



Neck Pain

What can cause neck pain? — Neck pain happens when there is a problem with or injury to any of the parts ("structures") of the neck. The structures in the neck include:

- Bones – The neck has 7 bones that are stacked on top of each other. These bones make up the top part of the spine and are called the "cervical vertebrae." Neck pain can happen when the bones get worn down or develop abnormal growths (called "spurs").
- Ligaments – Ligaments are strong tissues that connect bones to other bones. Ligament damage can happen when the neck moves back and forth suddenly (called "whiplash"), such as in a car accident.
- Discs – Discs are cushions that sit between the bones. When the discs change shape or move out of position, people can have symptoms.
- Muscles – Muscles hold the head up and make the neck move. Neck pain can be caused by muscle strain or tension, such as from poor posture or stress.
- Nerves – A large bundle of nerves (called "the spinal cord") travels down the middle of the spine. Nerves branch off from the spinal cord to all parts of the body. People can have symptoms if their nerves are irritated or pushed on by nearby bones or discs.

What symptoms can people with neck pain have? — People can have different symptoms that include:

- Pain, stiffness, or tightness in the neck, shoulders, upper back, or arms
- Headaches
- Neck weakness
- Being unable to move or turn the neck
- Pain when turning or tilting the head
- Numbness or strange feelings (such as pins and needles) in the shoulders or arms
- Trouble walking or moving the legs
- Having no control over the bladder or bowels

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — You should see a doctor or nurse if you have:

- A severe injury to your head or neck
- Severe pain
- Numbness or weakness in your arms or legs
- No control over your bladder or bowels
- Pain that doesn't get better after you treat it at home for 1 week

Do I need to have tests? — Most people do not need any tests. Your doctor or nurse will do an exam. He or she will feel your muscles and check how your head and neck move.

But some people might need tests. Tests can include:

- X-ray, CT scan, MRI scan, or other imaging tests – Imaging tests create pictures of the inside of the body.
- Muscle or nerve tests to see if the muscles and nerves work normally

Is there anything I can do on my own to feel better? — Yes. To reduce your symptoms, you can:

- Take a pain-relieving medicine
- Massage the muscles that are tight or tense
- Put ice on the area to reduce pain – You can rub ice on the area for 5 to 7 minutes. Or you can put a frozen bag of peas or a cold gel pack on the area for 20 minutes at a time, a few times a day.
- Put heat on the area to reduce pain and stiffness – Take a hot shower or hot bath, or put a hot towel on the area. Don't use heat for more than 20 minutes at a time. Don't use anything too hot that could burn your skin.
- Do neck exercises – Different exercises can stretch the neck, shoulder, and back muscles and help make them stronger. Ask your doctor or nurse if you should do exercises and which ones can help your symptoms.
- Reduce stress – Stress can make pain worse and prevent symptoms from getting better. Try to reduce your stress. You can ask your doctor or nurse about exercises that can help you relax.
- Watch your posture – Try to keep your neck straight in line with your body and avoid activities that involve a lot of neck movement. When you sleep, keep your head and neck in line with your body. Try to avoid sleeping on your stomach with your head turned to one side.

What other treatments might I have? — Your doctor or nurse can use other treatments if your neck pain doesn't improve after you treat it at home. For example, he or she might suggest that you see an exercise expert, called a physical therapist.

Can neck pain be prevented? — To help prevent neck pain, you can:

- Use good posture – Hold your head up and keep your shoulders down.
- Avoid sitting in the same position for too long
- Avoid doing work above your head for too long
- Avoid putting weight or pressure on your upper back
- Keep your neck in line with the rest of your body when you sleep

Neck Stretching Exercises -- The most useful stretching exercises for the neck include the following:

- Neck bending – Tilt the head forward and try to touch your chin to your neck. Hold for a few seconds, breathe in gradually, and exhale slowly with each exercise. Exhaling with the movement helps relax the muscles. Repeat 10 to 15 times. Relax the neck and back muscles with each neck bend.
- Shoulder rolls – In the sitting or standing position, hold the arms at the side with the elbows bent. Try to pinch the shoulder blades together. Roll the shoulders backwards 10 to 15 times, moving in a rhythmic, rowing motion. Rest. Roll the shoulders forwards 10 to 15 times.

Other exercise may include neck rotation, neck tilting, vertical shoulder stretches, upper back stretches, and back bending.

- Neck rotation – Slowly look to the right. Hold for a few seconds. Look to the center. Rest for a few seconds between movements. Repeat 10 to 15 times. Perform on the left side.
- Neck tilting – Look straight forward, then tilt the top of the head to the right, trying to touch your right ear to the right shoulder (without moving the shoulder). Hold in place for a few seconds. Return the head to the center. Repeat 10 to 15 times. Repeat on the left side.
- Vertical shoulder stretches – In the sitting or standing position, use the right hand to hold the left wrist and pull the arm (and shoulder) up and over the head, towards the right. Hold for five seconds. Keep the left shoulder and back muscles relaxed. Rest and repeat 10 to 15 times. Repeat using left hand to hold right wrist.
- Upper back stretches – In the standing position, lean forward from the hips and rest both hands on a low counter with the elbows straight. Exhale, relax the neck and shoulders, and allow the head to fall forward as you round the upper back. This requires the shoulder blades to spread apart and mimics the motion of a cat stretching its back. Exhaling with the motion helps to relax the muscles. Return to the standing position with hands on a counter. Repeat slowly 10 times.
- Upper back side bends – Stand or sit up straight in a chair. Bend the trunk to the right while holding the hands together slightly behind the neck for support. Hold for five seconds, and then return to center. Repeat to the left. Repeat 10 to 15 times. Keep the lower back straight or supported against a chair.