

A diagnosis is the condition that a doctor determines a patient is afflicted with. Some diagnoses are easy to determine and are known as definitive. In other words, the likelihood that the diagnosis is accurate is high. A presumptive diagnosis is one where the condition is presumed, but it has not been determined for certain.

Some conditions cannot be diagnosed definitively. This can be true when the condition is not well understood or when the necessary technology is not currently available to differentiate one condition from another. The flu is an example. The common tests used to identify if a patient is suffering from the flu are only accurate 50% of the time.

Doctors often make presumptive diagnoses when they feel it is not necessary to perform the tests required to arrive at a definitive diagnosis. This can be true when the tests required to arrive at an accurate diagnosis are expensive, potentially dangerous or unnecessary.

If it is likely that a condition will resolve on its own, a doctor may feel it is unnecessary to arrive at a definitive diagnosis. In other cases a definitive diagnosis may not change the treatment approach. For example, my treatment for a patient with back pain caused by a herniated disc can be the same as for back pain caused by a misaligned vertebra. In both cases the patient typically gets better under my care. I could order an MRI to confirm the diagnosis, but since the patient usually recovers without the MRI, I may forgo the test in order to save the patient many hundreds of dollars.

CT scans are often ordered to aid in a diagnosis. A CT scan can be very helpful and in some cases they are necessary. Recent research has shown that the radiation doses involved in a CT scan can significantly increase the risk of cancer for individuals receiving the scan. CT scans and other risky diagnostic procedures should only be done when the benefit of the information received is significantly greater than the risk of the test.

Sometimes the treatment itself provides its own diagnosis. If a condition is not life threatening and if the treatment has low risk, it can be appropriate to treat based on a presumed diagnosis and if the patient responds, it may confirm the diagnosis or even make the diagnosis irrelevant. This has proven true in my clinical experience.

Statistically, chiropractic care is extremely safe. Performing a few trial treatments very rarely does any harm and it often determines if chiropractic care is appropriate. If a patient shows improvement that they had not shown following other care they had received, then it is likely that chiropractic care is addressing the underlying problem. This in itself can confirm a diagnosis.