

Neck pain

Non-specific neck pain

Many people develop a stiff and painful neck for no obvious reason. Having non-specific neck pain does not mean that your neck is damaged. It often happens in people whose necks would appear completely normal under an x-ray. Most neck pain often disappears after a few days.

Cervical spondylosis

With everyday use over many years the discs and the joints may become worn. This wear varies from person to person. This is a particular form of osteoarthritis but it is known as 'cervical spondylosis'.

When these changes do cause pain it may come either from the linings of worn joints or from sore ligaments. Occasionally bulging discs or osteophytes (bony spurs) pinch the nerve roots and this can cause pain or numbness that travels into the arm.

Tension

Most muscles of the body relax completely when they are not being used but some have to work all the time in order to keep your body upright. Muscles at the back of your neck must always have some tension, otherwise your head would fall forwards when you are sitting or standing. When these muscles work too hard it can cause neck pain and tension headaches. People who are worried or under stress often tighten their muscles more than is necessary to hold their head upright – in other words, they are literally 'tense'. Tension headaches are very common and are often wrongly called migraines.

What are the symptoms of neck problems?

Pain

You may feel pain in the middle of your neck or on one side or the other. The pain may travel to the shoulder and shoulder blade or to the upper chest. In tension headaches the pain often travels to the back of the head and sometimes to the side of the head and behind the eye or even into the ear. If a nerve root is pinched, then as well as the pain you may have numbness or tingling that can be felt down the arm right to the fingers.

Stiffness

This is common. You may find it painful to move and your muscles feel tight. Stiffness is often worse after long periods of rest or after sitting in one position for a long time. You may also have muscle spasm or, in cervical spondylosis, you may lose movement because of the changes to the bones and discs.

Noisy joints

You may hear or feel clicking or grating (called 'crepitus') as you move your head. This is caused by roughened bony surfaces moving against each other or by ligaments rubbing against bone. The noises are often loudest at the top of the neck. This is a common symptom and can be upsetting but is very rarely anything to be concerned about.

Dizziness and blackouts

These can sometimes happen when bony changes in cervical spondylosis cause pinching of the vertebral artery. You may feel dizzy when looking up, or you may occasionally have blackouts. It is important to avoid movements that cause these symptoms and see your GP if they persist.



How can I help myself?

Most attacks of neck pain settle down within a few days and do not need medical treatment. Resting from aggravating activities for a few days is often all you need.

Painkillers

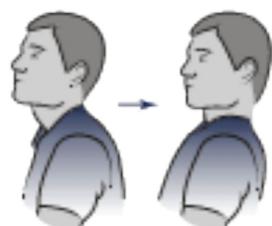
Taking pain relief is an important way to control your pain so that you can maintain good neck movements.

Exercises

Simple exercises can help to restore your range of movement, promote strength, ease localised stiffness and help get your neck back to normal. You should start by exercising very gently and gradually build up. You can expect to feel some slight discomfort at first.

The pictures below show some simple stretching exercises that should be attempted to reduce pain. If you do this every day, the neck movements should increase your muscle strength and reduce the pain.

All exercises should be done to mild discomfort only. **DO NOT PUSH INTO PAIN.**



Do 10 of these exercises 3 times a day.

Hold each exercise for 10 seconds

Massage

Gentle massage of the neck muscles may help to reduce some neck pain.

Relaxation

Stress can make neck pain worse. One way of reducing the effects of stress is to learn how to relax the neck muscles. Relaxation and exercises are not mutually exclusive – they complement each other. You can sometimes get audiotapes or CDs to help with relaxation.

Posture

Pain and stiffness can be caused by poor posture.

If you work at a desk which is too low, so that your head is bent forward for long periods, then the neck may be stretched and you may develop muscle pain. A slumped posture may also lead to tight muscles so check your desk height and chair design at work and in the home – this is important to prevent problems.

Similarly, if you work at a computer screen it is important to have screen, desk and chair set at the correct heights. Many firms employ people to check that their employees are sitting properly – check with your line manager or occupational health nurse if this affects you.

If pain persists you may benefit from assessment and treatment from a physiotherapist so ask your GP if a referral is appropriate.

Help us get it right

If you have any complaints, concerns, comments or compliments please let us know. We learn from all comments we receive and use the information to improve our services.

If you have a concern, please speak to a member of staff at your clinic or health centre. If you would rather talk to someone outside the service, you can contact PALS.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS provides confidential non-medical advice about local NHS services. Call freephone 0800 0525 270, Monday to Friday 8.30am–4.30pm.

We can make this information available in Braille, large print, audio or other languages.