

PREVENTION

Most neck pain is associated with poor posture on top of age-related wear and tear. To help prevent neck pain, keep your head centred over your spine, so gravity works with your neck instead of against it. Some simple changes in your daily routine may help. Consider trying to:

- ◆ Take frequent breaks if you drive long distances or work long hours at your computer. Keep your head back, over your spine, to reduce neck strain. Try to avoid clenching your teeth.



Regular stretches at work

- ◆ Adjust your desk, chair and computer so the monitor is at eye level. Knees should be slightly lower than hips. Use your chair's armrests.

- ◆ Avoid tucking the phone between your ear and shoulder when you talk. If you use the phone a lot, get a headset.

- ◆ Stretch frequently if you work at a desk. Shrug your shoulders up and down. Pull your shoulder blades together and then relax. Pull your shoulders down while leaning your head to each side to stretch your neck muscles.

- ◆ Balance your base. Stretching the front chest wall muscles and strengthening the muscles around the shoulder blade and back of the shoulder can promote a balanced base of support for the neck.

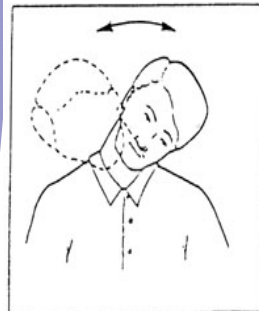
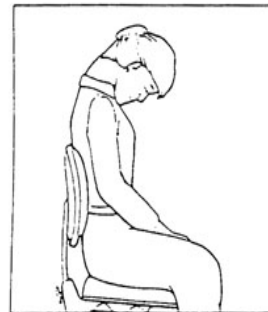
- ◆ Avoid sleeping on your stomach. This position puts stress on your neck. Choose a pillow that supports the natural curve of your neck.

These simple exercises can be done anywhere throughout the day to help reduce stiffness and muscle spasm and help relieve pain.

Neck Stretches



Relax



MORE RESOURCES

www.sheffieldbackpain.com a local guide to back pain in Sheffield.

www.patient.co.uk/showdoc/23068686/ to obtain a 4 page advice sheet.

www.backcare.org for detailed information especially in relation to work issues.

THE BACK BOOK—a very good book written by a host of professionals and provides comprehensive advice:



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Pain in the neck



- ◆ Most neck pain gets better within a few weeks
- ◆ One in three people will have neck pain in the past year
- ◆ Keeping active is the best way to treat most neck pain

Cervical neck pain

The cervical spine is the part of your backbone that makes up your neck and directly supports your neck.

- 7 small bones called vertebrae
- Muscles
- Ligaments
- Nerves from spinal cord which run all the way down your spine, out of your cervical spine, across the shoulders and chest and down your arms.
- Discs, which help with shock absorption
- Blood vessels



WHAT CAUSES NECK PAIN?

- ◆ **Mechanical neck pain:** most common cause, although exact origin of pain is not known.
- ◆ **Sprain/Strain** including whiplash (see separate advice sheet). Overuse, such as too much time spent hunched over a steering wheel, often triggers muscle strains. Neck muscles, particularly those in the back of your neck, become fatigued and eventually strained. Even such minor things as reading in bed or gritting your teeth can strain neck muscles.
- ◆ **Bad posture**
- ◆ **Wear & tear** (degeneration) of the discs, bones and joints is common cause in older people. It can lead to nerve problems. Medically known as cervical spondylosis.
- ◆ **Viral infections** can cause aches
- **Shooting pain.** Pain radiating to your shoulder, through your shoulder blades or down your arm, with or without numbness or tingling in your fingers, may indicate nerve irritation. Neck pain from nerve irritation can last from weeks to six months or longer.

- **Disk disorders.** As you age, the cushioning disks between your vertebrae become dry and stiff, narrowing the spaces in your spinal column where the nerves come out. The disks in your neck also can herniate. This means the inner gelatinous cartilage material of a disk protrudes through the disk's tougher cartilage covering. Neck pain may occur or nearby nerves can be irritated. Other tissues and bony growths (spurs) also can press on your nerves as they exit your spinal cord, causing pain.

LESS COMMON causes include:

- ◆ Rheumatoid arthritis
- ◆ Osteoporosis
- ◆ Serious injuries
- ◆ Cancer

THIS FACTSHEET DEALS WITH MECHANICAL CAUSES.

Symptoms

Neck pain takes many forms. Signs and symptoms of neck pain may include:

- Pain in your neck that may feel sharp or dull
- Stiffness in your neck
- Difficulty going about your daily tasks because of pain or stiffness in your neck
- Shoulder pain in addition to neck pain, in some cases
- Back pain in addition to neck pain, in some cases
- **Loss of strength.** Weakness in an arm or a leg, walking with a stiff leg, or shuffling your feet indicates a possible neurological problem and needs immediate evaluation.

Change in bladder or bowel habits. Any significant change, especially a sudden onset of incontinence, could indicate a neurological problem and means you should contact your GP URGENTLY.



Treatments and drugs

Self-care for neck pain

Over-the-counter pain relievers. Try over-the-counter pain relievers, such as aspirin, ibuprofen and paracetamol.

- **Alternate heat and cold.** Reduce inflammation by applying cold, such as an ice pack or ice wrapped in a towel, for up to 20 minutes several times a day. Alternate the cold treatment with heat. Try taking a warm shower or using a heating pad on the low setting. Heat can help relax sore muscles, but it sometimes aggravates inflammation, so use it with caution.
- **Rest.** Lie down from time to time during the day to give your neck a rest from holding up your head. Avoid prolonged rest, since too much inactivity can cause increased stiffness in your neck muscles.
- **Gentle stretching.** Gently move your neck to one side and hold it for 30 seconds. Stretch your neck in as many directions as your pain allows. This may help alleviate some of the pain.
- **Over-the-counter pain creams.** Creams and gels made to relieve muscle and joint pain may provide some temporary relief from neck pain. Look for products with ingredients such as menthol and camphor.
- **Neck exercises and stretching.** Your physiotherapist will give you a variety of exercises and stretches. Exercises may improve pain by restoring muscle function and increasing the strength and endurance of your neck muscles.
- **Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS).** Electrodes placed on your skin near the painful areas deliver tiny electrical impulses that may relieve pain.
- **Pain medications.** Your doctor may prescribe stronger pain medicine than what you can get over-the-counter. Opioid analgesics are sometimes used briefly to treat acute neck pain. Muscle relaxants may also be prescribed for pain relief.