

Product Sales in Your Practice - Part 4

Cervical Pillows – One Size Does Not Fit All

By Stuart Firsten, DC

Editor's note: Previous articles in this series introduced protocols for effective health product sales in chiropractic practice. Topics covered have included ethical and medical/legal issues, and MI Sales Tax exemption. A "Product Recommendation Form" for better documentation and to facilitate staff involvement in the sales process was also presented. Part 4 of this series provides information to help you evaluate cervical pillow features and requirements for your patients. Parts 1-3 of "Products Sales in Your Practice" are available online at www.chiromi.com/practice_tips.htm.

Neck pain related to sleeping, shoulder pain, arm numbness, headaches, or awakening with discomfort and fatigue are complaints commonly seen in chiropractic practice. Such symptoms may be aggravated when tissues are strained from a pillow providing inadequate support. It is no wonder that cervical pillows are frequently recommended by chiropractors - to improve sleeping posture and as an adjunct to care.

Cervical pillows should also be considered in cases when the patient has been subjected to trauma such as in an auto accident or in any case where maintaining the cervical lordosis in a neutral position can facilitate the healing process. The right pillow can provide relief, prevent future injury, and help patients obtain a better nights sleep. However, before deciding on which pillow to recommend, chiropractors should consider several factors to help insure that patients will benefit the most.

There are countless types of cervical pillows on the market, making it difficult to know which ones to inventory or recommend. Additionally, patients present with a variety of conditions and body sizes that necessitate individualized levels of firmness or support. Even the bed they sleep on may influence which type of pillow will work best for them. Such factors need to be evaluated before recommending a pillow to best suit your patients personal needs.

Inquiring about the type of pillow and bed the patient currently uses, and the patient's favored sleeping positions

can be useful in determining which pillow to choose. Many fall asleep on their side but then awake on their back, which may not be correct for spinal health when pillows are too thick or too firm. Others use two pillows, promoting flexion of the neck and reversing the natural cervical curve. Sleeping supine without a pillow can also cause the neck to flatten especially when the mattress is very firm.



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As a healthcare provider, it is important to understand that your patients are ultimately looking for one thing: Total mind/body wellness. Saturday, April 23, join Dr. Abbas S. Qutab for this important seminar to help you become a wellness expert. Dr. Qutab will detail the importance of nutrition, systematic interrelationships and the important steps of bio-detoxification. You will learn how to determine the answers to every patient's questions, including: "What is wrong?" "What do you recommend?" "How long will it take?" and "How will this help me?" Help your patients create health from the inside out.

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In most instances off-the-shelf pillows composed of feather, fiber, or solid foam have no mechanism inherent in their design to provide lordotic support. Some patients will naturally learn to roll their pillow or bunch it up when practicable to accommodate and support their spine. Usually this is motivated by trying to find the most comfortable position to fall asleep. Unfortunately as they move about at night the area of support created will collapse, thus they will lose the support that they need.

Pillows are not unlike shoes as they have to fit correctly to be comfortable. They also need to provide adequate support to limit excessive shearing forces when we are recumbent. The requirement for support also changes depending on the sleeping position. Since people tend to change positions throughout the night, a cervical pillow needs to support the cervical spine in various sleep positions to be effective. When supine, the pillow support should maintain the natural lordosis. When on the side, more support under the neck than beneath the head is typically preferred for comfort, to keep the spine from lateral flexing, and in better alignment. A thicker pillow limits compressing the shoulder for side sleepers with broad shoulders. Stomach sleepers tend to fully rotate their necks and therefore this sleep position is often discouraged. However, many stomach sleepers do perfectly fine and a thinner pillow usually works best for them. A good pillow will conform to the shape of the user's head and neck during various sleep positions and it will distribute pressure evenly while maintaining the spine in a neutral alignment.

Cervical pillow manufacturers often claim in their advertisements that their products provide relief. However, in the real world, doctors often find inconsistent results when recommending only one type of pillow to every patient. A pillow that is appreciated by one person may be thrown off the bed ending up on the floor by another. Research in this area has shown evidence that cervical pillows can be beneficial, however it is impossible to know which brand or pillow style will work best in each specific case. The trick is to find a pillow that fits best for each individual patient, that provides adequate cervical support that they can tolerate in their most predominant sleeping position.

The most common types of cervical pillows recommended by chiropractors include preformed solid polyurethane foam pillows, visco-elastic foam pillows, water bladder pillows, synthetic fiber stuffed pillows, buckwheat pillows, and cylindrical roll pillows. Following are descriptions of each and reviews of their main features and benefits.

Polyurethane Foam

These pillows come in various shapes and sizes. They generally have a pre-formed shape, usually with depressions and multiple lobes of varying size, and are also used in cervical rolls. Some manufacturers provide the same pillow in several sizes. Density, resiliency, firmness vary from brand to brand.

Advantages: Inexpensive. Choice of levels of support.

Disadvantages: Difficult to fit. One size does not fit all. Often not tolerated well. Foam breaks down or softens and

level of support changes over time. May be overly aggressive or provide inadequate support. Not washable.

Visco-Elastic Foam

These are formed of a specialized type of urethane foam, originally developed by NASA for the space program. They are also known as memory foam, temperature sensitive foam, or slow recovery foam. They have improved pressure relieving properties, and conform better to body shapes. Density, firmness, resiliency vary from manufacturer to manufacturer. Some are temperature sensitive and soften with body heat.

Advantages: Less need to change positions due to pressure relieving qualities. Less compromise of blood flow in area being compressed. Durable. Can be rolled up tightly for travel then return to shape when unrolled. Selection of different sizes available.

Disadvantages: Expensive. May provide adequate support and comfort in one position, but not in another. Tend to build up body heat. May feel warm to user especially when room is warm or humid. May not fit all users well. Not washable.

Water Pillow

These pillows have a water bladder base covered by synthetic fiber batting for enhanced comfort. The water layer provides support for the head and neck, and continuously responds to changes in sleeping positions, adjusts to fit patients shape, and firmness can be individualized to preferred comfort level.

Advantages: Inexpensive. Adjustable level of firmness for user defined level of support.

Disadvantages: May provide adequate support and comfort in one position but not in another.

Buck Wheat Hull

Buck wheat hull pillows have been used extensively in the Orient for hundreds, if not thousands of years. They are natural, and generally hypo-allergenic, and they feel like lying in the sand at the beach. The buck wheat hulls flow to conform to body shape, and they provide firm support that can be infinitely adjusted for user defined level of comfort, making them useful in all sleep positions.

Advantages: Firm support. Adjustable. Inexpensive. No heat build up. Last for years. Hulls can be removed from case for laundering. Increasingly popular.

Disadvantages: May be considered too firm or noisy for some users.

Synthetic Fiber

Synthetic fiber is stuffed into compartments in these pillows, and usually open in center to allow head to drop down for lordotic cervical support when supine. They generally have lobes on each side for side sleeping, or they may be butterfly shaped. They are also used in cervical rolls.

Advantages: Inexpensive. Not overly aggressive for most users. Accommodates back and side sleeping positions.

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Disadvantages: Not completely adjustable. Often not tolerated well. Limited sizes available. Level of firmness changes over time. May provide adequate support and comfort in one position but not in another.

The most important considerations to make are that the cervical pillow you recommend is not only comfortable, but supportive as well. Consider that the pillow you recommended could be overly firm or aggressive for the patient or provide inadequate support in their predominant sleep position, and that changing to another type or brand of pillow may be required.

Patients should be advised that although you believe that a specific cervical pillow is indicated for the management of their condition, it is possible that they may have difficulty adapting to the pillow that you recommended. In such cases, they should bring this to your attention so you can assess whether they may need more time to acclimate to the pillow you recommended. Advising the patient to discontinue further use may also be necessary occasionally, especially when a pillow seems to be aggravating the patient's condition, or perhaps switching to a different size or style of pillow may be indicated at such a time.

Whenever you recommend a cervical pillow, make sure to document your recommendation accordingly. Also, be sure to explain to your patient why you are recommending a cervical pillow to support the lordosis and cervical spine more correctly. Provide your patient adequate instructions for use, pricing or ordering information (or sources if you don't stock the item in your office). If you dispense the pillow from your inventory, be clear with the patient about your return or non-return policy, and that pillows are recommended or sold without guarantee of results. Staff involvement in the sales process will help you cover the bases. Detailed information of these topics can be found in previous articles in this series.

A well fitted cervical pillow can help protect the spine from injury by supporting the lordosis and sleeping posture in a more neutral position. In most cases, patients having difficulty getting comfortable at night, or who are waking up with increased pain, realize that the pillow they are using may be part of their problem. When they are introduced to a pillow that fits them correctly, they will appreciate your recommendations and the benefits of improved cervical support.

Future articles in this series "Product Sales in Your Practice" will explore other health products such as supports, fitness balls, ergonomic chairs, and inversion devices that are often recommended by chiropractors to their patients. Articles will focus on reviewing specific product design features related to health benefits - as opposed to specific product brands.

About the Author: *Stuart Firsten, DC is a licensed chiropractor in Michigan. His company, FitCare Products, an MCS Member Supporting Business, developed and introduced the new AirFit™ BackRest last year. The AirFit™ is recommended by many MCS members, and hundreds of chiropractors, health care professionals and medical suppliers. The product is also available online to learn more visit www.AirFitBackRest.com. To contact Dr. Firsten with your comments or for additional information you can call (248) 661-5088, or email him at sfirstendc@fitcareproducts.com.*

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