

Elite Physical Therapy Corner: Neck Pain

Neck pain as your walking to the 18th green or arm tingling and numbness as you sit riveted to the TV during the 4 hour long Wimbledon final? You may be experiencing some of the wide range of symptoms that can be caused by problems with your cervical spine. Research indicates that 90% of the population experience spine symptoms at least once in a lifetime. Severity of cervical pain can range from occasional minor neck pain to severe shoulder, upper back, and arm pain. Cervical dysfunction can progress to headache, vertigo, arm pain tingling, numbness and in severe cases, can actually cause weakness in the shoulder, arm, and hand. Injury, trauma or just poor posture and alignment as we age can cause breakdown of the neck joints, their supporting structures and the musculature around them. In severe cases, the nerves themselves can be impinged upon and injured. Each episode of neck pain and stiffness can become progressively worse and last longer. Symptoms may also start to travel to other parts of the body, for example, neck pain that occurred 2 years ago may come back but manifest itself as shoulder or shoulder blade area pain. Generally speaking, the more distant the pain gets from the source (in this case the cervical spine) the more severe the problem can be. If you don't stop the cycle and figure out the cause of each episode, the accumulation of damage to the spinal structures will eventually cause them to fail. At this stage, physical therapy alone will not be effective. You will need more extensive intervention that may involve spine doctors, pain management, or possibly surgery.

Some of the typical diagnoses you may receive from a Physician include cervical strain/sprain, spondylosis, Degenerative Disc Disease, Cervical Radiculopathy and spinal stenosis. Physical Therapy may be indicated in all of these cases. The key is starting treatment as early as possible. If you don't stop the cycle and figure out the cause of each episode, the accumulation of damage to the spinal structures will eventually cause them to fail. Research has showed that even in cases of herniated discs, if addressed early, 95% of people do not require surgery.

Physical therapy treatment will focus on postural correction attempting to attain proper alignment of the cervical vertebrae. Joint mobilization and manual therapy techniques along with flexibility and stability exercises will be utilized. The therapist should give you a home exercise program as this is crucial to recovery. The therapist may also use ultrasound for inflammation control and electrical stimulation for pain control.

What Can I Do?

Overall, you need to maintain good posture throughout all of your daily activities. If you start to feel sore or stiff, change your posture and modify your body mechanics. Your body will warn you – using pain as a signal – that your body mechanics are improperly aligned. However, we often choose to ignore these signals in order to complete the project, paper, book, etc. Learning to listen to your body is the best way to avoid pain.

Sit up straight; it feels better and puts the least amount of strain on your spine. If you sit or bend too often or for too long, bend in the opposite direction to balance the stress and relieve muscle tension.

When sitting, arch your back five to 10 times if it feels stiff. Repeat two to three times a day (or more often if you are sore).

Other Stretching Exercises:

- Shoulder rolls backwards x 10
- Shoulder blade squeeze x 10: squeeze shoulder blades straight back with no upward motion
- Chin in x 10: looking forward, retract your chin toward your chest without changing the angle of your head
- Chin in and slowly stretch head back x 10
- Head turn over shoulders x 10 each way: rotate head as far as you can
- Standing back bend stretch x 10: hands on hips and lean back as far as you can

All exercises should be performed with good posture, which in general terms means stay as tall as you can. Also, no pain should be experienced, only the feeling that tissues are being stretched.

For Consultation by an Elite Physical Therapist, call 239-653-9568