

Self treatment of acute neck pain

Accident and emergency

Patient information

What is acute neck pain?

Acute neck pain can happen after a sudden movement or jolt to your head or body. It may strain the joints, muscles, ligaments, tendons, or nerves in your neck or upper back.

Common causes include:

- Road traffic accidents
- Lifting something heavy
- Sudden coughing or sneezing
- Trips or falls.

It can also happen more gradually due to:

- Poor posture (like sitting at a computer for long periods)
- Change in activity (like moving house, or starting a new hobby).

What symptoms might I have?

You may experience the following symptoms:

- Neck pain (often spreading to the shoulder, arm, or hand)
- Headaches
- Pins and needles
- Dizziness or nausea
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering things
- Ringing in the ears
- Hearing changes or temporary deafness.

Most symptoms are temporary and improve on their own. Pain may get worse in the first few days. This is normal and happens because of swelling. Full recovery usually takes up to 6 weeks.

It is important to understand that the pain is not harmful. It is usually short lived and is controllable.

What can I do to help myself?

Research shows that an early return to normal daily activities helps you recover faster.

Self-care and exercises

Positioning

Lying down with a neck roll can ease pain. You can use:

- a rolled-up towel or magazine
- a rolling pin wrapped in a soft cloth.

Place the roll under your neck for short rest periods:

- for headaches: position the roll at the base of your skull
- for shoulder or arm pain: place it lower down the neck
- you may feel the pain in your arm move up toward the neck.
This is a good sign.

Try to avoid sleeping with more than two pillows under your head.

Exercises

Gentle exercises can help reduce pain. Do them frequently throughout the day, especially when your pain is active. Take pain relief if needed to help you move more comfortably.

Start slowly and increase your range of movement gradually as pain allows.

1. Tuck your chin and push head gently back feeling a stretch of muscles in the back of the neck. Do this 10 times.
2. Hold the back of your head with one or two hands, and tip it backwards 10 times as far as you are able. Stop if this exercise always makes you feel dizzy and see your GP.

You might find it helpful to also sit in a low backed chair and stretch the middle of your back over the chair back, raising your chest slightly. This is usually helpful for pain between the shoulder blades or around the ribcage. If this always makes you dizzy and see your GP. A stretch feeling is not harmful, or causing damage and will slowly improve.

3. Maintain as much range of movement in every direction as possible. It is normal to feel a stretch of muscles as they tend to tighten if not moved to full range of movement. Use your neck as normally as possible during the day. A stretch feeling is not harmful, or causing damage, and will slowly improve.

Keeping the nervous system moving

To keep your spine and nerves moving, sit on a bed or a chair that allows your legs to swing freely. Straighten one leg out in front of you, then bend it again. Repeat with the other leg. Do 20 rhythmic swings with each leg.

If you feel a gentle pull in your neck, middle back, or lower back, do the exercise gently twice a day until you no longer feel the pull.

Sitting Supported

When you sit for long periods, especially while traveling or working at a desk, it's important to maintain the natural curve in your spine. To do this, roll up a towel or cushion and place it in the small of your back. Sit back into your chair to avoid straining your lower back. Try to stand up and move around as often as possible to keep your body comfortable and prevent stiffness.

Try to avoid

- ✗ Long periods of bed rest
- ✗ Wearing soft neck collars
- ✗ Relying heavily on muscle relaxant tablets.

When to get urgent help

Call your GP or return to A&E immediately if you notice:

- loss of control over your bladder or bowels
- pins and needles in both arms or both legs
- numbness in your genital area or back passage
- muscle weakness, poor balance, or difficulty walking
- sexual dysfunction.

These could be signs of something more serious.

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This information is intended for patients receiving care
in Brighton & Hove or Haywards Heath.

Ref. number: 2174.1 Publication date: 08/2025 Review date: 08/2028

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