

Acute neck sprains

Information for patients

This leaflet can be made available in other formats including large print, CD and Braille and in languages other than English, upon request.

Neck sprain is an injury to the muscles and ligaments in your neck. It is usually caused by a sudden, unexpected movement forwards or backwards of your head and neck.

This leaflet tells you about your injury and the symptoms you might expect. It gives advice on posture and exercises you can do to help your recovery.

Neck pain and stiffness may not be noticed immediately after your neck sprain. It usually comes on gradually and can worsen over the next 24 - 48 hours, then gradually get better. You may also have a headache and some back pain. These symptoms can last from a few days to a few weeks or more.

If you had a neck problem before, then you may take longer to recover. If your neck stiffness or pain does not improve after 5 - 7 days you should make an appointment to see your GP.

Not all neck sprain injuries need to be x-rayed. After your examination your doctor may decide an x-ray is not needed.

What can I do to help myself?

To relieve your pain:

- take painkillers, as instructed by your doctor, for example, paracetamol, 2 tablets 4 times a day. Take **no more** than 8 tablets in 24 hours. **Do not** take paracetamol with any other medicines that contain paracetamol.

Always check the list of ingredients of other medication.

If your pain is not relieved by taking paracetamol you may also take anti-inflammatory medication, for example, ibuprofen (Nurofen). You must always follow the instructions provided in the leaflet supplied with your medication.

- place a cold compress, for example, a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a thin towel, over the part of your neck that hurts, every 2 - 3 hours.

Do not put ice directly against your skin.

Do not use the cold compress for more than 20 minutes at a time.

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- you may benefit from applying gentle heat (for example, a hot-water bottle wrapped in a towel, a hot shower or bath) along with gentle movements of your neck after 24 hours. This may help before exercising your neck.

To help movement:

Research information has shown that the sooner you start moving your neck the sooner you get better. This is why soft collars are no longer used for this type of injury.

You should begin moving your neck 'little and often', starting with slow, small movements and gradually increase. This will be painful at first, but will not harm your neck. Gradually increase to normal movement.

The following exercises may help:

- sit upright and tuck your chin into your chest
- slowly turn your head to look over your right shoulder then your left shoulder
- tuck your chin into your chest. Then stretch your head backwards to look upwards.
- repeat each exercise 5 - 10 times every 1 - 2 hours.

To help your posture:

- avoid positions that increase your neck pain, for example, sitting and reading at a desk or working at a computer for a long time
- keep your head up and your back straight
- use a supportive chair (try putting a rolled-up towel at your lower back).

To help you sleep:

- support your head so that your neck remains straight, usually using one pillow
- fold your arms in front of your body if sleeping on your side
- do not sleep on your tummy.

You must not drive until full movement of your neck is possible as this may invalidate your insurance policy.

Remember:

- your injury is not unusual and you should make a should make a speedy recovery
- pain does not necessarily mean serious damage
- the sooner you start moving the sooner you will get better.

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Contact numbers

If you need further advice, or have any problems, please telephone:

University Hospital of North Tees

Accident and Emergency Department

telephone: 01642 382799

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

Further information is available from:

NHS Choices

telephone: 111 (when it is less urgent than 999)

Calls to this number are free from landlines and mobile phones

or via the website at www.nhs.uk

Information used in the development of this leaflet:

Royal College of Radiologists Guidelines for Doctors, 4th Edition, 1998

Early mobilisation and outcome in acute sprains of the neck. McKinney LA. BMJ 1989;299:1006-8

Cambridge Textbook of Accident & Emergency Medicine. ISBN 0 521 43379 7

The whiplash book. HMSO; ISBN: 0-11-702862-2

Whiplash associated disorders: a review of the literature to guide patient information and advice. McClune T et al. Emergency Medicine Journal 2002; 19(6):499-506

Prevention of chronic pain after whiplash. Ferrari R. Emergency Medicine Journal 2002; 19(6):526-530

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This leaflet has been produced in partnership with patients and carers. All patient leaflets are regularly reviewed, and any suggestions you have as to how it may be improved are extremely valuable. Please write to the Quality Assurance Team, University Hospital of North Tees or email: patientinformation@nth.nhs.uk.

Comments, Concerns, Compliments or Complaints

We are continually trying to improve the services we provide.

We want to know what we're doing well or if there's anything which we can improve, that's why the Patient Experience Team is here to help.

Our Patient Experience Team is here to try to resolve your concerns as quickly as possible. If you would like to contact or request a copy of our PET leaflet, please contact:

telephone: 01642 624719
Monday – Friday, 9.00 am – 4.00 pm
Messages can be left on the answering machine and will be picked up throughout the day.

freephone: 0800 092 0084
Mobile: (can use text): 0779 561 883
Email: patientexperience@nth.nhs.uk

Out of hours if you wish to speak to a senior member of Trust staff, please contact the hospital switchboard who will bleep the appropriate person.

telephone: 01642 617617
24 hours a day, 7 days a week

The Patient Experience Team is available to discuss your concerns in person Monday – Friday, 1.30 pm – 4.30 pm.

Data Protection and use of patient information

The Trust has developed a Data Protection Policy in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1988 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000. All of our staff respect this policy and confidentiality is adhered to at all times. If you require further information please contact the Head of Communications.

telephone: 01642 624339 or www.dataprotection.gov.uk

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