ligaments can heal with scar tissue. With scar tissue there is a loss of elasticity in the ligaments, which in itself can result in a loosened spinal joint. If the loose joint becomes unstable, traumatic arthritis may well result years later.

Regardless of gender, between four and 50 percent of people who sustain neck injuries in car accidents exhibit symptoms that persist for years, which can become disabling. Chiropractors commonly see patients with neck and shoulder stiffness, tension, headaches, numbness, and many other problems that have been in a seemingly minor accident three or four years prior to their visit.

If you have been involved in a car accident recently or are still suffering from past injuries, a chiropractic examination may benefit you. Remember that outcomes improve when chiropractic care is received soon after an accident. Don't wait for symptoms to surface, as they may not surface for days, weeks, or even months after trauma. Play it safe and get your spine checked after any accident, even a minor one.