

## Neck Pain

*There are many types of neck pain and many causes. Neck injuries vary from minor injuries that heal in several days to more serious injuries that take considerably longer.*

### Common Causes of Neck Pain

**Acute Torticollis:** There is rapid onset (usually on awakening) of pain on one side of the neck with deviation of the neck to that side. It is frequently caused by exposure to cold or prolonged positioning of the neck in an unusual position. The condition usually resolves in a few days. Localized muscle spasm occurs due to muscle fatigue, environmental factors, or nerve irritation.

**Neck Pain Syndrome:** The pain may be present for days to years and is often associated with limited range of motion, cracking, increased "lordosis" (chin forward) posture, and sore "trigger" points in neck or upper back muscles. Various factors cause the pain and stiffness alone and in combination: muscle tension, incorrect posture, nerve root irritation, degeneration of disks or joints. No matter what the inciting cause or causes, all of these factors can interact to form a vicious cycle of pain—muscle tightness—incorrect posture—more pain.

**Acute Neck Strain:** There is either a sudden twist or prolonged abnormal posture with tenderness localized in one area. You may not experience pain until a day after the injury. Note: This type of injury is often called a "whiplash" when it involved forced flexion/extension of the neck. Usually it resolves in 1 week to 3 months.

### Treatment

#### Cold and Heat

- Put **ice packs** on for twenty minutes or massage the sore area with ice (allow some water to freeze in a paper cup with popsicle stick for a handle).
- Put **moist heat** on for twenty minutes or stand under the hot shower.

Sometimes alternating the cold with the heat, one after the other, feels especially good.

### Medications

Taking ibuprofen (Advil) or naproxen (Aleve) to reduce inflammation and break the pain spasm cycle may be helpful. (Follow label directions, unless instructed otherwise.) You may be prescribed other medications, including pain relievers and/or muscle relaxants. Take only as directed on the bottle.

### Posture

Pay attention to posture. Most people put extra strain on their necks because of poor posture. Try to be aware of the following:

- Lift upward from your chest to align your head and trunk. Hold the position by tightening your abdominal muscles.
- Don't let your shoulders slouch forward.
- When sitting, be sure to maintain the arch in your lower back.
- Avoid tilting your head backward, forward, or to one side for a prolonged time. Move your neck around every so often.
- Try to sit in a high backed chair or position your chair against a wall, so that you can put your head back and allow the neck muscles to relax.
- Avoid sleeping on your stomach, because your head will have to be twisted to the side. Either sleep on your side with your pillow just thick enough to hold your head straight, or if you sleep on your back use a "butterfly" pillow.

### Relaxation

Follow the relaxation technique printed below at least twice a day at first:

- Lie down on your back, or sit in a comfortable chair. Close your eyes.
- Breathe in slowly for a count of two and then out for a count of two. Keep breathing in this slow rhythm.
- Tense and relax the following parts of your body, holding each tensed part for 6 seconds, then slowly let it relax for 15 to 20 seconds, before going on to the next body part.
  - Tense your right hand by making a fist. Hold it. Then relax.
  - Tense and relax your right upper arm by bending it at the elbow and bringing your hand up to your shoulder.
  - Do the same with your left hand. Then your upper left arm.
  - Now your shoulders—lift them up toward your ears.
  - Tense and relax your neck by pushing your head back, then again by bringing your chin down toward your chest.
- Continue slow, rhythmic breathing until 10 minutes are up.

## Neck Pain

### Soft Cervical Collar

A soft cervical collar can be extremely helpful in the treatment of various neck problems, but only if it is worn properly. Make certain that it is the proper size to hold your head straight, not tipped back or forward. For acute neck strains, leave the collar on for most or all of the day at first; after a couple of days begin wearing it less and less each day.

### Neck Exercises

Perform the following neck exercises at least twice daily:

**Chin Tucks:** Tuck in your chin without bending your neck; feel the back of your neck flatten. Hold for a few seconds and relax. Repeat ten times.

**Range of Motion:** With your chin tucked in as in the first exercise, turn your head as far as it will go to each side and hold for a few seconds; then lean your head to each side and hold for a few seconds. Still keeping your chin tucked in, do the same thing going forward. Repeat the whole process three times.

**Shoulder Shrugs:** With your arms relaxed at your sides, bring your shoulders up and then back; hold for a few seconds and then relax. Repeat ten times.

### Please Read

If you develop any new, prolonged or more severe symptoms, such as those in the list below, call the advice nurse at 863-4463 or consult your health care provider.

- Pain, numbness, tingling, or weakness develops in the arm or face.
- New, unexplained symptoms develop.
- If symptoms do not improve, call your clinician for reevaluation and a referral to Physical Therapy.

If University Health Services is closed, go to Mount Nittany Medical Center Emergency Department or call 911 for an ambulance.

**In an emergency go to Mount Nittany Medical Center or call 911 for an ambulance.**

### Test Results and Advice Nurse

Please call the nurse for test results and advice: 863-4463

### Appointments

Appointments can be made online via the UHS website, by phone or in person. If you are unable to keep your appointment, please call and cancel. Otherwise you will be charged for the visit.

To schedule or cancel appointments call 863-0774 or schedule your appointment online through the UHS website

*This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. This information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.*