SYMPTOM

Neck pain

Neck pain is discomfort or stiffness anywhere between the base of your head and shoulders.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Aching, stiffness, or sharp pain when moving your head

WHERE IT IS FELT
Back or sides of neck, sometimes shoulders or head

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Muscle strain, awkward posture, age-related joint changes

WHEN IT IS URGENT
New weakness, fever with severe headache, or major injury

USUALLY LASTS
Days to weeks for uncomplicated muscle or joint pain

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Pain persists, recurs, or limits sleep and daily activities

Overview

Neck pain is discomfort in the muscles, joints, bones, or nerves of the neck. It may begin suddenly, such as after sleeping awkwardly, or develop slowly over time. The pain can remain in your neck or spread into your head, shoulders, upper back, or arms.

Common causes include muscle strain, prolonged positions, and age-related changes in the small joints and discs of the neck. A disc is a soft pad between two spinal bones. Neck pain can also follow an injury or occur when a nerve is irritated.

Most episodes improve with time and gentle movement. However, certain symptoms can point to an injury, infection, or nerve problem that needs prompt medical care.

What it may feel or look like

Neck pain can feel different depending on the tissues involved. You may notice:

A headache linked to the neck often begins near the base of the skull and may worsen with neck movement. Pain from an irritated nerve may travel down one arm and feel burning,

electric, or shooting. This is sometimes called cervical radiculopathy , meaning that a nerve leaving the neck is compressed or inflamed.

Pain intensity alone does not always show how serious the cause is. Changes in strength, balance, bladder or bowel control, alertness, or general health are more important warning signs.

- A dull ache or tight feeling
- Stiffness or difficulty turning your head
- Sharp pain with a particular movement
- Muscle spasms or tender areas
- Pain spreading into a shoulder, arm, upper back, or head
- Tingling, numbness, or weakness in an arm or hand

Common causes

Muscle and ligament strain is a frequent cause. It can follow lifting, an unfamiliar activity, a sudden movement, stress-related muscle tension, or keeping your neck in one position for a long time.

Work and daily habits may contribute. Examples include looking down at a phone, using a poorly positioned screen, or sleeping without comfortable neck support. Posture is rarely the only factor, but changing positions regularly may help.

Joint and disc changes become more common with age. These changes are sometimes called cervical spondylosis. They may cause stiffness or pain, although many people have such changes on scans without symptoms.

Nerve irritation can occur when nearby tissue presses on or inflames a nerve. This may cause arm pain, tingling, numbness, or weakness as well as neck pain.

Less common causes include inflammatory conditions affecting the joints, bone problems, or pain referred from another area of the body. Rare but urgent causes include a serious infection, pressure on the spinal cord, a major fracture, or a problem with a blood vessel in the neck.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services or go to an emergency department if neck pain follows a major collision, fall, diving accident, or other forceful injury. Keep your neck as still as practical while

waiting for help.

Emergency care is also appropriate for neck pain with:

Seek same-day medical advice if you have neck stiffness with fever, severe headache, a rash that does not fade when pressed, marked drowsiness, or sensitivity to light. These can occur with meningitis, an infection of the tissues surrounding the brain and spinal cord.

You should also seek prompt advice if the pain started after a less severe injury and is worsening, or if you have cancer, a weakened immune system, or signs of infection such as fever and feeling very unwell.

Book a routine appointment if pain is not improving, keeps returning, disrupts sleep, or limits normal activities. Arrange an assessment sooner if tingling, numbness, or weakness is persistent or worsening.

- New weakness or loss of movement in an arm or leg
- New trouble walking, poor balance, or loss of coordination
- Loss of bladder or bowel control
- Fainting, confusion, difficulty speaking, facial drooping, or sudden vision changes
- A sudden, severe, unfamiliar headache or neck pain

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the pain began, where it travels, what makes it better or worse, and whether there was an injury. They may also ask about headaches, fever, numbness, weakness, balance, and bladder or bowel changes.

The examination may include checking neck movement, tender areas, arm strength, sensation, reflexes, and walking. These findings often provide enough information to plan initial care.

Imaging is not always needed for new neck pain without warning signs. X-rays show bones but provide limited information about nerves and other soft tissues. Magnetic resonance imaging, or MRI, gives more detail about discs, nerves, the spinal cord, and infection. It may be considered when there are neurological symptoms, warning signs, or pain that does not improve as expected.

Blood tests may be used if infection or an inflammatory condition is suspected.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the likely cause and your other symptoms. For uncomplicated neck pain, staying gently active is usually more helpful than prolonged bed rest. Try comfortable movement within your normal range, but avoid forcing the neck through sharp pain.

Heat may relax tight muscles, while a wrapped cold pack may help after a recent strain. Protect your skin and use either for short periods.

Non-prescription pain medicines may help some people. Follow the package instructions and check with a pharmacist or clinician if you take other medicines, are pregnant, or have ongoing medical conditions.

Other practical steps include:

Physical therapy may help with movement, strength, and a gradual return to activity. A soft neck collar is not usually needed unless a clinician recommends one for a specific reason.

- Changing position regularly during work, travel, and screen use
- Placing screens where you can view them without prolonged bending
- Using a pillow that keeps your neck in a comfortable position
- Returning gradually to exercise and usual activities
- Avoiding forceful stretching or neck manipulation when pain is sudden or unexplained

What to expect

Pain from a simple strain or irritated joint often begins to settle over several days and may take a few weeks to resolve. Improvement may be uneven, with better and worse days.

Symptoms caused by nerve irritation can take longer and should be reviewed if weakness develops or worsens. Persistent pain does not automatically mean there is serious damage, but it may require a reassessment and a more structured treatment plan.

Keeping active, adjusting aggravating tasks, and gradually rebuilding movement can reduce stiffness. Neck pain can return, particularly when sleep, stress, workload, or activity levels change.

Common questions

Should I rest my neck completely?

Usually not. Short periods of rest may be comfortable, but prolonged inactivity can increase stiffness. Gentle movement and a gradual return to normal activities are generally preferred

unless an injury requires immobilisation.

Do I need an X-ray or MRI?

Not always. Scans are mainly useful when an examination suggests injury, infection, spinal cord or nerve involvement, or another specific cause. Age-related changes on a scan may not explain your pain.

Can neck pain cause headaches?

Yes. Muscles and joints in the upper neck can contribute to pain felt at the back or side of the head. A sudden severe headache, especially with neurological symptoms, needs urgent assessment.

Is arm tingling always an emergency?

No, but it can indicate an irritated nerve. Arrange medical review if it persists, worsens, or comes with weakness. Sudden weakness or symptoms affecting walking, balance, speech, or the face require emergency care.

Sources

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