Cervical and Neck Sprain and Strain
(Neck Sprain and Strain)

A cervical sprain is an injury to the neck. The injury can include either over-stretching or even small tears in the ligaments that hold the bones of the neck in place. A strain affects muscles and tendons. Minor injuries usually only involve ligaments and muscles. Because the different parts of the neck are so close together, more severe injuries can involve both sprain and strain. These injuries can affect the muscles, ligaments, tendons, discs, and nerves in the neck.

SYMPTOMS

- Pain, soreness, stiffness, or burning sensation in the front, back, or sides of the neck. This may develop immediately after injury. Onset of discomfort may also develop slowly and not begin for 24 hours or more.
- Shoulder and/or upper back pain.
- Limits to the normal movement of the neck.
- Headache.
- Dizziness.
- Weakness and/or abnormal sensation (such as numbness or tingling) of one or both arms and/or hands.
- Muscle spasm.
- Difficulty with swallowing or chewing.
- Tenderness and swelling at the injury site.

CAUSES

An injury may be the result of a direct blow or from certain habits that can lead to the symptoms noted above.

- Injury from:
  - Contact sports (such as football, rugby, wrestling, hockey, auto racing, gymnastics, diving, martial arts, and boxing).
  - Motor vehicle accidents.
  - Whiplash injuries (see image at right). These are common. They occur when the neck is forcefully whipped or forced backward and/or forward.
  - Falls.
- Lifestyle or awkward postures:
  - Cradling a telephone between the ear and shoulder.
  - Sitting in a chair that offers no support.
  - Working at an ill-designed computer station.
  - Activities that require hours of repeated or long periods of looking up (stretching the neck backward) or looking down (bending the head/neck forward).

DIAGNOSIS

Most of the time, your caregiver can diagnose this problem with a careful history and examination. The history will include information about known problems (such as arthritis in the neck) or a previous neck injury. X-rays may be ordered to find out if there is a different problem. X-rays can also help to find problems with the bones of the neck not related to the injury or current symptoms.

TREATMENT

Several treatment options are available to help pain, spasm, and other symptoms. They include:

- **Cold** helps relieve pain and reduce inflammation. Cold should be applied for 10 to 15 minutes every 2 to 3 hours after any activity that aggravates your symptoms. Use ice packs or an ice massage. Place a towel or cloth in between your skin and the ice pack.
- **Medication:**

- Only take over-the-counter or prescription medicines for pain, discomfort, or fever as directed by your caregiver.
- Pain relievers or muscle relaxants may be prescribed. Use only as directed and only as much as you need.

- **Change in the activity that caused the problem.** This might include using a headset with a telephone so that the phone is not propped between your ear and shoulder.
- **Neck collar.** Your caregiver may recommend temporary use of a soft cervical collar.
- **Work station.** Changes may be needed in your work place. A better sitting position and/or better posture during work may be part of your treatment.
- **Physical Therapy.** Your caregiver may recommend physical therapy. This can include instructions in the use of stretching and strengthening exercises. Improvement in posture is important. Exercises and posture training can help stabilize the neck and strengthen muscles and keep symptoms from returning.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

Other than formal physical therapy, all treatments above can be done at home. Even when not at work, it is important to be conscious of your posture and of activities that can cause a return of symptoms.

Most cervical sprains and/or strains are better in 1-3 weeks. As you improve and increase activities, doing a warm up and stretching before the activity will help prevent recurrent problems.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Pain is not effectively controlled with medication.
- You feel unable to decrease pain medication over time as planned.
- Activity level is not improving as planned and/or expected.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- While using medication, you develop any bleeding, stomach upset, or signs of an allergic reaction.
- Symptoms get worse, become intolerable, and are not helped by medications.
- New, unexplained symptoms develop.
- You experience numbness, tingling, weakness, or paralysis of any part of your body.

MAKE SURE YOU:

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.

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