Soft Tissue Injury of the Neck

Soft tissue injuries of the neck may be either blunt or penetrating. Blunt injuries may occur in several ways. Most involve some type of direct blow to the neck. This can cause a serious injury to the windpipe (*trachea*) or voice box (*larynx*). The blow may not result in a cut to the skin. In some cases, the injury to the soft tissue includes a broken neck.

These types of injuries require immediate medical care. Sometimes, the signs of the injury may not be evident right away. You may feel fine, but the swelling may lead to your airway being cut off. These types of injury are rare.

CAUSES

The different causes of blunt injury include:

- **"Clothesline injuries":** Injury where someone is moving at high speed and runs into a clothesline or similar object and gets a direct injury to the neck. If the airway is blocked, it can cause suffocation due to lack of oxygen (*asphyxiation*) and even instant death.
- **High-energy trauma:** In injuries such as motor vehicle crashes.
- **Sports-related injuries:** Injury to trachea and larynx can result from being struck by another player or being struck by an object such as a baseball.
- **Strangulation:** This type of injury may cause skin trauma, hoarseness of voice, broken cartilage in the larynx and/or trachea, and may cause a serious airway problem.

SYMPTOMS

- Bruising.
- Hoarseness of voice.
- Difficulty swallowing.
- Painful swallowing.
- Trouble breathing. This may become worse when lying flat.
- Pain in the front of the neck.
- Coughing up blood.
- High pitched, harsh, vibratory noise due to partial obstruction of the windpipe (*stridor*).
- Swelling in the neck and face.
- Swelling of upper arms.
- The windpipe appears to be pushed off to one side.
- Air in the tissues under the skin of neck or chest (*subcutaneous emphysema*).

DIAGNOSIS

- If possible, your caregiver may ask about the details of how the injury occurred. A detailed exam can help to identify specific areas of the neck that are injured.
- Your caregiver may ask for tests to rule out injury of the voice box, airway, or food pipe.

TREATMENT

If your trachea and/or larynx is injured, immediate medical attention is required. In almost all cases, hospitalization is needed. For injuries that do not appear to require surgery, it is helpful to have medical observation for 24 hours. You may be asked to do one or more of the following:

- Rest your voice.
- Bed rest.
- Limit your diet depending on the extent of injury.
- Keep your head raised.
- Breathe humidified air.
- Take medicines to control infection, reduce swelling, and reduce normal stomach acid.

For injuries that appear to require surgical treatment, you will need to stay in the hospital. The exact type of operation needed will depend on the exact injury or injuries.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- If the skin was broken, keep the wound area clean and dry.
- Follow your caregiver's advice about your diet.
- Follow your caregiver's advice about use of your voice.
- Take medications as directed.
- Keep your head and neck at least partially elevated while recovering. This should also be done while sleeping.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Your voice becomes weaker.
- You feel swelling and/or bruising is not improving as expected.
- You feel that you are having problems with medicines prescribed.
- You develop discharge from the site of injury.
- You develop pain/difficulty while swallowing.
- You develop a fever of 100.5º F (38.1º C) or higher.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You cough up blood.
- You develop sudden breathing difficulty.
- You develop sudden, new swelling of the neck and/or face.
- You develop a fever of 102° F (38.9° C) or higher.

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