

Chronic Neck Pain

Patient Information



(www.injurymap.com/free-human-anatomy-illustrations)

Anatomy of the Neck

The neck is made up of seven bones (cervical vertebrae) which connect to each other through small joints called facet joints. Between each vertebrae sits a fibrous disc. The discs act as a kind of “shock-absorber” in the neck. Several muscles and ligaments support the neck to make it a mobile yet strong column. Nerves emerge between the cervical vertebrae which carry messages to and from the arms and hands.

What is Chronic Neck Pain?

Chronic neck pain refers to pain or discomfort felt around the neck which persists for longer than three months and may affect people for several years. This can affect the ability to move your head comfortably, carry out your normal activities, and may even disrupt your sleep. Chronic neck pain is rarely caused by anything serious and is fairly common problem.

Working in partnership
Great Western Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
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Causes of neck pain

Trauma/Injury - Whiplash refers to a sudden jerking movement of the head, often caused by a road traffic accident. This can irritate the soft tissues within the neck. The pain usually settles after a few weeks/months, but it can sometimes persist.

Mechanical Neck Pain - There are many structures in the neck that can cause pain. These include muscles, ligaments, joints, and intervertebral discs. It is often difficult for a healthcare professional to determine the exact structure causing the issue.

Muscle Strain - Activities that place unaccustomed or repetitive stresses through the neck can create irritation within the muscles around the neck.

Osteoarthritis – (Sometimes referred to as Spondylosis) This refers to age-related changes to the structures of the neck, including the joints and intervertebral discs. It is estimated that most adults will show some level of these changes by the age of 60, but many do not experience neck pain.

Cervical Stenosis - This refers to degenerative changes in the cervical vertebrae which can narrow the spaces around the spinal cord and spinal nerves. This narrowing can cause pins and needles, numbness, weakness or co-ordination problems in the arms or legs. See your GP or physiotherapist if you experience any of these symptoms.

Cervical nerve root pain – (Sometimes referred to as radicular pain or radiculopathy) This occurs when a nerve within the neck becomes irritated or compressed as it exits the spinal canal. This can be caused by changes to the shapes of the intervertebral discs (cervical herniation) or degenerative changes within the neck joints. This can cause pins and needles, numbness and weakness within the arm or hand. See your GP or physiotherapist if you experience any of these symptoms.

Symptoms of neck pain

Pain - You may experience pain in the middle or side of your neck, the base of your skull, your shoulder/shoulder blade, or down your arm and into your hand. These symptoms may worsen with certain movements of your head or come on after resting in one position for some time.

Stiffness - Your neck may feel stiffer to move. You may notice for example that it is more difficult to turn your head to look over your shoulder

Tingling and Numbness - If there is some irritation around the nerves within the neck, you may get pins and needles or numbness down your arm or into your hand.

Clicking - You may experience a clicking or grating sensation with your neck. This occurs when joint surfaces move over one another, or when ligaments move over the neck bones. These sensations are very common and are usually harmless.

Headaches - Irritated structures within the neck can refer pain into the back of the head; this is called a cervicogenic headache.

Pain, numbness or tingling within the face - Irritation to the nerves within the neck can cause you to feel these symptoms over one side of the eye, temple, or jaw. Any facial symptoms should be assessed by your GP, to check for other causes.

Dizziness and Balance Issues - Dizziness and balance problems can sometimes occur in people with neck pain via a number of mechanisms. These symptoms can however also be caused by other conditions. If you are experiencing symptoms of dizziness and/or poor balance, you should talk to your healthcare professional who can assess and offer further advice.

Warning Signs

In very rare cases, there are more serious causes of neck pain that require further investigation. **If you experience pain AND any of the following, you should visit your local A&E department immediately for urgent assessment:**

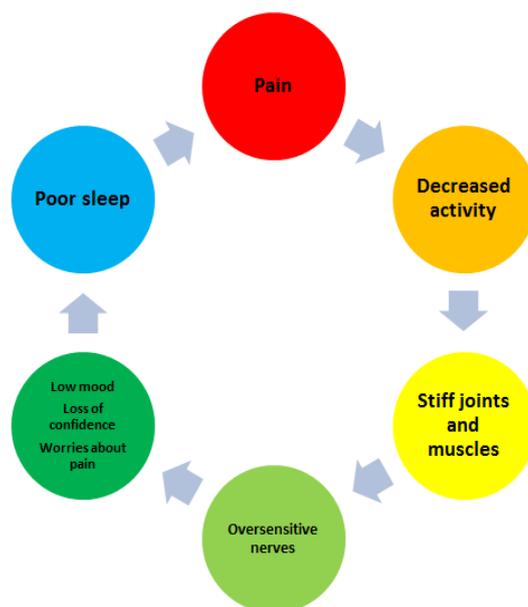
- A sudden onset of dizziness, fainting, headache, double vision, slurred speech, swallowing difficulties
- A sudden loss of co-ordination, for example, struggling with tasks like buttoning a shirt or walking
- Feelings of numbness, heaviness or weakness affecting your face or limbs
- A significant neck injury for example a road traffic accident or sports injury
- A sudden loss of bladder or bowel control, or changes to the sensation in your genitals

You should see your GP urgently if you experience neck pain that is worse at night, accompanied by night sweats, if you feel generally unwell and/or have recent unexplained weight loss - particularly if you have a history of cancer.

Why does neck pain persist?

One or more of the previously listed factors may have initially caused your neck pain, yet often the pain can persist even after the initial problem has resolved. When you experience persistent pain, you may start to avoid normal activities and movement. This may cause your neck to become stiffer and weaker, which can lead to more pain.

You may lose confidence in your ability to carry out normal tasks, and this may affect your work, relationships and social life. You might also find yourself worrying excessively about your pain, which makes the problem appear worse.



These factors can cause somebody to feel depressed or anxious, and other forms of stress caused by work and financial, relationship or family issues may contribute to these feelings. When you feel depressed or anxious, you might not feel like exercising or moving, and this can cause your neck to stiffen and weaken further. The longer that this cycle continues, that more difficult it becomes to recover your fitness and confidence.

What can I do to help myself?

Medication - Your GP/pharmacist can advise on the use of pain relieving medications or gels/creams. They will help to ease the pain and allow more comfortable movement of your neck. Consult your G.P if your medication is not helping as they may be able to offer an alternative.

Hot/Cold - Either heat or cold can be used to help pain and muscle spasm. Use frozen peas in a damp tea towel for up to 10 minutes, or alternatively try a wheat bag or hot water bottle in a cover. Use whatever gets best results for you. Check regularly to avoid any heat or freeze burns to your skin

Be Physically Active – Taking regular physical activity keeps your joints and muscles strong and mobile and promotes mental and physical wellbeing. If a specific activity increases your neck pain, you may need to modify or stop it for a short time. You should however try to continue your normal activities, especially those that you enjoy. If you do not currently do any regular physical activity you may find it beneficial to start. Try taking a short walk every other day to begin and build up gradually.

Relaxation - Stress can create tension in the neck and make the pain feel worse. Techniques such as mindfulness and meditation and other relaxing activities can help to reduce stress, improve your overall health, and therefore improve the pain. Your physiotherapist will be able to help you with these techniques.

Posture and movement - Be mindful of your posture when sitting and standing. Sitting or standing in the same position for prolonged periods can make your neck stiffer and weaker, and therefore more painful. Try to change your position regularly. If you work at a computer or laptop, ensure your ergonomic set-up is adequate, this will help to keep you in a healthy position. You might benefit from being referred to your occupational health department who can help you with your work set-up.

The following leaflet has some useful ideas;

[Physicalwellbeingforofficeworkers.pdf \(wiltshirehealthandcare.nhs.uk\)](https://www.wiltshirehealthandcare.nhs.uk/physicalwellbeingforofficeworkers.pdf)

Sleeping Position

Sleep on a supportive mattress and use a good pillow. You may need to experiment with different sleeping positions to find the best one for you. Many people find it useful to avoid sleeping on the stomach, due to prolonged extremes of neck rotation, which could be contributing to your pain. A position that keeps your neck in a neutral position is often the most comfortable.

Driving

You should avoid driving if you are unable to turn your head sufficiently, or if you regularly experience dizziness. You should feel safe and comfortable to drive. Speak to your GP if you have any concerns about whether you should be driving.

Exercises

These may help to reduce pain and increase movement of your neck. Start gently to avoid aggravating your pain. A small increase in pain while exercising is okay as long as it goes away within 30 minutes and is not worse the next day. If you do get an increase in pain, don't worry, do fewer repetitions the next time and then gradually build up again. If you get severe pain or any other symptoms such as dizziness after doing these exercises, stop and talk to your GP or physiotherapist.

Even if you only see slight improvements, keep doing the exercises. Often it can take a few weeks or months to get a significant improvement in your pain and function.

Getting the most from your exercise

- Build the exercises into your daily routine so you can do them regularly.
- Find time when you are not under pressure and can give the exercises your full attention.
- Try to do the exercises most days
- Your physiotherapist can highlight which exercises are the best for you to try.
- Start with 1 or 2 exercises and gradually build up to doing more.
- Your physiotherapist may recommend different exercises for you that relate more specifically to your individual problems or will help you to do your job, hobbies or sporting activities without pain.

Neck Flattening

Lying flat, tuck your chin down to your chest reducing the gap between your neck and the floor. You will feel a gentle stretch at the top back of your neck. Hold this position for a few seconds, and then relax.

Aim to do 5-8 repetitions

Rest for 2 minutes

Repeat for another 5-8 repetitions



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You can do this with a pillow under your head for comfort if needed. You can also try this in a sitting position if able.

Isometric Neck Flexion

Place your palm on your forehead, and resist forwards movement of your neck while keeping your head still. Hold, and then relax. You should feel the muscles at the front and side of your neck contracting.

Hold this position for about 10 seconds, and then relax.

Aim to do 3-5 repetitions

Rest for 2 minutes

Repeat for another 3-5 repetitions



Isometric Neck Side Flexion

Place your palm on the side of your head and resist bending your head towards your ear. Keep your head still. You will feel the muscles at the side of your neck contracting.

Hold this position for about 10 seconds, and then relax.

Repeat with your hand on the other side of your head

Aim to do 3-5 repetitions to each side

Rest for 2 minutes

Repeat for another 3-5 repetitions to each side



Shoulder Shrugs with weight

Shrug your shoulders upwards towards the ceiling while holding a small weight in each hand e.g. a water bottle or shopping bag with tins in.

Aim to do 8-12 repetitions

Rest for 2 minutes

Repeat for another 8-12 repetitions

Gradually increase the weight you use as the exercise becomes easier



Other Treatments that may be offered:

Physiotherapy

Physiotherapy has been shown to be effective in the management of neck pain. A physiotherapist will help you to understand your pain, and ways that you can improve it. They may suggest modifications to your daily activities and ways for you to remain active. A physiotherapist will usually provide you with exercises to mobilize and strengthen your neck. If you experience issues with your balance, co-ordination, or posture, they may be able to give you exercises to improve these factors.

A physiotherapist, osteopath or chiropractor can treat you with massage or other manual therapy techniques, which can be helpful. However, the techniques usually give only short-term relief and should always be used in conjunction with exercises and relevant lifestyle changes.

Injections or surgery

For those who experience significant pain, tingling or numbness into the arm or back of the head which does not improve with conservative management, an injection can be helpful in some cases. The injection usually contains a local anaesthetic and a steroid which is delivered into the facet joints of the neck or the small spaces where the nerves leave the spinal canal. Some risks are involved with neck injections and these will be discussed with you if this treatment option is offered.

In more severe cases where a person's pain or weakness does not improve, surgery may be considered by an orthopaedic surgeon. However, this is rarely needed.

Further Information

If you would like to seek the advice of a physiotherapist, there are a number of options within Wiltshire. Please speak to your GP practice about the ways you can be referred. Alternatively, you can visit our website for further information on accessing our services;

<https://wiltshirehealthandcare.nhs.uk/physiotherapy/>

Useful websites:

<https://www.activewiltshire.org.uk/>

Here you will find information on improving your activity level and details of what is available in your local area.

<http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/public-health-weight>

Here you will find information about weight management options in your local area.

[Health improvement coaches - Wiltshire Council](#)

Health Improvement Coaches work on a one to one basis to support behaviour change and improve health. They concentrate on behaviours associated with ill health including unhealthy eating often linked to obesity, stop or reduce smoking, sensible drinking, increasing physical activity, building confidence and motivation to change and boosting self-esteem, they also signpost and support clients to access other services and activities where appropriate.

Safeguarding

Wiltshire Health and Care (WHC) are committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, young people and adults at risk of abuse, including victims and survivors of domestic abuse. We expect all WHC staff to share this commitment and promote safeguarding by implementing WHC policies and procedures, act promptly on concerns and share information appropriately.

If you or your carer have any concerns regarding a child or adult's safety, please phone Wiltshire Safeguarding Team on 0300 456 0111 (Adult) or 0300 456 0108 (Child) (9am – 5pm Monday - Friday) or please call 999 if you feel they are in immediate danger.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

If you have any questions, or concerns, suggestions or compliments about our service, please speak to a member of staff.

This information sheet is available in other languages and formats. If you would like a copy, please contact us on 0300 123 7797 and whc.pals@nhs.net

Patient and Public Involvement

We value your opinions which will help us to further develop our services. If you wish to provide feedback or get involved in our patient participation groups, please email the Patient and Public Involvement Officer at ask.wiltshirehealthandcare@nhs.net or telephone 01249 454386.

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