Cervical spine (neck) fracture

This leaflet provides information to help you understand and manage your neck injury. If you have any further questions or concerns, please contact the nurse, doctor or therapist in charge of your care.

What is a cervical spine fracture?
Your spine is made up of 33 separate bones (vertebrae), plus many discs, ligaments and muscles. Together, they form your spinal column, which surrounds and protects your spinal cord. A break (fracture) to one of the bones in the upper part of the spinal column is called a cervical (neck) fracture.

Spinal fractures can be caused by a direct trauma, where a force to the spine causes the bone to break. This might be due to a fall or car accident, for example. In people with osteoporosis (brittle bone disease) the bone may break more easily.

When a fracture occurs it can damage your spinal cord, which can result in paralysis (loss of feeling and movement) below the level of the injury, reduced muscle power (weakness) and/or altered sensations and muscle tone.

This leaflet provides information on spinal fractures where there has not been damage to the spinal cord.

What are the signs and symptoms of a cervical spine fracture?
Everybody with a cervical spine fracture will experience slightly different symptoms. This will depend on the part of the vertebrae that is broken, where the break has occurred, and whether you have any other related injuries, for example, to surrounding muscles or ligaments. Common symptoms include:
- pain at the fracture site (on movement and when pressure is applied)
- reduced range of movement in the neck and surrounding areas
- reduced muscle power in the neck muscles
- reduced mobility
- reduced balance
- difficulty moving in bed or standing up from a sitting position.

How is a cervical spine fracture treated?
Fractures are managed differently depending on where they are located and what symptoms you are experiencing. This may include surgery and/or a neck collar, although some people do not require either of these. If you need to wear a collar or have surgery, separate instructions will be provided for you. You will also be advised about painkillers to help control your pain, and to enable you to move around and resume your normal activities.

What are the possible complications of a cervical spine fracture?
Following a spinal fracture you may develop stiffness and pain in your neck as a result of decreased normal movement. You may also experience some muscle spasm in the surrounding
tissues which can contribute to this pain. If there is damage to the nerves, you may experience muscle weakness or numbness/tingling.

**What can I do to help my recovery?**
If you develop pain and stiffness in your neck, you should continue to take regular painkillers to ensure your pain is well-controlled.

During your admission to hospital you will be provided with advice and an exercise sheet. You should complete the exercises daily (on the advice of your therapist) to help restore full range of movement. In some cases, you may need to temporarily modify your daily activities – your physiotherapist or occupational therapist will provide further advice on this.

**Will I have a follow-up appointment?**
You will receive an appointment to be reviewed in the fracture clinic. This appointment is usually scheduled for six to eight weeks following your injury.

If you have difficulty in achieving full range of movement in your neck, you have pain which does not settle or if you find it difficult to return to full work duties or hobbies, you may need a referral to outpatient physiotherapy. This can be done via the fracture clinic or your GP.

**Contact us**
If you have any questions or concerns about your neck injury, please contact the *trauma, orthopaedics and plastics team* on 020 8725 0985 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm).

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

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**Additional services**

**Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**
PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough Wing (near the lift foyer).

**Tel:** 020 8725 2453  **Email:** pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

**NHS Choices**
NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

**Web:** www.nhs.uk

**NHS 111**
You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it’s not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

**Tel:** 111