

# A guide for people with neck pain

Department of Physiotherapy

Information for Patients

Produced: July 2020

Review: July 2023

Leaflet number: 1024 Version: 1

## Introduction

Neck pain is very common; two thirds of the population will get it at some time in their life. You can have neck pain with or without a sprain or strain.

Although neck pain can be painful most people get back to normal within a few weeks.

X-rays and scans are not recommended for people with neck pain unless a specific cause is suspected.

## What can cause neck pain?

The most common causes are:

- the neck becoming locked in an awkward position while sleeping.
- bad posture e.g. when sitting at a desk for a long time.
- a pinched nerve.
- an injury e.g. from a fall or whiplash from a road traffic accident.

Another cause of neck pain can be due to a slipped disc (where a soft cushion of tissue between the bones in your spine pushes out and presses on a nerve in your neck). Although this can be painful it usually gets better slowly within 3 to 6 months, with rest, gentle exercise and painkillers. Surgery is not usually needed.

About 1% of all neck pain can be due to a serious cause such as cancer, infection, inflammation of the spine or a fracture.

**Health information and support is available at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

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To give feedback about this information sheet, contact [InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk](mailto:InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk)

## What can I do to help myself?

- Try neck exercises 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.
- Taking painkillers regularly 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.
- Use a low, firm pillow.
- Put heat or cold packs on your neck.
- Relaxation can help with recovery. Stress, low mood and anxiety can all have an impact on pain so take time to relax and do things you enjoy.
- Abdominal breathing can help you relax.
- Set backs or flare-ups can happen when recovering but it does not mean you have caused yourself damage.
- Do not wear a neck brace/ collar, as this can cause stiffness and slow down recovery.
- Remain at work or get back to work as soon as possible.

## How can I prevent neck pain?

- When sleeping, make sure your head is the same height as the rest of your body.
- Have a firm mattress.
- Do not keep your neck in the same position for a long time e.g. when sitting at a desk.
- If you were not previously active, consider starting a form of exercise.
- Have a regular sleeping pattern.

## When should I see a doctor?

### See your GP if:

- 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.
- you have neck and/or arm pain (e.g. after a fall or road accident) and get pins and needles, numbness, loss of strength, dizziness, double vision, feel sick (nausea), vomiting 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 your arm or hand function '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.

## What are the common myths about neck pain?

There are many myths surrounding 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.
- **I need an operation:**  
Surgery is very rarely needed for neck pain and only occasionally when there is a specific cause.
- **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 effect 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 and it can be helpful to change very rigid postures.
- **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.
- **Exercise 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.

## Exercises for your neck

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

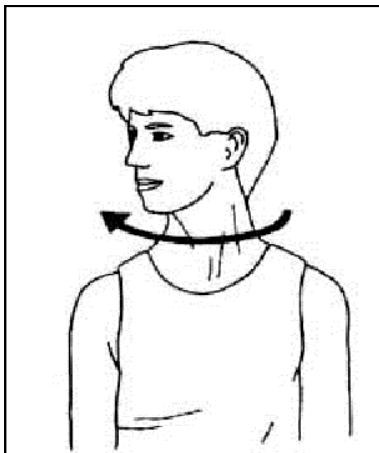
- stronger bones.
- develops your muscles.
- keeps you supple.
- keeps you fit.
- makes you feel good.
- releases natural chemicals that reduce pain.

There is no evidence that one exercise is best. Find what works best for your neck and slowly increase the amount of activity. You can exercise whilst sitting or standing.

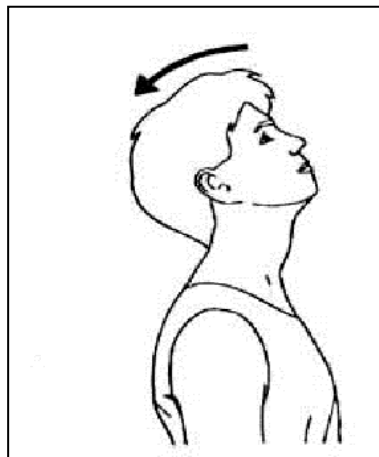
The exercises should not cause other symptoms such as dizziness, tingling or weakness in your hands. If they do, try a different exercise or speak to a physiotherapist.

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

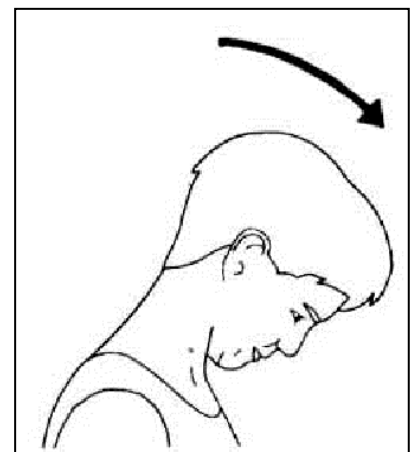
Move your head slowly in each direction as far as you feel you can. Do the movement in a relaxed way; it is safe to move your neck so you feel a stretch.



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

## 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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