NECK BASICS

Managing Neck Problems
YOUR NECK NEEDS CARE
Your neck is working all day long. It supports the head, which can weigh 10 to 15 pounds. Over time, poor posture, injury, and wear and tear can cause problems in your neck. But treatment can help. You can feel better and help avoid more neck problems in the future.

Causes and Symptoms
A neck problem may be from an injury, such as a fall. It may also be from repetitive movement. Once a problem begins, stress and age can make it worse. Symptoms of a neck problem include:

- Pain in the neck, shoulders, or arms
- Headache
- Stiffness or tightness in the neck or shoulders
- Numbness

Treatment Can Help
If you have pain or stiffness that interferes with your daily life, see your healthcare provider. A medical evaluation can help determine the source of your problem. You and your healthcare provider can then work together for the best treatment. This may include physical therapy, self-care, and medication.
YOUR MEDICAL EVALUATION

Before planning treatment, your healthcare provider will need to learn more about your neck problem. Your evaluation will include a medical history and physical exam. You may also have diagnostic tests. Talk with your provider about which treatments may be best for you.

Medical History

A medical history helps your healthcare provider evaluate your neck. You may be asked about injuries to your neck or other parts of your spine. You may also be asked about other medical conditions. Be sure to describe your work and everyday activities. Some activities may be affecting your neck.

Physical Exam

An exam helps locate the cause of your problem. Your healthcare provider may examine your neck, shoulders, and arms. This is because problems in your neck can cause pain in other places. Your neck’s range of motion may also be checked.

Diagnostic Tests

You may have one or more diagnostic tests. These tests help locate the source of pain. They also help rule out other medical problems. Your tests may include:

- X-rays to show the bones in your neck and their alignment.
- MRIs and CTs to show computer images of soft tissues and bones.
- EMGs ( electromyograms) to detect nerve damage in your arms that could be coming from your neck.
- Myelograms to show the areas of pressure on nerves and the spinal cord.

Working Together

You and your healthcare providers will work together as a team to treat your neck pain. Most neck problems can be helped with home care, exercise, and posture corrections. Medications or injections may also be used. If your symptoms remain, your treatment plan will be changed. In rare cases, if these measures aren’t enough, surgery may be needed.
UNDERSTANDING A HEALTHY NECK

By learning about the parts of the neck, you can better understand your neck problem. The bones of the neck are called **cervical vertebrae**. Together, they form a bony column called the **spine**. Vertebrae also protect the **spinal cord**, a pathway for messages to reach the brain. Surrounding the spine are soft tissues such as muscles, tendons, and nerves.

**Cervical vertebrae** are the seven bones of the upper spine.

**Disks** are cushions between the vertebrae. They absorb the shock of movement.

**Facets** are the joints between the vertebrae.

**Ligaments** connect the vertebrae.

**Muscles** support the spine and move the head.

**Foramina** are openings between the vertebrae where nerves exit the spine.

**Nerves** branch from the spinal cord to the arms.

**Flexibility Is Key**

For the neck to function normally, it has to be flexible enough to move without discomfort. A healthy neck can move easily in six different directions.

- **Flexion and extension** move the head forward and backward.
- **Rotation** turns the head from left to right, chin over the shoulders.
- **Lateral bending** moves the head from side to side.
Strong Muscles Support the Neck
The muscles in the neck and shoulders need to be strong to hold the neck and head in place. These muscles also help move the neck and shoulders.

- **Trapezius muscles** help shrug the shoulders.
- **Levator scapulae muscles** help control movement of the shoulder blades.
- **Sternocleidomastoid muscles** help turn the head.
- **Trapezius muscles** help raise the head.
UNDERSTANDING NECK PROBLEMS

There are many kinds of neck problems. Your symptoms may be from a muscle, bone, or disk problem. They may also be from a combination of these. Some problems are linked to injury, aging, or posture. Your healthcare provider will work with you to find the treatment that’s best for your neck.

Strains and Sprains
Problems may be related to strain or overuse of the neck. The soft tissue of the neck may be slightly inflamed (swollen). There may also be tiny tears in the neck muscles and ligaments.

Whiplash and Other Injuries
Whiplash occurs when muscles and ligaments in the neck are suddenly overstretched. This can be from an auto accident, sports injury, or fall. Whiplash and other injuries can cause tears and bleeding in the muscles.

Weakened Disks
A simple action such as a sneeze or cough can cause a disk to herniate (bulge). This puts pressure on the nerve. Over time, disks can also degenerate (thin).

Weakened Joints
Aging and injury can lead to a slow degeneration (wearing down) of joints. Over time, bone spurs (bony outgrowths) may form on the vertebrae. Bone spurs put pressure on the nerve, causing pain.
Common Symptoms
If you have a neck problem, you may have a variety of symptoms. Common symptoms range from muscle tension and pain to numbness or weakness in your shoulders or arms.

Muscle Tension and Spasm
You may not be able to move your neck, arms, or shoulders comfortably if you have muscle tension or stiffness in your neck. If your symptoms aren’t relieved, you may experience muscle spasms, or knots of contracted tissue (trigger points) in areas of your neck and shoulders.

Aches and Pains
Dull aches in your head or neck, sharp pains, and swelling of the soft tissue of the neck and shoulders are common symptoms. If there is pressure on the nerves in your neck, your arms or hands may be painful (referred pain).

Numbness or Weakness
If the nerves in your neck are injured, you may experience numbness, tingling, or weakness in your shoulders, arms, or hands. These symptoms arise when disks or bone spurs press on the nerves in your neck.
RELIEVING YOUR SYMPTOMS
The first goal of your treatment plan is to relieve your symptoms. Your healthcare provider may recommend self-care measures. These include resting, applying ice or heat, and taking medication. You may also see a physical therapist who can teach you ways to care for your neck.

Resting Your Neck
To relieve your symptoms, your healthcare provider may suggest rest. Resting your neck helps speed healing. It also helps relieve discomfort. Lie down with a pillow or rolled-up towel under your neck. You may want to buy a cervical pillow for comfort and support. To help your neck rest when you’re upright, a cervical collar may be prescribed.

Applying Ice
Your healthcare provider may recommend applying ice to your neck. Be sure to place a thin cloth or towel between the cold source and your skin. You can also use a gel pack. Place the ice under your neck when you’re resting. If ice doesn’t help, your provider may recommend heat. To do this, apply a heating pad to your neck.

Taking Medication
To help relieve symptoms, your healthcare provider may suggest over-the-counter or prescription medications. These include:
- Analgesics to help relieve pain
- Muscle relaxants to relieve muscle tension
- Anti-inflammatories to decrease swelling
Tell your healthcare provider if you are taking other medications, herbs, or supplements.
Working with a Physical Therapist

Physical therapy may be part of your treatment plan. A physical therapist can teach you how to hold and move your body in a healthy way. A therapist can also show you how to relieve pain and muscle spasms. You can also learn posture and strengthening exercises. The skills you learn can be used at home, at work, and everywhere you go.

Posture

Your therapist can teach you the best ways to position your neck and the rest of your body. Standing, sitting, and lying down without putting extra strain on your neck may help you heal more quickly.

Exercises

You may learn exercises that strengthen your neck and improve its range of motion. Your physical therapist may guide you as you do these exercises and recommend that you do them at home, too.

Other Treatment

Other treatment may help relieve your symptoms. Ultrasound (painless sound waves aimed at the neck) relieves inflammation in the neck and may reduce pain. Ice, heat, traction, or massage may also help.
CONDITONING YOUR NECK

Your healthcare provider may recommend exercises to improve your neck’s strength and flexibility. Follow the exercises on these pages. Start with 5 repetitions for each. As your neck feels stronger and more flexible, gradually work up to 10 repetitions for each exercise.

Finding Your Neutral Position

Before exercise, your head and neck should be in a neutral position to help prevent injury. To find this position, slowly move your head forward (forward position), then backward (back position). The middle point, where your head rests comfortably above your shoulders, is neutral position. Repeat this movement 4 times to help loosen up your neck (neck glides).

Rotation

Rotating your head helps increase your neck’s range of motion. While sitting, slowly turn your head to the left and then to the right. Turn only as far as is comfortable.

Shoulder Clock

While standing, raise your shoulders to the 12 o’clock position. Then move to the 3, the 6, the 9, and back to the 12 o’clock position.
Side-to-Side
Moving your neck from side to side increases its flexibility. While standing, slowly bend your neck from one side to the other, trying to touch your ears to your shoulders.

Resistance
These exercises help strengthen your neck.
- **Side-to-side** movement. Push against one side of your head and resist the movement. Repeat in the opposite direction.
- **Front-to-back** movement. Push against your forehead. Resist the movement. Then clasp your hands behind your head. Resist the movement.

Head Lifts
Lie on your back with your feet on the floor and your knees bent. Put a pillow under your head and neck. Lift and lower your head, keeping your shoulders on the floor. Turn on your side and repeat. Then repeat while lying on your stomach.
PROTECTING YOUR NECK

Good body mechanics help position the body correctly. They help prevent strain and overuse. There are easy ways you can protect your neck at home and at work.

Standing
Slouching can strain your neck. If you slouch in the shower, try using a handheld showerhead. Or, bend your knees slightly to get under the showerhead. When standing or walking, position your head squarely over your body.

Sitting
Drooping your head can stress your neck muscles. When reading, raise reading materials to eye level using a stack of books or a box. Position your body close to the steering wheel when driving. Use a blanket or air pillow to support your neck when sleeping on airplanes.

Lying Down
Propping up your head with big pillows curves your neck too far forward. If you're lying on your back, place a small pillow under your neck. If you're lying on your side, place a pillow under your head and neck.
Using Ergonomics at the Workstation

Sitting for long periods, especially combined with computer or phone use, can add to your neck problems. This can be made worse if your workstation causes you to strain. A physical or an occupational therapist can help you reduce strain and increase comfort using ergonomics (fitting your workstation to your body).

Monitor or work positioned at eye level prevents you from slouching or overstretching your neck.

Legs positioned at right angles with the floor takes the strain off your spine.

Feet raised several inches (on books or a box) helps keep your spine aligned.

Appropriate glasses prevent you from tilting your head up and down, which can strain your neck.

A firm chair supports your upper spine.

A chair with low-back support or a rolled-up towel supporting your lower back helps keep your spine aligned.

Hints to Help Your Neck

Keeping your neck in mind throughout the day may help prevent injuries. Below are some useful hints.

Use long-handled tools when you have to reach high to do chores, so you don’t bend your neck backward.

Balance the loads you carry. To distribute the weight evenly, carry equal weight on each side.

Take an occasional break when you’re on long car trips. This helps relax and stretch your neck.
MANAGING STRESS

Stress makes neck problems worse. To find the parts of your life that cause you the most stress, answer the questions below. Then work with your healthcare provider to find ways to relieve your stress and take control of your life.

Pressure on the Job

- Are your job responsibilities overwhelming you? □ □
- Are you having trouble with your boss or coworkers? □ □
- Do you sometimes feel like you’re in a dead-end job? List your job-related stressors. □ □

Pressure in Your Personal Life

- Do you feel you just have too much going on in your life? □ □
- Are you doing most or all of the chores at your house? □ □
- Are you having trouble talking with people you’re close to? List your personal stressors. □ □

Major Life Changes

- Are you moving soon? □ □
- Have you recently started or ended a close relationship? □ □
- Has a family member or friend become ill or died recently? List your major life stressors. □ □
Relieving Stress
If you have pain, muscle tension, or other symptoms of neck problems, giving your body and mind a short break can help. Try taking a walk at lunch to get away from the pressures at work. Or spend a few minutes imagining a favorite getaway spot. Gentle stretches and exercises are also good ways to relieve stress.

Taking Control
Confronting the situations that cause stress may help you feel in control. If you feel overwhelmed, learn to manage your time wisely. Delegate tasks. Try to resolve difficult situations by talking them out with those involved. If you feel you can’t cope with a situation, think about removing yourself from it permanently. If these steps don’t work for you, consider getting professional guidance.
LOOKING AHEAD
Your healthcare team will help guide your treatment. You’ll also learn how to continue care on your own, so you can help prevent neck problems in the future.

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