

What is Neck pain?

Neck pain, often referred to as cervicalgia, occurs in or around the area of your spine below the head. This region, known as the cervical spine, can experience different types of pain. Axial neck pain is primarily felt in the neck itself, while radicular neck pain radiates to other areas, such as the shoulders or arms.



Neck pain can be classified as acute, lasting from a few days to six weeks, or chronic, persisting for more than three months. If left untreated, neck pain can disrupt your daily activities and negatively impact your quality of life.

The good news is that most causes of neck pain are not severe and can improve with conservative treatments, including pain relief medications, exercise, and stress management techniques.

How does Neck pain feel?

Neck pain can feel different for everyone, but some common descriptions include:

- A constant dull ache
- Sharp or burning sensations
- Pain that travels from the neck to the shoulders or arms



Other symptoms often associated with neck pain can include:

- Headaches
- Stiffness in the neck, shoulders, and upper back
- Difficulty turning or tilting the head
- Numbness or tingling (often referred to as pins and needles) in the shoulders or arms

This type of pain is fairly common, affecting about 10% to 20% of adults. It is more frequently seen in women and those assigned female at birth, with the risk of developing neck pain increasing as one ages.

Potential Causes of Neck Pain

Neck pain, known as cervicalgia, can arise from various sources, including strain, injury, and stress. Here are some common causes:



Aging: With age, the cervical spine can undergo natural wear and tear. Conditions like osteoarthritis (the breakdown of joint cartilage) and spinal stenosis (narrowing of the spinal canal) can lead to pain. Over time, repetitive motions and stress may weaken spinal discs, resulting in herniated discs or pinched nerves.

Physical Strain: Excessive use of neck muscles from repetitive or intense activities can lead to stiffness and discomfort. Factors like poor posture, weak core muscles, and excess weight can negatively affect spinal alignment, contributing to neck pain. For example, holding your neck in an awkward position to view a computer screen for long periods is a common trigger.

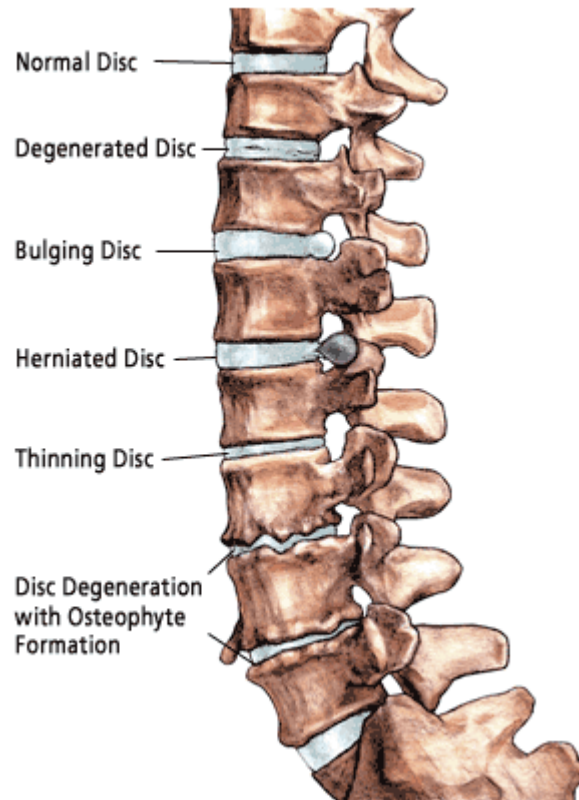
Mental Stress: Stress can cause muscle tension in the neck, leading to pain and stiffness. Many people don't realize they're tightening these muscles until they begin to experience discomfort.

Injury: Trauma, such as accidents, can damage the muscles, ligaments, discs, and nerves in the neck, resulting in pain. Whiplash from car crashes is a well-known cause of neck issues.

Growths: Tumours, cysts, and bone spurs can press on nerves in the neck, causing pain.

Other Health Conditions: Neck pain can also be a symptom of various health issues, including meningitis, rheumatoid arthritis, and cancer.

Examples of Disc Problems



Diagnosing Neck Pain

To diagnose neck pain, healthcare providers typically rely on a detailed medical history and a physical examination. The first priority is to rule out serious underlying conditions, such as spinal cord compression, myelopathy, infections, or cancer.

Medical History

Your provider will inquire about any past neck injuries, such as whiplash or herniated discs. They will also ask about your daily activities or work that may strain your neck. Specific questions about your pain, including when it started, its location, duration, and severity, will also be covered.

Physical Exam:

In the physical examination, your provider will evaluate your head and neck alignment and check your range of motion. They will feel around your neck and the surrounding muscles to identify tenderness or signs of strain.



Imaging tests are generally not needed for a straightforward diagnosis of neck pain, but if there's concern about a serious injury or if the pain is severe and persistent, your provider may recommend imaging to get a clearer view of your neck's condition.

Managing and Treating Neck Pain

The goal of treatment for neck pain is to relieve discomfort and enhance mobility. Most cases improve over time and can often be managed at home. Here are some common treatment options your healthcare provider may recommend:

Pain Relief Medications:

Over-the-counter pain relievers, like nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), can help alleviate pain and reduce inflammation. Muscle relaxants may also be prescribed to help the neck muscles recover.

Physical Therapy:

Working with a physical therapist or fitness trainer can help you learn exercises that strengthen neck muscles and improve flexibility.

Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS):

A TENS unit delivers low-level electrical currents to the skin near painful areas to disrupt pain signals. Always consult with your healthcare provider before using a TENS unit.



Steroid Injections:

Administering a steroid injection near nerve roots can help reduce inflammation and alleviate pain.

Surgery:

While most neck pain does not require surgical intervention, surgery may be necessary if vertebrae are misaligned or compressing nerves.

If pain is severe, you might be referred to a spine or pain specialist.

At-Home Relief for Neck Pain

In addition to medications, you can try several home remedies to alleviate neck pain:

Heat Therapy:

Take a warm shower or apply a heating pad or hot towel to the affected area for 15 minutes several times a day. Heat helps relax muscles and increase blood circulation.

Cold Therapy:

Use a cold pack or a bag of frozen vegetables wrapped in a thin towel for 15 minutes every few hours. Cold therapy can reduce inflammation and swelling, especially right after an injury.



Exercise:

Follow your healthcare provider's advice on neck exercises to relieve pain and improve range of motion. Avoid exercises if you have a serious injury or a pinched nerve. Apex Active Physiotherapist can give you an individualised program.

Stress Reduction:

Techniques such as mindfulness, meditation, deep breathing, and yoga can help reduce tension that may contribute to neck pain.

Quit Smoking:

Smoking can weaken bone structure, accelerate degenerative disk disease, and hinder healing.

Healing Time for Neck Pain

The duration for recovery from neck pain varies depending on the underlying cause. Neck pain due to common issues like strains or stress typically improves within one to two weeks, but complete recovery might take a few months.

Preventing Neck Pain

To help prevent neck pain associated with strains and muscle tension, consider the following tips:

How Forward Head Posture Causes Neck Pain



Maintain Good Posture:

Arrange your workspace and electronic devices to avoid slouching or straining your neck. Keep your shoulders aligned and back straight while sitting. Adjust your car seat to support good posture during drives.

Optimize Sleep Position:

Ensure proper alignment while sleeping. Use a supportive pillow if you sleep on your back or side. If you sleep on your back, placing a pillow under your knees can relieve pressure on your lower back. Avoid sleeping on your stomach with your head turned. Please

consult your Physiotherapist for recommendations on pillows.

Stay Active:

Incorporate neck exercises into your routine to prevent pain. If your job involves prolonged sitting, take breaks to move around and stretch.

Avoid Heavy Loads:

Refrain from carrying heavy bags over your shoulder. Consider using wheeled luggage or bags to reduce strain.

References: Google images

