

Lay summary on:

When there is little or no research evidence: a clinical decision tool



Ontario
Chiropractic
Association

Research summary of a peer-reviewed clinical decision tool



What is this research about?

Despite growth in chiropractic research and clinical guidelines, chiropractors – like clinicians in any discipline – often face situations where evidence is unclear. This can make it challenging to deliver effective evidence-based care.

This research introduces a tool to help chiropractors make informed, evidence-based decisions in situations where research evidence is limited, conflicting, or doesn't directly apply to a patient's condition. The tool guides clinical decision-making by ensuring the core pillars of evidence-based practice are considered – best available evidence, patient preferences, clinical context and clinical expertise. It directs care that is safe, personalized, and grounded in evidence-informed reasoning.

This paper also demonstrates how the tool can be applied across real-world clinical scenarios with varying levels of available evidence for chiropractic treatment.



How was this research conducted?

The research team searched three scientific databases to review existing literature on evidence-based chiropractic and musculoskeletal (MSK)-related clinical decision-making tools for situations where evidence is limited. Finding few tools designed for general guidance in these scenarios, they held group discussions and analyzed the strengths and gaps of existing models. This process informed the development of a new, clinically-relevant tool grounded in the core principles of evidence-based practice.

The research team's clinical decision tool

The team developed a three-step decision algorithm for informing clinical decisions, even in cases with limited evidence.

Step 1

Assess the Research Evidence

- **1A: Does the evidence suggest there are safety concerns?**
- **1B: Does the evidence suggest treatment is likely to be effective?**
 - Consider factors such as research strength, applicability to patient, and the patient's preferences along with treatment effectiveness to determine whether to proceed.

Step
2

Consider Scientific Rationale

- Are there supporting scientific factors, such as biological plausibility or related evidence, suggesting the treatment may help?

Step
3

Assess Clinical Training and Experience

- Is the treatment consistent with accepted clinical training, experience and professional standards?

Proceeding with a Trial of Care

If the treatment is appropriate, the tool supports developing a time-limited trial of therapy with clear goals and regular progress checks. This ensures decisions remain patient-centred, evidence-informed, and responsive to how the patient is doing over time.

The tool helps clinicians weigh safety, effectiveness, patient context, and professional expertise to make sound clinical decisions. Supplemental files show how this works in practice across different conditions.



Murphy, B., Emary, P. C., De Ciantis, M., Parish, J. M., Srbely, J., Chopra, A., & Gleberzon, B. (2025). When there is little or no research evidence: a clinical decision tool. *J Can Chiropr Assoc*, 69(3).

What does this all mean?



When chiropractors encounter patients with conditions that don't have clear research evidence to guide care, this doesn't mean care can't be provided. It means decisions need to be made carefully. This research offers a structured tool to help chiropractors make safe, informed, and personalized decisions in these situations. By combining research evidence, patient input, and clinical judgment, the tool helps ensure that care remains thoughtful, evidence-informed, and tailored to the individual.

Definitions:

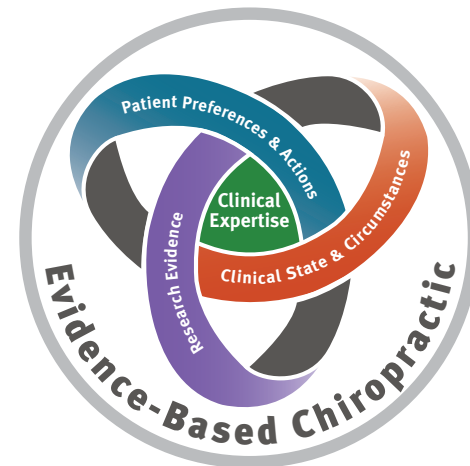
Patient-Centred Clinical Decision-Making:



A clinical decision related to a patient's health that prioritizes the individual patient's unique needs, preferences, and safety, while integrating the best available research evidence to tailor an effective and personalized treatment plan.

For more information:

Visit the Ontario Chiropractic Association (OCA)'s [Evidence-Based Chiropractic Care \(EBCC\)](#) for more research findings in a paper series that explores how chiropractors can integrate research evidence, clinical expertise and patient preferences to deliver high-quality care.



Contact us:



416-860-0070
Toll-free: 1-877-327-2273



oca@chiropractic.on.ca



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