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The evidence used in the preparation of this leaflet is available on request. Please email: information@salisbury.nhs.uk if you would like a reference list.

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Role: Physiotherapist
Date written: July 2011
Review date: July 2014
Version: 1.0
Code: PI0807

Whiplash (1 of 3)

What is whiplash?

Whiplash is a common injury to the neck caused by a sudden movement or jolt to the body or head. The result is a stretch and strain of the neck muscles and ligaments that can lead to muscle spasm, pain and stiffness. A common cause is a car accident when the neck is suddenly stressed forwards and backwards.

What symptoms can I expect?

Symptoms do not often appear immediately but may start, or gradually get worse, in the days following the injury.

Common symptoms include:

- neck pain and stiffness
- pain or stiffness in the shoulders or down the arms
- headaches.

Other symptoms may include:

- pins and needles in the arms or hands
- muscle spasms
- muscle ache or fatigue
- back pain
- temporary dizziness, blurred vision or ringing in the ears

Warning signs

If you have a combination of the following symptoms that are not improving, it is important to contact the doctor:

- Dizziness
- Blurred vision
- Difficulty swallowing
- Severe headaches not getting better after taking pain killers.
- Fainting/blackout
- Nausea/vomiting
- Slurring of speech

How long will the symptoms of whiplash last?

In many cases symptoms will begin to improve after a few days. It may take from 3 weeks to 3 months to disappear. There are a number of factors that can affect the prognosis such as the severity of the sprain, pre-existing neck pain or arthritis, posture, stress or anxiety and fear of movement.

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What can I do to help myself?

There are many things you can do to help ease your symptoms.

(a) Medication

If you have been prescribed anti-inflammatories or pain killers for pain relief take them regularly until the pain settles to enable you to move your neck. See your G.P if your medication is not helping.

(b) Hot/cold

Either heat or cold can be used to help pain and muscle spasm. Use frozen peas in a damp tea towel for up to 10 minutes, or alternatively try a hot water bottle in a cover. Use whatever gets best results for you.

(c) Should I use a collar?

Evidence shows that in many cases this can lead to delayed recovery and irregular movement patterns although in severe cases, short periods of use over the first three days may be appropriate. It is important to keep your neck moving regularly to avoid further stiffness

(d) Sleeping positions

Sleep on a supportive mattress and avoid sleeping on your front. Try to keep your head and neck in line with your spine. This may require 1 or 2 pillows depending on their thickness. Many people find it helpful to place a small rolled towel along the bottom edge of the pillowcase or tying the pillow in half to provide extra support.

e) Posture

Good posture is important as this will aid the healing process and avoid aggravating the neck pain. Regularly sit up straight and tuck your chin in. A small rolled towel placed in the back may help support a better posture.

At home When watching T.V keep the screen in front of you to avoid twisting the neck. When washing up/cooking keep the shoulders relaxed and head level. Try to work at an appropriate height.

At work Arrange your desk or computer so that you don't have to repeatedly reach or twist, and your computer screen is at eye level. If you have to adopt an awkward position, make sure you regularly straighten up and keep your neck and shoulders moving

Driving Try not to sit with your shoulders hunched and chin poking forwards. Position your seat upright and practice tucking the chin in with the head against the head rest.

(f) Exercise

You must start active exercise within 4 days of injuring the neck. This will help to increase the mobility in the neck and therefore reduce the pain.

Be positive and keep moving! There are many things you can do to help the healing process.

Try the following exercises at regular/hourly intervals through the day. They should be done

slowly, moving into discomfort but not into excessive pain. You may like to start these exercises when lying on your back with the neck supported and progress to sitting.

1 Neck rotation

Correct your posture.

Look over the right then left shoulder in a slow controlled way and as far as you feel comfortable.

Repeat 10 times.



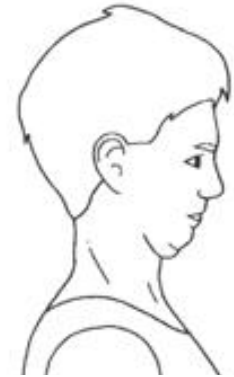
2 Neck retraction

Correct your posture.

Gently draw chin in. Feel the back of your neck lengthening.

Hold for a few seconds.

Repeat 10 times.



3 Side flexion stretch

Correct your posture.

Tilt your head to one side as far as you feel comfortable

Keep your eyes and nose pointing forwards.



4 Shoulder shrugs and shoulder stretch

Roll your shoulders in small circles forwards 5 times and backwards 5 times.

You can also try stretching each arm above your head as far as you feel comfortable and repeat 5 times.

If you find the exercises are making the pain worse stop doing them and speak to your physiotherapist.

Further information

The NHS Clinical Knowledge Summaries are a reliable source of evidence-based information and practical 'know how' about the common conditions managed in primary care. On the website you will find good information about whiplash and many other conditions.

www.cks.nhs.uk

NHS Choices is the online 'front door' to the NHS. It is the country's biggest health website and gives all the information you need to make choices about your health. On the website you will find information on a wide range of conditions including whiplash.

www.nhs.uk