

Neck Pain

[Neck pain](#) is discomfort that occurs in, or originates from, the cervical spine – the seven vertebrae that form the top of the backbone and provide support for the head.

Most of us will experience neck pain, also referred to as cervicalgia, at some point in our lives. Nearly all neck pain fades and disappears over time, but if it is severe or persists, it should never be ignored. You should consider visiting your doctor if you experience neck pain symptoms such as:

- Sharp pain
- A dull ache
- Neck stiffness
- Radiating discomfort or tingling down the arms
- Numbness in the arms or hands
- Severe headaches

All of these neck pain symptoms and others can give your doctor insight to the origin of your pain. For example, if you are experiencing muscle weakness in your upper limbs, it could be an indication of a cervical herniated disc. You have seven cervical vertebrae – which are numbered as C1-C7 – and your physician may be able to isolate the location of a herniated disc by the precise symptoms you describe. The following symptoms could indicate a ruptured disc between corresponding vertebrae in the neck:

- Between C4-C5 – Weakness in the shoulder, sometimes accompanied by shoulder pain
- Between C5-C6 – Weakness in the biceps and wrist, along with numbness and tingling in the hand and thumb
- Between C6-C7 – Weakness in the triceps, as well as weakness, numbness, and pain that may travel to the fingers, especially the middle finger

** At times, an X-ray, MRI or CT scan may be necessary to help diagnose the problem*



Not all neck pain symptoms require extensive medical attention, but you should always consider a visit to your doctor if you experience neck stiffness, a sharp pain, a dull ache, tingling or numbness in your arms or hands, or severe headaches. Medical advice is especially important if your pain is persistent, or if it comes and goes frequently.

This kind of lingering pain is called chronic pain. If your neck pain symptoms ebb and flow with different degrees of severity – but you’re never quite free of it – you may be experiencing chronic neck pain. Pain is considered chronic if it lasts more than three months and you probably should visit your doctor for proper diagnosis. Some potential causes are degenerative disc disease, a bulging disc or facet disease.

Pain can also be acute, or occur suddenly. Perhaps you slept with your head at an awkward position on your pillow, and now your neck hurts. Accident victims also are vulnerable to acute neck pain, which can be caused by whiplash, muscle strain or other injuries to the cervical spine region. Acute pain generally lasts between two weeks and three months, but sometimes can develop into chronic pain if not treated.

These symptoms could be the result of a number of neck pain causes, including muscle strain, ligament sprain, whiplash, or even a medical emergency such as meningitis. The pain also could be caused by one or more cervical spine conditions, such as a herniated disc, degenerative disc disease, osteoarthritis (facet disease) or cervical spinal stenosis.

WHAT CAUSES NECK PAIN?

Neck pain is the discomfort associated with any part of the neck, but what causes neck pain? Many situations and conditions can be to blame. Activities in our daily lives, medical conditions, and accidents can all contribute to its onset. The type of pain will vary between mild and severe, and can present as an aching, burning, dull, sharp, or shooting pain. Numbness, weakness, spasms, or tingling in the shoulders, arms, and hands also may occur. In most cases, the pain and other symptoms will subside over time.



During Your Day

You may have fallen asleep in an awkward position and woke up in the morning with a crick in your neck. Driving with tensed muscles, or sitting hunched over your desk for long periods of time, can result in a stiff neck. Your computer monitor, if too high or too low, will force you to hold your head in an uncomfortable position, placing undue strain on your neck. Neck pain also can be attributed to having poor posture – with your head forward and shoulders bowed inward or to sustaining an impact to your head or upper body while playing sports. The everyday stress and tensions you deal with may also be responsible for neck discomfort.

What Should I Do if I Have Neck Pain?

Discovering the cause of neck pain can be difficult, as it may stem from a variety of conditions. You should pay close attention to any other symptoms that may develop, as this can help you determine the reason for your pain and what steps you should take to remedy it.

If your neck pain occurs suddenly after a fall, a car accident or sports injury, you should see a doctor immediately. Your doctor may recommend that you initially treat symptoms such as stiffness, soreness, weakness, numbness, and difficulty moving your head by trying the following treatments. Take note of what makes your neck pain better or worse, as your doctor will use that information to properly diagnose your condition.

TREATMENTS THAT YOUR DOCTOR MAY RECOMMEND

- **Avoid sleeping on your stomach:** Stomach sleepers strain the muscles in the neck more than those who sleep on their side or back. Confirm that your pillow provides enough support for your head and neck, or invest in a neck pillow.
- **Massage:** Getting a massage will help loosen the muscles in your neck and may lessen symptoms.
- **Cold and hot therapy:** In the first two days of feeling pain, ice the area in 20-minute increments every few hours. This will help reduce inflammation. Thereafter, heat therapy in the form of heat packs or a warm bath may ease muscle tension.

- **Check your posture:** Maintain correct posture when sitting and standing to refrain from aggravating your neck pain.
- **Stretch:** Keep your muscles pliable by stretching before exercise or after sitting for long periods.
- **Check your office setup:** If you sit at a desk for the majority of the day, be sure your office chair is ergonomically designed. Your computer monitors should also be adjusted to reduce strain on your neck.
- **Medication:** Taking non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication can help alleviate symptoms.

NON-SURGICAL TREATMENT

Non-surgical treatment, also called conservative treatment, generally is effective for most forms and causes of neck pain. Some neck pain goes away with time, other people may find that pain relief is possible through a change in lifestyle or behavior. All in all, the cause and severity of neck pain will determine the form of treatment necessary to relieve it. The most important point to remember is that a health professional should be consulted before you undertake any form of treatment for neck and back pain.

Among the non-surgical treatments your physician may recommend are exercise to strengthen the neck muscles, over-the-counter pain medicine like ibuprofen or acetaminophen, or modifying your daily activity to help relieve stress on the cervical vertebrae and spinal column.



Here are a few other non-surgical treatments your doctor might suggest:

1. [Epidural injections](#)
 - The epidural space is where nerve roots are located along the spine. Anti-inflammatory drugs can be injected into the epidural space to help relieve nerves that might be inflamed or impinged by a bulging disc or other neck pain causes.
2. Physical therapy for neck pain
 - A trained therapist can prescribe an exercise regimen designed to strengthen the neck muscles and help reduce your pain. Some sufferers of degenerative disc disease in the neck can manage their pain through physical therapy.
3. Hot or cold pads
 - Heat applied to a sore neck will increase blood flow and could improve range of motion. Cold pads will decrease blood flow and will help limit inflammation. A physical therapist might alternate heat and cold during a therapy session.
4. Therapeutic massage for neck pain
 - This can help relax the neck muscles and reduce pain in the short term.
5. Acupuncture
 - Some believe the insertion of fine needles into specific points on the body can help relieve pain. Acupuncture has been used by some as an alternative to massage to achieve short-term pain relief.
6. Chiropractic therapy.
 - A chiropractor makes manual adjustments to the body, primarily to the spine, in an effort to relieve back or neck pain.

NECK PAIN EXERCISES



Neck pain exercises can be used to help manage back or neck pain associated with spinal conditions such as osteoarthritis, degenerative disc disease, herniated disc, bulging disc and others. Doctors and physical therapists often prescribe an exercise regimen as part of a course of conservative treatment.

But neck pain exercises aren't just for people with serious spinal conditions. Most neck pain is a result of everyday muscle strain. We all experience it from time to time, whether we sit at a desk in front of a computer all day or work a more physical job, such as golf course maintenance. For most of us, the same exercises a doctor might suggest to a patient with a more serious spine issue also can help us combat those occasional twinges of discomfort that can make it tough to get through the work day. Even if you think your neck pain symptoms are minor, however, you should never start any exercise program without consulting your doctor first.

Examples of simple neck pain exercises include:

- Using a slow nodding motion, alternate looking straight up at the ceiling and tucking the chin into the chest.
- Slowly bend each ear sideways toward the shoulder.
- Rotate the head left, then right, as if to say "no" to neck pain.
- Use your hand to apply isometric pressure against the temple, the forehead, and back of the head.
- Slowly rotate the shoulder blades backward and downward.

Whether you're a spinal patient or an otherwise healthy person suffering from occasional neck pain, these neck pain exercises should be performed slowly and never to the point of unbearable pain. You also should remember not to hold your breath while you exercise, because that deprives the muscles of the oxygen they need to perform.