



Management of Neck Pain (with or without arm pain)

Neck pain, +/- symptoms travelling from the neck to the arm are common and very rarely caused by anything serious. The information in this leaflet is designed to help you understand things a little better and give you some tips and advice on ways to try and improve your current problem.

Occasionally, some people with neck and/or associated arm pain may develop additional signs and symptoms that could indicate a more serious problem requiring more urgent attention. Please read the following information before continuing.

If you develop any of the following warning signs you should see your GP urgently for assessment:

- Pins and needles or numbness in BOTH arms and/or legs together
- Shooting pains in BOTH arms or legs together like electric shocks
- A band of pain around the chest or chest tightness
- Clumsiness in hands and fingers causing difficulty with tasks such as fastening buttons, tying laces or counting out coins
- Balance or walking problems including unsteadiness, stiffness of the legs, difficulty going up stairs or recent falls
- Difficulty passing urine or incontinence
- Significant weakness of muscles in your arm/hand or legs

If these symptoms develop rapidly, over a few days, you should seek help immediately at A and E

Secondly, if you have recently developed neck and/or arm pain and:

- have a history of Cancer
- feel generally unwell such as developed a fever or night sweats
- are losing weight for no clear reason

You should discuss your symptoms with your GP.

Finally, If you suddenly develop significant stiffness in you neck and both shoulders at the same time, you should see your GP.

What Causes Neck Pain?

Neck pain is very common and most of us will experience pain in the neck or upper back at some stage in our life. Most neck pain does not have a serious cause and often resolves on its own if given enough time and if we do the right things. Symptoms can arise from sensitivity or irritation of any of the structures in the neck (muscles, ligaments, joints, discs etc) and it is often very difficult to be accurate about the exact cause of most neck pains. Episodes of pain can often last several weeks to several months and rarely require health care intervention early on. Keeping on top of pain control, continuing with normal daily activities as much as you are able and trying some self help measures is often enough.

Some people find their neck pain persists beyond these time frames, or comes and goes in episodes over long periods of time. This is called persistent or chronic pain, and we know that in the vast majority of cases there is no serious cause to this either. The information in this leaflet gives some advice and pointers on some of the potential contributors to neck pain as well as some simple exercises and strategies to help speed up recovery or help you to manage the problem.

Arm Pain Linked to the Neck

Many people with neck pain also experience symptoms travelling into the shoulder or upper arm, often described as a dull aching pain or even sharp or stabbing pains. This can often be quite concerning and feel as though maybe there is a separate problem with the shoulder or upper arm. However this is known as 'referred pain', as although the pain is felt in the arm, the problem still originates in the neck. This is due to the way our bodies are 'wired up', as various structures in the neck such as the joints, discs and soft tissues can cause pain to travel to the shoulder or arm when they get sore or irritated. Whilst this can be quite distressing and confusing, it is usually nothing to worry about and these pains often clear up as the neck problem improves.

In some cases, arm pain is caused by irritation or sensitivity of one or more of the spinal nerves as they leave the neck and travel down into the arm. We call this 'Radicular' pain or 'nerve root' pain, similar to sciatica in the leg. Nerves are a bit like the wiring system in the body. They tell the muscles in the arm what to do and they also pass sensation messages from the arm to the brain. If there is a problem with the nerve, these messages can be interrupted or aren't quite as clear leading to strange sensations in the skin like pins and needles. It can even cause numbness of the skin or weakness in the muscles that each nerve supplies. As nerves recover these sensations often improve and weakness recovers although this is slow and can take months.

Nerve root pain can often be quite severe and is a little unfamiliar or unusual to some people, often described as electric, burning, shooting or tingly along with many other strange feeling. It often travels a bit further down the arm below the elbow and can affect the hand. This can make it quite distressing and difficult to understand and cope with. However, most nerve pains from the neck will settle significantly in the first 6-12 weeks, and in some cases can take several months.

What can you do to help yourself?

Relaxation

- Stress can make neck pain feel worse. Learning some relaxation, meditation or mindfulness techniques may help to manage your pain. The following video may be useful:

The single most important thing you can do for your stress, DrMike Evans-
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6402QJp52M>

Heat/ice packs

- Heat can help to relax the muscles and give you some temporary pain relief. Try a hot water bottle, bath or shower. Make sure the hot water bottle has a cover or is wrapped in a towel and is **warm**, not hot. Some people prefer using an ice pack, this should be wrapped in a tea towel before placing on the skin.

Painkillers

- It may be helpful to take painkillers or anti-inflammatory medications. If in doubt, check with a GP or pharmacist first.

Keep active

Exercise will help as it strengthens, improves fitness, keeps you flexible and makes you feel good by releasing natural chemicals in your body, which reduce pain. Exercise can be any activity that increases your heart rate so you are slightly out of breath (a good test is if you can still hold a conversation). Walking and swimming may be good activities to start with, but find something that you will enjoy doing. If swimming, try not to keep your head out of the water, as this puts your neck in an uncomfortable position. It is better to wear goggles and keep your neck straight with your face in the water.

You should build up gradually and aim to exercise for between 20 – 30 minutes every day. Try the neck exercises at the end of this leaflet and for some ideas of activities in your area, try the links below:

<https://www.activenewcastle.co.uk/>

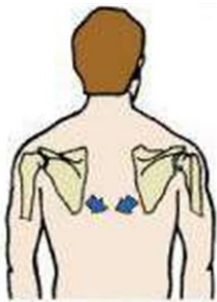
<https://www.ourgateshead.org/whatson>



Other Important Factors to Consider

Posture

Your neck is strong and flexible, surrounded by strong muscles which support your head on your neck, but allow you to move your head freely. Your head is heavy, so improving your posture so that your head is in a good position over the rest of your spine, will reduce how hard the muscles have to work and so may improve your pain.



Sitting or standing in one position for long periods of time is not recommended. It is important that you change your position regularly, before you start to feel stiff or sore. If you sit at a desk, try to get up at least once an hour and stand or walk around.

You may find it helpful to try to improve your posture:

To correct your posture, start at the lower back and pelvis and grow tall.

- Tilt your pelvis slightly and lift your chest bone, so you are not slumped.

- Draw the shoulder blades gently down, towards the centre of the spine, as if they were forming a 'V' shape. This should be a very subtle movement and it should not feel like you are shrugging or squeezing back the shoulder blades.

- Gently lift the base of the skull off the top of your neck- think of a helium balloon attached to the back of your head, lifting it up. This action activates the deep neck muscles and helps to support the weight of your head.

- Carry this exercise out in any position, such as sitting, standing or walking. Perform it regularly during the day- twice an hour if possible

Hold for up to 10 seconds.



Display Screen Equipment

One of the main problems with display screen equipment use is the repetitive nature of keyboard or mouse use, combined with a static posture. Short regular breaks are more useful than longer ones. Making sure your work station is set up correctly can be helpful, but it is still important to get up and move regularly. The following advice may be helpful:

Desk

- Ensure you can pull your chair under the desk.
- Avoid storing bags, bins, files, mobile pedestals etc. under the desk to limit leg access.
- Remove equipment from desk e.g. disc drive, printer.

Screen

- At arms length away (50 – 70cms), directly in front of you.
- The top of the screen should be just below your eye level. You should have a comfortable viewing angle to the middle of the screen. A screen step or swivel arm may be required.
- At 90 degrees to light source to avoid glare.
- Avoid letting your head and neck drift into extreme positions.

Chair

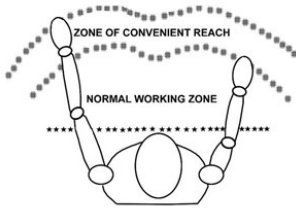
- Use an adjustable chair, raise or lower it, so that your elbows are at 90 degrees and your forearms are level with the desk/keyboard.
- Relax your shoulders, rest your forearms on the desk to allow the shoulders to relax and keep your wrists in a neutral position.
- Keep arms by your side in line with your body.
- Adjust the back rest to support your lower back, sit right back in the seat with the chair close to the desk.
- Keep feet flat on the floor – if not use a foot rest. Hips and knees should be close to a 90 degree angle.

Keyboard

- Keep wrist and fingers in line with forearm.
- Avoid bending the wrist back.
- Ensure there is enough space on the desk in front of the keyboard to rest the wrist when not keying. Remember not to rest your wrists when keying.

Mouse

- Keep within easy reach, in your normal working zone, close to the keyboard.
 - Avoid gripping.
 - Minimise use of mouse where possible. Use keyboard shortcuts.
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Normal working zone

Your arms remain by your side and frequent tasks should be undertaken within this area e.g. keyboard use, mouse use, written work.

Zone of convenient reach

Objects such as phone, filing trays should be stored within this area to avoid over stretching.

Laptops

It is very difficult to maintain a good neck position when using a laptop. A separate keyboard and mouse should be used. The laptop should be raised up and tilted on a stand or placed on some books, so the screen is at the correct height. Laptops should not be placed on your lap.

Telephones

If you use a telephone a lot at work, the use of a headset is recommended. Avoid holding the phone between your head and shoulder.

Documents

If working from documents, it is recommended you use a document holder. This should be placed in between the keyboard and mouse or at the same level as the screen, close to the monitor. If documents are placed flat on the desk, you are more likely to drift into a poor neck position, which may aggravate your neck pain. Books can be placed on a sloping surface to elevate them, such as a ring folder.

Managing Daily Activities

Housework

- Spread out chores over a few days, you should not try to do everything on one day.
- Vary the tasks that you do, so that you alternate between different positions and loads on your neck and take regular breaks.
- Try to keep upright when hoovering or mopping , move your feet so that you are not over reaching and clean a small area at a time.
- When making beds, it can be helpful to kneel down or place one knee on the bed.
- Working at benches that are too high may cause your shoulders to hitch up and place more strain on your neck. Try to adjust the height so that your shoulders and arms can be relaxed. You may need a step. Avoid over reaching for objects, keep things nearby.

Preparing food

- When preparing food, consider the previous advice on working at a bench. Use sharp knives to make chopping food easier.
 - Practice gently drawing your shoulder blades back and down as in the postural correction exercise, to allow your neck to relax. Take breaks.
 - Place items that you use regularly at bench height.
 - If you have heavy saucepans, lift with 2 hands and keep close to you with bent arms. Rest on the sink when you are draining them.
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Gardening

- Like housework, when you are gardening, vary the tasks that you are doing so that you change position often and take breaks. Kneel on your hands and knees or half knee with the other leg bent up when you are weeding.

Watching Television

- Sit with the screen straight in front of you. If lying down, it is better to lie on your side with a pillow under your head. Take regular breaks and stand up.

Tablets and phones

- Looking down at these for long periods of time can make your neck pain worse. Try to raise it up to a comfortable height.

Reading

- Holding your neck bent to look down at a book for long periods of time may aggravate your pain. Place the book on a stand or put one or two cushions on your lap to rest the book on. Take regular breaks.

Cinema

- Go early so that you can get a seat in the centre of the cinema or theatre, so that you can look straight on. Sit further away from the screen, so you don't have to look up.

Meetings or socialising

- Turn your body so that you can face the person speaking straight on, rather than keeping your neck turned to one side for long periods of time.

Hairdresser

- Your neck may hurt when you put your head back over the sink to get your hair washed. Try standing or kneeling on the chair, facing the sink and lean your head forwards over the sink.

Dentist

- Placing a rolled up towel or small pillow behind your neck when at the dentist can make your neck more comfortable.

Driving

Do adjust your seat to sit yourself upright. You should be close enough to the steering wheel that when your foot is on the accelerator, your knee is bent to about 30 degrees.

Do use a towel to support your low back.

Do keep your arms relaxed, with your elbows slightly bent and gently grasp the wheel.

Do take regular breaks to stretch or move every 30 minutes.

Do lean forwards slightly when reversing and turn from your trunk and shoulders first, before turning your neck.

Do take regular breaks when driving long distances.

Lifting

The important factor in lifting is to keep the object as close to you as possible. You should increase the weight you are lifting gradually to allow your body to strengthen and

get used to it.

You may find the following helpful:

- Carry fewer bags at a time and make more trips- ie unloading shopping from the car.
 - Only carry what you need to - check your handbag, gym or school bag daily and remove what you don't need to reduce the weight.
 - When travelling, use a suitcase with wheels. This can also be useful if you have a lot of equipment to carry for work.
 - Try to carry an equal amount on either shoulder. It can be more comfortable to use a backpack, to distribute the weight more evenly between both shoulders.
 - When carrying children, swap sides regularly. Try to use carriers such as slings or backpacks or a pram. Avoid carrying the baby in the car seat as this adds extra weight. Leave the seat in the car. When the child is old enough, encourage them to climb in, rather than lifting them in to the car.
 - When breastfeeding, place the baby on a pillow to help support the baby's weight. Avoid looking down at the baby for long periods.
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Sleep

Avoid sleeping on your stomach as this puts strain on your neck when it is held in a rotated position for long periods. It is better to lie on your back or side.

There is not one ideal pillow that suits everyone. Your pillow should support your head and neck in a neutral position- if lying on your side, the pillow should fill the gap between your ear and the tip of your shoulder. If lying on your back, your neck should be in line with the rest of the spine and not push your head forwards.

Some people find it comfortable to roll up a small towel and place it in the pillow case along the bottom edge, so this supports the curve of your neck.

When To Seek Help

As most neck problems tend to improve with time, it isn't always necessary to seek medical attention, particularly in the first few months. Remaining active, keeping pain under control with medication and addressing lifestyle factors such as weight, sufficient sleep and managing stress can really influence your outcome and aid recovery.

However, if either:

- **You feel your pain is too severe and unmanageable**
- **There is a significant impact on your sleep that isn't being helped with medication**
- **You feel your symptoms are progressively worsening despite trying the exercises and advice**
- **Symptoms have persisted for more than 6-8 weeks without any signs of improvement despite trying the exercises enclosed**

then call TIMS to arrange an appointment.

The following exercises are designed to help maintain or improve your neck mobility whilst you recover, as well as aid in the management of more persistent or long term symptoms. You may find they help with some pain relief in the short term, but even if they don't they still have the benefit of keeping your neck mobile and promoting health to the joints, muscles and nerves.

Try doing them several times each day, trying to do around 5-10 of each one holding for a few seconds each time.

[Video](#)



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Exercises to increase movement

Rotation

Sitting. Correct your posture first, as described before

Turn your head to one side until you feel a stretch.

[Video](#)



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Side bending

Sitting. Correct your posture first, as before.

Tilt your head toward one shoulder until you feel the stretch on the opposite side.

Repeat to other side.

[Video](#)



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Flexion

Sitting up straight.

Bend your head forward until you feel a stretch behind your neck.

[Video](#)



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Extension

Sitting, correct your posture first

Bend your head backwards as far as is comfortable, so that you are looking up at the ceiling.

Return back to the starting position by tucking your chin down first and then bringing your head back to upright.

Avoid letting your chin poke out

[Video](#)



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To relax the shoulder muscles

Sit or stand tall, unsupported with the shoulders relaxed. Roll the shoulders backwards and then forwards.

Repeat up to 5 times.

[Video](#)



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When you have neck pain, you can often have stiffness in your thoracic spine or upper back. The following exercises can be useful

Sit on a chair and clasp your hands behind your neck.

Lean the affected part of the thoracic spine against the back of the chair so that the chair supports the lower of the vertebrae to be mobilised. While exhaling push the shoulders over the edge of the chair.

[Video](#)



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Sit on a chair.

Take hold of the back of a chair. Look over your shoulder while turning your upper body.

[Video](#)



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Exercise to retrain muscle control and start strengthening your neck

Head nod

The deep neck flexor muscles are important muscles to retrain when you have neck pain

Lie on your back with your knees bent, with your head flat on the bed/floor. If this is not comfortable, place a small folded towel

under your head.

Start by looking up at a point on the ceiling.

Gently move your head so that your eyes lead the movement to look at a point just above your knees. You should feel the back of your head slide up the bed as if you are nodding your head.

To check that you are doing it correctly- place your hands gently on the front of the neck. These are the superficial muscles and they should stay soft and relaxed when you are doing this movement. Stop when you feel the muscles start to go hard, but keep looking down with your eyes

Return to the starting position

Hold for up to 10 seconds and try to repeat 10 times

For further information

Please email ghnt.newcastlegatesheadtims@nhs.net, ring on **0191 2138800** or visit our website at: www.tims.nhs.uk which provides online guidance and support on managing your musculoskeletal (MSK) condition effectively.

The NHS website also provides trusted online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare to help you manage your condition and/or inform your choices about your health: www.nhs.uk.

Useful links

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) can offer on-the-spot advice and information about the NHS. You can contact them on freephone **0800 032 02 02** or e-mail northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk.

Other websites

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/neck-pain-and-stiff-neck/>

<https://www.arthritisresearchuk.org/arthritis-information/common-achesand-pains/neck-pain.aspx>



Tyneside Integrated Musculoskeletal Service

TIMS is a partnership between Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust

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