

# Neck Pain

**This leaflet offers information about neck pain. If you have access to the internet, you can access our self-help app for neck pain. Details on how to do this are at the bottom of the leaflet. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to a healthcare professional.**

## What is neck pain and why have I got it?

Neck pain is very common, 7 out of 10 people will get neck pain at some point in their lives. Some people may describe your neck as your cervical spine which consists of the seven bones in the top part of your spine. The definition of neck pain is pain in the neck region, with or without pain in your shoulder region / arms that lasts for at least 24 hours.

We cannot be sure of the exact cause of neck pain; but it can happen gradually over time or after sustaining an awkward position, e.g. when sleeping. An X-Ray or scan is not usually required to diagnose your neck pain.

## What are the signs and symptoms?

- Pain.
- Stiffness.
- Muscle spasm or tight muscles.
- Reduced movement.

## How long will it take to recover?

Most neck pain improves by itself in a matter of days or weeks, but gentle movement can speed up recovery and prevent persistent pain developing.

Most neck pain does not cause lasting problems; your body is very good at healing itself.

## What else can contribute to neck pain?

Research suggests that some lifestyle factors play an important role in the structure of the neck, making them more sensitive to pain. Some factors which increase the likelihood of neck pain include:

- Not enough sleep, or poor sleep.
- Staying in the same position for prolonged periods.
- Lack of physical activity.
- Stress, anxiety, or other mental health conditions.

## What treatments are available?

### Medication

Paracetamol or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), for example ibuprofen, in tablet or cream form can be helpful. If you are still struggling to manage your pain, you can start taking oral NSAIDs and / or paracetamol. If you are unsure what to take, please consult a pharmacist. If your GP has prescribed pain relief, take these at the maximum recommended dose.

### Cold

A cold pack (an ice pack or a pack of frozen peas wrapped in a damp towel) can also give short term pain relief. Use whichever pack you find the most helpful and apply to the sore area for up to five to 10 minutes, every two hours. Ensure cold treatment is not in direct contact with skin.

### Heat

Gentle heat from a hot water bottle, bath or shower can help relieve neck pain and help improve your movement.

### Relaxation strategies

Pain can be a stressful experience which results in tense muscles and a change in normal behaviour to avoid painful movement. However, we know that being fearful of movement can worsen your pain. Try the following breathing steps to help reduce pain and muscular tension:

1. Sitting comfortably place one hand on the upper chest and the other below the rib cage.
2. Breathe in slowly through the nose allowing your stomach to move out against your hand. Try to keep the hand on the chest as still as possible.
3. Tighten your stomach muscles, letting them fall inward as you exhale through pursed lips.

Repeat for 5-10 minutes, 3-4 times a day.

### Exercises

Try to return to normal activities as soon as possible to help maintain movement in your neck. This may be uncomfortable to start with but is safe to do and will become much easier as you get your movement back. There is no specific type of exercise that has been proven to be most effective in the management of neck pain. Here are some examples of exercises which may help to reduce your pain and stiffness.

1. While sitting, or lying with a pillow under your head, turn your head to look over your shoulder, keeping your head in contact with the pillow. Return to the starting position, relax and repeat. You can try completing these head turns on the exhale to aid relaxation further.



2. While sitting, or lying as above, bring your ear towards your shoulder, relax and repeat the other side. Take care not to hunch up your shoulders.



3. Lie on your side with your arms outstretched on the floor in front of you, as in the picture below. Your lower leg should be straight and in line with the rest of your body and your upper leg in front of you with both the hip and knee at 90 degrees. Take in a deep breath.



As you breathe out, lift your top arm up from the floor towards the ceiling. Follow the movement with your head. Continue to move this arm up and over to the floor on the other side. Allow your upper body and head to follow the movement of this arm. Take a deep breath at this endpoint.



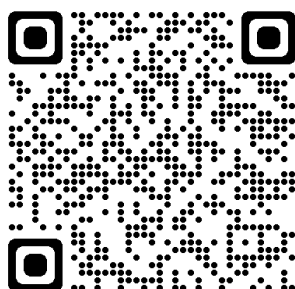
As you breathe out, lift this arm back up from the floor and return it to the original position. Again, follow this movement with your gaze, head, and upper body. Take in a deep breath and then repeat 10 times each side.

4. While sitting or standing, place the heel of your hand against the side of your head. Attempt to tilt your head to the side but resist this movement with your hand. This will result in a static muscle contraction, i.e. your neck will stay still whilst pressing against your hand. Hold for approximately 60 seconds and repeat 5 times each side.



## When to seek further help

Most neck pain resolves within 12 weeks. If you have access to the internet and / or a smartphone we recommend using the getUBetter app. It provides tailored support and advice for your symptoms. Please use the QR code below to access. Alternatively, it can be accessed via your GP practice website if you live in south west London. If your neck pain persists or you have any other symptoms associated with your neck pain, you can access physiotherapy via the app. If you don't have access to the internet or smartphone, please contact your GP practice for advice or call the number below.



## Other useful sources of information

The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy

<https://www.csp.org.uk/conditions/neck-pain>

Versus Arthritis

<https://www.versusarthritis.org/get-help>

Start your recovery today

[Resources for patients – Start your recovery today! - St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust \(stgeorges.nhs.uk\)](https://www.stgeorges.nhs.uk/resources-for-patients)

## Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the MSK Physiotherapy team on 020 8725 1357 (Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 4.30pm).

**For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.stgeorges.nhs.uk](http://www.stgeorges.nhs.uk)**

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## Additional services

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or care. You can contact the PALS team on the advisory telephone line Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 2pm to 5pm.

A Walk-in service is available:

Monday, Tuesday and Thursday between 10am and 4pm

Friday between 10am and 2pm.

Please contact PALS in advance to check if there are any changes to opening times.

The Walk-in and Advisory telephone services are closed on Wednesdays.

PALS is based within the hospital in the ground floor main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough Wing.

**Tel:** 020 8725 2453 **Email:** [pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk](mailto: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](http://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

## AccessAble

You can download accessibility guides for all our services by searching 'St George's Hospital' on the AccessAble website ([www.accessable.co.uk](http://www.accessable.co.uk)). The guides are designed to ensure everyone – including those with accessibility needs – can access our hospital and community sites with confidence.



**Reference:** PHY\_NPA\_02 **Published:** September 2023 **Review date:** September 2025