

Neck pain

This sheet has been written for people with neck pain. It provides general information about neck pain and what can be done to help it. It also tells you where to find further information.

What is neck pain?

Neck pain is pain that is felt in the upper part of the spine. It is sign that the joints, muscles or other parts of the neck are injured, strained or not working properly. Neck pain is very common with about one in 10 people having it at any given time.

What are the symptoms?

Neck pain can be felt in the middle of the neck or on either side. The pain may travel to the shoulder or shoulder blade, and may even go right down your arm. Headaches and pain at the back of the head may also be caused by problems with your neck. Your neck may feel stiff, making it difficult to turn or move your head.

What causes it?

There are many joints, muscles and other structures in the neck that can cause pain. It may be the result of an injury but in most cases it is not possible to find a cause of the pain. It can be worrying not knowing exactly what is wrong. The good news is that research shows you do not need to know the exact cause of the pain to be able to deal with it successfully. Less than one in 100 cases of neck pain are caused by a serious medical problem.

Should I see a doctor?

You should talk to your doctor or other health professional if your pain is bothering you. They will ask you about your symptoms and examine you. In most cases tests such as x-rays and blood tests are not helpful in finding out the cause of neck pain unless there has been an obvious injury or strain. They may check for any serious medical problems that could be causing your pain, but these are rare. You should see your doctor if:

- you have neck pain following a fall or accident, such as a car accident

- your pain does not settle down or starts getting worse
- you also have symptoms such as headache and vomiting, dizziness, losing weight, tingling or numbness in the arms or legs, sweats and chills or problems swallowing.

What will happen to me?

For most people neck pain settles down fairly quickly. This usually takes several weeks but can vary between people. Some people still have problems with their neck even after the original problem has settled down. This is often because a lack of activity has caused stiffness and weakness of the neck muscles.

What can I do?

- 1. Talk to your healthcare team.** It is normal to worry about the cause of your pain and how it will affect you. Talking to your doctor or other health professional about your worries can be helpful. You will usually find there is no serious cause and there are ways you can deal with it.
- 2. Learn about neck pain and play an active role in your treatment.** Not all information you read or hear about is trustworthy so always talk to your doctor or healthcare team about treatments you are thinking about trying. Reliable sources of further information are also listed in the section below. Self management courses aim to help you develop skills to be actively involved in your healthcare. Contact your local Arthritis Office for details of these courses.
- 3. Learn ways to manage pain.** Talk to your healthcare team about ways to relieve your pain. There are many things you can try, including:
 - acupuncture: this has been shown to be helpful for longer-term neck pain

- manipulation or mobilisation of the neck may reduce pain in the short-term but the long-term benefits are unproven
- medicines: always talk to your doctor or pharmacist before you take any medicine for your neck pain, as even natural and over-the-counter medicines can have side effects. See the *Medicines and arthritis* information sheet.

4. Stay active. Your neck is designed for movement. The sooner you starting moving your neck normally the sooner your neck will feel better. You may need to rest or reduce some activities when the pain is bad. But resting for more than a day or two usually does not help and may do more harm than good. See your physiotherapist or other health professional for advice about exercises to keep your neck moving. See the *Working with your healthcare team* sheet for more information about seeing a physiotherapist.

5. Acknowledge your feelings and seek support. It is natural to feel scared, frustrated, sad and sometimes angry when you have pain. Be aware of these feelings and get help if they start affecting your daily life. See the *Arthritis and emotions* information sheet.

There are many other treatments for neck pain that have not been well proven Some unproven treatments may still be useful, however further research is needed. These treatments include:

- TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation)
- electrotherapy (physiotherapy treatments involving an electric current, such as electrical muscle stimulation, pulsed electromagnetic field therapy)
- massage
- magnets
- herbal medicines
- heat and cold (for example, hot water bottles, heat packs, ice packs)
- traction.

Neck collars have been proven not to be useful for neck pain. Your healthcare team can give you more advice and information about whether any of these or other treatments might be useful for you. Or see the *Dealing with pain* information sheet.

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ARTHRITIS OFFICE FOR MORE INFORMATION SHEETS ON ARTHRITIS.

Neck pain is common and is rarely due to serious disease.

Staying active will help you get better faster and prevent more problems.

For more information:

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) has an information sheet on acute neck pain available only via the internet at www.nhmrc.gov.au

To find a physiotherapist, ask your doctor, contact the Australian Physiotherapy Association on 1300 306 622 or use the 'find a physio' tool at www.physiotherapy.asn.au