

Necks

- ◆ Many will experience neck pain but there are ways to help ease the pain
- ◆ Medications, complementary therapies and other treatments may be useful in managing neck pain
- ◆ Managing daily activities can help you prevent further pain

Nearly 25% of the population will experience neck pain at some time in their life and it is one of the three most frequently reported complaints of the musculoskeletal system. Neck problems result from a variety of causes including poor posture, injury, whiplash and degenerative changes. The neck works hard, holding up your head, which weighs around 10lb (4.5kg) and is therefore not easy to 'rest'. Typical symptoms stemming from neck problems include pain, headaches, shoulder/arm pain, and numbness and weakness that radiate down the arm. Neck injuries frequently affect the lumbar spine causing lower back pain. Prolonged neck pain can limit one's ability to participate in normal daily activities, leading to a combination of physical, psychological and social difficulties. Yet there is generally less advice available about neck problems than there is about backs.

This information sheet deals with chronic neck pain. For short-lived episodes, the advice given in the information sheet "**What to do when back pain strikes**" is helpful as is the one on "**Drugs for Pain Control**".

With persistent neck pain consult a GP or specialist and request an x-ray before anyone physically treats your neck. Physiotherapists, chiropractors and osteopaths are all trained to treat neck injuries and they may also be able to suggest exercises to strengthen your muscles. Regular appropriate exercise is an excellent way to strengthen a troublesome neck. If you have persistent neck pain think about what triggers the symptoms, what helps to improve them, and what makes them worse. It is unlikely that there will be a 'simple' answer; however, by gradually implementing some small changes you can make significant improvements to your comfort level. The following suggestions might give you some starting points.

Basic pain management

1. Try over the counter medications such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. Follow the usage instructions on the packaging carefully or consult a GP but if these are ineffective, talk to your GP about suitable alternatives. Research into some of the drugs used to manage neck pain suggests that:
 - ◆ Corticosteroid injections given within eight hours of the injury appear to reduce the pain of acute whiplash.
 - ◆ Local anaesthetics appear to reduce chronic neck pain.
 - ◆ Epidural injections of a corticosteroid with a local anaesthetic might reduce pain and improve function in those with chronic neck pain and associated arm symptoms. However, there are not enough studies on any one drug to allow a high degree of confidence in these results.
 - ◆ Muscle relaxants, analgesics and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) have unclear benefits.
 - ◆ There is moderate evidence that botulinum toxin A injections are no better than saline injections in lessening pain and disability in those with neck pain.

2. Treat the back of your neck (never the throat area) with an ice pack wrapped in a tea towel. You can also use heat; perhaps a wheat bag heated in the microwave used for 10 minutes every hour. Unless given medical advice to do so, avoid wearing a collar/neck support for longer than a few days as it could weaken your muscles. Try to keep as much mobility in your neck as you can. Once muscles and ligaments are restricted in their movement increased pain is likely to result.
3. There is some evidence that acupuncture can help with immediate short-term relief of chronic neck pain. Radiofrequency denervation can also provide short-term relief for a small proportion of people with specific joint problems in the neck. A work-oriented back pain management programme can reduce sick days for workers with chronic neck pain, particularly those with a cognitive-behavioural approach (addressing attitudes and behaviours eg fear of movement). This should ideally be done at work or in co-operation with employers under the supervision of a physiotherapist or a multidisciplinary team.

Simple management strategies

- ◆ Try to work out your pain triggers which may include staying in one position or doing something for too long, lifting or reaching, turning your head or looking up or down.
- ◆ Once you understand your triggers, try to pace your activities, changing what you are doing before pain levels start to increase, then resting or doing a different activity before resuming what you were doing.
- ◆ Use supportive seating with armrests to reduce neck strain. Try not to slouch or cross your legs and keep your body upright to help your neck to stay well positioned.
- ◆ Think about your bed, mattress and pillow as, if good quality, these can significantly reduce neck and back pain. Ask for advice about these as some are designed with those with neck and back pain in mind.
- ◆ Arrange computer equipment so you are in a symmetrical working position and learn about good ergonomic positioning so you minimize the strain on your neck, back and arms when using a keyboard. Also consider using a book rest when reading.
- ◆ If turning your neck in social situations is a problem use a chair or stool with a revolving seat so you can turn your whole body.
- ◆ If you can, take a 30-45 minute walk each day.
- ◆ Be careful when lifting/carrying ensuring you bend your knees, not your back and keep your feet apart carrying items close to your chest.
- ◆ Make simple changes around the house to minimize the strain on your neck such as raising the height of, for example, the ironing board.

Relevant Information

BackCare Information Sheets - Beds, Drugs for Pain Relief, Hot and Cold Therapies
BackCare Booklets - Back to Bed, Back on the Couch, Back in the Office