Emergency Services

Neck Pain and Strain

Neck pain is usually from an injury to the muscles or ligaments that support the neck bones. The most common cause of neck pain is from a car accident, also called 'whiplash'. However, a person can get neck pain for no obvious reason.

The pain is usually worse for the first two days after the injury. Neck pain usually gets better within 10 days.

Your neck pain might:
- Spread to your upper back or arms
- Be worse with movement
- Make your neck stiff or tender
- Give you headaches

When to get help

Go see your family doctor or go to the nearest walk-in clinic if:

☐ You still have mild to moderate pain after at least 2 weeks of home treatment.

☐ You have numbness or tingling in your arms of legs.

☐ You cannot do your everyday activities because of the pain.

Go to the nearest Emergency Department if:

☐ You lose strength or feeling in your arms or legs.

☐ You lose the ability to control your bladder or bowels.

How to take care of yourself at home

- Take pain relieving medicines such as acetaminophen (Tylenol or store brand) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, or store brand).

- For the first 48 to 72 hours:
  - Use an ice pack on the painful area. Cover the ice pack with a cloth to protect your skin.
  - Use the ice pack for only 10 to 15 minutes every hour.

- After 72 hours:
  - Use heat on the painful area.
  - Use the heat for only 10 to 15 minutes at a time.

- Gently massage or rub the area to relieve pain and encourage blood flow.

- Be careful driving. You might not be able to do shoulder checks.

- Get moving.
  - Slowly return to your everyday activities as soon as you can. Move your neck as much as the pain allows you to move. This will help to speed up healing. It will be sore to move your neck at first.
  - Do stretching and strengthening exercise. This keeps your neck flexible and strong, and reduces stiffness.
  - Do not do activities that increase your pain and stiffness.

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Other treatment options

There are other treatments that might help relieve your neck pain, restore movement, and strengthen the muscles around your spine.

These options include seeing a:
- – physiotherapist
- – registered massage therapist
- – chiropractor
- – acupuncturist

Strong back and neck muscles can help prevent future neck pain or neck injuries.

Ways to prevent neck pain

- Practice good posture, both standing and sitting.

- Take stretch breaks often.

- Try not to sleep on your stomach.

- Exercise regularly.

- Adjust the way you do activities that might give you neck pain.

- When you start to feel neck pain, take a break.

- Look for ways to reduce stress and tension in your life.

To learn more, it's good to ask:

- Your family doctor

- Fraser Health Virtual Care
  1-800-314-0999 or live chat online at
  fraserhealth.ca/virtualcare
  10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., daily

- HealthLinkBC - call 8-1-1 (7-1-1 for deaf and hard of hearing) or go online at
  HealthLinkBC.ca

Adapted from 'FB.700.N281 Neck Pain' (October 2011) with permission from Vancouver Coastal Health.

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