

Cervicogenic headaches

Information and advice

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This information is designed to supplement the advice given by your doctor, and is written by physiotherapists based on the latest medical advice.

What is a cervicogenic headache?

This is a headache related to neck problems that often begins at the top of the neck and moves into the head.

What are the signs and symptoms?

- Headache symptoms relating to neck movement
- Pain on pressure over the upper neck / base of skull regions
- Restricted neck range of movement worsening headache
- One sided neck / shoulder / arm pain
- Episodes of varying duration

What should I look out for?

Most headaches aren't due to any serious disease however if you start to experience any of the following symptoms in relation to your headaches then please ask for advice from your GP:

- Dizziness of unknown cause
- Double vision
- Difficulty talking
- Difficulty swallowing
- Sudden fainting attacks
- Nausea and vomiting
- Facial numbness / pins and needles
- Uncontrolled movements of the eyes

What can I do to help prevent the headaches?

- Maintain a good sitting posture
- Avoid long periods of sitting or not moving in general
- Ask your employer about having an appropriate workstation assessment
- Avoid getting overtired to the point of exhaustion

- Keep yourself well hydrated throughout the day
- Exercise regularly to stimulate the circulation of blood to the head and to maintain neuro-musculoskeletal flexibility
- Try not to sleep on your stomach. Either sleep on your side with your head supported so that it is level with your spine, or on your back with a small pillow or rolled up towel supporting your neck rather than your head
- Organise for an eye check to make sure this is not playing a part in the headaches.

All patients with cervicogenic headaches should be referred to a physiotherapist as well as using this advice leaflet to begin managing the symptoms.

Exercise

The following exercises can be done three to four times a day. Gradually increase the number of repetitions and try to regain your full range of movement as soon as you can. It may be more comfortable to do some of the exercises lying down for the first few days.

Sitting on a hard-backed chair:

1. Turn your head slowly to look over left shoulder and then turn to look over right shoulder.

Repeat five times



2. Tilt your head slowly towards your shoulder.

Return to the middle and repeat to the other side.

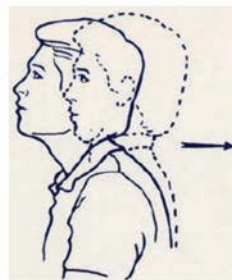
Repeat five times



3. Sitting with your back supported, gently tuck your chin into your chest as if making a 'double chin'.

Hold for the count of three seconds

Repeat five times



4. Shrug shoulders up, back and around, then relax.

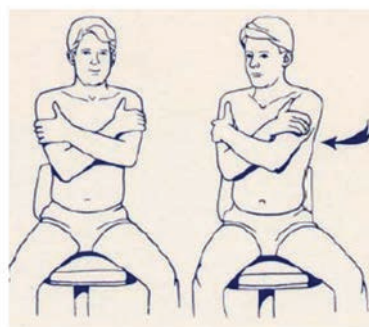
Repeat five times



5. Sitting in a chair with your arms across your chest, turn your trunk to the right and hold for five seconds.

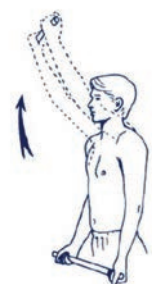
Then turn to the left.

Repeat five times each side



6. Stretch both hands overhead as high as possible.

Repeat five times



If you feel the exercises are making your pain worse, reduce the number or frequency of the exercises or stop and seek advice.

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