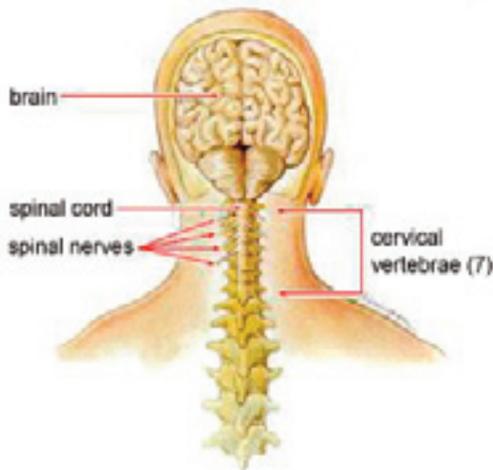


# Neck Pain



The neck (cervical spine) is composed of vertebrae that begin in the upper torso and end at the base of the skull. The bony vertebrae along with the ligaments (which are comparable to thick rubber bands) provide stability to the spine. The muscles allow for support and motion. The neck has a significant amount of motion and supports the weight of the head. However, because it is less protected than the rest of the spine, the neck can be vulnerable to injury and disorders that produce pain and restrict motion. For many people, neck pain is a temporary condition that disappears with time. Others need medical diagnosis and treatment to relieve their symptoms.

## Cause

Neck pain may result from abnormalities in the soft tissues—the muscles, ligaments, and nerves—as well as in bones and joints of the spine. The most common causes of neck pain are soft-tissue abnormalities due to injury or prolonged wear and tear. In rare instances, infection or tumors may cause neck pain. In some people, neck problems may be the source of pain in the upper back, shoulders, or arms.

## Inflammatory Diseases

Rheumatoid arthritis can destroy joints in the neck and cause severe stiffness and pain. Rheumatoid arthritis typically occurs in the upper neck area.

## Cervical Disk Degeneration (Spondylosis)

The disk acts as a shock absorber between the bones in the neck. In cervical disk degeneration (which typically occurs in people age 40 years and older), the normal gelatin-like center of the disk degenerates and the space between the vertebrae narrows. As the disk space narrows, added stress is applied to the joints of the spine causing further wear and degenerative disease. The cervical disk may also protrude and put pressure on the spinal cord or nerve roots when the rim of the disk weakens. This is known as a herniated cervical disk.

## Injury

Because the neck is so flexible and because it supports the head, it is extremely vulnerable to injury. Motor vehicle or diving accidents, contact sports, and falls may result in neck injury. The regular use of safety belts in motor vehicles can help to prevent or minimize neck injury. A "rear end" automobile collision may result in hyperextension, a backward motion of the neck beyond normal limits, or hyperflexion, a forward motion of the neck beyond normal limits. The most common neck injuries involve the soft tissues: the muscles and ligaments. Severe neck injuries with a fracture or dislocation of the neck may damage the spinal cord and cause paralysis.

## Other Causes

Less common causes of neck pain include tumors, infections, or congenital abnormalities of the vertebrae.

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## When Should You Seek Medical Care?

If severe neck pain occurs following an injury (motor vehicle accident, diving accident, or fall), a trained professional, such as a paramedic, should immobilize the patient to avoid the risk of further injury and possible paralysis. Medical care should be sought immediately.

Immediate medical care should also be sought when an injury causes pain in the neck that radiates down the arms and legs.

Radiating pain or numbness in your arms or legs causing weakness in the arms or legs with-out significant neck pain should also be evaluated.

If there has not been an injury, you should seek medical care when neck pain is:

- continuous and persistent
- severe
- accompanied by pain that radiates down the arms or legs
- accompanied by headaches, numbness, tingling, or weakness

## Treatment

In general, treatment for neck pain falls into one of three categories: medications, physical medicine, and surgery.

### Nonsurgical Treatment

**Medications:** Several medications may be used to help relieve your pain.

- Aspirin or acetaminophen can relieve pain with few side effects.
- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicines like ibuprofen and naproxen reduce pain and swelling.
- Narcotic pain medications, such as codeine or morphine, may help.
- Steroids, taken either orally or injected into your spine, deliver a high dose of anti-inflammatory medicine.

**Physical medicine:** Neck pain can be disabling. Medications and therapeutic treatments combined often relieve pain enough for you to do all the things you want to do.

- Physical therapy can include passive modalities such as heat, ice, massage, ultra-sound, and electrical stimulation. Active therapy consists of stretching, weight lifting, and cardiovascular exercises. Exercising

to restore motion and strength to your neck can be very helpful in relieving pain.

- Chiropractic or manipulation therapy is provided in many different forms. Some patients have relief from neck pain with these treatments.
- Traction is often used, but without scientific evidence for effectiveness.
- Other exercise-based programs, such as Pilates or yoga are helpful for some.

## Surgical Treatment

Surgery for neck pain should only be considered when nonsurgical treatment options have been tried and have failed. It is best to try nonsurgical options for 6 months to a year before considering surgery. In addition, surgery should only be considered if your doctor can pinpoint the source of your pain.

Surgery is not a last resort treatment option "when all else fails." Some patients are not candidates for surgery, even though they have significant pain and other treatments have not worked. Some types of chronic neck pain simply can not be treated with surgery.

## Prevention

It may not be possible to prevent all neck pain. We cannot avoid the normal wear and tear on our spines that goes along with aging. But there are things we can do to lessen the impact of neck problems. Having a healthy lifestyle is a good start.

**Exercise:** Combine aerobic exercise, like walking or swimming, with specific exercises to keep the muscles in your neck strong and flexible.

**Avoid Smoking:** Both the smoke and the nicotine cause your spine to age faster than normal.

**Proper Posture:** Good posture is important for avoiding future problems. A therapist can teach you how to safely stand, sit, and lift.

*Adapted from American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. For more information, see [orthoinfo.aaos.org](http://orthoinfo.aaos.org)*

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