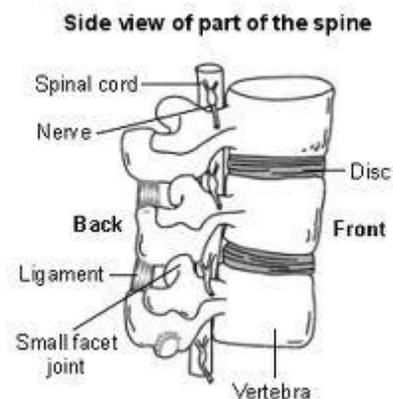
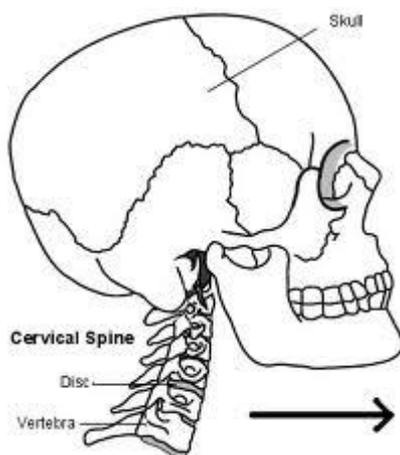


## Self Management of Neck (Cervical) Pain

The neck (cervical spine) is made up of seven bones called vertebrae with discs between each vertebrae which act as shock absorbers and allow the neck to move. The vertebrae are supported by strong ligaments (fibres that link the bones together) and muscles which enable the neck to move. Within the vertebrae is the spinal cord which contains nerves carrying messages to and from the brain. Nerves come out from between the vertebrae in the neck to take and receive messages to the arms. A major blood vessel called the vertebral artery also runs alongside the vertebrae to carry blood to the brain.



### What causes neck pain?

Neck pain can occur at any age but is more common as you get older. It may come on as a result of trauma eg, whiplash injury, you may wake with pain or it may come on gradually for no apparent reason.

### What are the symptoms of neck problems?

**Pain and stiffness** – pain may be in middle of the neck or to one side. Pain may travel to the shoulder or shoulder blade. Muscles may feel tight and stiffness may be worse after rest.

**Numbness and tingling** – if a nerve is compressed you may feel numbness or tingling down the arm to the fingers.

**Clicking or grating noises** – you may hear or feel this as you move your head. This is caused by roughened bony surfaces moving against each other. It is a common symptom but is not serious.

**Dizziness and blackouts** – if you feel dizzy when looking up or turning your head, this may be due to pinching of the vertebral arteries and can sometimes happen as a result of changes in the vertebrae. This kind of dizziness can have other causes so its best to seek medical advice.

## **What are the causes of Neck Pain?**

**Non specific neck pain** – Many people have a stiff and painful neck for no obvious reason. It may be due to spasm in the neck muscles, made worse by poor posture.

**Cervical Spondylosis** – Occurs due to wear and tear of the discs and small joints in the neck. This is quite normal as we get older. The discs become thinner and the spaces between bones get narrower. Spurs of bone known as osteophytes form at the edge of the vertebrae and small joints.

**Whiplash** – usually due to the head carried forward and backwards at speed in a car accident. It is thought the pain is due to muscle spasm and stretching of ligaments and other soft tissues.

**Tension** – muscles at the back of your neck have to work all the time to hold your head up. When we are worried or stressed we often tighten these muscles even more which can cause neck pain and tension headaches.

**Torticollis or wry neck** - is when the head becomes twisted to one side and it is very painful to move the head back straight. The cause is often not known however, it may be due to a minor strain or sprain to a muscle or ligament in the neck. It is common for people to go to bed feeling fine and to wake up the next morning with torticollis. The pain usually eases and clears away over a few days without any treatment.

**Cervical radiculopathy** is when the nerve is pressed on or damaged as it comes out from the spinal cord in the neck. As well as neck pain, there are symptoms such as loss of feeling (numbness), pins and needles, pain and weakness in parts of an arm supplied by the nerve. The common causes are cervical spondylosis and a disc bulge in the neck pressing on the nerve.

## **What is the treatment for neck pain?**

**Painkillers** as prescribed by your GP on a regular basis.

Use of **heat or ice packs** can be used for pain relief eg, frozen peas in a damp towel applied for 20 minutes, hot water bottle or shower.

**Good posture** can help to reduce neck pain. When **sitting**, sit well back in the chair and place a rolled towel in the small of your back. Make sure your shoulders are in line with your hips and your chin is not poking forward. Sitting correctly reduces the strain on muscles and ligaments.

When **standing** make sure your shoulders are back and your chin tucked in.

When **sleeping** avoid sleeping on your front as this strains your neck. Change the number, firmness and position of pillows for comfort. Often people with neck pain find using 1 pillow that can be pulled into the neck for support works best or adding a rolled towel into the pillow case so it is placed under your neck.

**Exercise** the neck to keep the joints mobile and the muscles flexible. At first the pain may be quite bad, and you may need to rest for a day or so. However, gently exercise the neck as soon as you are able. Do the exercises attached regularly within pain and gradually try to increase the range of the neck movements. Avoid rolling the neck in circular motions.

**Keep active.**

**See your doctor** if the pain becomes worse and or lasts longer than 4-6 weeks. Also if other symptoms develop such as loss of feeling (numbness), weakness, or persistent pins and needles in part of an arm or hand.