

Neck Pain

Neck pain is very common and affects most people at some point in their lives. Neck pain usually improves within a few weeks but can sometimes last longer or keep coming back.

Neck pain can have many causes.

It is not always obvious what causes neck pain. Often there is not one specific cause for neck pain but your symptoms may be due to a combination of factors.

A small number of people may get brachialgia (nerve pain in the arm) with neck pain. This occurs when there is physical or chemical irritation of the nerve in the neck. It can cause arm pain, numbness or pins and needles.

Very few people with neck pain have symptoms that need urgent medical attention.

You should see a health professional if you have neck pain and:

- An 'electric shock' feeling that may radiate into your arms or legs when you look down
- the pain began after a recent trauma to the head/neck (e.g. a fall or severe whiplash)
- Changes to your balance or the way you are walking e.g. trips or falls
- Weakness and/ or altered sensation in both arms and/or legs at the same time
- Problems with coordination of arms and/or legs e.g. writing, getting dressed
- Fever/ generally feeling unwell at the same time the neck pain developed
- New onset of fainting, double vision, or difficulty speaking or swallowing
- Changes to bladder, bowel and/or sexual function require immediate medical assessment

Wider Health and Neck pain

What is happening in your life has a large bearing on your pain experience. There are many factors that can influence neck pain and a combination of these are often involved.

They could be:

- **Physical factors:** such as muscle strain, joint stiffness or moving differently to try and 'protect' your neck
- **Psychological factors:** including a fear of damage or not getting better, feeling down or being stressed
- **Social factors:** such as stressful life events or difficult relationships at work or at home
- **General health and lifestyle factors:** not getting enough physical activity, smoking, not getting enough good quality sleep, other health conditions such as diabetes.

Caring for your wider health should not be underestimated when it comes to your recovery.

Helping your recovery

There are several things you can do to help reduce your pain and speed up your recovery.

- **Keep active:** Exercise and movement is the best treatment for neck pain. Resting or avoiding movement for more than a day or 2 might make your pain last longer. An important message is 'hurt does not equal harm'.
- **Apply heat or ice to the area:** Try using an ice pack wrapped in a damp towel or alternatively place a warm water bottle (in a cover) on the area. Use either of these regularly for up to 20 minutes at a time. Do not use heat or ice if you have any loss of skin sensation or damage to the skin.
- **Carry out exercises and stretches for your neck:** You will find some suggestions of gentle exercises at the end of this leaflet.
- **Relaxation:** Simple relaxation techniques can help manage neck pain and the stress that can be linked to pain. Try to find some time to practice relaxation each day if you find it helpful. Other things might work better for you such as signing or lying in a hot bath.
- **Work:** stay at work if possible and remember to move, stretch and change position regularly. If you work in an office, make sure your chair fits you and supports your back. Arrange your desk so that you can reach things like your computer without straining your neck.
- **Medication:** pain killers can help you keep moving. However, it is important that if you're already taking medication for something else or have other health problems then you should check with a pharmacist before taking pain killers for your problem.

Exercises

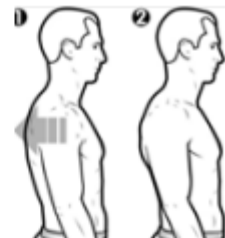
Your neck is designed for movement, the sooner you get back to normal activity, the sooner your neck will feel better. Here are some exercises to help you do this.

If any of these exercises make your symptoms worse then reduce the frequency or stop them and consult your doctor or physiotherapist. If after 4-6 weeks your neck pain is not improving, go back and see your doctor or physiotherapists. A delay in recovery rarely means that it is a serious problem, it is more likely that you may need some extra support to manage your pain.

- Turn your head slowly to look over your left shoulder and hold for 5-10 secs. Then turn to look over your right shoulder and hold for 5-10 secs
- Repeat each side 5 times



- Shrug shoulders up, back and around. Hold for 5-10 secs then relax
- Repeat each side 5 times



- Sitting in a chair with your arms across your chest, turn your trunk to the right and hold for 5 secs. Then turn to the left
- Repeat each side 5 times



- Tilt your head slowly towards your left shoulder, and hold for 5-10 secs. Return to the middle and tilt to your right shoulder, and hold for 5-10 secs
- Repeat each side 5 times



- Stretch both hands over your head as high as possible
- Hold for 5-10 secs
- Repeat each side 5 times

