

Advice for People with Neck Pain

- Most people get some neck pain at some point in their lives - it could be said that neck pain is normal! Most neck pain settles very quickly, but about half the people who get neck ache will have it again. What you learn now will help in the future.
- Even when neck pain is very severe it is rarely due to a serious disease, and you can still recover quickly. The spine is extremely strong, and very difficult to damage. Most neck pain comes from the muscles, ligaments and joints in your spine, but in most people we cannot identify the exact source of pain. X-rays are not particularly helpful in identifying what is wrong -the changes seen on x-ray are normal changes that come with age.
- **The best approach to neck pain is to get it moving, to do exercises, and to keep fit. We now know movement is better for it than rest.**

Looking after your neck in the future

Neck pain commonly returns -that is the normal experience for many people. What you have learnt by managing this episode will be useful in the future.

Key things to remember:

- **The fitter, more active and more supple you are the less likely you are to have pain.**
- **A healthy neck is a flexible neck**
- **Keep on top of your neck problem by exercising it regularly**
- **Remember the importance of posture in looking after your spine**
- **Remember the importance of frequent changes of activity, and limiting the time you remain in one position**
- **If your neck pain returns use the same things that helped you get back to normal this time**
- **When you start to increase your fitness do so in a gradual way. Start with an easy level of exercise for you and do more as you feel able to.**

Keep fit for a fit spine.

As things start to get easier

(from the second week)

If you follow the advice above your pain should start to get easier. The time when improvement occurs varies between individuals, but usually the symptoms are easing by the second week, if not earlier. Any injury will be healing now, and movement is essential to encourage the healing process.

1. Gradually increase activity and get back to your normal routine.
2. Continue with the exercises above. Make sure you are getting full movement.



3. When you are sitting a support in the lower back may help to keep your head in the best position



5. If sitting and working adjust your seat to gain maximum comfort. **Remember to change position frequently, and get up regularly and walk around**

5. **If you have to sit or bend for prolonged periods it is essential to interrupt this at regular intervals to prevent onset of pain. Walk about, change positions frequently, and move your neck in a way that feels good -if you have been bent forward try bending backwards a few times, if this is helpful.**

- Those people who avoid activity and wait for the pain to get better tend to do worse. If the pain is very severe you may need relative rest for 1-2 days -but the important thing is to get moving again as quickly as possible. You should be starting to return to normal activities within the first week.
- **Exercise is good for your neck** - Exercise strengthens your bones and muscles, keeps you supple, and makes you feel better by releasing natural chemicals that reduce pain. Those people who cope with the pain by being positive, staying active and staying at work tend to do better.

Start with small amounts of movement and build up the time you do it. Even if your neck is sore you can still start to exercise in gentle ways by

- Light activities
- Walking
- Using an exercise bike - if one is readily available

Do small amounts initially. It may hurt a little at first - but hurt does not necessarily mean damage. It should get easier to do. The longer you put off movement and activity the more difficult it will be to get back to normal.

- **If you don't get moving the pain will get worse and activity will become more difficult. There are no magic wands to make necks better.** Therapy and medication may help you get moving, **but you can do so much to help yourself and you may not need any extra help.**
- The pain may be a bit worse when you start moving, don't worry; movement will help loosen you up and ease the pain.

When the pain is most severe and new

(in the first week or two)

1. You may be able to manage by simply reducing your more vigorous activity, or the speed at which you do things, and having some 'relative rest'. It is better to modify activities rather than avoid them altogether.
2. If you need to avoid certain movements, make sure you move your neck regularly. Stay calm if it hurts a bit when you first get going.



3. When sitting avoid slouching. Keep your back straight and your head over your shoulders
4. **Resume full movements as soon as possible. A recovering spine likes movement.** The longer your movement is limited, the harder it is to get full movement back.

- Some pain on movement is normal, especially at first, and does not mean you are harming your neck.
- The extra pain caused by movement should fade after a few minutes. (if it does not, reduce the frequency and vigour of the exercises, but don't stop).
- You should do each of these EXERCISES up to 10 times every 2 hours from 2-3 days after the pain starts. Movement should be gentle, slow and controlled. If sitting, sit up straight before doing these exercises. They may be done standing, sitting, or even lying - which ever is most comfortable.
- Try to stretch the movements more each day, and do more of them



Sit up straight. Tuck your chin in, moving your head straight backwards, making double chins



Move your head towards your shoulder, repeat towards both left and right



Try looking round over each shoulder



Look up at the ceiling

5. **If you are experiencing arm pain and can find a movement or position which eases it (even if the neck pain increases a bit), use this as part of your management. It may be helpful in the short term to avoid activities that seem to create more lasting arm pain.**
6. Collars are not usually advised but if you have been provided with one you should aim to reduce its use within 2-3 days. Prolonged use of a collar can cause increased stiffness of the neck and delay recovery.
7. In bed if you need more support try rolling up a towel, like a sausage, and put it inside your pillowcase to support the hollow in your neck. This may help, but discard it if it doesn't.

On waking you may find your neck to be stiff and achy. Start the day with some exercise to relieve the stiffness.