

Chronic Neck Pain

Service User Information Leaflet

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The Information in this Leaflet Comes From:

- What patients have said they want to know about chronic neck pain.
- The most up to date evidence on how to self manage.

You have been given this leaflet because you have chronic neck pain. You are the one who is most affected by your pain.



What **you** do is more important than diagnosis or treatment.

Neck Pain is Very Common

- Two thirds of the population may experience neck pain at some point in their lives.
- 10% of these patients develop chronic neck pain.

Most people get neck pain at some point in their lives. This does not mean it is serious. You are in control. What you do can decrease the discomfort you may experience.

What Makes my Neck Pain Chronic?

Acute pain is a signal of actual or possible damage. For example if you stub your toe you may have a high pain level at the start, but it quickly settles. The pain is drawing your attention to your toe. Once you realise what it is you do not worry about it and the pain eases.

Chronic pain is pain that lasts longer than 3 months. This can be caused by soft tissue injury, normal age related changes or previous trauma.

Your pain may persist due to continuing irritation of the joints. There is no cure for changes within the joint. However there are ways which will help manage your symptoms.

Soft tissue injuries usually heal within 3 months. Sometimes the pain you feel may persist.

Serious damage is rare in neck pain. Being positive and maintaining movement are the best ways to improve in the long term.

Continuing symptoms you may feel include:

- Stiffness.
- Muscle ache.
- Persisting pain.
- Headaches.

Surely Hurt Equals Harm?

It is not true that pain always means harm.

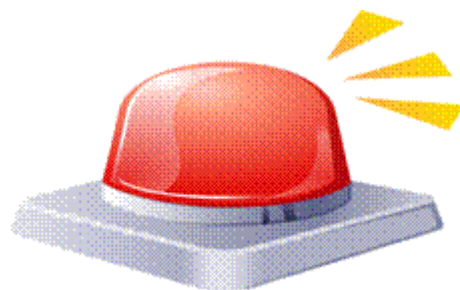
Pain is part of the body's alarm system to alert you to an actual or potential problem. Sometimes the alarm system gets rewired and sends constant signals even when there is nothing seriously wrong.

It is true that stress and anxiety can heighten the alarm system and perception of pain.

Warning Signs

If you develop any of the following you should see a doctor.

- Dizziness.
- Double vision.
- Dropping to the ground with no warning.
- Slurred speech.



- Difficulty swallowing.
- Numbness in *both* arms.
- Pins and needles in *both* arms.
- Constant night pain.
- Altered ability to walk.
- Constant headaches.

Should I Have an X-ray or Scan?

Your GP may refer you for other tests to rule out more worrying conditions. Sometimes people who have intense pain have normal x-rays or scans. In other cases there may be a lot of changes on an x ray or scan, but the person has little if any pain. It is important to remember that X-rays or scans cannot 'show' pain.

Sometimes people get told that they have 'wear and tear' or 'bulging discs'. This can sound worrying. In fact these 'abnormal' findings are actually 'normal' as we get older. This means that many people have disc bulges, but do not have pain. Investigations do not always explain pain and this can be frustrating. Worrying about the cause of pain can be a barrier to moving forward. Most people who have neck pain can learn to deal with the pain themselves.

Surgery

Surgery **does not** help most people with neck pain.

Not all surgery is successful and persistent neck pain is not an indication for surgery.

****This means that exercise, good posture and having a positive attitude are the best advice for managing chronic neck pain****

Exercise or Bed Rest?

All the best research shows that staying active is one of the best things you can do for chronic neck pain. If you need to rest, no more than 1 or 2 days is advised.

Disadvantages of resting too much or avoiding activity are:

- Muscles weaken
- Get stiffer
- Lose your fitness
- Less able to do things
- Poor sleep
- Put on weight
- Feel fed up
- Feel frustrated
- Lose confidence
- Feel lethargic
- Lose concentration
- Become forgetful

Benefits of staying active are:

- Strengthens muscles
- Strengthens heart and lungs
- Reduce blood pressure
- Lose weight
- Reduced stress
- Strengthens your immune system
- Makes your bones stronger
- Improves concentration
- Reduce pain
- Lifts mood

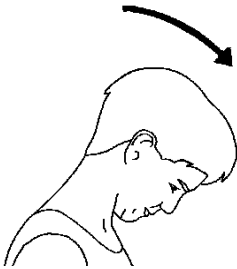
What are the Best Things to Do?

Keep Moving

It is normal to feel stiff and sore through the day. There are some gentle stretches and exercises you can do to help this.



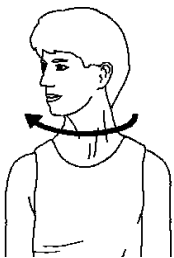
1. **Head Retraction.** Feel as if you are gently moving your head backwards while keeping your chin level until a stretch is felt at the back of your neck. Repeat as comfortable.



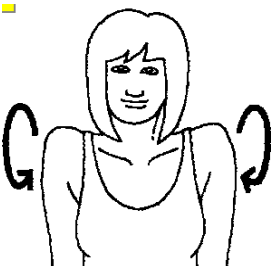
2. **Neck Flexion.** Bend your head forwards until you feel a stretch



3. **Neck Side Flexion.** Tilt your head until you feel a stretch on the opposite side. Repeat to both sides.



4. **Neck Rotation.** Turn your head until you feel a stretch on the opposite side. Repeat to both sides.



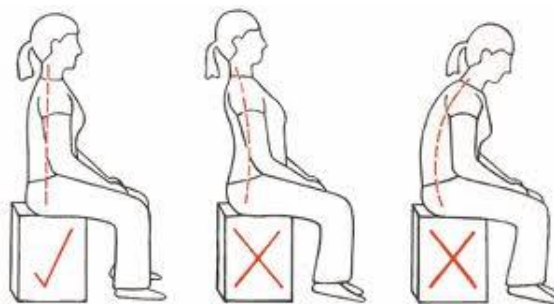
5. **Shoulder Rolling.** Roll your shoulders in both directions.

Pacing:

- Build up activity gradually by pacing rather than jumping ahead. This means staying in control by pausing before the pain worsens and not fighting through the pain.
- Doing a small amount each day is better than a large amount once or twice per week. People who stay active have a positive attitude and suffer less.
 - Exercise *will not cause* more harm.
 - Most people find some discomfort at the start. It is important to start gradually to strengthen and build stamina.

Postural awareness

Being aware of your posture at work and at home will greatly help your pain management.



Try to avoid:

- Slouched positions.
- Prolonged positions.

Consider:

- Work space environment e.g. desk and computer monitor height.
- Driving position e.g. chair and steering wheel height.
- Sleeping position e.g. the number of pillows.

Worrying About Pain Can Make it Worse

It is common for people to be anxious or worried about neck pain. Current evidence shows that this can contribute to pain. Other factors which can make you worse are shown below:

- Thinking that you have a serious injury
- Believing that the more pain you experience the more damaged your neck must be
- Avoiding movement or activity due to fear of causing damage
- Becoming withdrawn and depressed.

It is important to move on with your life rather than waiting for somebody to “fix” you.

The above factors can start early and become deep rooted. Pain is a physical and emotional experience. The earlier you get information that helps you to understand your situation the better.

Question: Does this mean the pain is all in my head?

Answer: No. Pain affects every aspect of life, work, family, relationships and social life. The earlier you get access to good information and by thinking positively you can reduce the impact of pain on your life.

Medication

Painkillers may not cure the pain but can allow you to cope better. People who have had pain for a long time emphasise how important it is to discuss their medication with their GP. One of the most common beliefs is that you only take your tablets when you need them. This leads to poorly controlled pain or a ‘yo-yo’ effect. Tablets are more effective if taken regularly as prescribed. This means even when the pain is not as bad.

Question: Do painkillers just ‘mask the damage’?

Answer: No. Painkillers taken properly allow you to get on with your day to day life and cope better

Pain and Work

Many people with chronic pain find it difficult to continue at work or do not see themselves returning to work. Sometimes the loss of social contact and structure to the day is as damaging as the financial loss. Despite the obstacles many people with chronic pain return to work.

If you are at work:

- Discuss your difficulties with your employer.
- Stress that you want to be at work. Offer suggestions to overcome your problems if you have just been signed off work.
- Try to return as soon as possible. The longer you are off the less likely it is you will return.
- Discuss a graded return with temporary changes to your duties and work area.

If you are on benefits:

- Your 'Personal Adviser' at Job Centre Plus can help you discuss and provide assistance on return to work issues.
- On some benefits you may get some support for retraining or you can work a certain amount of hours without it affecting your benefits.
- Others have found voluntary work helpful as it can help them feel 'part of society' again.

For free and confidential advice about work call the Health Working Lives Advice

Line on 0800 019 2211 or www.healthyworkinglives.com.

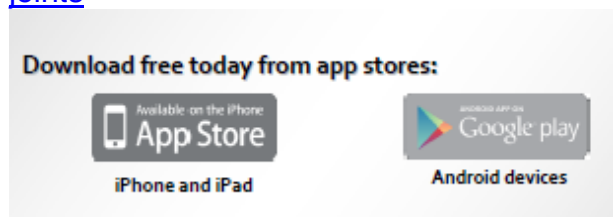
Summary

- Chronic neck pain is rarely due to anything serious.
- The above information is from the most up to date research and guidelines.
- The important thing is how you get on with your life.
- How much your neck pain affects you depends on what you do about it yourself.

Useful Information

General Musculoskeletal Advice

Musculoskeletal App www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints



Advice on Work

For free and confidential advice about work call the Healthy Working Lives Adviceline on 0800 019 2211 or www.healthyworkinglives.com

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www.painassociation.com

British Pain Society

www.britishpainsociety.org

Healthtalkonline – patients discuss their experiences

<https://www.healthtalk.org/>

Painconcern

www.painconcern.org.uk

Action on Pain

<http://www.action-on-pain.co.uk/>

Backcare

www.backcare.org.uk

Back Pain Overview

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOjTegn9RuY>

Understanding Pain Overview

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH9NG1c6mIY>