

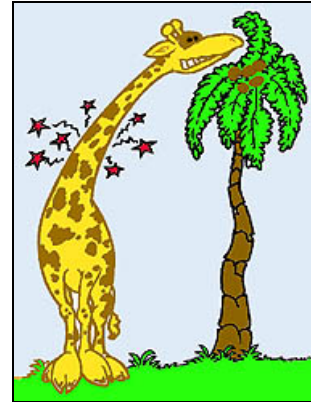
It's a Pain In the Neck!

Part 2

Solutions for your neck

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In the last article we talked about the structure of the neck and sources of neck problems. In this article, we discuss ways to prevent neck problems and treatments for neck pain.

Prevention

Postural and stress pain.

- Use relaxation techniques to prevent stress and tension in the neck muscles.^{1,2,5,9} Learn to relax the neck muscles using audio tapes available through doctors, physiotherapists, or from the Pain Relief Foundation listed under Resources below.⁶ Done regularly, meditation, guided imagery, or progressive muscle relaxation can help your body let go of physical and emotional tension.¹
- Improve your body awareness. The Alexander Technique is a highly recommended method for achieving better posture.⁶ The Balance Center in Palo Alto (www.balancecenter.com) also teaches very effective classes in posture awareness.
- Take the recommended daily allowance of calcium and magnesium to help relax muscles and prevent muscle spasms.¹ 1,000 mg of calcium and 500 mg of magnesium is recommended
- Regular exercise is recommended to maintain a fit and flexible body.¹ Exercise can improve the general alignment of the body, improve breathing, and release muscle tension.¹
- Stretching and strengthening exercises specifically for your neck can help prevent muscle fatigue and injury.^{2,5,6,7} If you do these exercises every day, your neck will become stronger.⁶ See *Attachment 1* for stretching and strengthening exercises.
- Apply ice to your neck after physical activity if you tend to get neck pain from exercise.²
- Notice your posture throughout the day and be mindful to keep your head upright.⁹ While sitting, it is easier to do this if you keep your back supported by sitting all the way back in the chair.
- Adjust the computer monitor so the top of the screen is at eye level (or below, if you wear bifocals). If the screen is at the correct height, your neck doesn't have to support your head in an unbalanced position, looking up or down.^{2,3}
- Rethink your arrangements for crafts and hobbies to improve your posture and support your neck muscles.¹ Keep what you are working with as close to you as possible.
- Avoid tucking the phone between your ear and shoulder when you talk.³ Use a headset when using the telephone, while typing or taking notes or walking around the house.^{2,3}
- When reading or typing from documents at your desk, place them in a holder at eye level.² If you read at your desk, keep materials on a slanted surface to keep your neck aligned and your head upright.⁹ If you read in bed, be sure your head is supported and you're not leaning forward.⁹ Refer to our web page with recommendations for document holders and slant boards (<http://www.workingwell.org/pdochldr.html>).
- Take frequent breaks if you drive long distances or work long hours at your computer.^{3,9} Stretch during these breaks; shrug your shoulders up and down, pull your shoulder blades together and then

relax, and pull your shoulders down while leaning your head to each side to stretch your neck muscles.³

- Evaluate your sleeping conditions. Don't sleep on your stomach.^{1,9} When you sleep on your stomach with your head turned to one side night after night, you strain the same muscles over and over.⁹ Make sure your pillow is comfortably supporting your head and neck. Using a neck pillow or orthopedic pillow may help. Do not sleep on a mattress that is very soft.^{2,7} When traveling, invest in a neck pillow to support your head and neck in an upright position.⁹ Sleeping in a car or plane in a slouched, cramped position often leads to neck pain.



Illustrations courtesy of Reference 7



Illustration courtesy of www.painreliever.com

- Avoid carrying heavy loads, especially when carried over one shoulder. This can strain your neck and upset the alignment of your spine. Use a backpack (and carry it on two shoulders!) or a rolling cart, or at least streamline your purse or shoulder bag so you carry only what you use on a daily basis.
- Use seat belts, properly adjusted car headrests, and bike helmets to prevent injuries to the neck.²

Cervical spondylosis. Many cases are not preventable.¹⁰ Research has indicated that a large part of the normal wear and tear of the spine is genetically determined.⁶ Preventing injury by using proper sports equipment and techniques may help prevent some degeneration.¹⁰ By age 60, 70% of women and 85% of men show evidence of cervical spondylosis in x-rays.¹⁰

Cervical herniated disc. Many factors increase the risk for disc herniation. Use of tobacco, lack of regular exercise, inadequate nutrition, and obesity contribute significantly to poor disc health.¹⁴ As the body ages, the discs gradually dry out, affecting disc strength and resiliency.¹⁴ Poor posture and incorrect body mechanics can place additional stress on the cervical spine.¹⁴ To reduce the risk of disc herniation, immediately change habits that will help preserve your spine:

- As mentioned above, be aware of poor posture and body mechanics.¹⁴ Adjust work and hobby areas to ensure that the head is upright. Take classes at the Balance Center or investigate the Alexander Technique to improve your movements and posture.
- Stop smoking.¹⁴
- Do exercises to strengthen the neck (Attachment 1).¹⁴
- Eat a proper diet and if you are overweight, lose weight to reduce the strain on your spine.¹⁴

Treatment

Postural and stress pain. The following treatments can help reduce pain from general neck stresses and strains.

- Do not use heat if there is inflammation. Heat can increase swelling, causing more pain.⁴ If your muscles are tight or knotted, heat can help relax them. Take a hot shower and let the water run on your neck, or use hot moist heat from wet towel compresses.⁷ Keep the heat on long enough to allow your skin to turn somewhat red and warm from increased circulation.⁷
- Remain active. Bed rest is not necessary. If you are given a neck-collar, try not to use it for more than a couple of days so you do not lose muscle strength.⁵ There is no evidence that support collars are any help for short-lived or long-lived neck pain.
- Massage restores mobility by reducing tension and improving blood flow.^{1,6} Try using aromatic oils or using liniments (such as Tiger Balm) which produce a feeling of warmth and reduce pain.⁶
- Acupuncture is another option that may help, as can chiropractic or osteopathic manipulation.¹
- Neck exercises (Attachment 1) will restore your range of motion, promote strength, break down localized stiffness, and facilitate recovery.⁶
- Try using a neck pillow to maintain correct neck position while sleeping.⁶

Cervical spondylosis. Symptoms of this degeneration, also termed cervical osteoarthritis, vary a lot. As mentioned earlier, some people exhibit significant degeneration in x-rays, but experience no pain. Symptoms may include neck pain, sometimes radiating to the arms or shoulders, progressive stiffness of the neck, popping or grinding in the neck, loss of sensation or abnormal sensations in the shoulders or arms, loss of balance, or headaches, especially in the back of the head.¹⁰ Most people experience some chronic problems, but these do respond to treatment and do not require surgery.

Treatment involves relief of pain and prevention of permanent spinal cord and nerve root injury.¹⁰ In some minor cases, no treatment is required. One or a combination of the following treatments may be recommended:

- Rest is often recommended, from limiting normal activities to complete bed rest for 3-5 days.¹¹
- A neck collar or brace limits neck movement and moves the load of the head to the shoulders.¹¹
- Exercises will relieve symptoms and strengthen neck and shoulder muscles.¹¹
- Pain relieving drugs, generally non-steroidal anti-inflammatories such as aspirin or ibuprofen, will help reduce inflammation and pain. In some cases, a muscle relaxing drug may be prescribed.¹¹
- Alternative therapies including physiotherapy, massage, yoga, chiropractic care, acupuncture and posture retraining may be used to help relieve tension, manage pain, and strengthen neck and back muscles.¹¹ Vitamin and mineral supplements, herbal therapies and homeopathy may help to rebuild the weakened spinal structure.¹¹
- Pain-relieving injections of corticosteroids can help reduce inflammation and pain by reducing muscle contraction.¹¹
- Surgery is a last resort. The effectiveness of surgery may only last a year or two. It may be recommended in severe or chronic pain or loss of movement.¹¹

Cervical herniated disc. Most of the time, herniated discs can be treated with one or a combination of the following treatments:

- Anti-inflammatories to reduce pain and inflammation of the disc.⁸
- Physical therapy and exercises.⁸
- Chiropractic or osteopathic manipulation to restore normal joint motion. High-velocity manipulation should be avoided.⁸

- Avoid vibration and compression to the cervical spine and overhead activities that require prolonged bending or rotation of the neck (boating, snowmobile riding, running, bird-watching, etc.).⁸
- Cervical traction can help reduce pressure over the nerve root. It doesn't work for everyone, but it is easy to do and the patient can use a home traction device for pain relief.⁸
- Medications such as narcotic agents, muscle relaxants or anti-depressants may help reduce nerve pain and help restore normal sleep patterns.⁸ Injections to selective nerve roots can be very effective if accompanied by a comprehensive rehabilitation program that may involve a number of the above treatments.⁸

If the above treatments do not resolve the pain within 6 to 12 weeks or if the pain and disability is severe, spinal surgery is a final option. Surgery on cervical herniated discs is generally very reliable and can be done with a minimal amount of unwanted aftereffects.⁸ Success rates to relieve arm pain via surgery are 95-98%.⁸

RESOURCES:

- *The Pain Relief Foundation.* Pain management and relaxation tapes. 0151-529-5820 (U.K.).
<http://www.painreliefoundation.org.uk/foundation/information.html>
- *The Pain Reliever.* Neck pillows. 1-888-498-8587. http://www.painreliever.com/pillows_neck.html
- *The Comfort Channel.* Neck pillows. 1-800-303-7574. <http://www.comfortchannel.com/level.itml/icOid/3644>

This article and all of our articles are intended for your information and education. We are not experts in the diagnosis and treatment of specific medical or mental problems. When dealing with a severe problem, please consult with a healthcare or mental health professional and research the alternatives available for your particular diagnosis prior to embarking on a treatment plan. You are ultimately responsible for your own health and treatment!



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Attachment 1




If you are currently experiencing neck pain with numbness in your chest, shoulder or arm, please do not attempt any of the techniques listed below. Contact your physician or health practitioner for an evaluation.⁷

Stretching exercises for the neck

<p>Let your neck bend to the side and with your hand, apply a little pressure to your head to help bring it into the same direction. Gently pull until you feel a nice stretch and hold it for 6 seconds. Then bend your neck to the other side and hold it for 6 seconds. Repeat this sequence 3 times.⁷</p>	
<p>With your shoulders relaxed, turn your head to the side as if you are looking over your shoulder. Turn until you feel a stretch and hold it for 6 seconds. Turn to the other side and do the same thing. Repeat the sequence 3 times.⁷</p>	

Strengthening exercises for the neck

Gently tense your neck muscles for a few seconds in each position. If you do this every day, the neck movements will increase your muscle strength.⁶

<p>Place one hand on the side of your head and hold it there. Press your head into your hand, trying to bend it to the side, but don't let your head move. Hold that contraction for 10 seconds. Do this three times and repeat with the opposite side.⁷</p>	
<p>Place both of your hands on your forehead. Push your head into your hands, not letting your head move and hold the contraction for 10 seconds. Do this three times on each side.⁷</p>	
<p>Place one hand onto the side of your head and hold it there. Turn your head into your hand as if you were going to look over your shoulder, only don't let your head move. Hold this contraction for 10 seconds. Do this three times on each side.⁷</p>	
<p>Stand with your back flat against a wall. Tuck your chin and press your head into the wall. Hold for 10 seconds and relax. Repeat this three times.⁷</p>	