

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Dr. Wayne Terai

Tips for a Healthier Commute

According to a 2007 Gallup poll, the average commuter spends nearly 200 hours per year driving to and from work. Are you spending hours a week behind the wheel? If so, commuting may be chipping away at your overall well-being. Prolonged sitting coupled with the vibrations produced by the tires hitting the road can wreak havoc on the spine. Driving may also be emotionally stressful and exact a psychological toll. Dr. Terai is concerned about the effects of commuting on patients' health and offers suggestions to help.



Keep up With Chiropractic Care

Study after study confirms that logging regular hours in the car greatly increases the incidence of back pain (*Work* 2002;19:95-102; *Harefuah* 2005;144:492-6, 526). The stress of a long commute can also have significant effects on the musculoskeletal system and overall wellness. Specifically, car travel is linked with an elevated risk of **vertebral subluxation**. This condition occurs when spinal movement is restricted and spinal bones (vertebrae) move slightly out of place. Dr. Terai corrects vertebral subluxations with safe and effective maneuvers called **chiropractic adjustments**.

Because of the extra strain to the spine by car time, it is particularly essential for commuters to maintain regular

chiropractic appointments. By focusing on prevention, patients can ward off commuting-related health problems before they impact their quality of life.

Hit the Road Rested

A healthy commute starts the night before with adequate sleep. Safe driving, especially in heavy traffic, requires a high level of attention to properly react to rapidly changing circumstances. Insufficient sleep decreases cognitive function and makes driving more hazardous (*Neurosci Lett* 2010;469:229-33). Fatigue may impair driving performance as much as alcohol consumption. So make sure to get sufficient zzz's.

Sit Comfortably

Proper position and back support are key for minimizing the influence of car time on the spine. Move the driver's seat as close to the steering wheel as is comfortable, and fine-tune seat position so that your knees are slightly higher than your hips. Depending on the alignment of your spine and the specific ergonomics of your car, Dr. Terai may also recommend using a lumbar support cushion.

Make the Most of Red Lights

Consider each traffic light an opportunity to relax and refresh your body.

Dr. Terai suggests rolling or shaking out your shoulders, stretching arms and legs, or massaging your temples and forehead. Stretch out your feet and toes and tighten and release calf, thigh, and gluteal muscles to mitigate swelling in these areas.

Enjoy Soothing Scents

Harness the power of aromatherapy to transform your car into a peaceful oasis. A small sachet, fragrance diffuser, or a few drops of essential oil on a handkerchief tucked under a seat can bring calm during rush hour. Research shows that lavender and rosemary scents decrease levels of cortisol, the stress hormone that increases blood pressure and weakens immune function (*Psychiatry Res* 2007;150:89-96).



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Breathe Deeply

A few slow, deep breaths have the power to swiftly diffuse traffic-related emotional stress. Search “breathing exercises” on-line for ideas on stress-reducing breathing techniques. If you’re sharing the road with semi-trucks, keep windows closed and set your car’s climate control system to recirculate internal air. This will reduce exposure to harmful diesel exhaust fumes.

Get a (Gentle) Grip

Be mindful of how you grasp the steering wheel — a tight grip may lead to muscle tension in the hands, arms, shoulder and neck. Hold the wheel gently with your hands positioned at 9 o’clock and 3 o’clock or 10 o’clock and 2 o’clock, switching occasionally between the two. Periodically squeeze and release your hands a few times to discourage muscle fatigue.

Make Your Car a Haven

If you spend a lot of time in the car, make it as inviting and peaceful an environment as possible. Remove trash daily and use organizers to keep electronics, CDs, and other travel necessities in order. A favorite photo, inspiring quote, or religious symbol on the dashboard can serve as a soothing talisman during rush hour.

Fuel Your Body

Especially helpful on a long commute, a healthy snack keeps energy levels up and the mind sharp. Researchers report that eating small amounts frequently — rather than consuming calories in a few large meals — improves cognitive speed and accuracy (*Appetite* 2009;52:245-8). Nuts, dried or fresh fruit, vegetable crudites, cheese, and whole grain crackers are filling, travel-friendly options.

Drink Smart

The stereotypical worker hits the highway with a travel mug of coffee in his or her car’s cup holder. However, research links caffeine con-

sumption to increased anxiety (*J Psychopharmacol* 2009; Epub). So, switch to decaf. Or, better yet, choose herbal tea, water or juice for the drive. Stay hydrated without the jitters.

Break for Breaks

If your commute is over 45 minutes, plan a regular half-way break. Take 10 to 15 minutes to get out of the car, walk around and stretch. The benefit to mind and body is well worth leaving a few minutes earlier in the morning, and returning home a few minutes later in the evening.

Take a Musical Journey

Music is said to soothe the savage beast — and it can also soothe the stressed-out commuter. The music of Bach and Mozart is particularly recommended by researchers for reducing anxiety (*Dtsch Med Wochenschr* 2009;134:2601-6). If popular music is more your taste, go ahead and sing along. Scientific studies show that singing eases anxiety and boosts feeling of well-being (*Integr Physiol Behav Sci* 2003;38:65-74).

Learn on the Road

Talk radio is a popular drive-time genre. But heated political discussions can cause emotional stress. Instead, try an audiobook or podcast on a topic that will enrich your life. Many health and wellness titles are available on CD at the public library, and a variety of podcasts cover topics like nutrition, mental health, personal development and natural medicine. Ask the doctor for specific recommendations.

Rest Your Eyes

As you try to keep different parts of your body from tightening up in the car, don’t forget to relax your eyes. While keeping them safely open and on the road, shift your focal point occasionally. This lessens the risk of eye strain and tension headaches.

Keep a Positive Attitude

Maintaining patience while driving does more than prevent road rage — impatient individuals are twice as

likely to develop high blood pressure, compared with those with a more laid-back approach to life (*JAMA* 2003; 290:2138-48). And, let that other car merge in front of you. Altruistic actions are linked to increased happiness, longevity, and well-being (*Int J Behav Med* 2005;12:66-77).

Buddy Up

Carpooling is not only good for the environment — it’s good for mental health. A study presented at the meeting of the Transportation Research Board in Washington, D.C., indicates that commuters who share their ride are less frazzled by traffic congestion and more satisfied with their commutes.

Creatively Shorten Commute Time

Talk to your supervisor about changing your work hours to avoid rush hour. Research indicates that commuters who take advantage of flextime experience less stress behind the wheel (*J Business Psychol* 2004;16:565-61). Or, if your job allows it, negotiate one or more days per week of virtual commuting from your home office.

Consider Alternatives to Driving

Finally, investigate other means of getting to and from work. Drivers report a higher level of commuting stress than those who opt for alternative modes of transportation (*Environment and Behavior* 2007;39: 416-31). Using mass transit options like busses and trains reduces the mental work of commuting. If you are lucky to live close enough to walk or bicycle to work, take advantage of this luxury at least a few days a week.

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