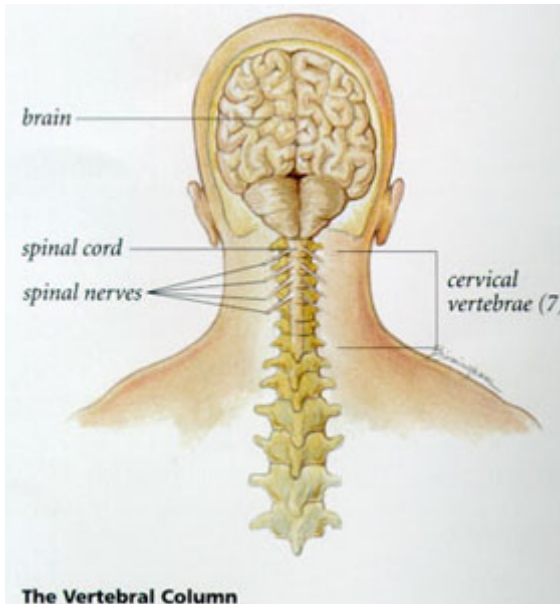


Neck Pain



The neck (cervical spine) is composed of vertebrae which begin in the upper torso and end at the base of the skull. The bony vertebrae along with the ligaments (like thick rubber bands) provide stability to the spine. The muscles allow for support and motion. The neck has a significant amount of motion and supports the weight of the head. However, because it is less protected than the rest of the spine, the neck can be vulnerable to injury and disorders that produce pain and restrict motion. For many people, neck pain is a temporary condition that disappears with time. Others need medical diagnosis and treatment to relieve their symptoms.

This brochure explains some of the causes of and treatment for neck pain. Ask your orthopaedic surgeon for more detailed information.

What causes neck pain?

Neck pain may result from abnormalities in the soft tissues - the muscles, ligaments, and nerves - as well as in bones and joints of the spine. The most common causes of neck pain are soft tissue abnormalities due to injury or prolonged wear and tear. In rare cases, infection or tumors may cause neck pain. In some people, neck problems may be the source of pain in the upper back, shoulders or arms.

Degenerative and inflammatory diseases - Degenerative diseases that cause neck pain include osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. Osteoarthritis usually occurs in older people as a result of wear of the joints between the bones in the neck. Rheumatoid arthritis can cause destruction of the joints of the neck. Both of these major types of arthritis can cause stiffness and pain.

Cervical disk degeneration also can cause neck pain. The disk acts as a shock absorber between the bones in the neck. In cervical disk degeneration (typically age 40 onwards), the normal gelatin-like center of the disk degenerates and the space between the vertebrae narrows. As the disk space narrows, added stress is applied to the joints of the spine causing further wear and degenerative disease. The cervical disk may also protrude and cause pressure on the spinal

cord or nerve roots when the rim of the disk weakens. This is known as a herniated cervical disk.

Injury - Because the neck is so flexible and because it supports the head, it is extremely vulnerable to injury. Motor vehicle or diving accidents, contact sports, and falls may result in neck injury. The regular use of safety belts in motor vehicles can help to prevent or minimize injury. A "rear end" automobile collision may result in hyperextension, a backward motion of the neck beyond normal limits, or hyperflexion, a forward motion of the neck beyond normal limits. Most common injuries are to the soft tissues, i.e., muscles and ligaments. Severe injury with fracture or dislocation of the neck may damage the spinal cord and cause paralysis (quadriplegia).

Much less common causes of neck pain include tumors, infections, or congenital abnormalities of the vertebrae.

When should you seek medical care?

If severe neck pain occurs following an injury (motor vehicle accident, diving accident, fall), a trained professional, such as a paramedic, should immobilize the patient to avoid the risk of further injury and possible paralysis. Medical care should be sought immediately. Immediate medical care should also be sought when an injury causes pain in the neck that radiates down the arms and legs. Radiating pain or numbness in your arms or legs causing weakness in the arms or legs without significant neck pain should also be evaluated.

If there has not been an injury, you should seek medical care when neck pain is:

- continuous and persistent
- severe
- accompanied by pain that radiates down the arms or legs
- accompanied by headaches, numbness, tingling, or weakness

Who can treat neck pain?

Many patients seek orthopaedic care for neck pain, because orthopaedic surgeons are specifically trained in the workings of the musculoskeletal system, including the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of problems involving the muscles, bones, joints, ligaments and tendons. While some orthopaedic surgeons confine their practices to specific areas of the musculoskeletal system, most treat a wide variety of diseases, injuries and other conditions, including neck pain.

Diagnosing neck pain



Determining the source of the pain is essential to recommend the right method of treatment and rehabilitation. Therefore a comprehensive examination is required to determine the cause of neck pain.

Your orthopaedic surgeon will take a complete history of the difficulties you are having with your neck. He or she may ask you about other illnesses, any injury that occurred to your neck and any complaints you have associated with neck pain. Previous treatment for your neck condition will also be noted.

Next, your orthopaedic surgeon will perform a physical examination. This examination may include evaluation of neck motion, neck tenderness, and the function of the nerves and muscles in your arms and legs.

X-ray studies often will be done to allow your orthopaedist to look closely at the bones in your neck. These simple diagnostic techniques often help orthopaedists to determine the cause of neck pain and to prescribe effective treatment.

Patients who require further evaluation may undergo one or more of the following examinations:

- MRI (magnetic resonance imaging). This non X-ray study allows an evaluation of the spinal cord and nerve roots.
- CT (computed tomography). This specialized X-ray study allows careful evaluation of the bone and spinal canal.
- Myelogram (injection of a dye or contrast material into the spinal canal). This specific X-ray study also allows careful evaluation of the spinal canal and nerve roots.
- EMG (electromyogram). This test evaluates nerve and muscle function.

Your orthopaedic surgeon may supplement your evaluation with blood tests, and, if necessary, will consult with other medical specialists.

Treatment

How neck pain is treated depends on what the diagnosis reveals. However, most patients are treated successfully with rest, medication, immobilization, physical therapy, exercise, activity modifications or a combination of these methods.

For example, if pain is caused by inflammation as a result of stretching muscles and ligaments beyond their limits, your orthopaedic surgeon may prescribe rest and a neck collar for a specified period of time, as well as medication to reduce inflammation. If medication is prescribed to reduce pain, it should be used only as directed and should not be taken for extended periods of time. In addition, remember that if your orthopaedic surgeon t prescribes rest, it is vital that you follow instructions carefully.

When neck pain persists or is chronic, your orthopaedic surgeon may recommend a rehabilitation program that includes an exercise program and various types of physical therapy to help you relieve your pain and prevent it from coming back.

Very few patients require surgery to relieve neck pain. For the vast majority of patients, a combination of rest, medication and physical therapy will relieve neck pain. Surgery may be necessary to reduce pressure on the spinal cord or a nerve root when pain is caused by a herniated disk or bony narrowing of the spinal canal. Surgery may also be required following an injury, to stabilize the neck and minimize the possibility of paralysis such as when a fracture results in instability of the neck.

Your orthopaedic surgeon is a medical doctor with extensive training in the diagnosis and nonsurgical and surgical treatment of the musculoskeletal system, including bones, joints, ligaments, tendons, muscles and nerves.

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