

Acute Neck Pain

The aim of this leaflet is to give you some understanding of the problems you have with your neck pain and to provide some advice on how to manage this. It is not a substitute for professional healthcare advice and should be used along with information you may be given by your GP or health practitioner.

Neck pain is a common problem which has many causes. These include trauma or injury, worry and stress, poor posture or sleeping in an awkward position, or prolonged use of a computer keyboard. For most people, no specific reason for the pain is found.

What are the symptoms?

These may include:

- General pain in your neck area which may radiate to your shoulder or between your shoulder blades, out into your arm or up to your head causing a headache.
- Tension in the muscles of your neck.
- Abnormal neck posture or difficulty moving your neck normally.
- Weakness or altered sensation in one or both of your arms.

How is it treated?

What you do in the early stages of your injury can affect your recovery. Most injuries are not serious and the pain will improve over time. It is important to keep your neck moving whilst it is recovering. This will help prevent stiffness and help you to get better faster. Long inactivity can be unhelpful and can slow down recovery.

The first few days:

- Take painkillers for pain relief. Your doctor may have given them to you. Alternatively your local pharmacy will be able to suggest something.
- Try to stay active. This may mean you have to change your activities slightly.
- Some people find heat or ice packs helpful. Leave it on for up to 10 minutes. Do not put over the front of your chest or neck.
- Try to sit with an upright posture. You may be more comfortable if you support your lower back with a rolled up towel and sit in a straight backed chair.
- You may find it difficult to get comfortable in bed so use pillows to help support your neck. Sleeping on your back or side provides a better position for your neck.
- Research shows that using a neck collar delays recovery.

Tense muscles, caused by anxiety and stress can increase the amount of discomfort you feel. You may find exercise, controlled breathing and relaxation helpful to do.

Please see your GP if you do not manage to get back to most normal activities within 6 weeks. Or your neck is not recovering at the rate that you expect.

Pain control

Medication

Neck pain can be very uncomfortable. Many people use medication to help them remain active and cope with the pain. It is recommended that you take medication regularly. It is best to get advice from a GP or pharmacist.

Other forms of pain relief

Many people use other forms of pain relief alongside or instead of medication, some examples are listed below.

Table 1: Short term pain relieving measures

Acupuncture
Cold packs
Heat packs
Massage
Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS)

What are the best exercises?

Try to continue to do your ordinary activities as normally as possible. You may need to take it a little easier at first and gradually build it up. Being active little and often is a good idea.

You may like to start some specific exercises. The aim of these exercises is to help you move normally and safely.

Stop these exercises if you feel they are:

- Making your symptoms steadily worse over time. They may be slightly uncomfortable at first.
- Bringing on new pain.
- If the pain seems to be getting worse reduce the number of exercises you do and do smaller movements until the pain improves.

Early Exercises

Repeat each movement up to 10 times every 1-2 hours or as your pain allows. Avoid rolling your head round.

As your neck movement improves your pain will start to ease.

Exercise 1: In sitting. Bend your head forward until you feel a stretch behind your neck. Hold for approximately 5 to 10 seconds.

Exercise 2: In sitting. Tilt your head toward one shoulder until you feel the stretch on the opposite side. Hold for approximately 5 to 10 seconds. Repeat to other side.

Exercise 3: In sitting. Turn your head to one side until you feel a stretch. Hold for approximately 5 to 10 seconds. Repeat to the other side.

Exercise 4: In sitting or standing. Roll your shoulders in both directions. Repeat 5 to 10 times in each direction.

Should I be off work?

Neck pain can be very painful. You may be unable to do some parts of your job. It is usually recommended that you try to stay at work, if possible, or get back to work as soon as possible after a flare-up. The pain does not need to be 100% away in order to return to work. Research shows that the longer you are off work the less likely it is that you will return.

Try to stay positive. There is a lot you can do to help yourself. Remember, most neck pain settles with time.

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