

Neck Pain

Neck pain may begin in any of the structures in the neck. These include muscles and nerves as well as spinal vertebrae and the cushioning disks in between. Neck pain may also come from regions near the neck, like the shoulder, jaw, head and upper arms.

When your neck is sore, you may have difficulty moving it, especially to one side. Many people describe this as having a stiff neck.

If neck pain involves nerves (for example, significant muscle spasm pinching on a nerve or a slipped disk pressing on a nerve), you may feel numbness, tingling or weakness in your arm, hand, or elsewhere.

Causes

A common cause of neck pain is muscle strain or tension. Usually, everyday activities are to blame. Such activities include bending over a desk for hours, having poor posture while watching TV or reading, placing your computer monitor too high or too low, sleeping in an uncomfortable position, or twisting and turning the neck in a jarring manner while exercising.

Traumatic accidents or falls can cause severe neck injuries like vertebral fractures, whiplash, blood vessel injury, and even paralysis.

Other causes include herniated disk, fibromyalgia (pain syndrome throughout the body), and arthritis. Meningitis, although much less common, can cause significant neck stiffness.

Home Care

For minor, common causes of neck pain:

- Apply heat or ice to the painful area. One good method is to use ice for the first 48 - 72 hours, then use heat after that. Heat may be applied with hot showers, hot compresses, or a heating pad. Be careful not to fall asleep with a heating pad on.
- Perform slow range-of-motion exercises -- up-and-down, side-to-side, and from ear-to-ear -- to gently stretch the neck muscles.
- Have a partner gently massage the sore or painful areas.

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Seek immediate medical help if you have a fever and headache, and your neck is so stiff that you cannot touch your chin to your chest. This may be meningitis. Call your local emergency number (such as 911) or get to a hospital.

Call your health care provider if:

- Symptoms do not go away in 3 days with self-care.
- You have numbness, tingling, or weakness in your arm or hand.
- Your neck pain was caused by a fall, blow, or injury -- if you cannot move your arm or hand, have someone call 911.
- You have swollen glands or a lump in your neck.
- Your pain does not go away with regular doses of over-the-counter pain medication.
- You have difficulty swallowing or breathing along with the neck pain.

