

Overcoming the agony of a fender bender

Whiplash an often-overlooked injury

It's an all too common sight on Canadian roads this time of year: drivers losing control of their cars on ice and snow, sliding off the road or colliding with one another. After a bone-jarring crunch, you might count yourself lucky if you get out of your car and discover only minor damage – damage that can be easily fixed by a mechanic. But what about the pain and stiffness you feel the next day? Who will fix that?

“One of the most common injuries from a car accident is one that isn't immediately obvious, and that's whiplash,”¹ says Lisa Carlesso, physical therapist and executive chair of the Canadian Academy of Manipulative Therapy (CAMT). “There are more than 100,000 whiplash cases in Canada each year, and most of those occur from automobile accidents when the force of impact thrusts the head back and forth. The problem is that many people will wake up the next day and think they just have a stiff neck, when they could have torn muscles and stretched ligaments in their neck.”

In fact, that stiff neck may be the beginning of more serious pain after a few days, as it moves up to the back of the head or down into the shoulders. However, early treatment and consultation with a manual therapist will greatly improve the recovery process, and prevent future complications and ongoing pain.

“Our goal is to get our patient back on their feet and up to their normal level of activity as soon as possible – and the sooner we see a patient after the injury, the better,” says Carlesso. “There is now strong research that shows how starting treatment in the first 96 hours will result in the best outcome. Canadian clinical practice guidelines for whiplash treatment also recommend early referral to physiotherapy, which includes manual therapy. Manual therapists can quickly assess a patient and classify the extent of their injury into one of three categories. In the most severe cases, the injury might require a visit to the emergency room or family doctor. For the less severe cases, we'll begin with a very specific, gentle range-of-motion exercises and education regarding appropriate activities in their day-to-day lives.”

Helping patients with their own treatment plays a significant role in the CAMT approach to treating whiplash. In addition to clinical treatment, therapists work with the patient to develop a program of gentle aerobic exercises, walking and the resumption of normal activities to help speed recovery. By monitoring the patient's progress throughout the course of treatment, CAMT therapists can ensure their full return to pre-injury function in a way that helps patients meet their recovery goals at their own pace.

¹ Caroll, Linda J. et al. Course and Prognostic Factors for Neck Pain in Whiplash-Associated Disorders (WAD). SPINE. 2008;33: S83-S92

In Canada, the Canadian Academy of Manipulative Therapy has members coast-to-coast who can help relieve such pain and get patients back on their feet into a normal, active life. What sets CAMT physiotherapists apart from other physiotherapists is their advanced post-graduate diploma in Orthopaedic Manual Therapy. This specialized training allows them to use hands-on techniques to more specifically assess and treat individual joints and soft-tissues for injury and movement disorders. They have also developed problem-solving skills that help Canadians with complex and chronic joint and muscle pain. Manual therapy may include massage, stretching, mobilization or manipulation of joints and soft-tissue including muscle, tendon and ligament.

“It was once assumed that the best way to treat whiplash or any other neck injury is to immobilize it with a neck brace and minimize any movement,” says Carlesso. “However, we now know that early movement and exercise, in combination with manipulation, helps promote healing.² The key is early diagnosis and working with a manual therapist to develop a program of clinical treatment and simple exercises. It’s an approach that will help ensure that the road to recovery from whiplash isn’t as painful to follow as a road covered in snow and ice during a Canadian winter.”

Patient Education - Postural and Neck Exercises

As part of the treatment process, patients can help speed their recovery by consulting with a manual therapist and engaging in a home exercise program. By working together, the patient and therapist can develop a program that meets their physical ability and focuses on their personal goals. An example of these exercises can be found on the CAMT website at www.manipulativetherapy.org, under the Patients – Educational Resources section.

About the Canadian Academy of Manipulative Therapists

The Canadian Academy of Manipulative Therapy is a group of skilled physiotherapists with extensive post-graduate education in manual therapy and clinical reasoning, who have passed an internationally recognized accreditation process. As a result, they have a comprehensive understanding of advanced manual therapy—a key component of the multi-modal approach. With over 370 members in ten provincial associations, Fellows of CAMT excel in such areas as sports injuries, spinal instabilities, lower limb/pelvic alignment disorders, whiplash injuries, and foot disorders. CAMT members have worked to improve the standards of manipulative and other manual therapy skills, encourage scientific research and promote new discoveries, while supporting their larger, national association the Canadian Physiotherapy Association.

Additional information, including a list of CAMT members across Canada, is available at www.manipulativetherapy.org.

² Hurwitz, Eric L. et al. Treatment of Neck Pain: Noninvasive Interventions. SPINE. 2008;33: S123–S152