

Neck Pain

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<http://www.cssphysio.com.au/forpatients.html>



Causes and Treatments

Neck pain is one of the most common reasons for which people visit a physiotherapist. The incidence of neck related complaints has increased substantially with the information



technology revolution. This is because more people spend significantly more time sitting, often with prolonged and poor posture. This has also resulted in a much younger average age of people with chronic neck complaints.

There is no such thing a good sitting posture. The seated position loads the spine quite differently to the upright position, and makes it impossible to maintain healthy posture. Even the most diligent person will eventually succumb to the pressures that sitting applies to the body.

Causes:

Apart from posture, other potential causes of neck pain include:

1. Heavy or repetitive lifting
2. Trauma. For example this can be due to:
 - (a) Whiplash.
 - (b) Sport, particularly collision and contact sports.



3. Flexibility problems: too much or too little flexibility can be a disadvantage.
4. Problems in other joints of the body, particularly the shoulders, & the mid or lower back.

Types of Neck Pain

Acute

1. Wry Neck. This is when a joint of the neck locks, often after a sudden movement. The cause is believed to be due to entrapment of a small piece of cartilage in the joint, and this is accompanied by a lot of muscle spasm.



2. Joint sprain. Joints in the neck can be sprained like any other joint in the body. This makes them stiff & painful. Causes include poor sleeping position, & sudden or repetitive movements.

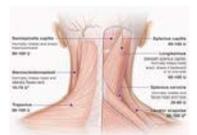


3. Whiplash. This is a sudden whipping of the neck, from back to front or from side to side. It occurs most commonly with motor vehicle accidents, but may occur in sport and other activities. The injury can affect bones, joints, ligaments, muscles, nerves, and even the tissues of throat.



4. Pinched nerve. This can come on suddenly or be a chronic problem. It often occurs due to pressure on a nerve from a bulging disc. The pressure can also come from swelling due to inflammation, from bony spurs, and due to muscle spasm. Pain can be severe and usually spreads into one arm. However not all neck related arm pain is due to a pinched nerve.

5. Muscle tension. Muscles in or around the neck can become tight and painful. This can occur for many reasons, & the muscles

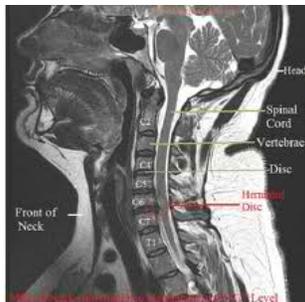


can sometimes 'lock-up' suddenly, causing acute pain.

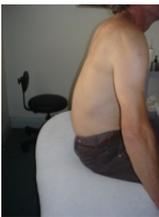
Chronic Neck Pain:

Chronic neck pain is by far the most common neck complaint for which people will seek treatment. Postural problems are usually the cause. Below is a list of different parts of the neck that can be involved in chronic neck pain. However it is rare that only one structure will be at fault. There will often be pain arising from several tissues at once.

1. **Facet joint.** The joints become stiff and painful due to excessive loading. The joints of the upper neck are most vulnerable, as they get compressed due to forward head posture.
2. **Ligaments.** This includes the ligaments and capsule of the joints, and other ligaments that support the neck. Ligaments don't like being stretched for prolonged periods. Chronic over-stretching, due to postural faults & lack of muscular support, can make them very painful.
3. **Discs.** The intervertebral discs between the bones are subject to wear & tear. This is part of aging, and occurs mostly in the lower neck. In certain circumstances, the disc can bulge or become painful due to injury, inflammation or degeneration.
4. **Muscles.** The muscles are always significantly involved in any type of chronic neck pain. Some become tight and painful, others stretched and weak. 'Trigger points' or 'knots' are commonly found in certain muscles around the neck.
5. **Nerves.** Nerve pain can occur due to chronic tension or compression. The pain can come and go, or be present most of the time. It can range from being mild to being very severe.



Treatments include:

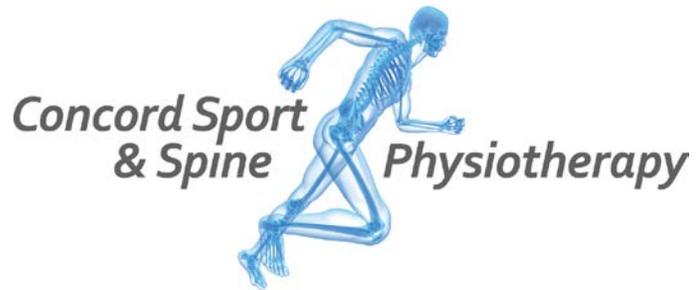
1. **Joint mobilisation or manipulation.** Stiff and painful joints will often free up & settle with treatments that get them moving into their stiff directions. 
2. **Massage.** Tight muscles become painful & often 'clamp down' on the joints, restricting their movement. Massage can include transverse or longitudinal pressures, & trigger point techniques. 
3. **Trigger point dry needling.** This is a very effective way to settle painful *trigger points* in the muscles. It involves using an acupuncture needle, rather than massage, to ease tight points in the muscle. 
4. **Postural correction.** The posture of the whole spine needs addressing, particularly with chronic neck pain. This will often require you to make changes to the way you work, move, and to your surroundings. For example see the section on 'Computer Workplace Set-up'. With office workers, there is often a typical 'computer posture', where people who have worked in this position for a moderate to long time, develop specific changes to their spinal curves. This intensifies the stress in certain parts of the body. Correction is about minimizing this stress. 
2. **Stretching and strengthening exercises** may be necessary to correct tight and weak muscles.
3. **Traction.** This is sometimes used to relieve pressure on nerves, or to help mobilise stiff joints.

Most neck pain will respond well to treatment. Where pain does not settle quickly, or is more severe & widespread, other factors may be involved. Cervical discogenic pain with or without nerve impingement, is one of the more common problems that may be difficult to treat. These tissues do not heal as quickly, & treatment needs to be modified to suit the condition as it presents. Manual therapy will not always be effective, and other approaches may be required. However the old adage that "time is the best healer", is worth remembering when conservative treatments do not offer relief.

Treatment.

This will depend on the cause and source of the pain. Most acute neck complaints settle quickly with treatment. The exception is an acutely inflamed nerve. Chronic pain may take longer to settle, but most of the time this will also respond well to treatment. This is because the cause of the pain is usually reversible. More than the rest of the body, the neck likes to be active & moving rather than static. This is important to remember when aiming for long-term pain relief.

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