

# neck pain

## WHAT YOU CAN DO





# Neck pain

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Neck pain is a common problem. Nearly 25 percent of adults will experience neck pain at some time in their lives. Even though neck problems can be painful and frustrating, they are rarely caused by serious diseases. The good news is that most of the time neck pain improves within 4 to 6 weeks. Follow the tips in this booklet to help you feel better and get back to your normal activities.

## Where does neck pain come from?

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The neck is made up of many different parts, including bones, joints, ligaments, discs, muscles, and nerves. Neck pain can begin in any of these areas. It can be felt in the neck, upper back, shoulders, or sometimes down the arm. Neck problems can also cause headaches.

**Bones** – The bones in the neck are called vertebrae.

**Joints** – A joint is formed where the vertebrae meet. These joints allow

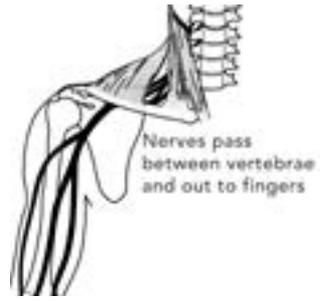
the spine to bend and move. Joints lose some of their ability to move as you age.

**Ligaments** – Ligaments are strong bands that hold the bones together. When ligaments are pulled or over-stretched, it is called a sprain.

**Discs** – Discs are made up of many layers. They separate the vertebrae and allow the neck to bend. Like joints, discs can wear down as you age.

**Muscles** – The muscles surrounding your neck give it support and allow you to move. The muscles in the neck and upper back area are very important in helping to maintain good posture. When muscles are pulled or overworked, it is called a strain.

**Nerves** – Nerves carry messages to the brain and control the muscles. The spinal nerves pass through small openings between the vertebrae. When irritated, they can cause pain, numbness, or tingling in the arm.



## What makes it hurt?

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Most neck pain results from irritation or injury to one or more of the parts of the neck described above. Most commonly this is caused by:

- Poor sitting posture while working at your desk or computer; or while reading or driving.
- Sleeping in an awkward position.
- Looking up repeatedly while doing tasks such as painting or trimming trees.
- Changes in neck alignment due to eye strain or incorrect eyewear.
- Whiplash from an accident.
- Lifting injuries.
- Changes to the normal condition of the joints and discs over time.
- Stressful work or home situations that increase the tension in the neck muscles.

## What can I do to help my neck?

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### FIRST AID

**Place a cold or heat pack on your neck** for 10-15 minutes to help with the pain. Make sure there is a thin cloth layer between the skin and the cold or heat pack. Repeat this several times per day as needed for pain relief. Ice is usually best in the early stages of an injury or flare up; after that, both heat and ice can be helpful.

**Take medications as directed.** When taking anti-inflammatory drugs as prescribed (such as Motrin / ibuprofen or Aleve / naproxen sodium), it will take 10 to 14 days for them to become fully effective. Talk to your doctor about prescription medication.

## Reduce the stress and strain on your neck

Use **good posture and body positions**. Proper alignment of your head, neck, and back is the key to spinal comfort. If you slouch, your chin will tend to protrude forward and cause your shoulders to round. This “forward head posture” can **produce** or **increase** neck and shoulder tension and pain.

### GOOD SITTING POSTURE

It is important to maintain good posture throughout the day. Good posture means maintaining the natural curves in your neck and back or the “neutral spine” position. This is also the most comfortable position for your neck and back.

- Sit all the way back in the chair with your legs uncrossed and feet flat on the floor. (Use a footrest if you can't touch the ground.) Support the natural curve in your back by using a lumbar pillow or a small rolled towel, if needed.
- Sit with your hips higher than your knees by adjusting the seat pan or use a wedge.
- Gently draw your shoulder blades back and down.
- Keep your chest up (think about making yourself taller).
- Avoid holding your neck still or keeping it in one position for too long. Even a “good position” will cause muscle fatigue if maintained for too long.
- Sit for no longer than 30 minutes at a time. Set a timer to remind you to take a break to get up and move around.



## TIPS FOR DRIVING

- Sit up straight, or in a slightly reclined position, and use good posture as described.
- Make sure you have good lumbar support. Use a towel roll if needed to help support the natural curve of your back.
- Hold the steering wheel at 4 and 8 o'clock with your elbows at your side.
- Keep your neck relaxed by using a support such as the headrest.
- When driving for a long period of time, stop for frequent breaks. Get out of the car and move around.

## TIPS FOR COMPUTER USE

- Sit up straight, directly facing the monitor.
- Adjust your chair to bring your hips slightly higher than your knees.
- Keep both feet flat on the floor or on a footrest.
- Adjust your monitor so the top of your head is level with the top of your screen.
- To avoid eye strain: For every 20 minutes of computer use, look at least 20 feet away for 20 seconds.
- At your work station keep your phone, mouse and other regularly used items close to you.
- Set an alarm on your computer as a stretch reminder.

## TIPS FOR TELEPHONE USE

- Avoid tilting your head sideways to hold the phone against your neck.
- Use a headset if you use the phone for extended periods of time.

## TIPS FOR SLEEPING

### On your back

- Lying on your back can be the best sleeping position when you have neck pain.
- Support the curve of your neck with a pillow or small rolled towel.
- Use 1–3 pillows under your knees if needed to keep your spine in a more comfortable position.
- If you have a painful shoulder/arm, use a pillow to prop your arm up and allow your hand to rest across your chest or stomach.



### Side-lying

- When side-lying, it is important to support your entire neck.
- Make sure the pillow fills in the space between your neck and your shoulder. Use the appropriate sized pillow to support the natural curve of your neck. You can try placing a rolled towel in the pillow to support your neck.
- Place a pillow between your knees.
- If you have a painful shoulder or arm, use a pillow in front of your body to prop up your arm.



### On your stomach

Avoid lying on your stomach. This position places too much stress on your neck and may increase your symptoms.

# Proper neck positions during daily activities

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## REACHING

- Get as close to the object as possible. (Use a sturdy step stool so you do not need to reach as high.)
- Look up with your eyes and avoid tipping your head back.



## WASHING YOUR HAIR IN THE SHOWER

- Avoid tilting your head backwards to rinse your hair if it is painful.

## PUTTING ON MAKEUP, SHAVING or BRUSHING YOUR TEETH

- Bring the mirror close to you rather than leaning into it.
- Nod your chin down like you are saying yes.
- Keep your body as upright as possible.



## READING

- Hold materials up to allow you to look straight ahead.
- Use a document holder or slant board for desktop activities.
- Use arm rests or pillows to support your arms.
- Avoid reading in bed with your head and neck propped on pillows.

## LIFTING

- Place your feet shoulder-width apart.
- Bend your knees and slowly squat.
- Stick your rear end out as you go down.
- Keep the object close to your body.
- Only squat as far as you can without rounding your back.



## Exercise regularly

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It is okay to decrease your activities to avoid pain for 1 to 3 days after a flare-up. Too much rest can make your neck pain worse and delay your recovery. It is helpful to continue light and easy activity, as long as your symptoms don't get worse. In general, people who are physically active recover quicker and have fewer flare-ups.

Your exercise program should include:

- Aerobic exercise (walking, stationary bike)
- Postural exercises
- Neck range of motion exercises
- Strengthening (as you improve)
- Relaxation exercises

## Exercises to improve your neck pain

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### AEROBIC EXERCISES

#### WALKING

- Take short walks several times during the day.
- Wear athletic shoes.
- Practice good upright posture when you walk.
- Avoid carrying heavy items on your shoulders or in your arms.

### POSTURAL EXERCISES

These exercises will help change your habits through postural awareness, and improve the strength and flexibility in your neck and upper back. Do one or two of these exercises every 20-30 minutes when you are working at a computer, texting, cooking, watching TV or any other prolonged activity. Do these exercises in a slow and controlled way.

## Shoulder Blade Squeeze

Sit or stand with good posture. Reach both hands down toward the floor, and squeeze your shoulder blades together. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 2-3 times.



## Elbow Press

Sit or stand with good posture. Place both hands behind your head with your elbows forward. Make sure your hands are just touching the back of your head. Do not push your head forward. Squeeze your shoulder blades together and bring your elbows back. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 2-3 times.



## Alternating Over Head Reach

Raise one hand up over your head and slightly back. Reach the other hand down towards the floor and slightly back. Hold for 5 seconds and then switch arms. Repeat 2-3 times with each arm.



## Corner Stretch

Face the corner with one foot forward and one hand on each wall. Lean in while maintaining good posture until you feel a stretch in front of your shoulders and chest. Hold for 10-30 seconds and repeat 2-3 times. Place your hands higher or lower to vary the stretch.



## NECK RANGE OF MOTION EXERCISES

These gentle exercises are used to restore or maintain neck movement. You should feel a gentle pull with no increase in your symptoms. Remember to breathe normally and relax.

### Neck Turning

Sit with good posture.

Slowly turn your head from one side to the other. Move as far as you can comfortably.

Repeat 5 times to each side.



### Neck Tilting

Sit with good posture. Slowly tilt your ear towards your shoulder and feel a gentle stretch in the muscles on the opposite side of your neck. Move as far as you can comfortably. If you feel pain on the side

you are tilting your ear to, bend your head slightly forward and then tilt your ear toward your shoulder. Repeat 5 times to each side.



## NECK STRENGTHENING EXERCISES

These exercises should not cause an increase in your symptoms. Remember to breathe normally and relax.

For each exercise, do the following:

- Begin exercise with good posture.
- Hold for 5 – 10 seconds.
- Repeat 5 times.
- Do 2 times per day.

## Head Nodding: Lying on Your Back

Lie on your back with your knees bent. Place a small towel under the back of your neck for support. Start by looking at a spot on the ceiling. Next, look



towards your knees with your eyes. Follow with a slow and gentle nod of your head as if you were saying ‘yes’.

## Head Nodding: Sitting or Standing

Sit or stand tall with good posture looking straight forward. Look down towards your knees with your eyes first. Follow with a slow and gentle nod of your head as if you were saying ‘yes’.



## RELAXATION EXERCISES

- Lie on your back with your knees bent. Place one hand on your stomach.
- Place the other hand on your chest with your thumb and index finger just above your collar bones to feel the neck muscles. These muscles should stay relaxed and not become tight during the exercise.
- Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. You should feel your stomach rise when you breathe in and fall when you breathe out.
- Make sure your upper chest remains quiet and the neck muscles stay relaxed.



## Headache pain related to the neck

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Some headaches may start in the neck. These headaches are often caused by prolonged poor posture or stress. Increased tension in the neck muscles or neck injuries may lead to headaches.

### HELPFUL TECHNIQUES TO REDUCE HEADACHE PAIN

- Self-massage the base of your skull. Gently support your chin or forehead with your one hand. Use the fingertips of your other hand to gently massage the tender muscles at the top of your neck under your skull on the side of your headache. You can also do this massage lying on your back.
- Apply gentle pressure to points where you feel pain or tightness.
- Apply an ice pack to the base of your skull.
- Lie down and perform the *Head Nodding Exercise* described in this booklet.



### THE ROLE OF STRESS IN NECK AND HEADACHE PAIN

An increase in stress may cause more muscle tightness in your neck. This can cause neck and headache pain. There are a number of stress reduction methods that may help:

- Walking
- Deep breathing
- Relaxation exercises
- Guided imagery
- Meditation
- Self hypnosis
- Gentle yoga stretching

## Call your doctor if:

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- You develop new symptoms (weakness, numbness or pain) in your arms or legs.
- Your pain has lasted 2 weeks or longer despite home treatment.
- You have a severe headache that strikes suddenly without apparent cause or is very different from previous headaches.

## Other resources

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For more health information:

- Visit your doctor or your physical therapist's home page at [kp.org/mydoctor](https://kp.org/mydoctor) to use online health tools, view your Preventive Services reminders, check most lab results, and much more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.





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Regional Health Education

9134000104 (Revised 8-12) RL 5.7