



Neck pain - It can be more than just a pain in the neck!

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Neck pain can come in from many different structures or causes. An obvious cause for neck pain is trauma, as in whiplash. This is most often seen in car accidents when there is a sudden jolt that forces the head and body to move separately from each other. When this happens, the muscles in the neck try to protect the head and cervical spine by tightening up. This can lead to spasm and pain which can be difficult to relieve. Physical therapy and massage therapy can be very helpful to relieve this spasm and return the neck to its normal function.

Another typical cause of neck pain is from prolonged poor posture. This is most often seen in people with office jobs or people that spend too much time in front of the computer. This usually looks like everything is positioned forward: the shoulders and head sit in front of the body. When the neck is held in this position for a long period of time, the muscles shorten, and there can even be structural changes to the bones in the neck. This puts abnormal stresses on the joints, support structures, and the muscles. To correct these problems, controlled stretching, work place modification, and strengthening of the appropriate postural muscles are all essential.

Degenerative changes, also known as arthritis, can be a result of normal or abnormal wear and tear. This can lead to formation of bone spurs or narrowing of the holes that carry nerves, a.k.a. stenosis. When this happens, there can be compression of the nerves that travel down into the arms and lead to tingling in the hands, decreased sensation, or weakness. A similar problem occurs with a cervical disc herniation when the disc gets displaced and may compress a nerve. By knowing what area has altered sensation or what muscles are weak, your physical therapist can determine what level is involved. Before any invasive treatments are performed, usually physical therapy can be attempted to maximize the spaces in the cervical spine to allow more room for the nerves. Injections may also be used to decrease pain or reduce inflammation. Maximizing the spaces in the neck requires various movements which must be thoroughly explored to determine the right combination. Physical therapy treatment will also entail stretching, strengthening, and activity modification. If you are having any of these problems, see your physical therapist or other health care provider for an assessment and see what can be done.

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