

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

Neck pain

Neck pain usually starts suddenly. But it often starts to feel better after a few days and is usually gone after a week or so. If it doesn't go away or it gets worse, you may need treatment.

We've looked at the best and most up-to-date research to produce this information. You can use it to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are right for you.

What happens?

There are different types of neck pain. Each has different causes.

- Simple (or uncomplicated) neck pain is the most common type of neck pain. You might never know the exact reason for your neck pain, but it might be because of bad posture or stress. Or you may have strained your neck muscles or ligaments (the strands of tissue that hold bones together) or slept awkwardly. If you're older, neck pain may be caused by wear and tear of the bones in your neck and the shock-absorbing discs between them.
- Sometimes the root of a nerve is squashed or injured as it comes out between the bones in the neck. It can happen when a bone or discs in your neck press on a nerve.
- Whiplash is common after car crashes and sports injuries. To learn more, see our information on whiplash.

What are the symptoms?

Most neck pain starts suddenly, and usually improves after a couple of days. Your neck will be sore and painful, especially when you try to move it. The pain may spread to your head and shoulders.

You should tell your doctor if your arm or hand feels numb, weak, or tingling, as this may mean you have a problem with a nerve in your neck. You might also have a slipped disc pressing on a nerve. Or a muscle spasm might be pinching a nerve. You should also see your doctor if your neck pain doesn't start to feel better after a few days, or if it gets worse.

Your doctor can rule out serious causes of neck pain by examining your neck. You might also have an X-ray of your neck, a CT scan, or an MRI scan. Sometimes doctors do blood tests to look for inflammation or more serious causes.

What treatments work?

There are lots of different treatments for simple (uncomplicated) neck pain.

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Treatments without medicines

- Your neck will probably be less painful after **manipulation** or **mobilisation** by a chiropractor, osteopath, or physiotherapist. If you are treated by a trained therapist, manipulation is unlikely to do any harm. However, there have been rare cases of people getting damage to blood vessels, or even strokes, after manipulation involving sharp thrusts to the neck.
- **Exercises** to strengthen your neck muscles and improve your flexibility may help long-term neck pain. A physiotherapist may be able to show you what exercises work best.
- **Combining manipulation and exercise** may be especially helpful if you have had neck pain for a long time.
- Some research suggests that **acupuncture** could help with neck pain. But not all the studies are good quality, so it's hard to be sure.
- Many other treatments have been tried for neck pain, but there's not enough good research to say whether they help. These treatments include hot and cold packs, treatment with a machine that sends small electrical signals into your nerves (called transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation, or TENS for short), soft collars, and special pillows.

Medicines

There isn't any specific research that shows drugs help neck pain, but your doctor may recommend one or more of the following.

- **Painkillers.** You can buy milder painkillers in a pharmacy, such as paracetamol. But you'll need a prescription from your doctor to get stronger ones. Some strong painkillers can cause withdrawal symptoms when you stop taking them.
- **Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).** These are painkillers that also reduce inflammation. You can buy some NSAIDs, such as ibuprofen, from a pharmacy. For others, you need a prescription from your doctor. NSAIDs can cause stomach pains and diarrhoea.
- **Antidepressants.** Your doctor might prescribe an antidepressant if you have had neck pain for a long time, especially if the pain keeps you awake at night. Antidepressants can cause side effects such as a dry mouth, constipation, nausea, and dizziness.
- **Muscle relaxants.** Muscle relaxants are sometimes used for people in severe pain from muscle spasms, but they are only used for a short amount of time. They include benzodiazepines, such as diazepam (brand name Valium). Muscle relaxants can make you feel sick, dizzy, or drowsy. It's also possible to become dependent on these drugs if you take them for too long. This means you get side effects when you stop taking them.

Treatments for neck pain caused by an injured nerve (cervical radiculopathy) have not been as well studied as those for simple neck pain. Doctors sometimes recommend injections or surgery.

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- Having **an injection of steroids** into the spinal cord in your neck may reduce your pain. But more research is needed. There is a small risk that you could get an infection or a swelling full of pus (an abscess) after this treatment.
- There's no evidence that **surgery** can help people with neck pain caused by nerve problems. An injection of steroids might work just as well. More research is needed into this treatment.

What will happen to me?

Neck pain usually goes away after a few days or weeks. But it can come back or last longer. One study found that roughly 1 in 10 people have long-term neck pain.

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