

Managing neck pain

Practical tools and techniques
to support your recovery



Important Information

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Introduction

Neck pain is a very common problem but does not usually have a serious medical cause.

In this booklet you will find some information to increase your understanding of neck pain as well as some tools and techniques you can do to ease the problem and improve your health and wellbeing.

While this information may help you, it is not a substitute for medical advice and it is important for you to maintain an ongoing relationship with your doctor, any medical specialists you may have and any other health professionals that are within your medical team.

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Understanding neck pain

Neck pain is pain that is felt in the upper part of the spine. It may be a sign that the joints, muscles or other parts of the neck are injured, strained or not working properly.

To understand some of the causes of neck pain, it's helpful to understand some basics about how your spine works.

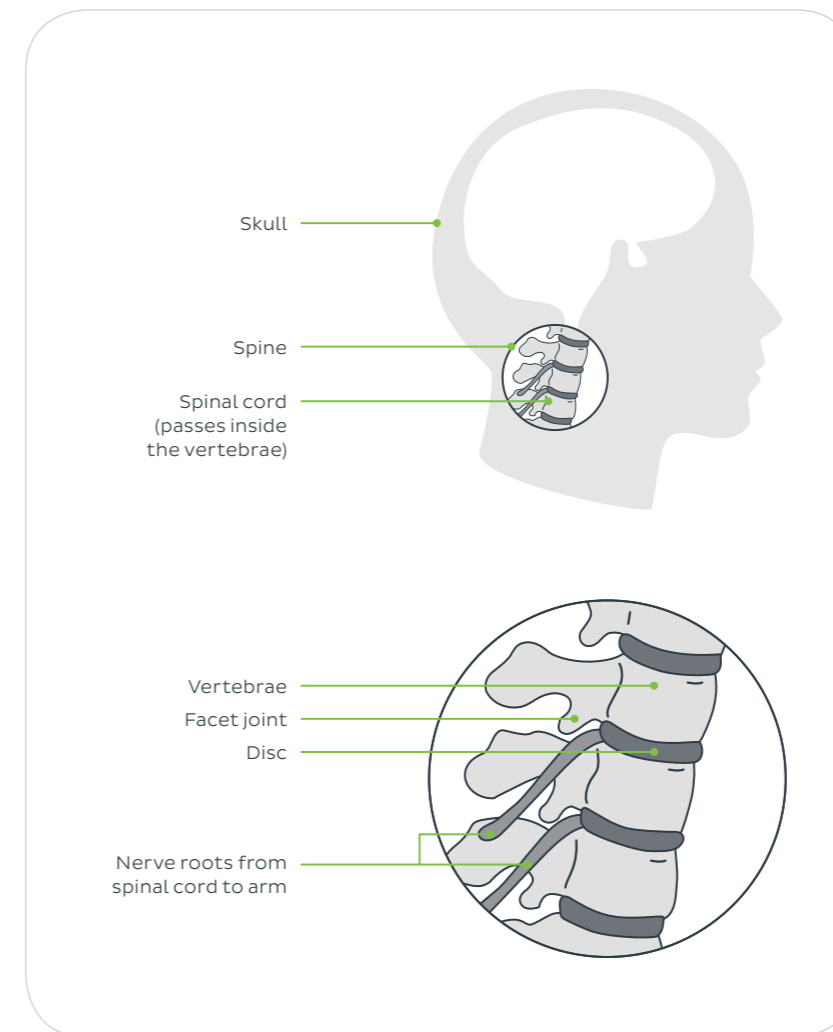
Your neck and back are made up of bones called vertebrae that are stacked on top of the other to form the spinal column. There are 24 vertebrae in your spine, each cushioned by discs of cartilage called intervertebral discs. These discs act as a shock absorber and help give your spine its flexibility.

At the level of each disc, nerve roots branch out from your spinal cord, passing through an opening in the side of your spine. The nerve roots in your neck join to form the nerve trunks that run into your arms. Impulses travel along these nerves, sending sensations such as touch and pain to your brain and messages from your brain to your muscles. Layers of muscle provide structural support and allow you to move.

Your vertebrae are divided into four sections: seven cervical or neck vertebrae, 12 thoracic vertebrae, five lumbar vertebrae and the sacrum and coccyx vertebrae which are joined together.

The cervical vertebrae performs three important functions:

- 1 Forms the structural support for the head because it's part of the skeletal framework
- 2 Protects the cervical spine cord and exiting nerve roots enclosed within it
- 3 Provides mobility, much more than the rest of the spine so it's able to move in greater degrees.



Neck pain is most commonly caused by:

- Poor posture while sitting at your desk or computer, or while reading or driving
- Stressful work or personal situations that increase tension in the neck muscles
- Sleeping in an awkward position
- Looking up or down repeatedly while completing tasks
- An accident ('whiplash')
- Changes in the joints and discs over time due to wear and tear.

NECK PAIN IS COMMON WITH TWO OUT OF THREE PEOPLE BEING AFFECTED AT SOME POINT IN THEIR LIVES¹

Symptoms of neck pain

Symptoms of neck pain vary but may include stiffness, tightness, aching, burning or stabbing pains, pressure, or tingling.

The pain can be felt in the middle of the neck or on either side. The pain may travel to the shoulder or shoulder blade, and may even go right down your arm. Headaches and pain at the back of the head may also be caused by problems with your neck.

Pain and stiffness

You may feel pain in the middle or on either side of your neck, but it may also extend to the shoulder and shoulder blade, or to the upper chest. If you have tension headaches, the pain often travels to the back of your head, and sometimes behind your eye or even into your ear. It may be painful to move and your muscles may feel tight, especially if you've been sitting in one position for a long time or resting.

Numbness or tingling

If a nerve root is pinched then you may have numbness, pins and needles or tingling that can be felt down your arm, sometimes right down to your fingers.

Clicking and grating noises

You may hear or feel clicking or grating as you move your head. This is called crepitus, and it's caused by bony surfaces moving against each other or by ligaments moving over bone. Other joints often do this too but noises from your neck usually seem louder because they're happening closer to your ears.

Dizziness and blackouts

If you feel dizzy when looking up or turning your head, this may be due to pinching of the vertebral arteries. This can sometimes happen as a result of changes in the vertebrae. Pinching of the vertebral arteries can occasionally cause blackouts as the blood flow is temporarily reduced. Seek medical advice if you experience episodes of dizziness and/or blackouts.

Muscle spasms

Sometimes if you have neck pain you may also have muscle spasms that turn the head to one side or prevent you looking in one direction. This is called torticollis, cervical dystonia or acute wry neck. It's not very common but can be unpleasant. It usually only lasts a few hours or days, although rarely it may continue for several weeks.

Specific conditions related to the neck

Most of the time, neck pain improves within four to six weeks. Even though neck pain can be painful and frustrating, it's rarely caused by serious disease².

Non-specific neck pain

This is the most common type. This is sometimes called 'simple' or 'mechanical' neck pain. Often the exact cause or origin of the pain is not known. It may include minor strains and sprains to muscles or ligaments in the neck. Bad posture may also be a contributing factor in some cases. For example, neck pain is more common in people who spend much of their working day at a desk, with a 'bent-forward' posture.

Tension

Muscles at the back of your neck must always be tensed, otherwise your head would fall forwards when you're sitting or standing. When you're worried or stressed you often tighten these muscles even more, which can cause neck pain and tension headaches. Tension headaches are very common and are often wrongly called migraines.

Whiplash

An injury to the neck that results from sudden backwards and forwards movement is often called whiplash. Typically, this occurs as a result of a rear-end motor vehicle accident. This type of injury can result in a strain or tear to the neck's supporting ligaments, muscles and discs, even irritating the nerves.

There's often a delay before you feel any pain or stiffness from whiplash. As well as neck pain and stiffness, whiplash can cause:

- Tenderness in the neck muscles
- Reduced and painful neck movements
- Headaches.



HOW ARE NECK PROBLEMS DIAGNOSED?

Your doctor will usually examine your neck and recommend treatment options based on your symptoms.

Further tests and investigations (e.g. blood samples, x-rays, CT or MRI scans) may be requested if your doctor thinks there may be a more serious cause for your neck pain or be helpful in developing a treatment plan that's right for you.

It's important to know that many investigations show 'changes' to your spine that are likely to represent the normal aging process, not damage to your spine.



SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR

If your neck pain lasts more than a few days, you should see your doctor. You should also speak to your doctor if you:

- Have neck pain following a fall or accident, such as a car accident
- Have symptoms other than pain and stiffness

- Have pain, tingling, numbness or weakness in your arms
- Suddenly develop neck stiffness along with stiffness in both shoulders

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, seek medical advice.

Understanding neck pain

Bulging Disc

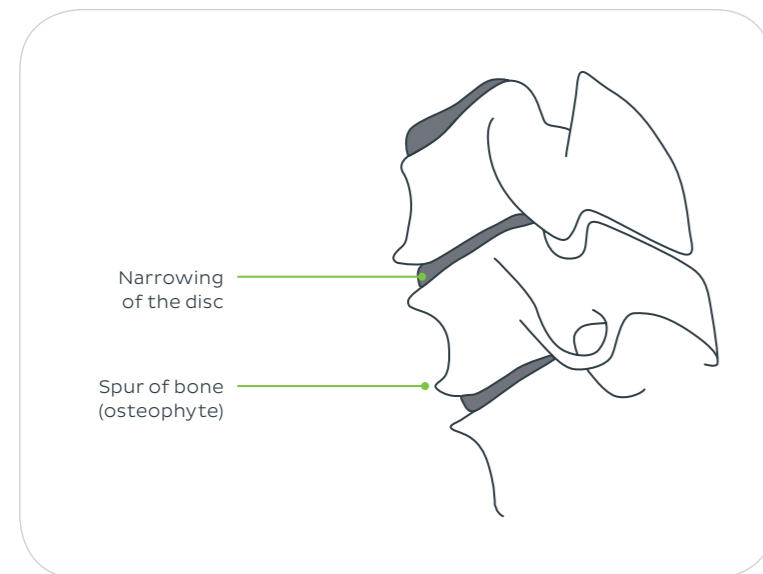
Intervertebral discs between the vertebrae of the spine can become damaged due to wear and tear or trauma. A damaged disc, may bulge, pushing backwards into the spinal canal. A bulging disc in your neck can cause neck pain which is usually associated with pain radiating down one arm, numbness, pins and needles, or weakness. This will often settle by itself or following physiotherapy, but occasionally you may need further treatment.

Cervical spondylosis

Spondylosis happens when the discs and the facet joints in your spine become worn. It's caused by everyday use over many years and is quite normal as you get older. The discs between the vertebrae become thinner and as a result the spaces between the bones become narrower.

In spondylosis, spurs of bone called osteophytes sometimes form at the edges of the vertebrae and the facet joints. These changes can be seen in x-rays and are very similar to the changes that occur in osteoarthritis, but in the neck they're known as cervical spondylosis.

Although spondylosis doesn't always cause pain, it may increase the risk of having spells of neck pain. However, because neck pain tends to come and go, it's not usually possible to identify spondylosis as a direct cause.



How to ease neck pain

There are a number of self-help options you can do to ease and manage neck pain, swelling and stiffness. Here are a few suggestions to consider. Discuss these with your doctor or physiotherapist.

1 Stay active

Your neck is designed for movement so the sooner you get back to your normal activities the sooner you will recover. Though some things that you do will feel painful, moving gently is very unlikely to damage your neck. Pain can feel worse if your neck stiffens up; try to continue moving as normally as you can within the limits of your pain.

You might feel better if you change positions more often and avoid the one position for too long. For example, alternate regularly between walking, sitting and standing. If travelling for long periods, try to plan your journey so that you can change position frequently.

If you find a particular activity aggravates your neck pain, you may need to use pacing. This means that you may need to spend a shorter amount of time, make a less intense effort, or less frequent effort. As the body recovers, you can then return to the activity. Over time, there will be less need for pacing as you progress.

Additionally, it is useful to prioritise your daily tasks for a few days and leave those that might aggravate your pain such as vacuuming and lawn mowing.

2 Regular exercise

If your neck pain lasts a while, lack of movement can cause the muscles to become weak. This makes it more likely that you'll strain them in the future.

Exercise is the most important way that you can:

- Ease stiffness and pain
- Build up muscle strength and stamina
- Improve your flexibility and general fitness.

The type of exercise you should do will vary depending upon on your level of fitness. A physiotherapist may be able to show you what exercises work best.

There is no perfect type of exercise. It's much better that you do a type of exercise which you enjoy and are likely to stick to. This could include:



Walking: provides low-impact regular movement for the joints and muscles



Swimming: the water environment takes the strain off joints and muscles while working out the entire body



Yoga: improves balance and increases flexibility



Pilates: strengthens muscles and promotes good posture



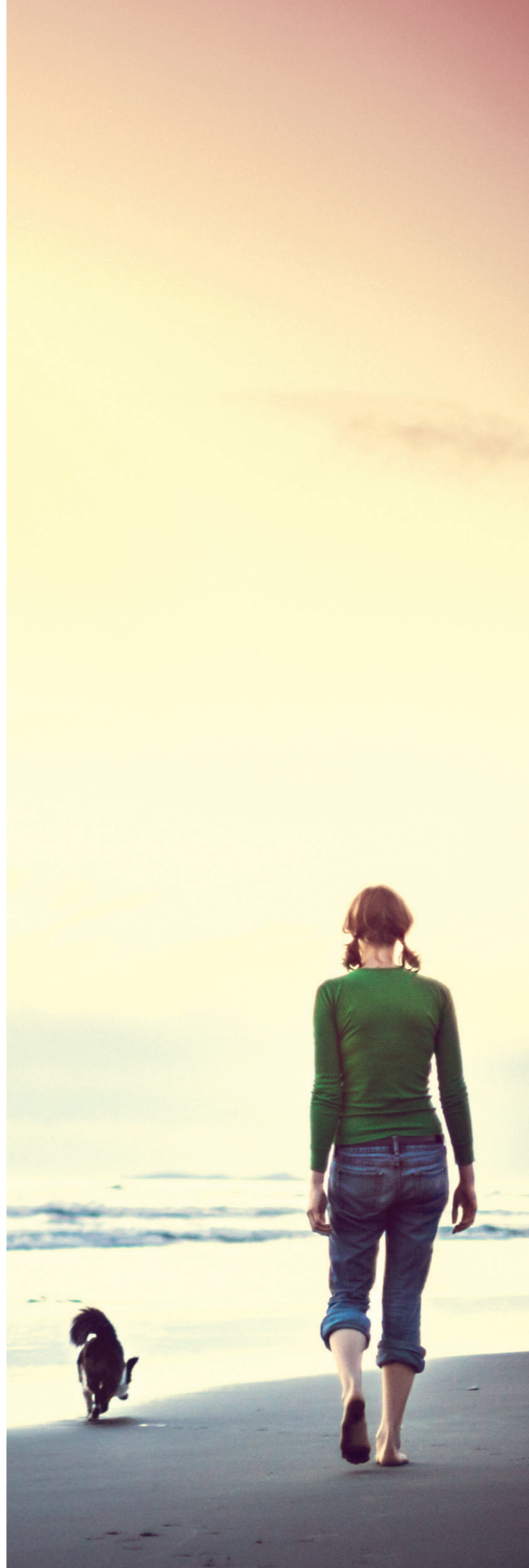
Exercise programs: provide a cardiovascular workout and all over body conditioning which includes the back and core muscles.

Consult your doctor or physiotherapist before starting any exercise program.



USEFUL TIP: USING HEAT OR ICE PACKS

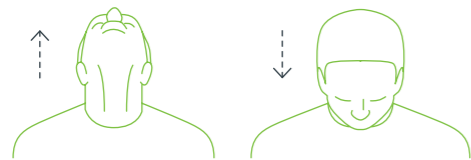
Using a hot water bottle or an ice pack may help ease pain and promote muscle relaxation. Place a cold pack or heat pack on your neck for 10–15 minutes every 2 to 3 hours to help ease the pain in your neck. Be careful, ice can burn. Place the ice in a thin cloth layer before applying it to your skin.



Simple stretches

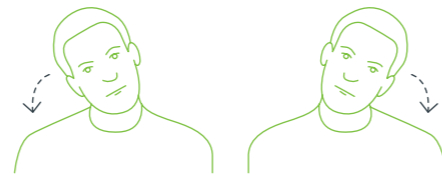
You may find a short period of rest is helpful initially to ease the pain and discomfort. But to prevent your neck muscles becoming weaker and your joints from stiffening, you should rest for as short a time as possible and certainly no more than a day or two. As soon as possible, start some gentle stretches and neck movements as these can help the muscles and ligaments to relax and ease your pain and stiffness.

The following are simple stretching and strengthening exercises you can do on a daily basis which will increase the strength of your muscles, ease stiffness, and help to restore your range of movement and get your neck back to normal. Start by exercising very gently and gradually build up.



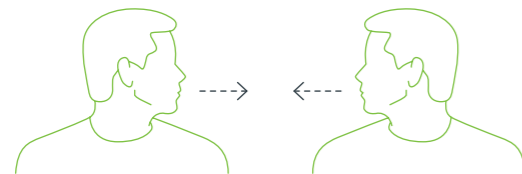
Neck tilt (up and down)

Sit or stand, keeping a good posture. It's best to sit down if you have trouble balancing. Tilt your head backwards, stretching your neck muscles. Hold this for five seconds and then repeat five times. Tilt your head down to rest your chin on your chest. Gently tense your neck muscles and hold for five seconds. Repeat five times.



Neck tilt (side to side)

It's best to sit down for this exercise to help you balance. Tilt your head down towards your shoulder, leading with your ear. Gently tense your neck muscles and hold for five seconds. Return your head to centre and repeat on the opposite side. Repeat five times on each side.



Neck turn

It's best to sit down for this exercise to help you balance. Turn your head towards one side, keeping your chin at the same height. Gently tense your neck muscles and hold for five seconds. Return your head to the centre and repeat on the opposite side. Repeat five times on each side.



Neck stretch

Sit or stand with good posture. It's best to sit down if you have trouble balancing. Keeping the rest of the body straight, push your chin forward so your throat is stretched. Gently tense your neck muscles and hold for five seconds. Return your head to the centre and push it backwards, keeping your chin up. Hold for five seconds. Repeat five times.

Remember to keep exercising regularly, even after your neck pain has eased

As with any physical activity, some aches or discomfort during or following exercise are normal and should be expected. But if an exercise makes your symptoms significantly worse you should stop doing it and consult your doctor or physiotherapist.

3

Reduce the stress and strain on your neck

DID YOU KNOW...?

Some headaches may start in the neck. These headaches are often caused by prolonged poor posture or stress.

Self-massage, applying an ice pack to the base of the skull or lying with a rolled towel under your neck may be helpful in reducing headache pain.

Any type of prolonged poor posture will, over time, substantially increase the risk of developing musculoskeletal pain. Examples include slouching in your chair, hunching over your keyboard or the prolonged use of your mobile phone.



Prevent 'text neck'

Hunching over a keyboard or prolonged use of a mobile can contribute to you developing a rounded upper back, which can cause shoulder and upper back stiffness.

Upper back, neck and rear shoulder strengthening exercises, chest stretches and neck posture drills can help correct this.

Remember to consult your doctor or physiotherapist before starting any exercise program.



Slouching in a chair

Slouching doesn't necessarily cause discomfort, but over time this position can place strain on muscles and soft tissues. This strain may increase tension in the muscles, which may in turn cause pain.

Prevent pain from slouching by sitting correctly. A good sitting posture is one in which your spinal curves are maintained and you are sitting well back in the chair, upright but relaxed. Use a support behind your lower back if sitting for long periods and keep hips, knees and ankles at right angles with knees slightly higher than hips. Avoid sitting for long periods of time without regular posture changes.

It may not feel comfortable initially because your muscles have not been conditioned to support you in the correct position. Exercises to strengthen your core and buttock muscles, and back extensions, will help correct a slouching posture. You can discuss what exercises to do your doctor or physiotherapist.



Poking your chin

The poking chin posture can be caused by sitting too low, a screen set too high, a hunched back, or a combination of all three. Correcting a poking chin involves improving your sitting habits and exercises to correct your posture.

- Gently lengthen your neck upwards as you tuck in your chin
- Bring your shoulder blades down and back towards your spine
- Pull in your lower tummy muscles to maintain a natural curve in your lower back
- Adjust your seating.



HANDY TIPS: DRIVING WITH NECK PAIN

- Know your limit. Know how long you can drive without pain
- Take regular breaks to move around and do back stretches
- Be comfortably seated. Sit with the seat upright and close enough to the wheel and controls that you do not need to reach forward. Adjust your headrest to the height of your head.

4 Sleep

If your pillow is too firm or thick, it can make neck pain worse. Changing the number or position of pillows may be helpful – ideally, you should use only one so that your head isn't pushed too far forward or to the side. Your head and neck should be supported so your head is level with your body in a neutral position.

The pillow should fill in the natural hollow between the neck and shoulders – a soft or moulded pillow may be useful, or a supportive roll inside your pillow case can support the hollow of your neck.

If your mattress doesn't give your back proper support, it can also make neck pain worse. You may want to consider replacing it if it's old or uncomfortable.

Talk to your doctor if you're having problems getting a good night's sleep.



Sleeping on your back

Support the curve of your neck with a small towel roll. If you use a pillow, place the towel roll inside the pillow case at its base.



Sleeping on your side

It's important to maintain your natural spine position. Your head and neck should be in the same position, as if you were standing up looking straight ahead.

You should not lie on your stomach, since this position places your neck at an awkward angle and may increase your symptoms.

5 Eating well



It is not only important to keep active when recovering from neck pain, but also to eat well.

No particular diet has been shown to help relieve or prevent neck pain. However, a healthy balanced diet is important for your general health. The Australian Dietary Guidelines³ suggest the following tips that can help to achieve a healthy weight and improve overall health.

Enjoy a wide variety of foods from these five groups every day

- Vegetables, including different types and colours, and legumes/beans
- Fruit
- Grain (cereal) foods, mostly wholegrain and/or high cereal fibre varieties, such as breads, cereals, rice, pasta, noodles, polenta, couscous, oats, quinoa and barley
- Lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds, and legumes/beans
- Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or their alternatives, mostly reduced fat (reduced fat milks are not suitable for children under the age of two years).

And drink plenty of water.

Limit saturated fat

Limit foods high in saturated fat such as biscuits, cakes, pastries, pies, processed meats, burgers, pizza, fried foods, potato chips, crisps and other savoury snacks.

Replace high fat foods which contain predominantly saturated fats such as butter, cream, cooking margarine, coconut and palm oil with foods which contain predominantly polyunsaturated and mono-unsaturated fats such as oils, spreads, nut butters/pastes and avocado.

Limit added salt

Limit intake of foods and drinks containing added salt.

- Read labels to choose lower sodium options among similar foods
- Do not add salt to foods in cooking or at the table.

Foods high in calcium and Vitamin D

Calcium and Vitamin D are both important to increase bone strength, and Vitamin D helps improve calcium absorption, as well as boosting the immune system. Low fat dairy products such as milk, yoghurt and cheese are the best way to get both of these nutrients, as well as green leafy vegetables.

Limit added sugars

Limit intake of foods and drinks containing added sugars, such as confectionery, sugar sweetened soft drinks and cordials, fruit drinks, vitamin waters, energy and sports drinks.

Limit alcohol intake

If you choose to drink alcohol, limit intake. For women who are pregnant, planning a pregnancy or breast-feeding, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.

There are some food components and substances that may have some impact on relieving inflammation or controlling symptoms that you may experience from chronic pain.

Please consult your doctor or Accredited Practising Dietitian before commencing a new diet.

6 Managing stress

Trying to relax is a crucial part of easing neck pain caused by muscle tension. Whilst you cannot always avoid stress, you can learn to reduce and manage it.

The following tips can help you look after your mind and body, and reduce stress and its impact on your health.

- 1 Identify warning signs**
Learn to notice the signs in your body that indicate when stress is becoming a problem, such as tensing your jaw, experiencing headaches, irritability and short temper.
- 2 Identify your sources of stress**
These might include late nights, deadlines, relationships, financial worries or changing jobs. Anticipating, managing or even finding ways to remove the source will help reduce stress.
- 3 Establish routines**
Routines such as regular times for exercise and relaxation, meal times, waking and bedtimes, can be calming and reassuring, and can help you to manage your stress.
- 4 Look after your health**
Focus on healthy eating and getting regular exercise. Take time to do activities you find calming or uplifting, such as listening to music, walking or dancing. Avoid using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs to cope.
- 5 Connect to others who care**
Share your thoughts and feelings with others when opportunities arise. Don't 'bottle up' your feelings. When you share your concerns or feelings with another person, it does help relieve stress. But it's important that the person you talk to is someone that you trust and who you feel can understand and validate your thoughts and feelings.
- 6 Make time for fun and relaxation**
Nurturing yourself is a necessity, not a luxury. If you regularly make time for fun and relaxation, you'll be in a better place to handle life's stressors. Relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing can help you manage stress levels.
- 7 Manage your time**
Poor time management can cause a lot of stress. Try not to over commit yourself. Prioritise or delegate tasks to others if you can.

7 Managing your emotional health

It is natural to feel scared, frustrated, sad and sometimes angry when you have pain. These are all normal emotions and can motivate you to manage your symptoms and engage in treatment.

The emotional distress may change over time as a result of changes in your capacity, your levels of and ability to cope with pain, changes in your symptoms and perceived effectiveness of your treatment.

It is, however, important to take note of how you are feeling and to address feelings of depression and anxiety that last longer than two weeks. It is also important to pay attention to your use of substances to help manage your symptoms.

Minimising your distress and putting on a brave face is not the answer. Depression, anxiety and substance misuse are just like other health problems, there are treatments available; however there is no one size fits all.

There are a range of effective treatments and health professionals, including your psychologist, psychiatrists, specialist addiction counsellors and social workers, who can help people on the road to recovery. Your doctor will be able to make the appropriate referral and enable you to claim some of the fee through Medicare.

Be aware of these feelings and get help if they start affecting your daily life.

It is normal to worry about the cause of your pain and how it will affect you. Talking to your doctor or other health professional about your worries can be helpful.



Treatment options for neck pain

There are several types of treatment for neck pain, depending on the cause and your symptoms.

Medication

Simple painkillers such as paracetamol and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, can help ease pain.

Always talk to your doctor or pharmacist before you take any medicine for your neck pain, as even natural and over-the-counter medicines can have side effects.

Physiotherapy

If your neck pain is affecting your daily activities and is persisting, it is a good idea to see a Physiotherapist to help you understand your problem and get you back to your everyday activities. Physiotherapy can help to reduce and manage your pain and improve your strength and flexibility. A physiotherapist will assess your neck pain and provide you with some effective treatment options. For example, they may use hands-on manual therapy.

Your physiotherapist may provide you with specific neck-exercises that target specific muscles. They can also give advice on how you can prevent symptoms returning in the future, for example by teaching you to use the correct muscles during everyday tasks.

Physiotherapists and chiropractors use manipulation, a type of manual therapy, to treat stiffness. Recent research suggests that manipulation is more effective within the first three months of developing a neck problem⁴.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture involves inserting thin needles at certain points on the body. If you are considering acupuncture, discuss with your doctor first. Be sure to let your doctor know any other medications you are taking. Also tell your doctor if you are pregnant, wear a pacemaker, or have any type of implant.

Injections

If you have continuing pain in your neck or arm, a long acting local anaesthetic and/or a steroid injection may help. Talk with your doctor about whether this is right for you.

Surgery

In most cases of neck pain surgery is not required. Surgery may be an option if other treatment avenues have not been successful and a specialist has identified a specific structural problem that can be corrected with surgery. For example, nerve root compression.

Your doctor can give you more advice and information about whether any of these or other treatments might be useful for you.



DID YOU KNOW...?

There is little evidence that neck collars help with either short-term or long-term neck pain⁵.

Where to find more information and support

How do I find a health professional?

If you don't have a regular doctor, speak to your local practice or medical centre.

You may want to consider approaching a **physiotherapist** directly by contacting the Australian Physiotherapy Association:

→ 1300 306 622

→ Use the 'Find a Physio' feature on their website at physiotherapy.asn.au

To find an **occupational therapist** see the Occupational Therapy Australia website:

→ otaus.com.au

To find a **psychologist** see the Australian Psychological Society website:

→ psychology.org.au

healthdirect

Trusted health information and advice online and over the phone, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Funded by the governments of Australia.

→ 1800 022 222

→ healthdirect.gov.au

Arthritis Australia

Arthritis Australia is the peak body and works on behalf of the nearly four million Australian living with arthritis. Learn more about arthritis and how to manage it by contacting Arthritis Australia.

→ 1800 011 041

→ arthritisaustralia.com.au

Visit www.empowered.org.au to hear directly from people with rheumatoid arthritis and similar conditions on how they learned to deal with the emotional ups and downs of living with arthritis.

Eat for Health

An Australian government website providing information, resources and tools about the Australian Dietary Guidelines and advice about the amount and kinds of foods that we need to eat for health and wellbeing.

→ eatforhealth.gov.au

About TAL

TAL is Australia's leading life insurance specialist, protecting people – not things – for over 150 years. Today, we insure more than 5 million Australians and in 2022, reached a new milestone paying \$3.5 billion in claims.

At the heart of the claims experience is you. Our goal is to help you lead as healthy and full a life as possible and help you get back to health as quickly as possible, taking into account all of your circumstances: your physical health, your mental wellbeing and your social support.

TAL's focused on your health

Health and wellbeing is at the heart of what we do. From your physical and mental health, to your social and financial wellbeing – helping you be the best you can be is our number one priority.

We want all Australians to live a life as healthy and full as possible, because that's what living this Australian life is all about. Our focus on your health begins when your cover does. Working with you to keep you well and supporting your return to health, with a personalised plan should the unfortunate happen and you suffer an illness or injury.

Because your health and wellbeing is as important to us as it is to you.

References

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The TAL logo consists of the letters 'TAL' in a bold, sans-serif font. The 'T' and 'A' are a dark blue color, while the 'L' is a bright green color.