

Physio Med Self Help for Neck and Arm Pain

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The most likely cause of neck pain is poor posture. Neck pain is very common particularly in people who sit at a desk or computer for many hours (including domestic use of unsupported laptops / tablets). The problem may be due to a trapped nerve due to a stiff joint or less commonly due to a prolapsed disc.

Pain itself can be a causative factor such as a sporting injury; a fall on to the arm or hand which can jar the neck; a whiplash injury in a car accident; prolonged sitting in a bad position (including falling asleep in an awkward position on the sofa!) and worry and stress. Although it can be scary to experience, neck pain is rarely caused by a serious illness and will often disappear within a week.

Stress and anxiety is a big factor in neck pain as we show stress in increased muscle tone or muscle spasm in the big neck muscles. When you look at someone who is stressed it often looks like their shoulders are raised up to their ears! Because the neck muscles attach between the neck and the shoulder blade and collar bone, neck pain often radiates to the arm.

Anatomy of the Area

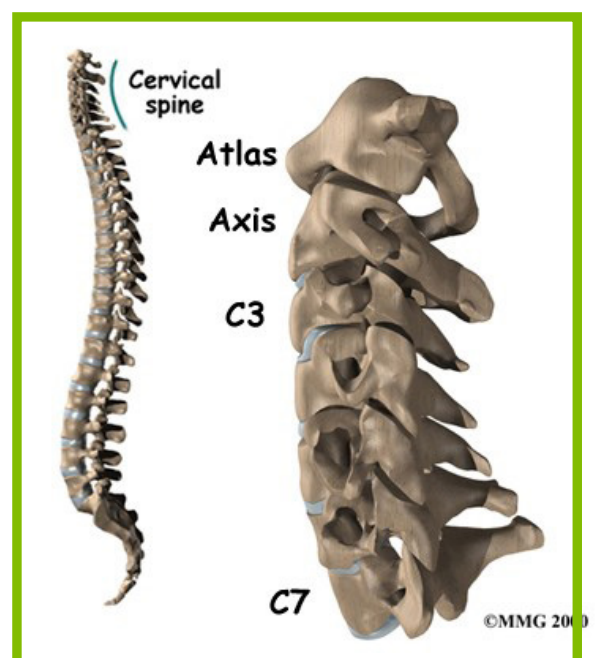
Many important parts make up the anatomy of the neck. Understanding the regions and structures of the cervical spine can help you be more involved in your health care and better able to care for your problem.

BONES AND JOINTS

The human spine is made up of 24 spinal bones, called vertebrae. Vertebrae are stacked on top of one another to form the spinal column. The spinal column is the body's main upright support.

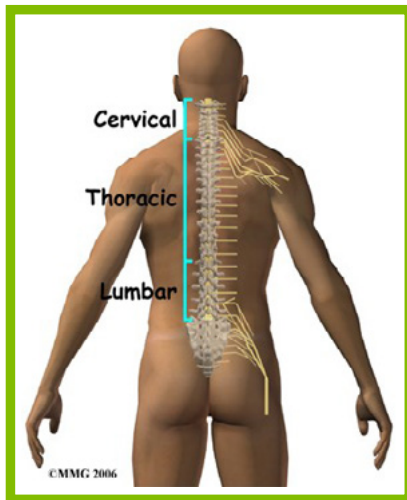
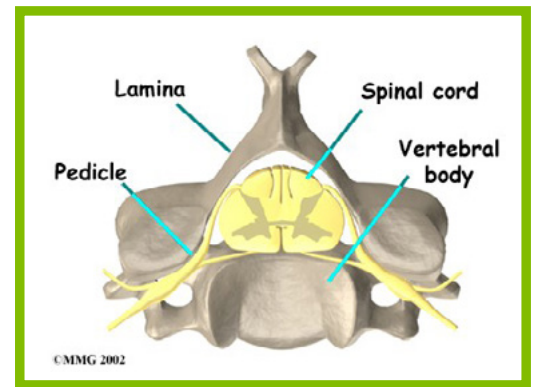
The cervical spine (neck) is formed by the first seven vertebrae referred to as C1 to C7. The cervical spine starts where the top vertebra (C1, or often called Atlas) connects to the bottom edge of the skull. The cervical spine curves slightly inward and ends where C7 joins the top of the thoracic spine. This is where the chest begins.

A bony ring attaches to the back of the vertebral body. When the vertebrae are stacked on top of each other, the rings form a hollow tube. This bony tube surrounds the spinal cord as it passes through the spine. Just as the skull protects the brain, the bones of the spinal column protect the spinal cord.



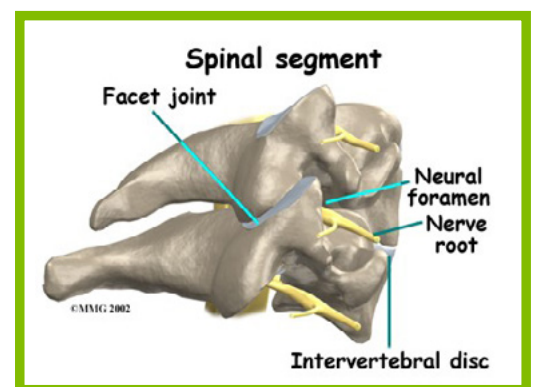
Birds Eye View of a Cervical Vertebra showing the Spinal Cord

As the spinal cord travels from the brain down through the spine, it sends out nerve branches between each vertebra called nerve roots. The nerve roots that come out of the cervical spine form the nerves that go to the arms and hands. The nerves pass through a small tunnel between each vertebra called the neural foramen.



Bony lumps on the top and bottom of the vertebrae interlock when they are stacked on top of each other and these are called facet joints which aid and control the movement of the spine, along with the soft connective tissue structures (e.g. ligaments and muscles).

For ease of understanding we often divide the spine into spinal segments as shown below in the diagram. Each spinal segment includes two vertebrae separated by an intervertebral disc, the nerves that leave the spinal cord at that level, and the small facet joints that link each level of the spinal column.

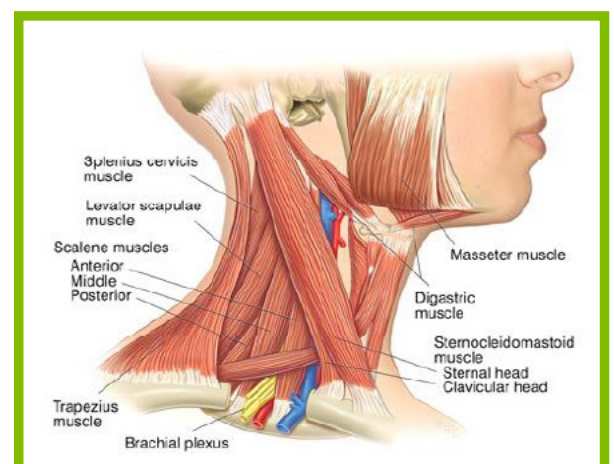


CONNECTIVE TISSUES AND MUSCLES

Connective tissues are networks of fibre that hold the cells of the body together. Ligaments are strong connective tissues that attach bones to other bones. Several long ligaments connect on the front and back sections of the vertebrae.

A special type of structure in the spine called an intervertebral disc is also made of connective tissue. It provides most of the shock absorption in the spine and also increases the size of the neural foramen. A bulged or herniated disc (as a result of poor posture or incorrect lifting and twisting) can narrow the opening and put pressure on the nerve.

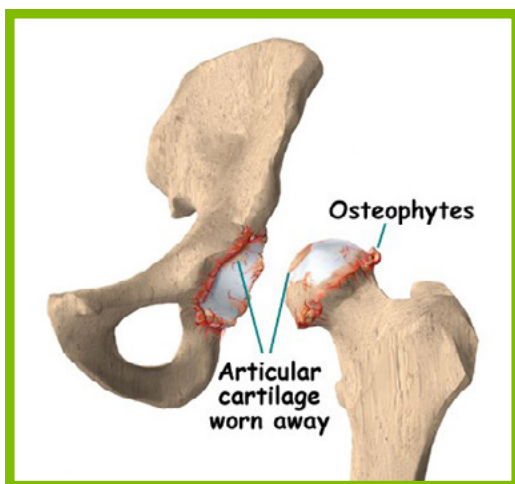
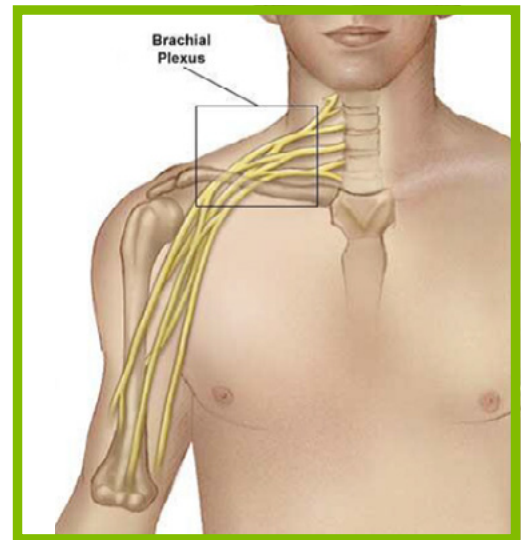
The muscles of the neck are arranged in layers. Those closest to the skin's surface, the superficial layer, are covered by a thick tissue called fascia. Neck muscles are bodies of tissue that produce motion in the neck when stimulated. The muscles of neck run from the base of the skull to the back and work together to bend the head and assist in breathing. The motions of the muscles of neck are divided into the four categories of rotation, lateral flexion, flexion, and extension. Rotation describes the action of moving the head from side to side; lateral motion brings the ear to the shoulder, flexion moves chin to chest as in looking down, and extension the neck and head upward to look up. It is important to keep the muscles of neck strong to maintain proper function and avoid injuries and neck pain. The main function of the muscles of the neck is head movement, as well as contributing to the maintenance of blood flow to the brain, and holding the head upright.



The large sternocleidomastoid muscle originates from the back of the skull and attaches on to the collar bone at the front. It is the muscle that causes a poking chin which puts pressure on the joints of the neck. The trapezius muscle also originates from the back of the skull and attaches to the shoulder blade and the spine. This is the muscle that gets very tense with stress or prolonged computer work. Tension in these muscles can contribute to a headache.

NERVES OF THE NECK AND ARM

The brachial plexus which has 3 major trunks of nerves (the median, radial and ulnar nerves) originates from the neck. Each nerve comes out between a pair of neck vertebrae and they join together to form the trunks. The nerves then travel down the arm.



The median, ulnar and radial nerves all end in the hand. On the way down through the arm they pass through the elbow. A pinched nerve in the neck can therefore produce symptoms such as pain, tingling, numbness and hot and cold feelings anywhere down the arm and hand depending on which nerve is affected.

Potential Causes of Neck and Arm Pain and how to Prevent it

CERVICAL SPONDYLOSIS

It's quite normal for the discs and the facet joints to become worn as we get older. The discs between the vertebrae become thinner and the spaces between the bones become narrower. Spurs of new bone (osteophytes) form at the edges of the vertebrae and the facet joints. These changes are very similar to osteoarthritis, but in the neck they're known as cervical spondylosis. Almost everyone will have spondylosis somewhere in the spine by the age of 65. Often it doesn't cause any pain, though it may increase the risk of having spells of neck pain.

When spondylosis does cause problems, they may come from the linings of worn joints or from stretched ligaments:

- Occasionally, the nerve roots may be pinched, either by bulging discs or osteophytes, causing pain or numbness.
- If the vertebral artery is pinched it can affect the blood supply to the brain, causing dizziness or blackouts.

Spondylosis shouldn't be confused with ankylosing spondylitis, where inflammation in the spine can cause the bones to fuse together.

PROLAPSED DISC

Heavy, repetitive bending, twisting, and lifting or very poor posture over a significant period of time can place extra pressure on the disc. If great enough, this increased pressure can injure the disc itself and cause some tissue to squeeze out of it. This is called a prolapse.

If the prolapsed disc material presses against a nerve root it can cause pain, numbness, and weakness in the area the nerve supplies. Any time the prolapsed tissue contacts tissues outside the damaged disc, it releases chemicals that cause inflammation and pain.

If the tissue prolapses completely, it may squeeze against the spinal cord. Although rare, this may cause a condition that is serious because it affects all the nerves of the spinal cord. This condition is called cervical myelopathy. Cervical myelopathy can cause problems with the bowels and bladder, change the way you walk, and affect your ability to use your fingers and hand. If experienced, you should contact your GP immediately as it is a condition that demands medical attention.

WHIPLASH

Whiplash is caused by your body being carried forward, causing your head to flip back. As your body stops, your head is thrown forwards. This happens most commonly in car accidents, falls and sports injuries. It's thought that the pain is caused by stretching of the ligaments and the capsule around the facet joints, along with muscle spasm as your body tries to splint the injury. There's often a delay before you feel any pain or stiffness.

Although whiplash can badly strain your neck, it should improve within a few weeks or months. Seat belts and properly adjusted headrests in cars greatly reduce the damage, and gentle exercises to keep your neck moving will help to prevent longer-term problems.

Physio Med have produced a whiplash injury specific pamphlet which if you are suffering from whiplash, we advise you to read.

POOR POSTURE

Poor Posture, eventually damages the structures within the neck which causes pain and dysfunction (it is often the main causative factor for the conditions mentioned above). Good posture is the term applied when the 3 spinal curves are maintained with low muscular effort. So poor posture does not just apply to those who sprawl on their sofa, hunch over their desk or slump as they stand – it also includes those who sit perched rigidly on their chair without supporting themselves against the back of it.

- The Standing Posture – avoid the 2 main types of poor posture – Sway Back and Flat Back (see postural advice section)
 - » Maintain the 3 curves with equal weight distribution by keeping your ears, shoulders and hips in a straight line (view from the side)
 - » Raise or tilt your work surface for precision tasks and keep the task at a suitable (comfortable) height so that you don't have to bend your neck to look down e.g. put an upturned bowl under the washing up bowl in the sink
 - » Alter your position regularly so that you don't stand still in one position for longer than 20 minutes
 - » Don't stand for long periods on a hard surface – stand on a cushioned surface, put a mat down or wear shock absorbing (rubber soled) footwear
 - » Don't stand for long periods in high heels or shoes with little cushioning or support

- The Seated Posture – sit unsupported in one position for a few minutes and the lower back muscles fatigue which results in a slouched sitting position – often referred to as a 'C' shape posture (where your neck pushes forwards and your chin pokes out) which is bad as opposed to an 'S' shape posture which is good (you can see the 3 curves). Your head weighs over a stone, so when your neck is forward of your trunk and your chin pokes out, it is not resting on the bony column of your spine, therefore muscles are working very hard to keep it upright which causes pain over time.
 - » In order to maintain the 'S' shape without excess effort and rigidity; sit with both buttocks on the seat (ensure it is stable and firm), take most of your weight equally through the tail bones of the pelvis, rest your feet easily on the floor and support your low back arch with the chair back or if that won't fit properly use an additional cushion / rolled up towel. Your hips should be slightly higher or equal to your knee joint (90 degrees bend)
 - » If sat at a table or desk using a computer the middle row of the keyboard should be level with your elbow and the top of the screen (not the screen casing!) level with eye height
 - » If sat at a table or desk writing the elbow should be just below the table top. A writing slope (or tilted surface) helps stop the head from needing to lean forwards, thus maintaining good posture
 - » Office chairs can be easily altered to fit the individual; however home furniture is not so easy. To check if your sofa / armchair is right for you, you should be able to sit down into the correct position (back supported and feet on the floor) in one motion holding a cup of tea. Also you should be able to stand up again from that position in one motion still holding and not spilling the tea, without putting your hands down
 - * Too deep – pack the back with firm cushions
 - * Too soft – wrap a wooden board in foam and put it under the seat cushions
 - * Too low – raise it up using wooden blocks under the feet
 - * No back support – used a rolled up towel
 - » Do not sit in a draught, or if your workstation cannot be moved, wear a scarf or roll neck that will keep your neck warm
- The Sleeping Posture – 40% of our lives are spent in bed therefore the bed and position are important to prevent neck problems developing or re-occurring.
 - » The best sleeping posture is lying either on your side or on your back. Avoid sleeping on your stomach as you must fully turn your neck all night to breathe
 - » Pillows are a personal item. What suits one person is not necessarily comfortable for another. You do not necessarily need to change your pillow because you have had a neck injury
 - » The principle is that your neck should be supported in a neutral position while you sleep. For example, if you sleep on your side look in a mirror and check the distance between your ear and the tip of your shoulder. Your pillow height should match this distance
 - » If you cannot get comfortable with your pillow, try rolling up a small towel to the diameter of your forearm. Place it under your pillow, within the pillow case so it lies horizontally against the bottom edge. Your head will lie on the area of the pillow without the towel, while your neck will lie on the pillow with the towel. This way your neck is supported by the additional bulk of the towel which helps to keep it in the neutral position. Do not allow your shoulders to rest on the pillow, or use more than one pillow for this arrangement
 - » Do not sleep in a draught
 - » Do not 'heave' sit-up style into sitting from lying on your back, roll over onto your side move your feet over the edge of the bed and use your arm to push you upwards (while your feet move down to the floor as a counter weight).

STRESS AND TENSION

Most muscles relax completely when they're not being used, but some (known as anti-gravity muscles) have to work all the time in order to keep your body upright. Muscles at the back of your neck must always be tensed, otherwise your head would fall forwards when you're sitting or standing. When we're worried or stressed we often tighten these muscles even more, which can cause neck pain and tension headaches. Tension headaches are very common and are often wrongly called migraines.

- Try to avoid becoming overly stressed or anxious, discuss issues before they become problems, try meditation and relaxation exercises at home and work

DRIVING – GENERAL SET-UP AND POSTURAL ADVICE

People who spend a large amount of their time driving are more likely to get back and neck problems. This is because the task combines; static posture in a constrained environment, exposure to constant vibration, occasional jarring and it can be a stressful environment and activity.

- Proper adjustment - Starting with the seat in a completely wrong position makes it easier to get the right position so push the seat all the way back, place it as low to the floor as possible and recline the seat 40 – 45 degrees
 - » Bring the seat height up until you can comfortably see the road and instruments and your hips are as high as your knees. If you are still too low, try adding a small cushion or folded towel under your tail bones
 - » Scoot the seat forward so you can reach and fully depress all the foot pedals with a comfortably bent knee (110 – 135 degrees)
 - » Bring the back forwards until you are reclined at a 100 - 110 degree angle
 - » Adjust your headrest so it rests in the middle of your head – it should not push your head forwards!
 - » Adjust the lumbar support so that you have even back support, you can feel it support your lower back comfortably. Use a rolled up towel if your seat lacks sufficient support
 - » Bring the steering wheel down and towards you to minimize reach. You should be able to reach it with a slightly bent elbow and your back resting on the seat back
 - » Now adjust the mirrors – if you start to slouch down or get into a bad position the mirrors will feel like they need to be adjusted – this is your cue to correct your posture!
- Holding the steering wheel
 - » Lower your hands from the ten to two position to the quarter to three and feel your shoulder and neck muscles relax
- Exercise in traffic jams
 - » Shrug shoulders, hold for 5 seconds, relax & repeat x 5
 - » Pull shoulder blades back, hold for 5 seconds relax and repeat x 5
 - » Tuck chin in, hold for 5 seconds, relax and repeat x 5
 - » Pull in stomach while exhaling forcefully, relax then repeat

Signs and Symptoms of Neck and Arm Pain

Symptoms from whiplash problems vary. They depend on a person's condition and which structures are affected. Some of the more common symptoms of neck problems are:

- neck pain / stiffness
- headache, dizziness, altered vision / light tolerance, nausea
- pain spreading into the shoulders and shoulder blade regions
- pain radiating from the neck into one or both arms

- muscle weakness in the shoulders / upper arms / forearms / hands
- sensory changes (numbness, prickling, or tingling) in the neck / shoulders/ upper arms / forearms / hands / face

Aiding Recovery with a Home Programme

When suffering from neck pain, the temptation may be to rest in bed or in a collar until it resolves, however this often makes the pain worse. Where possible, the best advice is to stay active and continue your daily activities as normal. Obviously if these activities are adding to the pain then modify or do not continue them, but getting back to work and keeping the area moving is often the best way to minimise the pain and aid recovery.

First Aid advice (immediately after the injury)

- Any bed rest should be kept to a minimum of 2 days – any longer the detrimental effects outweigh the benefits
- Pain relieving medication should help with the discomfort. Anti-inflammatory medications can help ease pain and swelling and get people back to activity sooner. These medications include common over-the-counter drugs such as ibuprofen. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you have specific questions about which pain reliever is right for you. Also see your GP if over the counter medication is not easing your pain after a day or two
- Apply hot or cold packs to the painful area. You may decide which the best approach is for you. You can buy hot and cold packs from most pharmacies, but you can also use a hot water bottle or bags of ice or frozen peas (wrapped in a damp tea towel) will often be as good. Both approaches help to reduce the pain sensation, but they also help to increase the blood flow to the area which brings oxygen and nutrients to the tissues to help them heal more quickly.
 - » Ice pack to be applied to the neck and shoulders for approximately 20 minutes every 2 hours. It is advised that you check the skin every 5-10 minutes to avoid the possibility of an ice burn from the cold temperature. Apply frequently in the first 2 days
 - » Hot water bottle to be applied for at least 20 minutes every 2 hours, if in severe pain avoid a hot bath in case you cannot get out of it. Also you must lie with your head in the water to keep your neck straight
- Position yourself in the most comfortable position and postures but try to change position every 30 minutes. For further detail see the postural advice in this leaflet
- Attempt gentle walking and movement to prevent ceasing up
- Sleep in the most naturally comfortable position on a comfortable surface. The best sleeping posture is lying either on your side or on your back. Avoid sleeping on your stomach as you must fully turn your neck all night to breathe (see above for further information)
- Further Self-Help for when you are in Pain
- Use heat or ice in the form of hot baths, hot water bottles, heat or ice packs (20 minutes minimum duration)
- Be aware of neck positions and postures at work and home. The positions in which you work and relax each day have a great impact on the health of your spine. It is easy to compensate and allow yourself to develop poor postural habits. You will need to be consciously aware of postures and positions when you are performing tasks at home and work
- Think about how you are sitting in all situations
 - » Driving the car: refer to the above information
 - » Going to the cinema: Don't avoid going to the movies or theatre because it bothers your neck. Go early so you can get a seat in the centre of the theatre. By being straight on, you can reduce neck strain and enjoy the film
 - » Reading: Rest the book up on a stand so that you do not have to hold your neck bent for long periods of time
 - » Going to the hairdresser: Stand and face the basin if you know that your neck hurts to put your head back
 - » Going to the dentist: Take a rolled towel or small pillow to the dentist to support your neck

- » Attending a dinner party or work meeting: Sit where you can view people straight on. Sitting with your head turned to talk for prolonged periods can make your neck stiff.
- » Watching television: Practise the postural exercise (in this leaflet) during advertisements or stand up. If lying down, lie on your side and support your neck with a pillow. Don't lie on your back with your neck bent up on a pillow
- Think about your standing posture, whether working at benches in your job or for household activities, be aware of your posture, particularly of your shoulders and arms
 - » Ensure the bench height allows you to work with shoulders and arms relaxed. Benches that are too high can result in raised shoulders, which places unnecessary strain on the neck
 - » Have objects close to you to avoid unnecessary reaching
 - » As much as sitting in one position is not good, prolonged standing can be fatiguing. Try to do some of your work while sitting, alternate your work or household tasks to vary your position
 - » Don't forget to correct your posture every 15 minutes. Stand tall, gently draw your shoulder blades back and lift the base of your skull from the top of your neck. Hold for 10 seconds. Feel your neck and shoulder region relax with this manoeuvre
- Think about Lifting and Carrying
 - » Think before you lift. Test the weight. Avoid reaching to lift objects or lifting awkwardly. Carry the object close to your body
 - » When lifting from ground level, stand close to the object with feet apart, bend using your knees and your back (about 50:50). Keep your chin in during the lift.
 - » Carry fewer bags of groceries from the car at a time. There will be more trips but less strain on your neck
 - » Check the contents of your bags (e.g. handbag, gym bag, school bag). Lighten the load. You can prevent neck strain
 - » When travelling, always use a suitcase with wheels, including hand luggage. Consider whether you need all those items that you have packed, especially footwear, which is heavy -lessen the load
 - » When going to and from work, carry your laptop or papers in a rucksack. Do not use a briefcase, or if you insist on not using a rucksack, alternate the side you carry your briefcase or laptop. If you need to carry extra paperwork, consider transporting it separately. Do not overload one side
 - » Specially designed laptop rucksacks are a more comfortable way of carrying computers
 - » Use a trolley to carry oversized or multiple items. At the supermarket, choose a trolley that steers easily when you push it
 - » When carrying children, regularly change sides. Use slings if comfortable, backpacks, prams or pushchairs
 - » When nursing or breastfeeding a baby, place the baby on a pillow on your lap to save having to hold the weight of the baby for prolonged periods
 - » Encourage children to climb onto your lap or into the car as soon as they are able Position their car seat to limit the amount of reaching you have to do to secure the child in the seat
- Household Activities
 - » Spread chores out over a few days. You don't have to do all the household tasks at once. Change your routine and reduce the chance of neck strain
 - » Rotate the cleaning tasks and don't do the same task all at once. Alternate lighter tasks with heavier tasks. For example, dust, Hoover one room, do the washing up, and vacuum another room. Take breaks between each task. You do not have to do everything at once – be adaptable and pace yourself
 - » Adjust the height of your vacuum cleaner so you do not have to bend as far. Try to keep your posture as upright as possible when using brooms or mops. Clean small areas at a time

- » When laundering, lift fewer clothes from the washing machine at once. Lower the clothesline and place the basket up on a trolley to reduce the strain on your neck and shoulders while hanging out the clothes. Dry heavy items on a clothes rack / radiator if necessary
- » When preparing food, be mindful that your shoulders are not creeping upwards. While peeling or chopping vegetables, regularly draw your shoulder blades gently back towards your spine. This keeps your neck relaxed. Lift the base of your skull off the top of your neck to take the load from your neck
- » In the kitchen, place items that you use regularly at bench height so that you don't have to do unnecessary bending or reaching
- » Using sharp knives reduces the force required to chop hard vegetables
- » If using heavy saucepans or pans, draw them close to you first and lift with two hands. To lessen the weight, let them rest on the sink as you drain the contents
- » Don't start new projects such as painting a ceiling or projects involving heavy lifting until your neck has recovered. Get help to carry heavy loads or to do heavy tasks
- » In the garden, vary your activities and positions. Do some weeding then some raking, then some trimming. Rotate your activities
- » Weed the garden kneeling on your hands and knees or in a half kneeling position with one knee bent up
- » When trimming high hedges, don't stretch up too high. Use a step ladder to improve your position. Make sure it is positioned safely
- » Use a wheelbarrow to take weeds to the compost bin
- Your Sleeping Posture
 - » See previous advice
 - » Side lie with your painful arm uppermost, cuddle a pillow with the painful arm so that it is supported by the pillow, reducing the drag on the shoulder
- The Seated Posture – sit unsupported in one position for a few minutes and the lower back muscles fatigue which results in a slouched sitting position – often referred to as a 'C' shape posture which is bad as opposed to an 'S' shape posture which is good (you can see the 3 curves).
 - » See previous advice
- Exercise
 - » Act as usual: It is normal to experience some discomfort during recovery but don't stress your neck to a painful level. Try to participate in most of your normal activities. If your normal activities or sports place high strains on your neck, adapt them or build up to them gradually as your neck recovers
 - » Be active: Perform general exercise and activity to maintain your wellbeing and health. Undertake a specific exercise regime to improve your movement and flexibility and restore muscle control and support to your neck
 - » Be adaptable: It is good for you to undertake your normal physical exercise, but you may have to change how you exercise in the recovery phase. Some examples:
 - * Swimming: swim with a snorkel and goggles if turning your head to breathe is difficult. Do not undertake breaststroke as this is not a good position for your neck
 - * Riding a bike: lift up the handlebars so you can ride with a better posture for your neck
 - * Running: brisk walk (use ankle weights) or if you must run, run on grass at a park rather than on the hard surface of the road
 - * At the gym: seek advice from your health professional or trainer on how to change your program to prevent strain on your neck
 - » Be aware: Make a conscious effort to maintain good posture during your daily activities. Practise postural correction and control when sitting. Maintain good posture when standing and walking

- » Undertake the neck rehabilitation exercises. The exercises in this leaflet were chosen specifically to assist you to regain your normal neck movement and flexibility. The exercises will also help restore the muscle control necessary to support your neck during normal activities. Muscle control means pain control. Exercise to reduce your pain.
- Be adaptable - If the way you are performing a task aggravates your symptoms, find another way that does not strain or make your neck painful. Don't hesitate to change positions and tasks that place excess stress on your neck. There is no substitution for common sense
- The Seated Posture – sit unsupported in one position for a few minutes and the lower back muscles fatigue which results in a slouched sitting position – often referred to as a 'C' shape posture which is bad as opposed to an 'S' shape posture which is good (you can see the 3 curves).

Stretches

Lengthening tight muscles is important to reduce pain and speed healing, as tense muscles have a reduced blood supply. Blood carries oxygen and nutrients that the muscles need to heal.

UPPER TRAPEZIUS

One of the main muscles affected during episodes of neck pain, this is the large muscle to the left and right of the back of the neck and shoulders. As this muscle becomes tight it pulls on the neck and over time can cause pain and stiffness in the neck.

As with all the stretches, do this gently and carefully until you feel a stretch sensation that is not overly painful.

Stand beside a table and hold onto the edge with your hand

Very gently pull down your shoulder; you will feel a stretch between your shoulder and neck

If you want to increase the stretch, side bend your head to the opposite side (ear to shoulder) and maintain the position for 10 - 15 seconds – until you feel the stretch relaxing off

Repeat this 3 times on either shoulder twice a day

LEVATOR SCAPULAE

The scapula is the shoulder blade and the word levator means to lift, so the levator scapulae muscle lifts the shoulder blade. Similar to the trapezius muscle, this one is commonly affected during episodes of neck pain and needs lengthening in order to help it heal and reduce your pain.

Place one hand behind the buttock and lower your shoulder, this will start to put the levator scapulae muscle on a stretch

To increase the stretch turn your head to the opposite side and look down

If you want to increase the stretch even further, gently pull down on your head with the other hand and maintain the position when you feel a stretching sensation

Maintain the position for 10 - 15 seconds – until you feel the stretch relaxing off

Repeat this 3 times on either shoulder twice a day

RHOMBOIDS

Your Rhomboids are on the inside of the shoulder blades – between your shoulder blades and spine.

Stand and raise your arms forward grasping your hands together

Spread your shoulder blades apart by pulling your arms forward until you feel a stretch between your shoulder blades

Maintain the position for 10 - 15 seconds – until you feel the stretch relaxing off

Repeat this 3 times on either shoulder twice a day

STERNOCLEIDOMASTOID

This is the large muscle on the front and side of your neck that can look like a really thick cable passing from just below your ear downwards to your collar bone and sternum. You have one on either side of your neck. They are responsible for pulling your head forward (working together) or sideways when working singly. This muscle is often affected during episodes of neck pain. Sit in a good postural position with your hands either resting in your lap or holding on to the arms of a chair

Lift your left hand up to hold the back of your head

Gently tip your head upwards and backwards (like you are looking at the ceiling) using your left hand to provide some gently support

Turn your head to face into your left arm and feel a stretch in the right side of your throat and neck

To increase the stretch, push your right shoulder downwards

Maintain the position for 10 - 15 seconds – until you feel the stretch relaxing off

Repeat this stretch using the opposite arm to stretch the left muscle

Repeat this 3 times on either side twice a day

If you find this position and use of your arms to uncomfortable, try sitting on a chair / sofa with a very high back, that you can rest your head on as you look up.

Neck & Shoulder Loosening Exercises

ROTATION

This movement describes looking over your left and right shoulder.

Sit up straight with a slight curve in the base of the spine

Gently tuck your chin in, and then turn your head to the left to look over your shoulder

Return to the start position; and repeat 5 times

You may find it easier to have a target on the wall to focus on. With each repetition, try to go a little further in that direction

Perform the same exercise to the right side

Do 5 of these to each side, 10 in total twice a day

Alternate position for the rotation exercise

Sometimes it is easier to perform this exercise while kneeling on your hands and knees, especially in the early days after injury.

Push through your hands so your back is not slumped. Practise turning your head and looking to each side.

SIDE FLEXION (SIDE BENDING)

Assume the correct postural position in sitting

Start with your head centred and gently bring your right ear down towards your right shoulder

Keep your right shoulder still (keep it down, don't raise it to your ear)

Return to the start position; and repeat 5 times

You may feel a normal stretch of the muscles on the side of your neck. The exercise should be pain-free

Perform the same exercise to the right side

Do 5 of these to each side, 10 in total twice a day

FORWARD BENDING

Assume the correct postural position in sitting

Look down and gently bring your chin down towards your chest

Lift your chin up and return to the starting position

Each movement should be done slowly and purposefully taking about 2-4 seconds to perform

Repeat each exercise 5-10 times, twice a day

BACKWARD BENDING

Assume the correct postural position in sitting

Slowly roll your head and neck backwards to look up at the ceiling as far as is comfortable

Come back up by tucking your chin down and bringing your head back to the upright position.

Avoid letting your chin poke out

Each movement should be done slowly and purposefully taking about 2-4 seconds to perform

Repeat each exercise 5-10 times twice a day

ROLL UP & DOWNS

Your neck muscles and soft tissue are joined to those in the rest of your spine. So you can often feel stiff and sore in your lower back when you bend your head, and bending your back can make your neck feel stiffer. Therefore the following exercise will help to ease this.

Assume the correct postural position in sitting

Slowly bend your head forwards so that your chin moves towards your chest

While keeping your head down, let your shoulders and arms drop forward towards the floor

Remain seated as you gradually roll your upper body towards the floor. Stop when you feel a strong stretch down your spine – do not progress into pain

Keeping your neck bent forward, slowly roll your back and then shoulders upright

Lastly lift your head back up to neutral

Each movement should be done to a count of 3 and the low position held for a count of 2 before returning upright

Repeat 5 - 10 times twice a day

Exercises for muscle control and pain relief

NECK ISOMETRIC EXERCISE (NO MOVEMENT)

Isometric exercises can help strengthen muscles when neck movements are too painful.

Assume the correct postural position in sitting and gently raise the back of your head

Place your right hand on the right cheek

Without moving your head, turn your eyes to the right and gently push your head into your hand as if to look over your shoulder - do the exercise smoothly and gently, use only 10% effort

While performing this exercise no movement occurs

Hold the muscle contraction for five seconds

Change hand position and perform the same exercise to the left side

Repeat the exercise 5 times each side twice a day

HEAD NOD AND HOLDING EXERCISE

This is an important exercise to retrain the deep neck muscles of the front of your neck for pain relief and muscle control.

Lie on your back with knees bent without a pillow under your head and neck. If this is not comfortable, place a small, folded towel under your head for support

Start by looking up at a point on the ceiling

Then with your eyes, look at a spot on the wall just above your knees. Feel the back of your head slide up the bed as you perform a slow and gentle nod as if you were indicating 'yes'

While doing the exercise, place your hand gently on the front of the neck to feel the muscles.

Make sure they stay soft and relaxed when doing the head nod movement

Stop at the point you sense the muscles are beginning to harden, but keep looking down with your eyes.

Hold the position for 10 seconds and then relax. Look up to a point on the ceiling to resume the starting position

Repeat the exercise 5- 10 times twice a day

RETRACTION

This simple exercise will stretch out the tissue at the back of the neck and lift a lot of that pressure and stress on the area.

Assume the correct postural position in sitting

Focus on an object at eye level as if you were looking at the horizon

Slowly without moving your shoulder and without looking up or down, bring your head back and tuck your chin in and hold for 2-3 seconds

Repeat the exercise 5- 10 times twice a day

SCAPULA (SHOULDER BLADE) 1

Poor muscle control around the shoulder blades can increase pain and strain on the neck. This exercise will relax and ease any tension in the muscles on top of your shoulders. It can give you pain relief.

Lie on your left side with your right arm resting on two pillows - the arm is positioned over 90 degrees away from the body

Roll your right shoulder blade back and across your ribs towards the centre of your back

Hold the position for 10 seconds.

Repeat 5 times twice a day

Repeat lying on the right side for the left shoulder blade

SCAPULA (SHOULDER BLADE) 2

The second exercise helps you to improve the control of your shoulder blades while mimicking work you may do with your arms. It trains you to ease any tension in the muscles on top of your shoulders while you are using your arms.

Sit and correct your posture by moving your shoulders using the 'up, back and drop' method as you have already practised

Concentrate on holding your shoulder blade position

Then move your arms: (A) forwards and backwards

(B) out to the side

(C) turn your forearms outwards (like opening and closing a jacket)

Do not lift your arms more than 30 degrees in exercises A and B (that is, about a quarter of the way up)

Perform each exercise (A,B and C) five times and repeat this set three times

Strengthening Exercises

When should I do more difficult exercises? Once your neck pain has settled, the exercises can be progressed to include strengthening exercises. These exercises should not cause pain. Progress slowly.

HEAD LIFT EXERCISE

The weight of your head is enough weight to lift.

Start by sitting on a chair close to a wall

Rest your head back on the wall

Slide the back of your head up the wall to nod your chin and hold it in this position

Then just take the weight of your head off the wall (your hair still touches the wall)

Hold for 5 seconds and relax

Start by doing 3 sets of 2 to 3 repetitions and gradually build up to 3 sets of 5 repetitions

Shifting the chair a little further from the wall makes the exercise more difficult. You can progress the exercise by moving the chair away from the wall in five centimetre stages.

RETRACTION

Assume the correct postural position in sitting

Keeping your shoulders down, put your hands behind your head

Focus on an object at eye level as if you were looking at the horizon

Slowly without moving your shoulder and without looking up or down, bring your head back and tuck your chin in and hold for 2-3 seconds

Use your hands to provide a resistance to this movement

Repeat the exercise 5- 10 times twice a day

Alternatively, you can do this exercise either standing with your back against a wall, or sitting with your chair back against a wall. Keep your arms down and use the wall as the resistance to the head movement.

Please remember to use this advice under the guidance of your Physiotherapist.

To learn even more about neck and arm pain and ways to manage these painful conditions, visit our Educational Zone at:

CLICK HERE

Tel: 0113 229 1300

Website: [Contact Us Form](#)

Website: [Book Now](#)

Email: customerservices@physiomed.co.uk