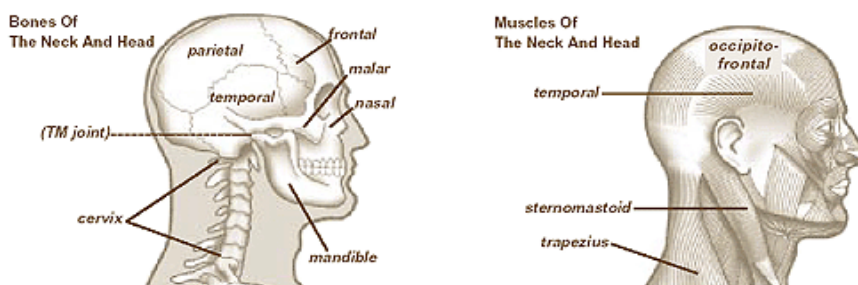


## Neck Pain

Your neck region is vulnerable to many different stresses. Bad posture can cause misalignment of your neck, head, and spine. Car accidents can cause whiplash. Age and wear and tear can cause arthritis. Activities such as gum chewing and reading in bed can cause pain. So how do we avoid these potential problems? And if we can't avoid them, how can we recover as quickly as possible?

### Anatomy of the neck region

One of the most flexible regions of the spine is the neck (cervical) region. It consists of vertebrae, seven shock-absorbing discs, muscles, and vertebral ligaments to hold them in place. The spinal cord, which sends nerve impulses to every part of the body, runs through a canal in the cervical vertebrae and continues all the way down the spine. The cervical nerves spread down into the arms; because of this, arm pain is sometimes traceable to a problem in the neck.



### Possible causes of neck pain

One of the most common causes of neck pain, and sometimes headaches, is **poor posture**. It is easy to get into bad postural habits without even realizing it. Even an activity as "innocent" as reading in bed can ultimately lead to pain, headaches, and more serious problems.

The basic rule is simple: keep your neck in a "neutral" position whenever possible. In other words, don't bend or hunch your neck forward for long periods. Try not to sit in one position for a long time. If you must sit for an extended period, make sure your posture is good. Keep your head in a neutral position, make sure your back is supported, keep your knees slightly lower than your hips, and rest your arms if possible.

Reading in bed can cause neck strain - especially if you're propped up on several pillows, bending your neck forward, and trying to hold your arms out in order to support the book. If you do read in bed, make it easy on your neck; consider purchasing one of the products specifically designed for this purpose, such as a wedge pillow to prop up the book or a portable "mini desk." Finally, remember not to stay in any single position too long - our bodies are designed to move.

#### Sleeping Position



The correct pillow should keep your spine straight and your neck in a "neutral" position.



Your **sleeping position** is another possible source of neck problems. Does your pillow cause you to sleep with your neck at an angle, either too high or too low? If so, you may want to invest in a new pillow. Feather pillows are generally preferable to foam; they conform easily to the shape of the neck.

Also, remember that pillows don't last forever. After a year or so feather pillows tend to "collapse" and may need to be replaced. In addition, a bed that doesn't offer enough back support can also be a source of neck discomfort.

## Here are some other tips to help you avoid neck strain and pain:

- Try doing stretching exercises before bed and first thing in the morning
- Don't sleep on your stomach - this position puts great pressure on the neck
- Don't "over-pillow" your neck; keep your neck and spine in a neutral position

### At Your Workstation



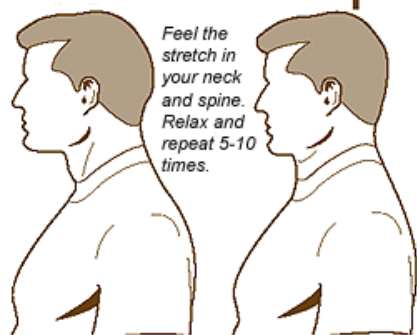
The neutral position rule also holds true for people who spend time working at computers. Again, don't bend your neck forward. Adjust your desk, monitor, and chair to a comfortable height, so that the monitor is at eye level and your knees are slightly lower than your hips. You may find that a footstool helps in attaining this correct position. Sit close enough to the monitor so that you don't have to bend forward in order to see well. Use the chair's armrests - your arms need support. Wear your eyeglasses if necessary. Consult your physiotherapist to find the set-up that is right for you.

You should also follow the neutral position rule when driving a car. Adjust the seat to bring you close enough to the pedals so that you don't have to extend your neck forward.

## Is it only a "pain in the neck"?

Pain in the cervical region can cause arm pain as well as the "pain in the neck." Why? In the case of the arms, it's because the nerves that branch out from the neck go all the way down into the arms and the hands. Sometimes it's difficult to tell whether the pain is actually originating in the neck, or the arms, or both. Symptoms in the arm can include numbness, tingling, cold, aching, and "pins and needles".

**Standing Tall** Stand in a normal, relaxed posture, then pretend that a string is pulling you straight up from the top of your head.



## What to do when your neck is hurting

You can apply ice or heat. Many physiotherapists prefer ice because of its effectiveness in reducing pain and inflammation. (To use ice, fill a plastic bag with crushed ice, place a damp towel over the affected area, and then apply the ice-filled bag to the area.) Heat also provides relief to some people, but should be used with caution because it can sometimes make an inflamed area worse. Apply heat or ice for 15-20 minutes at a time, and give yourself a 40-minute rest between applications. If you use both heat and ice, make sure to alternate between the two.

## What physiotherapy can do to help

- We take a detailed history.
- We give exercises to increase range of motion, strength and flexibility.
- We use electrotherapy and/or acupuncture for pain relief.
- We give ergonomic advice for your work and home environment.
- We return you to normal activity as quickly as possible.