

# Neck Strain

## What is neck strain?

A strain is a tear of a muscle or tendon. Your neck is surrounded by small muscles, which run close to the vertebrae, and larger muscles, which make up the visible muscles of the neck.

## How does it occur?

Neck strains most often occur when the head and neck are forcibly moved, such as in a whiplash injury or from contact in sports.

## What are the symptoms?

You have pain in your neck. When the neck muscles go into spasm you feel hard, tight muscles in your neck that are very tender to the touch. You have pain when you move your head to either side or when you try to move your head up or down. The spasming muscles can cause headaches.

## How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will examine your neck. Your neck muscles will be tender and tight. You may have pain over the bones in your neck. Your health care provider may order x-rays to make sure the vertebrae are not injured.

## How is it treated?

Right after the injury you should place an ice pack on your neck for 20 to 30 minutes every 3 or 4 hours for 2 to 3 days or until the pain goes away.

Your health care provider may prescribe an anti-inflammatory medication and a neck collar to support your neck and prevent further injury.

If you still have neck pain several days after the injury and after using ice, your health care

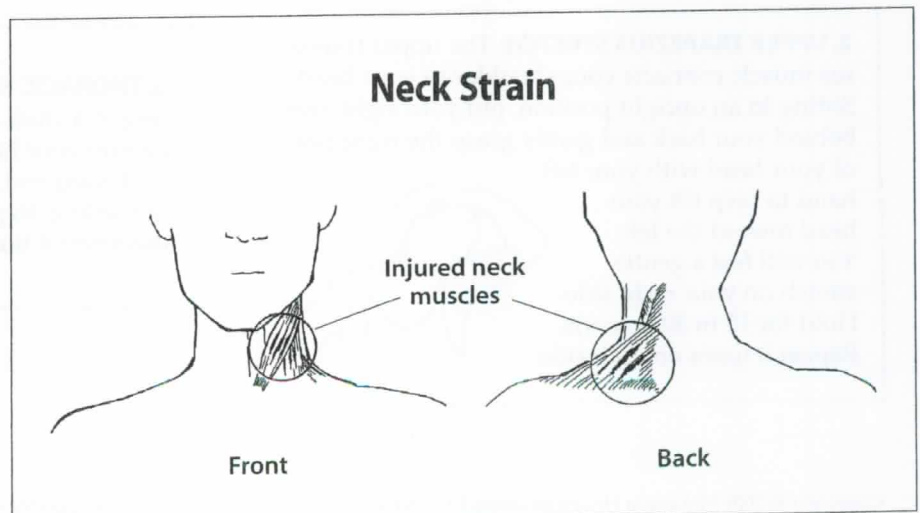
provider may recommend using moist heat on your neck. You can buy a moist-heat pad or make your own by soaking towels in hot water. You should apply moist heat to your neck for 20 to 30 minutes every 3 or 4 hours until the pain goes away. You may find that it helps to alternate putting heat and ice on your neck.

## How long will the effects last?

Most people recover from neck strains in a few days to a few weeks, but some people take longer to get better.

## When can I return to my sport or activity?

The goal of rehabilitation is to return you to your sport or activity as soon as is safely possible. If you return too soon you may worsen your injury, which could lead to permanent damage. Everyone recovers from injury at a different rate. Return to your sport or activity will be determined by how soon your neck recovers, not by how many days or weeks it has been since your injury occurred. In general, the longer you have symptoms before you start treatment, the longer it will take to get better.



If you participate in contact sports, it is important to rehabilitate your neck and shoulders before going back to competition. You must have full range of motion of your neck. This means you must be able to:

- ▶ turn your head fully to look over both shoulders
- ▶ extend your head backward as far as possible
- ▶ flex your neck forward until your chin touches your chest
- ▶ move your head in each direction so that your ear touches your shoulder.

If any of these actions cause burning in your neck or shoulder, or pain or spasm in your neck or shoulder muscles, you are not yet able to return.

### How can I prevent neck strain?

Neck strain is best prevented by having strong and supple neck muscles. If you have a job that requires you to be in one position all day (for example, work at a computer all day), it is very important to take breaks and relax your neck muscles.

In many cases an injury to the neck occurs during an accident that is not preventable.

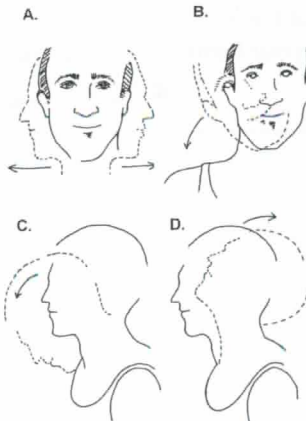
## Neck Strain Rehabilitation Exercises

Do these exercises only if you do not have pain or numbness running down your arm or into your hand. The first 4 exercises are meant to help your neck remain flexible. The last exercise (head lifts) will help you maintain or regain your range of motion.

### 1. NECK RANGE OF MOTION EXERCISES

A. Neck rotation: Sit in a chair, keeping your neck, shoulders, and trunk straight. First, turn your head slowly to the right. Move it gently to the point of pain. Move it back to the forward position. Relax. Then move it to the left. Repeat 10 times.

B. Neck side bend: Tilt your head so that your right ear moves toward your right shoulder. Move it to the point of pain. Then tilt your head so your left ear moves toward your



left shoulder. Make sure you do not rotate your head while tilting or raise your shoulder toward your head. Repeat this exercise 10 times in each direction.

C. Neck flexion: Bend your head forward, reaching your chin toward your chest. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 10 times.

D. Neck extension: Bring your head back so that your chin is pointing toward the ceiling. Repeat 10 times.

**2. UPPER TRAPEZIUS STRETCH:** The upper trapezius muscle connects your shoulder to your head. Sitting in an upright position, put your right arm behind your back and gently grasp the right side of your head with your left hand to help tilt your head toward the left. You will feel a gentle stretch on your right side. Hold for 15 to 30 seconds. Repeat 3 times on each side.



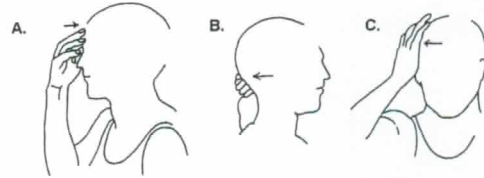
**3. SCALENE STRETCH:** This stretches the neck muscles that attach to your ribs. Sitting in an upright position, clasp both hands behind your back, lower your left shoulder, and tilt your head toward the right. Hold this position for 15 to 30 seconds and then come back to the starting position. Lower your right shoulder and tilt your head toward the left until you feel a stretch. Hold for 15 to 30 seconds. Repeat 3 times on each side.



**4. NECK ISOMETRIC EXERCISES**

- A. Neck flexion: Sit tall, eyes straight ahead, and chin level. Place your palm against your forehead and gently push your forehead into your palm. Hold for 5 seconds and release. Do 3 sets of 5.
- B. Neck extension: Clasp your hands together and place them behind your head. Press the back of your head into your palm. Hold 5 seconds and release. Do 3 sets of 5.

- C. Neck side bend: Place the palm of your hand at the side of your temple and press your temple into the palm of your hand. Hold 5 seconds and release. Do 3 sets of 5 on each side.

**5. HEAD LIFTS**

- A. Neck curl: Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Tuck your chin and lift your head toward your chest, keeping your shoulders on the floor. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 10 times.
- B. Neck side bend: Lie on your right side with your right arm laying straight out. Rest your head on your arm, then lift your head slowly toward your left shoulder. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 10 times. Switch to your left side and repeat the exercise lifting your head toward your right shoulder.

- C. Hands and knees neck extension: Get on your hands and knees and look down at the floor. Keep your back straight and let your head slowly drop toward your chest. Then tuck your chin and lift your head up until your neck is level with your back. Hold this position for 5 seconds. Repeat 10 times.

