

Pain in the Neck

The neck is a frequent cause of pain, disability and reduced quality of life. The cervical spine functions to support the skull and helps the eyes to look in nearly every direction. The neck contains the bony spine, which encloses and protects the spinal cord. The neck also contains joints, muscles, ligaments, discs and many other structures.

Due to the complex anatomy and function of the neck, there are **several potential causes of pain**. This may include structures from within or outside of the spine. A thorough medical and functional evaluation is necessary to determine what is (and what is not) causing the pain.

Pain in the neck is often related to the spine and can result from an obvious traumatic event (such as a "whiplash" in a car accident) or more subtle causes such as repetitive awkward positioning (poor posture at a computer workstation) and gradual degenerative changes. The pain can be caused by muscle, facet joint (the very small joints in the back of the spine), nerve or disc problems.

Neck pain can radiate or refer to other regions of the body -- usually the upper extremity or head. Pain, tingling or numbness in the shoulder and into the arm and hand is common. Occasionally, weakness and sensory loss will be present. Headaches can sometimes be relieved with treatment of the neck.

In order to treat neck pain, the **structures causing the pain must be identified**. It is also important to learn why those structures are not functioning normally. This is done by a thorough patient history and a physical exam. Pictures of the neck, such as X-rays and MRIs, and nerve tests often help the physician make the diagnosis. Spinal and muscular injections may also provide diagnostic, as well as therapeutic benefit.

Once a diagnosis has been made, the primary goal of treating neck pain is to improve the overall function. While treatment is focused on the neck, functional improvement concerns the patient as a whole. This can include issues such as posture, sleep, anxiety or depression, relationships and employment. Pain reduction is a way to improve function and quality of life.

Much of the functional improvement will be taught and achieved during **formal therapy sessions (primarily physical and occupational)**. The patient should progress through an exercise program with the **goal of becoming independent with a home exercise program**.

If pain is interfering with your progression toward optimal function, multiple **options for pain relief** can be considered. Options include medications, manual treatment (manipulation, massage, muscle energy techniques, etc.), modalities (ice, heat, ultrasound), acupuncture, muscle and spinal injections, and sometimes surgery. As mentioned above, appropriate treatment can only occur after making a specific diagnosis.

Many people improve within a few months of conservative treatment. For those who do not, it is important to maintain function while proceeding to more aggressive treatment options.