

Pain in the neck (Cervical spine pain)

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

Who gets neck pain?

Neck pain is common. More than half of people will get neck pain some time in their life¹ and over one in three people have had it in the past year². In fact, neck pain may cause as many days lost from work as lower back pain³.

What is the cervical spine?

The cervical spine is the part of your backbone that makes up your neck and directly supports your head. It is made up of seven small shock-absorbing discs (vertebrae) that are piled up on top of each other, held in place by muscles and ligaments. Nerves from the spinal cord - which runs all the way down the spine - run out from the cervical spine into your shoulders, arms and upper chest.

What causes neck pain?

Mechanical neck pain is the most common cause although the exact origin of the pain is not known. It can include:

- ◆ Injuries or sprains, including whiplash (see our separate factsheet).
- ◆ Bad posture, especially for people working at desks bent forward.

Wear and tear (degeneration) of the 'discs', spinal bones and the joints is a common cause in older people and can, in some circumstances, lead to nerve problems. It is medically known as cervical spondylosis or facet joint pain (see our factsheet on facet joint pain).

Viral infections like flu can make your muscles ache⁴.

Much less common, but serious causes, include rheumatoid arthritis, bone disorders (like osteoporosis) and serious injuries. This factsheet deals with neck pain caused by mechanical and wear and tear.

Symptoms of something serious

If you have any of the following symptoms you should seek medical advice:

- ◆ If the pain comes on when you're ill with other problems, such as rheumatoid arthritis, Aids or cancer.
- ◆ If the pain gets worse and worse.
- ◆ If your arms or hands become weak, clumsy or have ongoing numbness - particularly if it does not clear up within four weeks.
- ◆ If you feel ill and have other symptoms, such as weight loss or fever. If your neck bones are tender to touch.

Will it get better?

Most neck pain gets better completely and you should see improvements within a few days. Within a few weeks, most people's pain has gone entirely. Some studies have shown that about one in 10 men and about 17% of women continue with pain six months after first developing neck pain.⁵

If you do develop long-term (chronic) neck pain, usually the pain comes and goes, with "flare-ups" from time to time.⁶

Treatments

Apart from keeping active and pain relief, there is very little high quality evidence to show what helps neck pain.⁷ The main message is not to stiffen up.

Despite the pain, the best treatment for neck pain is to keep active. The spine is not designed to stay immobile and if you rest for too long, things may get worse. If you need some pain relief, such as paracetamol, take it regularly.

Basically treatments can be divided into three:

1. Keeping active

- ◆ Try and keep the neck moving as normally as possible. Try and keep up with your normal activities. Start with gentle exercises.
- ◆ If you do need to rest, try to do so for as short a time as possible.

2. Drugs

- ◆ If you need pain relief try paracetamol first (take it at full strength regularly).
- ◆ Anti-inflammatory painkillers, such as ibuprofen, can also help.
- ◆ Although the evidence is weaker⁸ your doctor may suggest stronger painkillers, such as codeine. These can have side effects.
- ◆ Muscle relaxants, such as diazepam, may help, in severe cases.

3. Helping yourself and non-medical therapies

- ◆ Physiotherapy, chiropractic or osteopathy all have been shown to help in the short term and long term, particularly when combined with other treatments.⁹
- ◆ Keep a good posture – shoulders slightly backwards and “walk like a model”.
- ◆ Use pillows that offer support and keep the neck in a neutral position. May also help, but there a little good evidence.¹⁰
- ◆ TENS and acupuncture

Evidence base/references

1. Neck Pain in Adults, Prodigy PILS 2002
2. Neck Pain, NHS Prodigy Guidance: Bovim, G et al (1994) Neck Pain in the general population. Spine 19, 1307-1309
3. White, A.R. and Ernst, E (1999) A Systematic review of randomized controlled trials of acupuncture for neck pain. Rheumatology 38, 143-147; quoted in Neck Pain, NHS Prodigy Guidance
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6. Neck Pain in Adults, Prodigy PILS 2002
7. Neck Pain, NHS Prodigy Guidance
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9. Gross, AR et al, Manipulation & Mobilisations for Mechanical Neck Disorders, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews: 1, 2004.
10. Neck Pain, NHS Prodigy Guidance