

Neck Pain

The odds are that you'll get pain your neck at some time or other.

After all, the neck has the enormous job of holding up and balancing a head that weighs approximately 10 pounds. And it has to perform this task with only seven small cervical vertebrae and a few dozen muscles that must flex and relax, with even the slightest nod, thousands of times a day.

Considering the toughness of its job and its vulnerability to varying stresses, it is no wonder that the neck is strained more often than any other body structure, according to some authorities.

What are the particular stresses and strains that hit us in the neck? What should we do when our necks are strained? And, finally, how can we save our necks – how can we avoid strains?

Minor Neck Aches

You may get a stiff or sore neck from fatigued muscles or strains you may not even notice happening. For example, holding your head in an awkward position, sleeping upright in a chair, or plain overwork can lead to neck pain. Slumping over a desk or a machine can strain the trapezius muscle that runs down the neck from the base of the skull and fans out to the shoulder blades and back. Unbalanced acts such as carrying a heavy suitcase or briefcase or scrunching a telephone receiver between your shoulder and ear can strain the sternocleidomastoid muscle which runs from the base of the skull below the ear down the front of the neck to the clavicle.

Mental stress can also cause neck pain – sometimes severe. A common stress reaction to anger, fear, or depression is the tightening of the neck muscles. If prolonged, this muscle tightening builds up by-products that can cause muscle spasms. This brings on more pain and more spasms. To break the spasm-pain-spasm cycle (and the “tension headache” that frequently accompanies it), it's necessary to relax the neck muscles. Use mild neck exercises and stretches and gentle massage, along with rest and relaxation to prevent neck pain.

Many minor neck strains will clear up with a good night's sleep. Learn what brings on such neck pains for you (stress, slouching in chairs, fatigue, etc.) and adopt good posture and stress control habits. Major neck problems, however, are another matter.

Major Neck Aches

Major neck problems may be involved if you have neck pain or stiffness that lasts more than 24 hours, if the ache or stiffness recurs frequently, or if you've had an accident or fall. If this is the case, you'd be well advised to see your Doctor of Chiropractic as soon as possible.

Chiropractic evaluation is also needed if any of these symptoms – frequently caused by irritation of the nerves in the neck – are experienced: persistent or frequent headaches; pain in the face, ears, scalp, shoulder, arm or hand; numbness in the fingers; dizziness; difficulty in breathing; or chest pains.

Through careful examination, possibly including x-ray, your Doctor of Chiropractic can determine the specific kind of problem you have and what can be done to correct it.

For example, if your neck becomes more painful during the course of a day, it's probably reacting to fatigue and muscular weakness. This can be corrected through strengthening the neck muscles and rest.

If, however, your neck is stiff in the morning and improves during the day, it's possible that the culprit is some underlying problem, such as arthritis. Improved flexibility (“range of motion”) can be achieved through chiropractic technique and proper exercise, and the pain can be lessened.

Neck pain that is worsened by coughing or sneezing may be a sign of disc involvement. A fairly common disorder, “cervical spondylosis,” affects some of the neck vertebrae and the cushiony “discs” that lie between them, causing nerve irritation. Chiropractic methods to increase spinal mobility and, in some cases, cervical collars to temporarily support the head, can treat such problems.

A stiff neck that tilts the head to one side, “torticollis,” may indicate that one or more of the vertebrae in the neck has become “fixed,” again irritating the nerves and sometimes resulting in muscle spasms. Treatment may involve chiropractic manipulation, physiotherapies, and exercise.

Injuries require special attention. The “whiplash” injury, most common when car passengers are subjected to rear-end collisions, puts a tremendous strain on the neck. The sudden impact from behind causes the head to flip backwards, and then deceleration thrusts the head forward. This whipping motion distorts the natural curve of the neck. Symptoms such as headaches, visual disturbance, shoulder, neck and arm pain, and neuralgia are frequent. But it sometimes takes hours, even days or months, for these symptoms to appear. If you have a serious fall or accident – particularly one that could involve whiplash – see your

Doctor of Chiropractic immediately, even if you don't notice serious problems.

Exercises For Your Neck

These two exercises, done regularly, will strengthen and relax your neck muscles and help maintain the normal range of motion in your neck. Do each three or four times slowly and deliberately, relaxing as you do them, twice a day. (If you are under care for circulatory, bone or muscle problems, check with your doctor before doing them.)

The Shrug – Draw your shoulders up toward your ears slowly. Breathe deeply and return to original position. Relax and repeat. Slowly rotating your shoulders forward and back is a variation of the shrug.

The Trapezius Stretch – While standing with a straight back, lock your hands behind your head. Slowly bring your elbows together in front of your face. Reverse the exercise by again locking your hands behind your head and slowly pulling your elbows back. Repeat.

Saving Your Neck – Here are some ways you can cut the frequency and severity of neck strains, pains, aches, and stiffness:

1. **Preventive Posture** – Practice relaxed, balanced posture (not “military-type posture”) when you're standing, walking, sitting, or working. Don't slouch in an easy chair – nor over your desk or workstation. Never sleep upright in a chair. Don't look or reach up for long periods of time. Use a stool or ladder to reach a high shelf or wash a high window. When driving, don't stretch your neck to see over the steering wheel, adjust the seat instead.
2. **Exercise** – In addition to stress-relieving aerobic exercise – such as regular walking or aerobic dancing – always do warm-up, cool-down and flexibility exercises. The exercises will help relax, strengthen, and increase flexibility in your neck and back muscles. Doing them regularly will help prevent neckaches, backaches, and headaches.
3. **Handling Stress** – Negative mental attitudes and reactions to daily stressors can cause neck muscle tightness, strain, fatigue and pain – as well as headaches. Try not to be a perfectionist for yourself or others. Learn to “turn it off.” Your neck will thank you!