

A guide for people with neck pain

Department of Physiotherapy

Information for Patients

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Introduction

Neck pain is very common. 2 out of 3 people will get it at some time in their life. You can have neck pain with or without a sprain or strain.

Neck pain can be painful but most people get back to normal within a few weeks.

We do not advise X-rays and scans for people with neck pain. We only do these if we think there is a specific cause.

What can cause neck pain?

Often people do not know the cause of their neck pain. It can come on slowly or quickly, for example, you can wake up with it. This is called non-specific neck pain.

Non-specific neck pain is often due to strain, when we are tired and rundown, or when we are stressed or inactive.

The recovery for this type of neck pain is excellent. Most people get back to normal within a few weeks.

Some people may start to get it after a fall or injury. But most people improve within a few weeks.

Only 1% is usually due to a serious cause such as cancer, infection, fracture or inflammation of the spine. Please see p2 'When to seek medical help', if you have not already done so.

**Health information and support is available at www.nhs.uk
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

Visit www.leicestershospitals.nhs.uk for maps and information about visiting Leicester's Hospitals
To give feedback about this information sheet, contact InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk

What can I do to help myself?

- Try the neck exercises in this booklet and slowly get yourself moving. It may be painful to do this at first but this is not causing any damage. Keeping your neck stiff and avoiding movement can delay recovery
- Take painkillers regularly. These can help in the first few days of neck pain. Paracetamol and/ or anti-inflammatory medication such as ibuprofen can be helpful. You can discuss medication with your pharmacist
- Relaxation can help with recovery. Stress, low mood and anxiety can all have an affect on pain. Take time to relax and do things you enjoy
- Belly (abdominal) breathing can help you relax
- Heat, such as using a warm but not hot wheat bag, may help. Put the wheat pack at the back of your neck is usually best. Make sure it is not around all your neck
- Set backs or flare-ups can happen when recovering. It does not mean you have caused yourself damage
- Evidence now says not to wear a neck collar. This leads to further stiffness and weakness of the muscles
- Stay in work or get back to work as soon as possible. This helps you to recover
- Try and have a regular sleep pattern

When should I seek medical help?

Contact a health care professional if:

- you have neck and/or arm pain (for example, after a fall or road accident) and get pins and needles, numbness, loss of strength, dizziness, double vision, feel sick (nausea), be sick (vomit) or have blackouts.
- you feel unwell with your neck pain and have a fever or a lot of sweating that is keeping you awake at night.
- you feel unwell with your neck pain and have a loss of appetite or unexplained weight loss.
- you have neck pain with an unexplained change in how your arm or hand works, 'clumsy hands', walking pattern, or a change in your sexual, bladder or bowel function.
- you have an unexplained onset of neck pain and have a history of TB, HIV, cancer or inflammatory arthritis.
- pain or stiffness does not go away after a few weeks.
- painkillers like paracetamol or ibuprofen have not worked.
- you are worried about the pain.

What are the common myths about neck pain?

There are many myths about neck pain. Here are some common myths:

- **My pain is due to something being out of place:**
No evidence suggests that bones or joints move out of alignment. Discs do not pop in and out of place. X-rays and scans can show slight change of alignment and disc bulges but these are generally not related to pain.
- **The more pain I feel the more damage I am doing:**
This is not true. Different people with similar neck problems can get different levels of pain. There are many factors that affect the level of pain we feel such as experience of previous pain, anxiety, fear, worry, stress levels and our ability to cope.
- **I must keep an upright posture:**
No specific posture is better than another so just keep changing it. Different postures suit different people. Slouching is not damaging for your neck. It can be helpful to change very rigid postures as movement is more important,
- **My neck pain is here to stay:**
Various things can be causing your neck pain. Treatment that deals with a range of individual issues is usually more successful in helping you to get better.
- **Exercising isn't safe for my neck:**
The exact opposite is true. Regular and paced exercise is great for your body and mind. Exercise usually helps to reduce pain and discomfort. Try these neck exercises as well as general exercise such as walking, running and gym work or any activity you usually do.
- **Clicking or grinding noises in the neck is harmful:**
These sounds are common and not usually linked with pain or damage.
- **I need an operation:**
Surgery is very rarely needed for neck pain. It is only needed sometimes when there is a specific cause.

Exercises for your neck

Movement is good for your neck. Regular exercise and physical activity gives you:

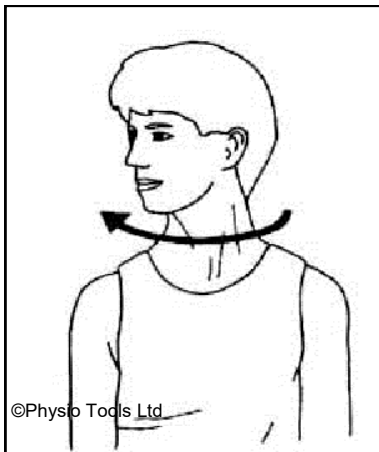
- stronger bones
- develops strength in your muscles
- keeps you supple
- keeps you fit
- makes you feel good
- releases natural chemicals that reduce pain

There is no evidence that one exercise is best. Find what works best for your neck. Slowly increase the amount of daily activity. These include exercises to do whilst sitting or standing.

The exercises should not cause other symptoms such as dizziness, tingling or weakness in your hands. If they do, try a different exercise or speak to a physiotherapist.

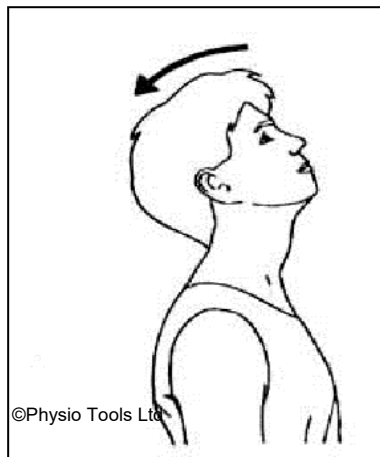
Try the exercises shown below. Repeat the movements 5 to 10 times to begin with.

Move your head slowly in each direction as far as you feel you can. Do the movement in a relaxed way. It is safe to move your neck so you feel a stretch.



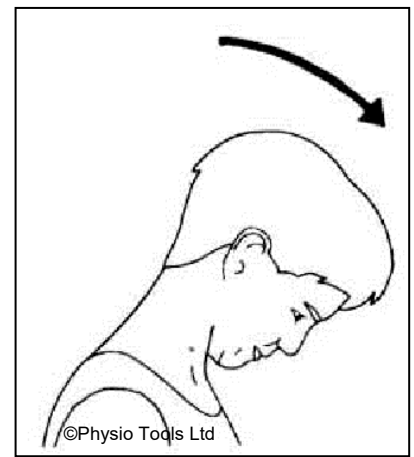
Rotate your head to each side.

Repeat 5 times to each side



Move your head up

Repeat 5 times



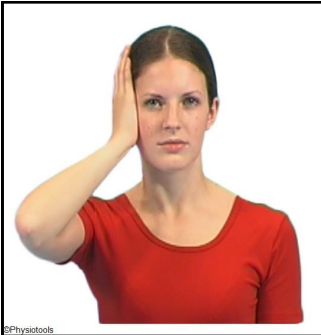
Move your head down

Repeat 5 times

Keeping a healthy lifestyle including regular exercise, good sleeping pattern and reducing stress, can help stop neck pain.

Strengthening exercises

Try these exercises, you can always start off with less building up to this amount as able

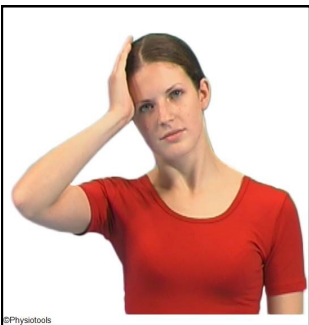


Sitting.

Try to turn your head to one side while resisting the movement with your hand.

Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 5 to 10 times

Repeat on the other side.

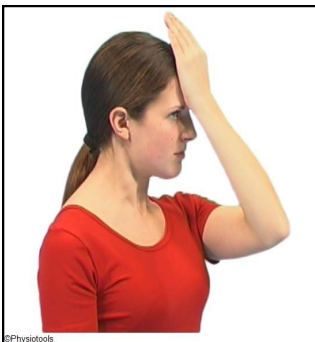


Sitting.

Tilt your head to one side whilst resisting the movement with your hand.

Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 5 to 10 times

Repeat on the other side.

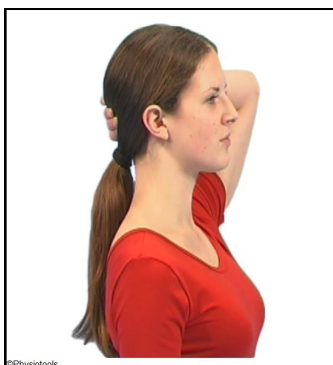


Sitting.

Try to move your head forwards whilst resisting the movement with your hand.

Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 5 to 10 times

Repeat on the other side.



Sitting.

Try to bend you head backwards whilst resisting the movement with your hand.

Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 5 to 10 times

Repeat on the other side.

Key points to remember

- Most neck pain gets better quickly
- The neck is strong and is meant to move and be used
- Serious or permanent damage is rare
- A scan is not needed to be able to treat neck pain
- Keep moving in a relaxed way. It is normal to have some pain as you recover. Remember, pain does not always mean you are doing harm

Contact details

Physiotherapy Departments:

Glenfield Hospital:	0116 258 3595
Leicester General Hospital:	0116 258 4070
Leicester Royal Infirmary:	0116 258 5816

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