

# Neck Matters

## How to help yourself have a healthy neck

This leaflet provides information for adults on self-help strategies for neck pain.

Neck pain is very common. Most of us will experience neck pain at some point in our lives. In most cases the pain isn't caused by anything serious. It will usually get better within a few weeks to months.

### What causes neck pain?

Often it's not possible to identify a specific cause of neck pain. It is rarely caused by anything serious. Sometimes the pain may be a result of an injury such as sprain or strain. It can be caused by normal age-related changes. Pain can sometimes be brought on by sleeping awkwardly, or brought on by worry or stress. Neck pain can often occur for no clear reason, and this is often the most common type.

Occasionally neck pain can be due to an irritation of a nerve that runs into your arm. This can cause additional symptoms such as a numb feeling, weakness or tingling sensation.

### 8 tips for a healthy neck

1. **Keep active:** Avoid bedrest. Keeping active is important even if you have to move slowly at first and gradually build it up. Keeping active can also help you to maintain a healthy body weight.
2. **Stay at work/hobbies** or return to them as soon as possible. People who continue to work during an episode of neck pain recover more quickly.
3. **Pain Management:** Your pharmacist can advise you on medication.
4. **Reduce or quit smoking:** Smokers have slower recovery rates and are at higher risk of recurrent nerve related pain than non-smokers.
5. **A good night's sleep:** Poor sleep can increase stress, headaches and mood. Improving sleep routine and habits can be very helpful in reducing pain.
6. **Stay positive:** Neck pain nearly always gets better. Having a positive mood and keeping up your normal daily activities, despite your pain, can help your recovery.
7. **Don't rush for tests:** MRI and x-rays are rarely helpful. Tests will be arranged by your healthcare professional if necessary.
8. Use of a collar isn't recommended.

### Activity and Exercises

Exercise is helpful for neck pain. Try and do what you enjoy. Walking, running, cycling, swimming, stretching, yoga and Pilates all have similar effects for neck pain. Gradually build up over several days or weeks.

In the early phase of neck pain, exercises may be helpful.



**Head turn:** Keep your shoulders relaxed and slowly turn your head side to side.



**Head tilt:** keeping your shoulders relaxed slowly tilt your head to the side, taking your ear towards your shoulder.



**Chin tucks:** Sitting up straight and looking ahead, pull your chin backwards without moving your head up or down.

## Why does some neck pain not get better?

Sometimes neck pain can last a long time or keep coming back. This does not mean your neck pain is being caused by anything serious. The diagram below explains why this can happen. It is important to recover your confidence in your neck and start to move again to help break this cycle.

## When to speak to a health professional

If you experience any of the following, phone 111 as soon as possible:

- Clumsiness in your hands, numbness, pins and needles or weakness that is worsening, in one or both arms.
- Problems with your balance or walking since your neck pain started.
- Your neck pain is associated with a severe headache.

Contact your GP, or phone 111 if your GP practice is closed, if you experience any of the following:

- You have neck pain and you also feel generally unwell.
- You have neck pain that starts when you are ill with other problems – such as rheumatoid arthritis or cancer.
- You develop blurred vision, ringing in your ears or dizziness.

## What to do if your neck pain is not improving

Following this advice, you should see gradual improvements over time. If your neck pain hasn't improved within 6 weeks of following this advice, it's a good idea to talk to a healthcare professional about your symptoms. In NHS Lothian all the services which help people with neck pain and neck related arm pain work together. This ensures they provide the right service, for the right person, at the right time, in the right place.

Some people may benefit from physiotherapy, for further information please contact your GP practice or follow the information on **NHS Inform - How to access MSK services:**

[www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints/how-to-access-msk-services](http://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints/how-to-access-msk-services)

A physiotherapist will assess you and discuss your options.

## Useful Web Addresses

### NHS Inform – Neck problems

[www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints/neck-and-back-problems-and-conditions/neck-problems/](http://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints/neck-and-back-problems-and-conditions/neck-problems/)

### The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy – Neck Pain

[www.csp.org.uk/conditions/neck-pain](http://www.csp.org.uk/conditions/neck-pain)

### For more exercises and videos please visit NHS Inform – Exercises for neck problems:

[www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints/neck-and-back-problems-and-conditions/exercises-for-neck-problems](http://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints/neck-and-back-problems-and-conditions/exercises-for-neck-problems)



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