

Knowing about your neck sprain



What causes neck sprain

A neck sprain happens when soft tissue such as muscles or ligaments stretch or tear. Ligaments connect bone to bone. Muscles work to hold your head up and to move your neck. Ligaments and muscles also help to protect the joints of the spine.

Neck sprain injuries have many causes. Excess force that flings your head back or forward can cause the muscles or ligaments to overstretch or tear. This can happen for example, in a car accident, when an awkward fall jars your neck, or when playing sports.

Other causes of a sprain include a sudden turn of the head, a force that compresses the neck such as a blow to the head, or holding the head in an awkward position for long periods.

Sometimes the neck muscles can get very tense and tired because of personal or work pressures, causing discomfort, stiffness and pain.

Neck strain can happen more than once. It is important to know what you can do to prevent it happening again.

Tips to help your recovery

When you first see your health professional

- Ask about pain medication that's right for you.
- Tell them about the jobs and activities you do at home and work – they may need to be changed.
- Ask about your treatment plan and discuss it with them.
- Ask about serious symptoms that may mean you need to see a specialist or have other tests.

During the next 1-4 weeks

- Stay active. If pain medication is not enough to help you do this, ask about other treatment options such as physiotherapy, postural advice and flexibility exercises.
- Depending on the type of job or activities you do, alternative work duties or reduced hours may be advised. Work with your health professional, employer and ACC to develop a safe work or return to work plan.
- Talk with your health professional if you have concerns.

Important facts

- Keeping active and avoiding bed rest will help your recovery.
- Simple painkillers, such as paracetamol help.
- The pain will settle – most people make an excellent recovery.
- Xrays and other tests are not usually needed unless you have serious symptoms.
- Serious neck injuries or diseases are not common, however, you must see your health professional if you:
 - have persistent numbness or pins and needles in your arms or legs,
 - cannot use your arms, hands or legs,
 - start having bladder problems,
 - have persisting pain or stiffness that lasts more than four to six weeks.

After 4-6 weeks

Most people with neck pain get better within four weeks.

If your symptoms have not improved

- Ask your health professional if an xray, further tests or referral to a specialist are needed.
- Ask about the rehabilitation options available to help your recovery.

Prevention tips

Many people experience a neck sprain more than once. So, to help prevent further problems:

- Stay fit and keep good muscle tone – ask your health professional for advice on which type of exercises will help.
- Make sure your bed and pillow keep your neck straight and supported.
- Avoid sitting in one position too long. Take regular standing breaks, stretch often and exercise your neck.
- When using a computer, sit on a firm chair with knees and hips level, lower back supported (as this automatically keeps your neck in a better position), and the screen at eye level so you don't have to tilt your head. Check your posture during the day. Your shoulders should be relaxed (down and slightly back), and your chin should be level and slightly tucked in (not poking forwards or tilting up).
- For more information on correct posture at work see www.habitatwork.co.nz.

Exercises



Neck (chin) tuck 1

Lie down with a small rolled up towel under your neck. Gently tuck your chin in. Do not tip your head up or down. Relax and repeat.



Neck side turns

Sit upright facing forwards. Turn your head gently to one side. Feel and hold a slight stretch on the other side. Return to facing forwards. Repeat. Then try in the opposite direction.



Neck (chin) tuck 2

When sitting or standing, gently tuck your chin in. Do not tip your head up or down. Relax and repeat.

Staying active

Try to do all the things that you would normally do at home and work. Some tasks involving heavy lifting or long hours at the computer may need to be temporarily changed.

The time it takes to return to normal activities increases with the physical demands of the job. Most people with physically demanding lives can expect to return to their usual activities by four weeks depending on the severity of their injury. Most people in desk jobs can expect to return to their usual activities within a few days.

Information in this leaflet is not intended to replace advice from a health professional.

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