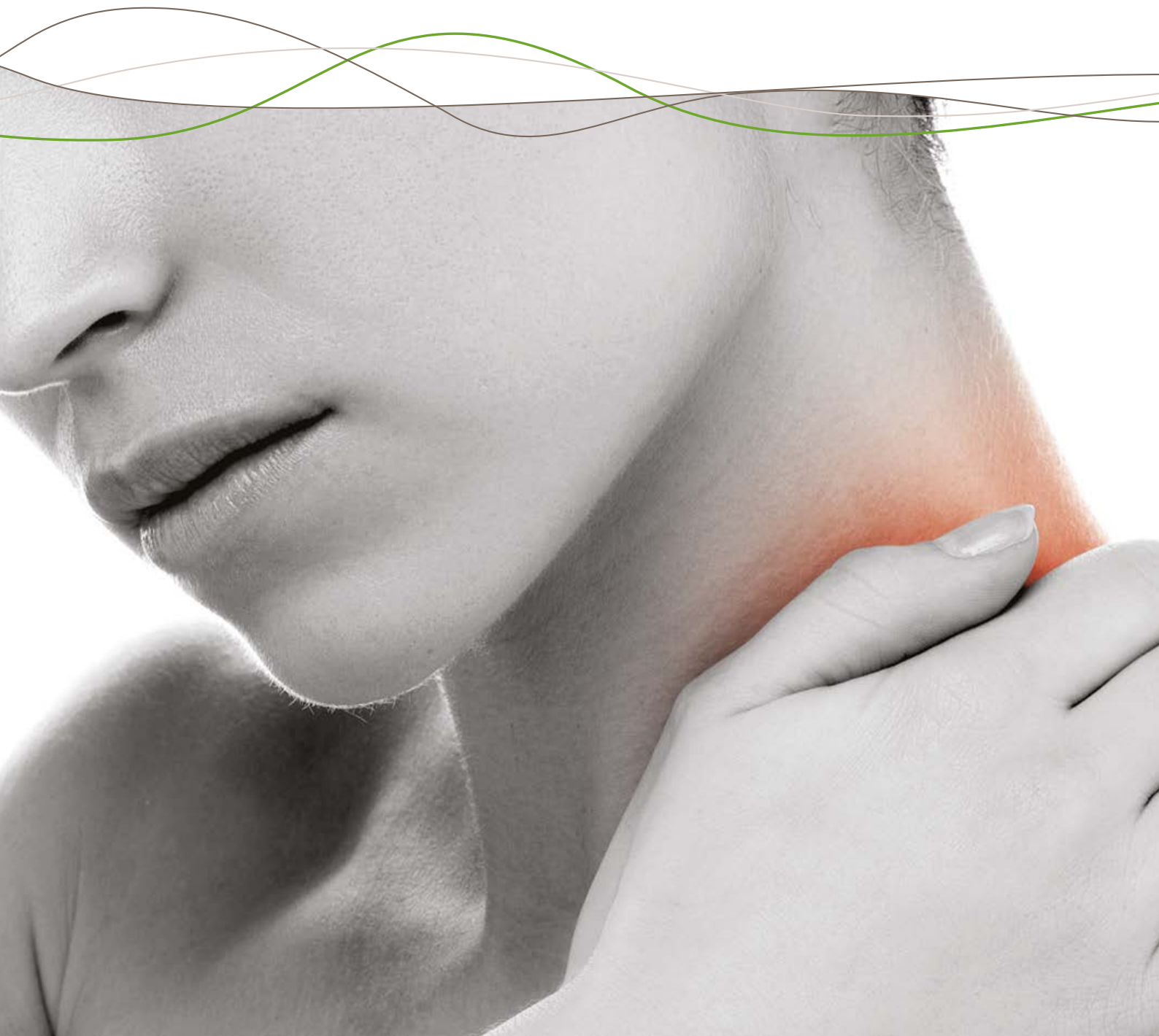


Managing Musculoskeletal
Complaints
Neck and Upper Back Pain



NECK AND UPPER BACK PAIN

Neck pain is the second most common reason people access Physio Med services from our clients. Neck pain accounts for 13% of all referrals our clients.

Of the cervical spine patients seen:

Work aggravated 53%
Domestic 38%
Accidents at work 8%

Cervical pain background

- Very few people who feel pain in their neck and upper back have a serious medical problem
- The majority of people with neck pain recover within a few days to a week
- Neck problems often give symptoms of headaches (even migraine type symptoms)
- People who have neck pain for longer than two weeks should seek advice from PAL
- Very rarely do people with neck pain develop chronic problems

Key facts

- Neck pain is common
- There is often no known mechanism of injury (it just appears)
- Poor posture can create neck problems
- It usually only causes problems for a short period of time
- Under normal circumstances, correct advice, posture and exercises can resolve the problem
- There are pro-active steps you can take to prevent problems



Symptoms

Most neck pain is normally in the centre of the cervical spine and normally radiates to one side.

In some cases the pain may be referred and will go into the arm and can go as far as the hand.



There are three nerves in the arm so the pattern of pain can be different person to person.

In many cases the pain goes into the head and creates headaches and can even give migraine type symptoms.



If the pain is in the arm not just the neck and shoulder seek medical advice immediately. Nerve pain can be very debilitating and should be addressed as quickly as possible.

General advice

REMEMBER if you try any of the things below and you feel they make you worse, NOT better, contact us for individual advice!!!

Although every neck problem is different, and there are many causes of neck pain, the most common cause is bad posture. Even sleeping with poor neck posture can create neck pain.

There are instances where trauma creates neck pain, for example after a car accident where the neck is forced backwards then forwards at speed. This is commonly called whiplash. These types of acceleration/deceleration injuries can occur in sports as well.

Most neck problems (not all but most) respond well to four things:

1. Keep Moving

This works in nearly all cases.

Do NOT stay in bed all day or sit in a chair for long periods.

Neck collars should only be used in extreme circumstances and always under the supervision of a Physio or Doctor.

Try to change your posture every 20 minutes e.g. if you are sat for 20 mins stand for one to two mins before sitting again. If you walk for 20 mins, stop and sit for a few minutes.

2. Heat

This works in most cases.

Wheat packs are best for this as they can be wrapped around the neck for 20 minutes at a time.

3. Medication

If you can't do your daily activities due to the symptoms, take some tablets.

The use of the correct medication works to relieve symptoms in nearly every case.

Use pain killers and/or anti-inflammatories - ask your local pharmacist for advice.

If over the counter medication is ineffective see your GP for stronger tablets.

4. Exercises

Exercises can be used to relieve muscular tension and correct alignment of the spine.

Simple posture and mobility exercises work for most people even as early as 24hrs after onset.

Physiotherapy Treatment

Mobilisations

Some neck problems require specific treatments which can be provided by a qualified physiotherapist. Physio Med can offer specific advice on these situations.

Factors that contribute to neck pain

- **Poor posture**

Poor posture accounts for most neck problems because it stresses the structures within the neck which are not naturally large and robust.

Most structures in the neck are only designed to take the weight of the head, offering support and movement. They are not designed, like the larger lower back structures, for lifting etc.

This makes them more vulnerable to overuse injuries from poor posture.

So what is good posture?

Good neck posture is when the neck holds the head in a neutral position.

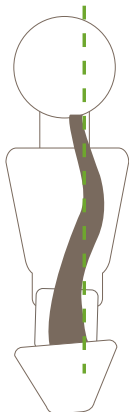
The most common bad posture is head forward (or protracted) posture.

Remember postures are position related!

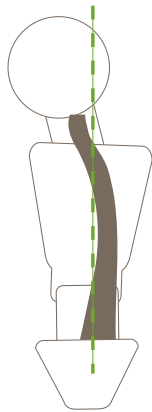
- **The Standing Posture** – as can be seen in the three bad posture types below, each one has a head forward posture



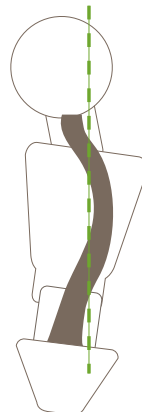
Upper Body in 4 Main Types of Standing Posture



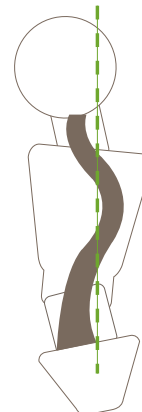
Balanced Posture



Flat Back

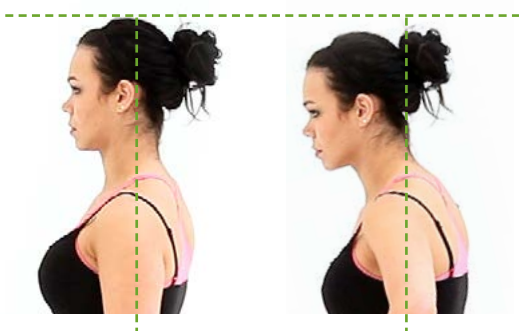


Swayback



Kypho-Lordotic

- Maintaining head neutral posture usually involves making sure your ear lobe is behind your collar bone when viewed from the side. This can be easier said than done! The first picture is correct the second picture is relaxed!!!!



- Sometimes the neck posture can be affected by the rib cage position or even lower back posture. If this is the case speak to a physiotherapist who can help you correct this.

- If your task involves standing try to make sure you don't constantly look down. Look up periodically to reset your neck position.

Don't break our earlier rule!!! Alter your position regularly so that you don't stand still in one position for longer than 20 minutes.

The Seated Posture – for the neck the two key components to sitting correctly are desk height and monitor height



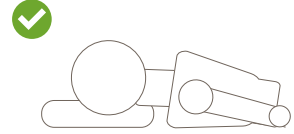
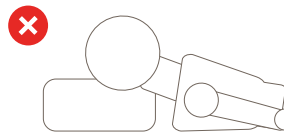
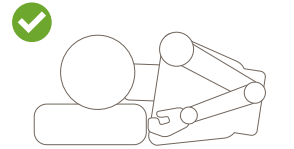
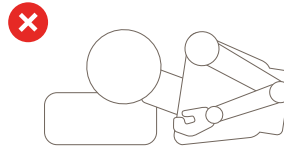
If sat at a table or desk using a computer the middle row of the keyboard should be level with your elbow

- The top of the screen (not the screen casing!) level with eye height
- If sat at a table or desk writing the elbow should be just below the table top. A writing, slope (or tilted surface) helps stop the body from needing to lean forwards, thus maintaining good posture

• **The Sleeping Posture** – over half of reported neck problems were created by or are worse during or after being in bed. We spend a lot of time in bed (40% of our lives) and therefore the bed and, more importantly pillow are important to prevent neck problems developing or re-occurring.

- Make an assessment of your pillow or pillows
- If you lay on mainly on your back, your pillow should be just high enough to support your head whilst keeping your chin in the neutral position (see illustration). A thin single pillow is often enough to achieve this. Your chin should not be tucked and your head should not be tilted back.

- If you lay mainly on your side, your pillow/s should be high enough to make up to gap between the point of your shoulder and head (as seen below) This will often require a full size pillow or maybe even two pillows.

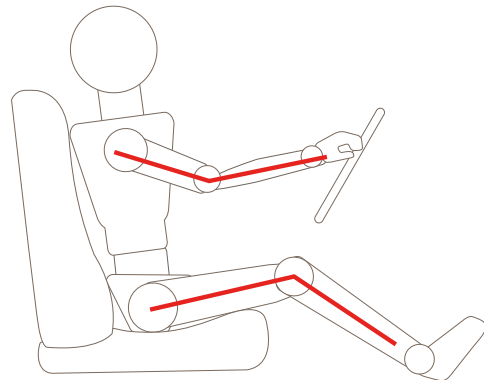


Driving

Although many cases of neck pain are from whiplash most people who get neck pain from the car get it from poor posture in the car.

Proper adjustment

- Bring the seat height up until you can comfortably



see the road and instruments and your hips are as high as your knees. This stops you from looking up or down when driving.

- Bring the back forwards until you are reclined at a 100-110 degree angle. This sets your spine in a neutral position
- Bring your chin back to neutral alignment (ear lobe behind collar bone as seen earlier)
- Adjust your headrest so it rests in the middle of your head – it should not push your head forwards!

- Bring the steering wheel down and towards you to minimize reach. You should be able to reach it with a slightly bent elbow and your back resting on the seat back
- Now adjust the mirrors – using your mirrors correctly prevents unwanted neck rotation which can exacerbate symptoms.

Holding the steering wheel

- Lower your hands from the ten to two position to the quarter to three position and feel your shoulder and neck muscles relax

Exercise in traffic jams

- Shrug shoulders, hold for five seconds, relax and repeat five times. Pull shoulder blades back, hold for five seconds relax and repeat five times
- Tuck chin in, hold for five seconds, relax and repeat five times

Aiding Recovery with a Home Exercise Programme

DO NOT rest in bed until the pain resolves. This often makes the pain and/or problem worse.

Where possible, the best advice is to stay active and continue your daily activities as normal.

Obviously if these activities are adding to the pain then do not continue them, but getting back to work and keeping the area moving is most often the best way to minimise the pain.

- Do regular gentle posture correction exercises. Examples are shown below. REMEMBER most people find one or two exercises that don't suit them. If you find an exercise is making you worse STOP! Ideally you need an assessment to get the best exercises for you.

Most people with neck problems do not need 'heavy' or 'vigorous' neck exercises to improve. Remember your neck only needs to support your head, unless you take part in a sport like boxing or a sport/activity involving a helmet.

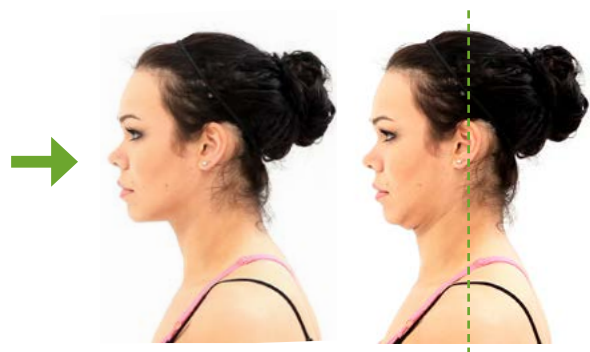
- Start at the top and see which ones you can do
- Stop if an exercise increases your pain
- Do not do exercises that make you feel worse

- Only work your way down the list as you are ready. Remember at some point the exercises will be too hard for you, don't do the ones that are too hard.
- If you can't do any of the exercises contact us for further guidance.

Neck retraction - the most popular neck exercise because it helps with most neck postural problems.

It is very important when you have neck pain to do this exercise VERY GENTLY at first. DO NOT just pull your chin all the way back - it will hurt! Start gently and work your way back!

This exercise can be done standing and sitting. Start by looking straight ahead (focussing on a point in front of you can help) do not look up or down or left or right during this exercise. Now pull your chin backwards in a STRAIGHT line. Do this gently at first. Relax and repeat (you do not need to hold this exercise). If done right the exercise gives a double chin and a funny voice (if you try to talk). Many people find gently holding their tongue between their teeth helps during this exercise as it tricks the muscles on the front of the neck into relaxing.



Repeat ten times

Do the exercises every waking hour

Mobility exercises - If you find your neck is stiff when trying any of the following movements you may want to stretch that movement gently to help restore it. You don't need to do every movement unless they all feel stiff. It is however, good advice to go the opposite way to the one you want to stretch as well. For example, if you are stiff looking over your right shoulder in the car you should stretch to the right side into rotation, but you should also stretch to the left side to keep the movement on that side. If you stretch looking down you should also do the one looking up. If you stretch the right ear to the shoulder you should also do the left ear to shoulder.

DO NOT ROTATE YOUR HEAD IN A CIRCLE

(circumduction) this is a combination motion of all of the movements in the neck and can grind the small joints (like a pestle and mortar).

Flexion and extension - many people find looking down (flexion) or looking up (extension) difficult. To help restore these movements simply do the movement and hold.

Flexion - a problem looking down - look down until you feel a stretch in the neck. DO NOT go into any pain! Stretch to the edge of pain but not into it. Look down for five to 30 seconds (longer is harder) and relax and repeat five times. Can be repeated hourly. If the symptoms increase you are doing them too hard or holding too long.

Extension - a problem looking up - look up until you feel a stretch in the neck. DO NOT go into any pain! Stretch to the edge of pain but not into it. Look up for five to 30 seconds (longer is harder) and relax and repeat five times. If you get dizzy or light headed whilst looking up seek medical advice and do not continue with this exercise. Can be repeated hourly. If the symptoms increase you are doing them too hard or holding too long.



Extension

Flexion

Rotation - this is the most common restriction in neck pain. Looking left and/or right can be limited when you have neck pain. To help restore these movements simply do the movement and hold.

Rotation - look left or right until you feel a stretch in the neck. DO NOT go into any pain! Stretch to the edge of pain but not into it. Rotate for five to 30 seconds (longer is harder) and relax and repeat five times. Can be repeated up to hourly. If the symptoms increase you are doing them too hard or holding too long.



Lateral bend - this is not something we do day to day but it can get stiff all the same. Bending left and/or right can be limited when you have neck pain. To help restore these movements simply do the movement and hold.

Lateral bend - bend left or right until you feel a stretch in the neck (this is normally a small motion) DO NOT go into any pain! Stretch to the edge of pain but not into it. Hold for five to 30 seconds (longer is harder) and relax and repeat five times. Can be repeated hourly. If the symptoms increase you are doing them too hard or holding too long.



Neck strengthening - Not everyone needs to strengthen their neck but some people find their symptoms reduce and they have fewer future problems if they have stronger neck muscles. The benefits are usually felt after the pain has subsided and the neck starts to improve. Strengthening exercises can be difficult and increase the symptoms in the early stages of neck pain.

As with stretching there are the same movements that can be strengthened.

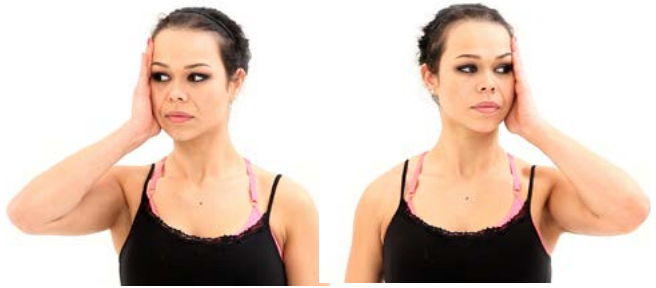


Flexion - The easiest way to resist flexion is to use your hand. Simply sit or stand with your head in the middle (neutral) position. Place the palm of your hand on your forehead and push into your hand with your head whilst offering the same resistance back from your hand (there should be no movement). Hold for five seconds and repeat five times. Perform this up to five times per day.

Extension - Normally both hands are used to resist extension (you need good shoulder movement for this). Simply sit or stand with your head in the middle (neutral) position. Place the palms of your hand on the back of the head (you can interlink your fingers) now push into your hands with your head whilst offering the same resistance back from your hands (there should be no movement). Hold for five seconds and repeat five times. Perform this up to five times per day.



Side flexion - Simply sit or stand with your head in the middle (neutral) position. Place the palm of your hand on the side of your head and push into your hand with your head whilst offering the same resistance back from your hand (there should be no movement). Hold for five seconds and repeat five times perform this up to five times per day.



Rotations - Simply sit or stand with your head in the middle (neutral) position. Place the palm of your hand on your cheek and turn into your hand with your head whilst offering the same resistance back from your hand (there should be no movement). Hold for five seconds and repeat five times. Perform this up to five times per day.



Self massage - some people find benefit from 'rolling' the upper back/ lower neck muscles. This self massage can help with tension and 'knots' in the muscles. It is normal to use a small soft ball (like a tennis ball) or a custom ball/roller which can be purchased from many retailers for less than £5. To do this self massage simply stand at a wall and place the ball/roller behind you on the affected area. Apply a pressure which gives relief but not pain (many people like the deep pain this massage can give and even do it so hard they bruise themselves - harder is not necessarily better). Now move your body to 'roll' the ball around on the affected area to relieve the tension. This can be performed for up to ten minutes and as many times per day as you feel comfortable (people tend to do this more in the middle to late stages of getting better).



General advice:

- Tuck your chin back regularly, hold for five seconds and repeat five times. Try to do this at least every hour
- Generally keep changing your position every 20 minutes
- Take your pain medication
- Make sure work surfaces are at a comfortable height so you don't have to look down constantly
- Review your pillows
- Use some heat on it

You may need a consultation!

Neck pain can be very complex and debilitating. Correct advice and treatment can make an enormous difference. If you have arm pain or headache symptoms from your neck contact Physio Med for advice and consultation.

When to seek immediate further advice:

- If the pain has persisted for more than two weeks
- The pain goes down into the arm
- If you have symptoms like headaches

Remember if you try any of the things above and you feel they make you worse not better contact us for individual advice!

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