



PAIN IN THE NECK

Neck pain is common but rarely serious. It can affect almost anyone at any age. The pain is usually mild but can be extremely painful or even disabling.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE NECK

The neck (cervical spine) is similar to the rest of the spine, but differs in that it is designed to move more and in different directions.

The neck consists of seven vertebrae. The vertebrae consist of a cylindrical body at the front and arches behind to protect the spinal cord. Between the bones are small openings through which nerves pass out from the spinal cord to the neck and arms.

The vertebrae are joined together by discs, facet joints and ligaments. The column of vertebrae is joined together by many ligaments and muscles.



COMMON CAUSES OF NECK PAIN

Poor posture or alignment of the head in relation to the body. When we let our shoulders go rounded or slouch, the head moves forward. The head will automatically tilt backwards in order to keep your eyes level. This causes the muscles at the back of the neck to work extra hard just to hold the head up. At the same time, the muscles at the front of the neck become overstretched and weak.

EXERCISES.

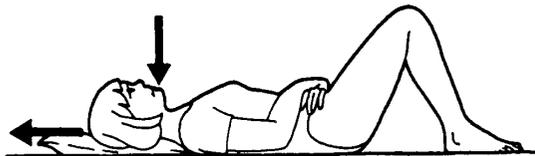
To keep the neck and upper spine mobile. Try at least once per day. They can be done 2-3 times a day if you find they benefit. Stop exercises that cause pain to linger for more than 30 minutes or aggravate arm symptoms.



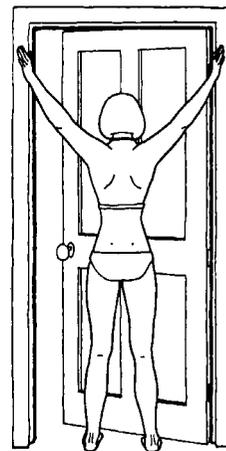
Tuck in your chin, then turn your head from side to side. 4-5 times.



Gently stretch one side of the neck, then the other. Hold 5-10 seconds.



An exercise to strengthen the front of the neck and to stretch the back of your neck. Gently tuck in the chin and hold for 10 seconds. Repeat 5 times.



A good stretch for round shoulders. Feel the stretch across the front of the chest and hold for 15 seconds.



Stretch backwards over the edge of a chair. Hold for 10 seconds.

A poor posture at work can result from furniture that doesn't fit or is not properly adjusted (see separate sheet)

Necks can be made worse at night. Lying for long periods with poor alignment can cause an acutely painful neck or aggravate a neck that is already stiff.

Strenuous home decorating, particularly painting ceilings, or any activity that requires you to look up for long periods can easily cause neck-ache.

Accidents, especially car crashes are the commonest cause of severe damage in the neck. (see separate sheet)

Cervical spondylosis or degenerative arthritis is a common cause of pain in people over 50. It may result from "wear and tear" or be the result of repeated injury. Most people get cervical spondylosis as they get older but it often causes no trouble.

SYMPTOMS

Pain and/or stiffness in the neck on one or both sides.

Muscular pain at the top of the shoulders.

Headaches can be referred from the neck and are commonly aggravated by tension or stress. Pain can spread from the back of the head forwards over the head to the front and sometimes to behind the eyes.

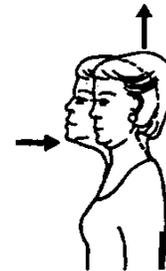
Cervical spondylosis can affect nerve roots or refer pain. This results in pain down the arm with associated numbness, tingling or weakness in more severe cases.

HOW TO HELP



At night. It is best to use a firm mattress and one pillow. Keep the neck in line with the rest of your spine. Try pillows of different heights so your head does not end up too high or too low. Keep the pillow tucked into the neck for full support.

Lying on the stomach at night places the neck in an extreme position. This can result in "locked" facet joints or cause joint problems. It is very important not to sleep in this position.



Posture. Try to keep the middle of your spine straighter by lifting the rib cage at the front. Don't overarch while doing this. Pull the shoulder blades gently together and down. Keep the head over the body by gently tucking the chin.

Practising this frequently during the day helps to keep postural muscles strong and spinal joints supple.

Collars. Are rarely required. They are sometimes provided under guidance of a health practitioner after injury or with severe pain. They provide relief and rest for painful or damaged joints but should only be worn during the day. If you have been given a collar remove it hourly to gently allow the neck to move. Collars should generally only be worn for short periods after injury or increased pain.



Support your neck when reading in bed.

A comfortable position to relieve "nerve" pain in the arm.

