

Neck Pain

Neck pain is common. The cause can be obvious like an accident or more subtle when related to a repetitive task or prolonged position. There are many triggers for neck pain most of them are not serious.

Physiotherapists are skilled in the examination and treatment of neck pain and associated headaches, arm pain, numbness or pins and needles. A consultation with your local Physio First Physiotherapist will promote a swift recovery.

Common causes of neck pain

Neck pain is rarely serious. If you are concerned about radiating left arm pain or any severe constant new headache symptoms associated with vomiting, fever or dizziness, please visit your G.P.

Most neck pain will have an identifiable cause but it can take time to work this out.

Some obvious examples are:

- Whiplash
- Muscle and ligament strains from lifting, twisting or falling awkwardly
- Sleeping awkwardly e.g. in a chair
- Arthritis.

Often overlooked however, are the effects of:

- Long hours spent in repetitive stressful positions e.g. using a computer or driving
- Watching a TV screen at a slight angle or reading in bed
- Anxiety or stress causing tense neck and spinal muscles
- Head and neck movements when wearing varifocal glasses.

These and many other stresses can affect all ages from young children to adults. Unfortunately the popularity of laptops, electronic gaming and texting has led to an increase in teenagers experiencing neck pain.

Cervical joints that are already affected by wear and tear are particularly susceptible to strain.

Your Physiotherapist can help you find possible causes and therefore prevent future recurrence.

Common symptoms of neck pain

Pain around the neck is the most obvious symptom but it can be referred to the shoulders, shoulder blade area or to the face and head. Headaches too are a common result of longstanding neck irritation. If a cervical nerve is irritated as it leaves your neck you may feel pain and or numbness/pins and needles in your arm and hand. Dizziness and light headedness can also be provoked by neck strain. Frequently joint stiffness and tense muscles limit the movement of your neck.

Physiotherapists are skilled in diagnosis they will guide you through and explain the origin of your symptoms.

Headaches

Looking for the causes and triggers of recurring headaches can be very confusing and at times worrying. Many physiotherapists are skilled at treating headaches and will work with you to carefully look at the whole picture. Whether your headache is classed as a migraine or a tension headache, studies have shown that treatment of the neck area can provide relief in many different headache types.

Your Physiotherapist will carefully listen to your headache symptoms and carry out a thorough examination. The appropriate treatment technique will be decided with you and advice given on how to manage your headache symptoms at home.

What can I do to ease the symptoms?

- Regularly and gently move your neck as pain allows
- Avoid keeping your neck completely still and do not wear a collar
- Try to 'let go' of the muscles around your neck and let your shoulders gently drop as you breathe out. Be aware if you are clenching your teeth
- Try to reduce your anxiety and stress levels, take time to unwind
- Use a heat pack around your neck, follow the instructions and do not have it hot enough to burn
- Over the counter painkillers that work for you can be taken. Relieving the pain will help to relax muscles and allow you to move your neck
- Take regular breaks from using computers and get advice from your physiotherapist on correct working postures
- Avoid looking at screens offset to either side and cut down on the time you spend with your head forward or down.

How can Physiotherapy help?

- Physiotherapists will take time to listen as you explain your pain/symptoms
 - On completing a thorough examination they will explain their findings and diagnosis
 - They will answer any serious concerns you have
 - Based on the examination they will discuss the most suitable evidence based treatment from a vast list of skills, for example; acupuncture, exercise, manipulation and massage
 - They will look at the possible causes and work with you to prevent recurrence
- They will provide you with specific exercises and advice to follow at home.
- Physiotherapy can provide you with efficient, effective treatment returning you to a normal, active life in the shortest possible time.
- Physio First practitioners care about ensuring this quality of care. Physio First regularly collects and collates data from our members across the country. The data collected on neck pain revealed that patients responded to treatment quickly and the majority were able to return to full normal activity.

Remember

- Neck pain is rarely serious
- Keep your neck moving within pain free limits
- Identify and avoid irritating postures and activities
- Physiotherapists are experts at treating neck pain
- Most headaches can be treated successfully with physiotherapy
- Early treatment ensures a swift recovery
- Seek advice and treatment from your local Physio First practitioner.

Words by Mairi Menzies, BSc, MCSP

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