

Acute neck pain

Patient Information

What is acute neck pain?

Acute neck pain is a sudden onset of pain in the neck region which can affect your ability to move the head and neck. It is very common and will happen in 2 out of 3 people at some point. It is not generally caused by serious disease, and full recovery occurs in most cases within a few weeks.

Anatomy of the neck

The neck is made up of 7 bones (vertebrae). The sides of the vertebrae are linked by small joints (facet joints) and between each vertebra is a fibrous disc which acts as a shock absorber to the neck.

The neck is a strong and stable structure, supported by ligaments and muscles that surround the neck.

Nerves emerge between each vertebra in the neck from the spinal cord to take messages to and from the arms.



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

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What are the causes of neck pain?

- **Non-specific neck pain** - Often the exact cause of the neck pain cannot be determined as the joints, muscles and ligaments are so close together. Often prolonged static postures play a contributing factor.
- **Age Related Changes** - Changes that occur between the facet joints and the discs over time. These are commonly found in the older population.
- **Whiplash** - is a common neck injury often caused by a road traffic collision or other traumas. A sudden movement or jolt to the neck causes the soft tissues (muscles and ligaments) around the neck to be stretched or strained.
- **Cervical radiculopathy**- This is when a nerve is affected as it exits via the vertebrae. It can be associated with pins and needles, numbness and weakness in the arm. Common causes of this are a bulge in the disc or degeneration in the cervical spine. It is advisable to see your GP or physiotherapist if you have these symptoms.

Please click on this link for further information on nerve root pain:

<https://wiltshirehealthandcare.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2022/04/Nerve-Root-Pain-PIL-2020.pdf>

- **More serious and rare causes**- These include infections, tumours, damage to the vertebrae (e.g. fractures) and rheumatoid arthritis. Your GP will arrange further investigations if they suspect any of the more serious causes.

What are the common Symptoms?

Pain can be felt in the neck, base of the skull and shoulder. Movement of the neck can feel restricted and is often painful. Sometimes the pain spreads down the arm as far as the hand. In addition sensations of pins and needles and numbness may occur if a nerve is being irritated.

How long will acute neck pain last?

Generally symptoms begin to settle after several days and usually have gone within 6 weeks. However this does vary from person to person.

What can you do to help yourself?

- **See your doctor** if your pain is severe or is the result of an injury, or if it does not start improving after a few days, spreads into your arm, or is accompanied by dizzy spells.
- Your GP may refer you for **Physiotherapy assessment**. Here they will make a tailored plan to assist your recovery.
- **Medication** - If your GP advises the use of pain relief, only take them as prescribed. 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.
- **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.
- **Avoid wearing a neck collar** unless advised otherwise, as there is no evidence to suggest that it will help your pain and it is better to keep your neck mobile.
- **Sleeping positions** - Sleep on a supportive mattress and avoid sleeping on your front. Try to keep your head and neck in line with your spine. This may require 1 or 2 pillows depending on the thickness.
- Try and **move regularly**, avoiding staying in one position for a prolonged period of time.
- **If you work at a desk/computer** try and make sure your ergonomic setup is correct, to optimise your comfort and reduce strain on your neck. Make sure you regularly straighten up and keep your neck and shoulders moving
- **Driving** should be avoided if the pain and stiffness are preventing you turning your head normally. If you feel safe to drive, position your seat upright and try to maintain a comfortable upright sitting position.

Exercises

It is important to continue to move your neck as normally as you are able during an episode of acute neck pain. This will help improve your range of movement and pain. It is also beneficial to resume your usual activities and exercise when you feel comfortable to do so. If in doubt ask your GP or physiotherapist for further advice or specific exercises.

Warning signs

Neck pain is not usually a cause for concern. However, if you experience a sudden onset of neck pain in combination with any of the following, you should seek medical assessment via your GP or 111 as soon as possible.

- A new onset of significant weakness which affects your function
- Dizziness, nausea, vision disturbances, speech disturbance, issues swallowing or drop attacks
- Fever, night sweats, unexplained weight loss or feeling generally unwell

Other treatments that may be offered

- You may be referred by your GP to a Physiotherapist for a bespoke treatment programme
- In cases of severe pain which does not improve you may be referred to an Orthopaedic Surgeon for a surgical opinion. However this is rarely necessary.

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/>

Nerve root pain patient information: <http://www.spinesurgeons.ac.uk/patients-area/patient-information/nerve-root-pain-treatment-options/>

Other 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.