Whiplash neck sprain

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A whiplash neck sprain (also know as just whiplash) is common after a road traffic accident. Symptoms usually ease and go without any specific treatment. It is best to keep the neck active and moving. If required, painkillers can ease pain.

At a glance

- Whiplash is a neck sprain from your head suddenly jolting backwards and forwards or rotating.
- Road traffic accidents are the most common cause of whiplash.
- Symptoms include neck pain and stiffness, which may develop hours after the injury.
- Treatment includes painkillers and keeping your neck gently moving.
- Most people recover fully from whiplash within a few weeks.
- See a doctor if pain worsens, persists beyond 4-6 weeks, or if you develop new symptoms like numbness.
- Properly adjusted head restraints in vehicles can help prevent whiplash injuries.

This summary has been automatically generated from the article content to help readers quickly understand the key points.

What is whiplash?

Whiplash is a neck sprain that occurs when your head is suddenly jolted backwards and forwards (or forwards then backwards) in a whip-like movement, or is suddenly forcibly rotated. This can cause some neck muscles and ligaments to stretch more than normal (sprain).

The common cause is when you are in a vehicle that is hit from behind by another vehicle. Being in a vehicle hit from the side or front can also cause a whiplash sprain.

Damage to the spine or spinal cord sometimes occurs from a severe whiplash accident. This is uncommon and is not dealt with in this leaflet. This leaflet deals only with the common whiplash sprain to neck muscles and ligaments. It assumes that you have been assessed by a doctor and serious neck injury has been ruled out.

How common is whiplash?

Whiplash neck sprains are common. Many people involved in road traffic accidents develop neck pain (with or without other injuries). Women are more prone than men are to a whiplash, as their neck muscles are less strong.

Some people are surprised at having symptoms after a minor road traffic accident. Even slow vehicle bumps may cause enough jerking of the neck to cause symptoms.

Less commonly, a whiplash can occur after a sporting injury, or even with everyday activities such as jolting the neck when you trip or fall.

What are the symptoms of whiplash?

- Pain and stiffness in the neck. It may take several hours after the accident for symptoms to appear. The pain and stiffness often become worse on the day after the accident. In about half of cases, the pain first develops the day after the accident.
- Turning or bending the neck may be difficult.
- You may also feel pain or stiffness in the shoulders or down the arms.
- There may be pain and stiffness in the upper and lower part of the back.
- Headache is a common symptom.

- Dizziness, blurred vision, pain in the jaw or pain on swallowing, and unusual sensations of the facial skin may occur for a short while, but soon go. Tell a doctor if any of these persist.
- Some people feel tired and irritable for a few days and find it difficult to concentrate.

How is whiplash diagnosed?

Your doctor will usually be able to diagnose whiplash from the description of the way the accident occurred, the typical symptoms, and by examining you. An examination of your neck and arms can check that there are no signs of damage to the bones of your spine (vertebrae) or to your spinal nerves or spinal cord. If these are suspected then further tests may be recommended.

What are the treatments for whiplash?

Exercise your neck and keep active

Aim to keep your neck moving as normally as possible. At first the pain may be bad and you may need to rest the neck for a day or so. However, gently exercise the neck as soon as you are able. You should not let it stiffen up.

Gradually try to increase the range of neck movements. Every few hours gently move the neck in each direction. Do this several times a day. As far as possible, continue with normal activities. You will not cause damage to your neck by moving it.

Medicines for whiplash

Painkillers are often helpful and may be recommended by your doctor.

- **Paracetamol** at full strength is often sufficient. For an adult this is two 500 mg tablets, four times a day.
- **Anti-inflammatory painkillers**. These may be used alone or at the same time as paracetamol. They include ibuprofen which you can buy at pharmacies or get on prescription. Other types such as diclofenac or naproxen need a prescription. Some people with stomach ulcers, asthma, high blood pressure, kidney failure, or heart failure may not be able to take anti-inflammatory painkillers.

- **A stronger painkiller** such as codeine is an option if anti-inflammatories do not suit or do not work well. Codeine is often taken in addition to paracetamol.
- **A muscle relaxant** such as diazepam is occasionally prescribed for a few days if your neck muscles become very tense and make the pain worse.

Other treatments

Some other treatments which may be advised include:

A good posture may help. Check that your sitting position at work or at the computer is not poor (that is, not with your head flexed forwards with a stooped back). Sit upright. Yoga, Pilates, and the Alexander Technique all improve neck posture but their value in treating neck pain is uncertain.

A firm supporting pillow seems to help some people when sleeping. Try not to use more than one pillow.

Physiotherapy:

- Various treatments may be advised by a physiotherapist if the pain is not settling. These include traction, heat, manipulation, etc. However, what is often most helpful is the advice a physiotherapist can give on exercises to do at home.
- A common situation is for a doctor to advise on painkillers and gentle neck exercises. If symptoms do not begin to settle over a week or so, you may then be referred to a physiotherapist to help with pain relief and for advice on specific neck exercises.

Treatment may vary and you should go back to see a doctor:

- If the pain becomes worse.
- If the pain persists beyond 4-6 weeks.
- If other symptoms develop such as loss of feeling (numbness), weakness, or persistent pins and needles in part of an arm or hand. These may indicate irritation to or pressure on a nerve emerging from the spinal cord.

Other pain-relieving techniques may be tried if the pain becomes persistent (chronic). Chronic neck pain is also sometimes associated with anxiety and depression which may also need to be treated.

Can whiplash be prevented?

Modern vehicles are increasingly designed to minimise the impact of collisions on the neck. However, all vehicles include head restraints on vehicle seats which may prevent some whiplash sprains. The head restraint should be as high as the top of the head. This may stop the head from jolting backwards in a road traffic accident.

However, up to 3 in 4 head restraints are not correctly adjusted. Head restraints may make a journey less comfortable when they are correctly adjusted as they will not allow your head to lie back. However, if you have had whiplash, you may be more particular about correctly adjusting the head restraint for yourself and for other passengers.

What is the outlook for whiplash?

This will depend on the severity of the sprain but the outlook (prognosis) is very good in most cases. Symptoms often begin to improve after a few days. Most people make a full recovery within a few weeks. However, in a small number of people, some symptoms persist long-term.

Frequently asked questions

What should I do if my whiplash pain gets worse or doesn't improve after a few weeks?

If your pain becomes worse, persists beyond 4-6 weeks, or if you develop new symptoms like numbness, weakness, or persistent pins and needles in your arm or hand, you should return to see a doctor. These new symptoms could indicate irritation or pressure on a nerve.

Are there any specific exercises I can do to help my whiplash recovery?

While the article recommends gently moving your neck in all directions and gradually increasing your range of motion several times a day, specific exercises might be advised by a physiotherapist. If your symptoms don't start to settle after about a week, your doctor might refer you to a physiotherapist for advice on particular neck exercises.

Can whiplash cause problems other than neck pain, like feeling tired or irritable?

Yes, some people with whiplash may experience other symptoms for a few days, such as feeling tired and irritable, and finding it difficult to concentrate. While these typically pass quickly, they are recognised symptoms.

How can I adjust my head restraint properly to help prevent whiplash?

To help prevent whiplash, your head restraint should be adjusted so it is as high as the top of your head. This position helps to prevent your head from jolting backwards during a vehicle collision.

Why do some people experience whiplash symptoms even after a minor car accident?

Even slow vehicle bumps can cause enough jerking of the neck to result in whiplash symptoms. This often surprises people, but the sudden whip-like movement regardless of vehicle speed can still cause muscles and ligaments in the neck to stretch more than normal.

These questions and answers have been generated from the information in this article.

Further reading and references

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Article history

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