

PHYSIO TIPS

IN AUGUST

NECK PAIN EXPLAINED



Physio Tips is a monthly newsletter aimed at educating the public regarding the latest evidence in injury management, without all the medical jargon. We will keep it simple and concise, but full of knowledge gems in order to empower and equip you.

REACH OUT TO US

Non-specific neck pain has become one of the most common complaints among patients of all ages and is on the increase due to a combination of increased technology usage and longer working hours.

It has become apparent that 7 out of 10 people in our population will experience neck pain at least once in their lifetime and 85% of those patients will likely have it again within 5 years from their initial episode. Luckily, 95% of neck pain cases are NOT due to serious underlying causes.

It is known that neck pain is of multi-factorial origin, indicating that individual-, psychosocial- and physical factors can contribute to its onset and persistence. This month we will provide you with some helpful knowledge to understand neck pain better so that it is less threatening and easier to manage.



Factors that increase your risk of experiencing neck pain:

- High job demands or job insecurity
- Psychological stressors (anxiety, depression, poor coping skills etc.)
- History of smoking
- Older age and/or female gender
- Poor computer workstation
- Lack of support at work or socially
- Sedentary lifestyle/ lack of movement
- Repetitive work/ precision work

Luckily, most risk factors can be modified and by changing them you can lower your chances of getting neck pain!

What can trigger the experience of neck pain?

It usually starts with firing of danger sensors in our neck. This can be as a result of acid build up from being in one position for too long, or from under/over used muscles. These messages can often go unnoticed by the brain, but can be amplified by triggers related to our environment/mood. In chronic neck pain, things become a bit more complex and pain can sometimes be triggered by thoughts/feelings alone, without any messages coming from the neck tissues. In acute injuries, inflammation and nerve irritation might play a big role in firing danger sensors that could result in pain.





Can it be something serious?

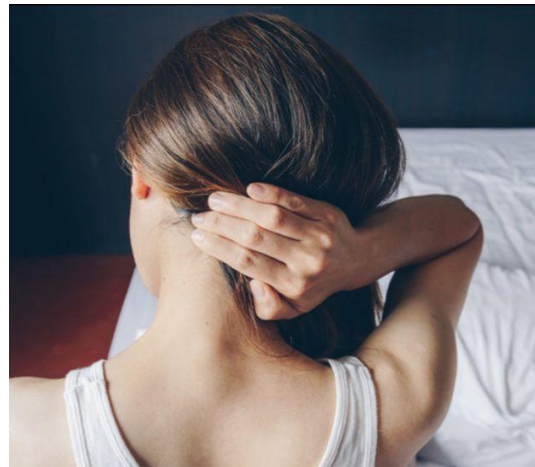
Less than 1% of cases are due to threatening causes, such as:

- Autoimmune diseases
- Cancer/ tumours
- Infection (e.g. meningitis)
- Spinal cord injuries (e.g. following trauma)
- Severe degenerative biomechanics

How long before it gets better

Non-specific neck pain normally improves within 6 weeks; however, some factors can prolong this timeframe:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Psychosocial stress
- Pain-related fears and beliefs
- Older age
- High job demands
- Habitual behaviour



What about whiplash?

Whiplash during a car accident is a common cause of neck pain. There is often some inflammation and muscle spasm that contribute to the initial pain experience, but these tissue injuries heal within 3 months. Research has now shown that persistent neck pain after whiplash is often related to post-traumatic stress or other psychological factors, rather than there being any remaining permanent damage in the neck.

Now for some tips on how to manage neck pain effectively. Treatments will vary according to the underlying contributing factors, but will generally include a combination of the interventions below:



Education

Information is empowering as it helps us to understand our symptoms better and thereby we are able to learn how to manage it better. Key education topics for neck pain include: coping strategies, information regarding the nature of the injury, information on the course of recovery, addressing unhelpful beliefs, reassurance, pain education, ergonomic education and the benefits of remaining active.

Exercise therapy

Evidence has shown that strengthening, endurance and sensorimotor exercises have superior benefits in neck pain patients. A variety of exercise approaches may be used and has the ability to improve mobility, reduce pain and address neck muscle impairments. Exercises are usually targeted at the deeper neck muscles and shoulder muscles to restore good neck control and movement patterns. The evidence suggests that strengthening is more effective than stretching.



Manual therapy

Manual therapy of the cervical- and thoracic spine is often used as a means of providing pain relief and to restore movement. It is a very useful tool to help muscles relax and to reduce pain, but should always be combined with strengthening and lifestyle interventions for long term relief.

Stress management

There is a strong correlation between anxiety/stress and non-specific neck pain. Pain always tends to be worse when we are stressed, but if you notice that your neck pain is always triggered by increased stress or anxiety, addressing psychological factors becomes very important in managing your symptoms. In some cases, basic stress-relieving methods are effective (like breathing exercises, meditation, cardiovascular exercise), but in severe cases psychological assessment and treatment might be necessary.



When to seek medical attention

It is important to make a correct diagnosis based on the signs and symptoms. If you present with the following it might be necessary to get a professional physiotherapist or doctor to assess you:

- Unexplained weight loss
- Night pain that wakes you
- Nausea/ dizziness,
- Bladder & bowel disturbances,
- A recent traumatic event
- Altered walking pattern/ clumsy hands

As mentioned previously, if you present with any of these symptoms it does not necessarily mean that you should worry, but rather that you should consult your physiotherapist/ doctor for an assessment.

WATCH THIS SPACE FOR PHYSIO TIPS IN SEPTEMBER

Topic: Osteoarthritis