

Neck and shoulder pain

The head is supported by the neck, which is made up of seven bones (vertebrae) stacked one on top of the other. The vertebrae are cushioned by discs of cartilage and bound together with ligaments. Muscles provide movement and additional support. The neck is very mobile, which means it is less stable than other areas of the body and more susceptible to injury. Trauma, poor posture and degenerative diseases, such as arthritis, are the most common causes of neck pain.

The shoulder is a ball and socket joint with a large range of movement. Once again, a mobile joint tends to be more susceptible to injury. The shoulder joint relies heavily on the shoulder muscles for stability. Any dysfunction of these muscles or other anatomical structures such as the collar bone, shoulder blade or joint itself can cause pain and mobility problems.

Both neck and shoulder pain can be successfully treated with physiotherapy.

Whiplash injury to the neck

An injury to the neck that results from increased forces in opposite directions during a short time span or increased speed is often called a whiplash. This may occur as a result of a motor vehicle accident, diving accident or similar mishap. This type of injury can overstretch the neck and upper back region, resulting in a strain or tear to the supporting ligaments, muscles and discs, and even irritating the nerves.

The common symptoms of a whiplash injury are pain, stiffness, dizziness and headache. Recovery depends on the individual and extent of the injury, but can take weeks to months. Treatment options may include:

- Pain-killing medication
- Anti-inflammatory drugs or muscle relaxants
- Icepacks for three days
- Gentle mobilisation exercises
- Gentle soft tissue mobilisation (massage) from a physiotherapist.

Maintaining your normal daily activities is ideal, although modifications may be necessary to assist in the recovery of your neck. Be adaptable and remain positive. If pain persists, a further examination or investigation may be required.

Posture problems and neck pain

Poor posture can cause neck pain by putting extra strain on ligaments and muscles. Standing with the shoulders slouched and chin jutting forward, working with your head down for long periods of time, slumping while seated and sleeping face-down are common postural problems that affect the neck.

Suggestions on how to prevent posture-related neck pain include:

- Correct your posture when standing or sitting, adjust your pelvic position, lift your chest gently, nod your chin slightly and relax your shoulders.
- Ensure your workstation is set up to help you sit properly.
- Stretch and change position frequently while you are working.
- Try not to sleep on your stomach, which overextends your neck.
- Choose a urethane or down pillow for neck support while you sleep.
- Combat the muscle-tightening effects of stress with relaxation techniques.
- Exercise regularly to improve muscle tone and posture.

Osteoarthritis can affect the neck

Osteoarthritis is one of the most common types of arthritis. Anyone can be affected. However, since osteoarthritis is the result of altered usage of the joints of the body over prolonged periods of time, older people are particularly prone. Osteoarthritis is characterised by the breakdown of cartilage, the firm cushion found between two bones to stop them from grinding together.

Symptoms include pain, stiffness and muscle weakness. Commonly affected areas include the neck, lower back, hands, hip and knee. There is no cure for osteoarthritis, but it can be managed with exercise. Keeping the joint mobile and in its proper alignment are the best ways to improve the health of the cartilage.

Common shoulder injuries

Diagnosing the cause of shoulder pain involves assessing the degree of movement and strength in the joint, and possibly taking an x-ray and/or ultrasound. Some of the conditions that commonly cause shoulder pain include:

- Strains, due to overexertion
- Tendonitis, due to overuse
- Shoulder joint instability
- Dislocation
- Collar or upper arm bone fractures
- 'Frozen' shoulder
- Pinched nerves.

Physiotherapy can help

Neck and shoulder pain can be successfully treated with physiotherapy. You don't need a doctor's referral. The physiotherapist will investigate the pain and determine its cause. Treatment depends on the cause, but may include:

- Soft tissue massage
- Mobilisation to stretch tight muscles and other soft tissue structures
- Mobilisation or manipulation of the joint
- Specific exercise programs
- Taping to stabilise the shoulder joint
- Relaxation therapy
- Various treatments such as electrotherapy, heat, laser or ultrasound treatment
- Information on how to correct postural problems.

Where to get help

- A physiotherapist
- Australian Physiotherapy Association Tel. (03) 9092 0888 or Find a Physio
- Your doctor

Things to remember

- The neck and shoulder are highly mobile, which means they are also prone to injury.
- Trauma, poor posture and arthritis are common causes of neck pain.
- Some shoulder conditions that can cause pain include strains, tendonitis and fractures.
- Neck and shoulder pain can be successfully treated with physiotherapy.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Physiotherapy Association

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