

Whiplash Advice



Whiplash is a common injury to the neck caused by a sudden movement of the head in a forwards, backwards or sideways direction. As the neck moves to and fro at speed the muscles, tendons and ligaments (known as soft tissue) are overstretched and strained.

For the majority of people the pain is mild, does not interfere with their normal activities and gradually gets better within 6 weeks. For some people recovery is slower if the injury is more severe and can take several months to improve.

What are the common symptoms of a whiplash neck sprain?

- Pain and stiffness in the neck. It may take several hours after the accident/incident for symptoms to appear. The pain and stiffness often becomes worse on the day after the accident. In about half of cases, the pain first develops the day after the accident.
- Turning, bending or moving the neck may be difficult.
- You may also feel pain or stiffness in the shoulders, between the shoulder blades or down the arms.
- There may be pain and stiffness in the upper and lower part of the back.
- Headaches
- Sleep disturbance. This may be due to pain or it may be difficult to find a comfortable position.
- Some people feel tired and irritable for a few days and find it difficult to concentrate.

Other less common symptoms include:

- Dizziness
- Blurred vision
- Ringing in the ears
- Pain in the jaw
- Pain on swallowing
- Tingling in the face

These symptoms should subside within the first 2 weeks.

If they persist please consult your doctor.

What can I do to help myself?

- Aim to keep your neck moving as normal as possible to prevent it from becoming stiff. Start off very gently and gradually aim to increase the range of movement. It is best to do these every few hours on a daily basis. You will not cause damage to your neck by moving it.

- Try to get back to your normal routine as soon as possible after a whiplash injury.
- Take regular pain relief. Painkillers such as Paracetamol and Ibuprofen may help reduce the pain. Taking the pain relief regularly rather than only when the pain is severe may help to control it better.

PLEASE READ THE INSTRUCTIONS CAREFULLY AND DO NOT EXCEED THE RECOMMENDED DOSE. PLEASE CHECK WITH YOUR GP/PHARMACIST IF YOU ARE UNSURE.

- The use of heat e.g.: warm water bottles, microwave heat packs or heat pads can also be useful. Apply mild heat at regular intervals throughout the day for up to 20 minutes at a time.

ALWAYS PROTECT YOUR SKIN FROM BURNS WHEN APPLYING HEAT BY ENSURING THE TEMPERATURE IS COMFORTABLY WARM, NOT HOT.

- Maintaining good posture can also help prevent the pain and stiffness in your neck from getting worse. Avoiding prolonged positions as much as possible. You could also try rolling a towel or scarf up so the roll is about the size of the palm of your hand. Loosely tie the roll around your neck so that the curve of your neck is supported when you lie down.

Please continue with all the above advice as long as you still have pain/stiffness. Remember the body takes a number of weeks to heal, so pain in the first few weeks is normal and not an indicator of more serious problems.

When should you seek further assistance from your GP or physiotherapist?

- If the pain becomes significantly worse.
- If the pain persists beyond 4-6 weeks and isn't improving
- You cannot get back to normal daily living because of this problem
- If other symptoms develop such as loss of feeling (numbness), weakness, or persistent pins and needles in part of the arm or hand.
- If you develop balance problems or difficulty walking

What is the outlook (prognosis) after a whiplash neck sprain?

This will depend on the severity of the sprain, but the outlook is good in most cases. Symptoms often begin to improve after a few days. Most people make a full recovery within a few weeks however, in a small number of people, some symptoms may persist long-term.