



# Neck Pain

Information for patients  
Physiotherapy



## THERE ARE 3 TYPES OF NECK PAIN:

- ❖ **Simple/non specific**
- ❖ **Neck pain with nerve pain** which is pain coming from the neck that is felt in the shoulder, down the arm and sometimes into the fingers. It can present as burning pain, paraesthesia (pins and needles) or anaesthesia (numbness)
- ❖ **Whiplash** related neck pain which is pain in the neck following an acceleration-deceleration injury to the neck such as in a road traffic accident. For more information on whiplash, please look for the NHS Lanarkshire Whiplash information leaflet.



## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF NECK PAIN

- ❖ Symptoms of neck pain can include, pain or stiffness or sometimes both together, pain with movements, staying in one position for too long or certain activities
- ❖ Intermittent headaches/dizziness. For more information on these symptoms, please look for NHS Lanarkshire Persistent Postural Perceptual Dizziness or Dizziness, Anxiety and Stress information leaflets
- ❖ Muscle spasms
- ❖ Pins and needles/numbness or burning sensation.

## HOW COMMON IS NECK PAIN

**Neck pain is a very common condition**, two out of three of us will experience it during our lives. It's not usually serious and most often eases on its own or with simple treatment within a few days.

In patients who present to physiotherapy almost half will have some neuropathic factors (pins and needles/numbness or arm pain).

## WHAT CAUSES NECK PAIN?

There is no one cause of non-specific neck pain. This means that in simple neck pain, it is not possible to identify one particular reason for the pain. Neck pain can be related to staying in one position for too long, strain, sporting and occupational activities, anxiety, and even depression. The symptoms can also vary over time. It is important to note that normal ageing processes does not necessarily translate into pain.

You can have:

- ❖ Acute neck pain. This is an episode of pain that resolves on it's own between a few days to a few weeks.
- ❖ Chronic neck pain. This is mild and/or intermittent pain for up to a year or more.

## WHAT CAN HELP WITH NECK PAIN?

Remember that neck pain is a common problem and will usually resolve between a few days to a few weeks. There are a few things you can do to help with your pain:

- ❖ Try and remain active including staying at work and continuing with hobbies and sports
- ❖ Using heat around your neck and shoulders can help
- ❖ Speak to your GP or Pharmacist to discuss pain relief medication in the early stages
- ❖ For neck pain that may be caused by work, consider asking for a referral to occupational health for a work based assessment if your work has access to this service.

- ❖ Pay attention to your posture in both sitting and standing; avoid lengthy periods in the one position. Try to avoid lengthy periods sitting or standing in one position. Change your position and move regularly. Getting up for a short walk can help if you work at a desk
- ❖ Wearing a neck collar is not recommended as it stops you from moving your neck and may prolong your pain.



## Can physiotherapy help?

Physiotherapists are qualified and skilled therapists in managing musculoskeletal conditions such as neck pain. Each patient is assessed and treated individually. It is therefore important when you speak to the physiotherapist to tell them about all your symptoms to help them make the appropriate decision regarding your particular neck pain. Physiotherapists use special physical examination techniques and special tests to assess your problem. They will use treatment and management strategies with the best evidence to help with your neck pain. Those strategies include:

- ❖ exercise: can consist of stretches, movements, strength
- ❖ advice and education
- ❖ manual therapy techniques
- ❖ acupuncture (Although this may not be suitable for everyone)  
\*Neck manipulations are not recommended\*

## PHYSIOTHERAPY/ADVICE

### Encourage

- ❖ regularly change your position throughout the day particularly if you sit for a long time during work
- ❖ ensure work surfaces /desk/seating is at a comfortable position for you and risk assessment has been completed if necessary.
- ❖ maintaining a healthy weight

### Stay active

Physiotherapists can assess and advise on exercises to address muscle imbalance and mobility but general exercise is important to maintain fitness, protect joints and promote general mental and physical wellbeing.

## ANALGESIA

- ❖ Analgesia also known as pain relief can be an important part in helping you manage your symptoms and allow you to stay active.
- ❖ Taking the right kind of pain relief regularly allows you to move more normally and continue your usual activities without causing any damage. Pain relief won't always stop your pain completely. For this reason we use the term pain relief (a 30-50% reduction in pain would be a good success).
- ❖ Pain relievers/anti-inflammatory medications can be used as advised by your GP or Pharmacist. If you feel the ones you usually take are not helping your pain or you have any side effects from your medicines, please speak to your GP or pharmacist.

## WHAT DO I DO IF MY SYMPTOMS FLARE UP?

Flare ups of pain are common. This is when your pain suddenly becomes very bad for a time.

Some people have a lot flare ups of pain so it is important to know how best to manage these flare ups. In most cases a pain flare-up will settle within 6 weeks.

### Top tips

- ❖ You will likely find it helpful to rest a bit more but it is still important to keep active. This will help to avoid becoming stiff and your muscles becoming weak.
- ❖ If you aim to get a balance between rest and activity it should help your pain to settle down. You may be sore at first, however, start slowly and gradually increase the amount you do.
- ❖ Reduce movements or tasks that make your symptoms worse. This can help especially in the early days.
- ❖ Finding positions or movements that reduce your pain can be useful.

## NECK EXERCISES

The following exercises are designed to help improve your neck range of movement and strength and may in turn help to reduce pain.

### Pacing and spacing

- ❖ Pacing and spacing methods can help you manage your pain better.
- ❖ Pacing is the term used for breaking down an activity or task. This can be done by taking regular breaks. Prioritising daily activities can also help. This can prevent “over stimulating” your pain system.
- ❖ When completing challenging tasks or activities, it may be useful to set a “baseline”. This is the amount you can manage on a good or bad day without increasing your symptoms



### Neck extension

You can do this exercise sitting down or standing up.

Lift your head up so that your eyes are looking up to the ceiling. Only go as far as you are comfortable. Slowly bring your head back down. Repeat the exercise 10 times. Do this 3 times a day.



### **Neck flexion**

You can do this exercise sitting down or standing up.

Bend your head forward until you feel a stretch at the back of your neck. Hold for 5 seconds then bring your head back to the middle.

Repeat the exercise 10 times.

Do this 3 times a day



### **Neck rotation**

You can do this exercise sitting down or standing up. Turn your head to one side until you feel a stretch. Hold approx. 5 seconds then repeat.

Repeat the exercise 10 times. Do this 3 times a day.



### **Side flexion**

You can do this exercise sitting down or standing up. Tilt your head towards one shoulder until you feel a stretch on the opposite side of your neck. Hold for 5 seconds, then repeat on the other side. Repeat the exercise 10 times. Do this 3 times a day.



### **Retractions**

You can do this exercise lying down on the floor or on a firm bed. Roll a 2-3 inch towel and place it at the base of your skull. Gently tuck your chin in so that you feel a stretch in the back of your neck and the base of your skull. Hold that stretch for 5 seconds then relax. Repeat 10 times. Do this 3 times a day.





### Scapular retraction

Stand with both arms by your side. Gently pull shoulders back squeezing your shoulder blades together. Hold this position for 5 secs then relax. Repeat 10 times, once a day.



### Thoracic Rotations

Sit up straight on a chair. One hand is placed on the outer side of the opposite thigh/knee and the other hand behind you. Twist your trunk, assisting with your hands until you feel a stretch in your side and back. Repeat this 10 times. Do this 3 times a day.

## MISCELLANEOUS

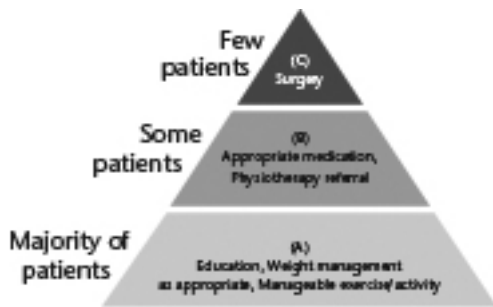
### Investigations

MRI scan (magnetic resonance imaging) and x-rays can be useful tools for examining the spine further. These tools are used to confirm a diagnosis made after you have been assessed. It is therefore not usual for us to ask for MRI scans or x-rays unless there are specific symptoms which we would like to investigate further. This may enable the medical team to determine whether your treatment should be changed; (particularly if surgery is being considered). There is a referral procedure for Spinal MRI scans within NHS Lanarkshire.

## SURGERY

In a very small percentage of people, neck surgery may be considered if you have a nerve or spinal cord compression that is worsening. This condition is called cervical myelopathy.

This may not cure your pain or symptoms but may stop them from getting worse.



*Majority of patients will benefit from (A)  
A larger number of people will benefit from (B)  
A very small number of patients will need (C)*

## SMOKING

Smoking can affect how your body recovers from musculoskeletal problems. If you smoke then the good news is that by stopping smoking it can improve your health in many different ways.

Giving up smoking is not something you have to do on your own. You're twice as likely to stop smoking successfully if you get the right support from the NHS. There is a free NHS stop smoking service available in Lanarkshire to help you succeed: <https://www.nhslanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk/services/quit-your-way/>

## CHRONIC PAIN

Some people will have pain which persists beyond the expected time frame for their condition. For further information on this and how best to manage it please visit <https://www.nhslanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk/services/chronic-pain/>.

Pain association Scotland is a national charity that delivers professionally led self-management pain education in the community. For more information please click on the following link: <https://painassociation.co.uk/>

## MENTAL WELLBEING

It is very important to look after your own mental wellbeing. This can have an influence on your recovery or management of your Musculoskeletal problem. For more information on mental wellbeing please click on the following link

<https://www.nhslanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk/services/mental-wellbeing/>

## WHEN TO SPEAK TO A HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

Please contact your GP or Out-of Hours service by phoning 111 if you start to experience:

- ❖ persistent or worsening headaches, dizziness, nausea or double vision,
- ❖ severe neck tenderness (pain that is getting much worse)
- ❖ lack of co-ordination – for example trouble with tasks like buttoning a shirt
- ❖ heaviness or weakness in your arms or legs
- ❖ pins and needles in an arm as well as pain
- ❖ problems walking
- ❖ loss of bladder or bowel control

These can be signs of a more severe problem that should be treated urgently.

If your symptoms continue to worsen or do not show signs of improvement after a period of 6-12 weeks of following the advice above, a self-referral to physiotherapy can be made on our website:

<https://www.nhslanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk/services/physiotherapy-msk/> or via your GP



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