



**The Leeds  
Teaching Hospitals**  
NHS Trust

# Acute neck sprains

Advice and exercises for patients

# Accident and Emergency Department/Minor Injuries Unit in conjunction with the Primary and Secondary Care Physiotherapy Teams

If you have any further queries about your injury you are advised to contact:

**NHS Direct on Tel: 111**

## Introduction

Acute neck sprain / Whiplash Associated Disorder (WAD) describes any forced forwards and backwards movement of the neck on the body.

Most of these injuries are not serious and permanent damage is rare. It is the muscles, ligaments and small joints of the neck that are affected . However they all have a natural ability to repair themselves.

### Common symptoms include:

- Neck pain and stiffness
- Headaches
- Back pain

### Less common symptoms include

- Dizziness
- Jaw pain
- Arm pain
- Tingling or numb sensations

These additional symptoms are usually only an extension of the common symptoms and will settle along with the neck pain.

Symptoms may develop 1-2 days after the injury, this delay is often a good sign, it means the damage is not serious.

Sometimes aches and pains can persist or recur for quite a long time after a whiplash injury. Experiencing good and bad days is a normal part of getting better.

## Painkillers

You can use painkillers such as Paracetamol or an anti-inflammatory such as Ibuprofen, to help control your pain. Take these regularly as advised by your G.P. or Pharmacist, as they will enable you to move your neck and stay active.

Soft collars are not recommended as they delay the healing process.

## Heat and Cold

Application of heat or cold locally to the neck can provide some short-term pain relief and can relax muscle spasm.

### Cold application

- This is most effective within the first three days following your injury.
- Use a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a damp towel
- Apply for about 5-10 mins, and repeat up to three times during the day.

## Heat application

- This is more effective **after** the first three days.
- Use a wheat bag or hot water bottle wrapped in a towel.

Apply for up to 15 mins and repeat as necessary throughout the day.

## Activity/Rest

- The long-term outlook is good if you can get your neck moving early.
- You may require a short period of rest after your injury however resting after the first three days can seriously delay recovery of movement and maintain a painful neck.
- Prolonged inactivity is not advisable – do not stay in one position for long e.g. when sitting or driving.
- Some activities that aggravate your pain may need to be modified.
- Balance your periods of rest with gentle exercise to prevent stiffness.
- People who cope better with whiplash are those who stay active, exercise their neck and get on with daily life despite the pain.

## Posture / positioning

Poor posture can delay your recovery.

*It is important particularly when sitting or when using a computer to:*

### Avoid

- Slouching
- Sitting with your chin poking forwards

### Do!

- Sit with a hollow in your lower back.
- Use a rolled up towel placed behind you just above your waistband to help achieve this position.
- Relax your shoulders.
- Check your chin isn't poking forwards.

## Sleeping

Try to sleep with just one pillow, you can put a small rolled up towel inside the pillowcase to help support your neck and fill the gap between your neck and shoulders. You may require two pillows when sleeping on your side.

Avoid sleeping on your stomach.

On waking, gently try to move the neck to relieve any stiffness after sleeping.

## Exercises

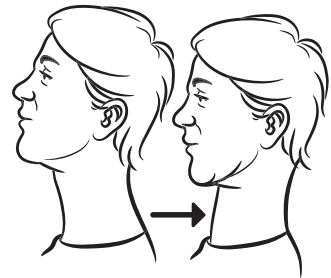
It is important to get the movement back in your neck as soon as possible. Exercises help to keep your neck mobile and assist in reducing pain.

Exercising injured areas of the body can cause discomfort. This does not mean that you are causing any harm. However, if any exercise aggravates your symptoms considerably or makes you dizzy, stop and seek advice from your doctor.

The following three exercises are safe to start immediately following your whiplash injury.

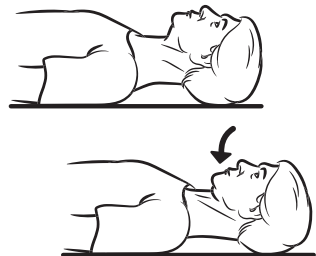
### 1. Neck retractions

Sitting straight-backed fix your eyes on a point straight ahead and draw your chin in to your neck as if trying to make a double chin. Hold approximately three seconds.



**Repeat 10 times.**

If this is too painful, lie on your back with one or two pillows under your head and do the same exercise – pressing your neck back in to the pillow and tucking your chin in.



## 2. Neck rotations

Sitting straight-backed, eyes looking at a point straight ahead and chin tucked in, slowly turn your head as far as you can comfortably in one direction and hold approximately three seconds. Return to the front and repeat the other way.

**Repeat 10 times each way.**



## 3. Neck side flexions

Sitting straight-backed, eyes looking straight ahead and chin tucked in, tilt your head toward one shoulder until you feel a stretch on the opposite side. Hold approximately three seconds.

**Repeat 10 times each side.**



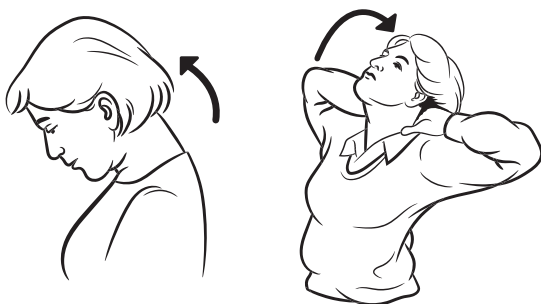
You can try these exercises every four hours. If your pain seems worse do them less frequently and through a smaller range rather than stop altogether. Then as the pain eases you can build up again.

**Attempt the next two exercises when your neck is feeling considerably better in order to restore full movement**

#### **4. Neck flexion and extension**

Sitting straight-backed, tip your head forward until you feel a stretch behind your neck. Hold approximately three seconds then tip your head back as far as is comfortable. Hold approximately three seconds then return to looking forwards.

**Repeat 10 times.**



**Be patient – it can take time**

**This information is evidence based. For further guidance from qualified physiotherapists please contact the minor injuries team.**