

Whiplash – a guide to help your recovery

Information for patients



After a whiplash injury it is important what you do in the early stages of your recovery. Most whiplash injuries are not serious and the pain will improve over time. It is important to keep your neck moving whilst it is recovering, as this will help to prevent stiffness and help you to get better faster. Prolonged inactivity can be unhelpful and can slow your recovery.

The first few days

- Take painkillers for pain relief. Your doctor may have prescribed you some painkillers. Alternatively, your local pharmacist will be able to recommend something.
- Try to stay active, even if this means modifying your usual activities at first.
- Ice packs on the back of your neck may be soothing. Leave on for up to 10 minutes.
- Try to sit with an upright posture. If you slouch (sit with your back curved) your chin tends to move forward. This can make your neck feel sore after a while. You may be more comfortable if you support your lower back with a rolled towel and sit in an upright chair. Get up and stretch regularly.
- Arrange your pillows in bed so there is good support for your neck.

Early exercises

- Move your head up and then down; lean it to the right and then the left; turn your head to the right and then the left. Move slowly in one direction and then in the opposite direction. Move your head as far as you feel you can.
- Shrug your shoulders up and down. You can try rolling them as well.
- Gently draw your chin backwards as if making a 'double chin'.

Repeat each movement up to 10 times in each direction every 1-2 hours or as your pain allows. Avoid rolling your head around.

Further exercises

Once the neck pain has started to settle you can try these exercises:

- Put your hand on the side of your head and apply pressure. Do not move your head. As you resist the pressure you will feel your neck muscles contracting. Hold the contraction for up to 10 seconds, then release gently. Repeat on the other side.
- In the same way, push forwards against both hands on your forehead, and then backwards against your clasped hands behind your head.
- Sit down and fix your eyes on a point on the wall straight ahead. Close your eyes and turn your head as far as you can to the right. Keeping your eyes closed, turn back so that when you open your eyes you can see the same point in front of you. Check to see how close you were. Try it looking to the left. With practice you will get better at it. You can also try this exercise looking up and down.

Warning signs

You should go to Accident and Emergency or see your GP if you have:

- disturbed vision
- severe muscle spasm
- “pins and needles”, numbness or weakness in your arms or legs
- any balance problems or difficulty walking.

Further information

- The Whiplash Book – UK Edition: How You Can Deal with a Whiplash Injury. Authors: Kim Burton, Tim McClune, Gordon Waddell. Published by TSO (The Stationery Office)
- www.nhsdirect.co.uk
- www.patient.co.uk

