What is general (mechanical) neck pain?

General neck pain is often referred to as ‘mechanical neck pain’ or ‘non-specific mechanical neck pain’ and is very common, affecting most of us at some point (or points) during our lives.



Source: 4\_neck\_pain.pdf (csp.org.uk)

**How is it caused?**

Pain is often caused by a change in activity that has not been tolerated well, such as using working at a computer for longer than normal or lifting heavier objects more than normal. Sometimes this may cause pain to start suddenly and other times it may develop gradually.

It remains difficult to identify the exact structure causing pain. Many structures in your neck including joints, muscles and other soft tissues can be a source of pain often at the same time. Scans such as X-rays and MRI will commonly reveal structural changes which poorly linked to pain levels. Whether the structure involved is a muscle, a ligament, or any other soft tissue, the treatment is largely the same.

**What are the symptoms?**

* Dull aching pain on one side or both sides of the neck which may radiate to the shoulders or shoulder blades
* Pain which may sometimes be sharp when the neck is moved for example when turning or looking up or down.
* Difficulty getting in a comfortable position at night or when turning over in bed
* Sometimes headaches that are most commonly felt at the back or side of the head.

**How is it diagnosed?**

General neck pain is normally diagnosed based on you tell us and a physical examination. Scans such as X-ray or MRI are not routinely required unless diagnosis is unclear. This is because they will often reveal structural changes commonly found in those without pain and are now known not to be a good predictor of pain levels.

**What can I do?**

Activity adjustment:

In the majority of cases mechanical neck pain will settle if you temporarily reduce your activity to a level which does not significantly aggravate your pain. This will allow you to control your symptoms more easily.

Exercise

Exercise is an essential towards helping your get back to normal activity as soon as possible as well as promoting healing.

Movement will help to reduce muscle tension, reduce pain and increase range of movement. Avoiding movement could lead to higher levels of pain and poorer recovery resulting in longer periods off work.

Exercise should be carried out little and often, throughout the day. Exercises may cause discomfort but should not increase your pain or symptoms. If a sharp shooting pain is provoked then ease off Perform the exercises in a slow and controlled manner. As your pain reduces and your movement improves consider progressing to the more difficult exercises.

Remember, although movement may initially be painful but this does not mean that you are causing more damage or making anything worse.



Medication:

If you require medication to relieve your pain, you can liaise with your GP or pharmacist to determine the most appropriate medication. It can be difficult to move your neck if you are in too much pain, therefore it is useful to take pain medication, to relieve the pain, enable you to carry out exercise effectively and allow a faster recovery.

Heat therapy:

The application of heat such as a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel or a wheat bag, to relax the muscles in your neck.

**Factors influencing pain and recovery**

During your recovery a number of other factors can influence your pain levels. Keep the following factors in mind to help move the healing process along:

Work

You may be worried about continuing with work, or other responsibilities. It is important to discuss these fears with your practitioner. Remaining at work usually leads to a quicker recovery even if you have to work with modified activities.

Having poor posture does not cause neck pain. There is no perfect posture. Staying in one position for long periods can be a factor in your pain. It is important to plan regular breaks and change posture regularly.

Your relationship with your boss and colleagues, job enjoyment, feeling supported at work and returning to work are all very important in helping your recovery. Speak to your employer if you need support at work.

Look after yourself

Pain is not usually simply a physical problem. Your general well-being can make you vulnerable to pain and your wellbeing can also be made worse by pain. Looking after your general health and well-being will help recovery. There is helpful advice on this website: [https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou](https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/)

Reduce stress and anxiety

It is normal for people with pain to have stress, anxiety and change in mood. This may affect your ability to cope with the pain and may influence your pain levels. Help is available if you are being affected by stress, anxiety or low mood – see the links below or discuss with your practitioner.

It is important that your whole nervous system is in a healthy state to aid recovery. If your brain is stressed or overworked this may slow recovery. Relaxation is an important part of your recovery. Simple relaxation techniques may help manage pain and stress. Try to set aside some time each day to relax – you can use relaxation techniques as linked below, or simply an activity you enjoy – reading, deep breathing, sitting in the garden, singing – whatever relaxes you.

Find help and support here: <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/>

<https://www.northessexiapt.nhs.uk/west-essex>

Physical Activity

Exercise improves fitness, confidence with movement and strength. It can also help reduce your stress and tension and improve your mood and quality of sleep, helping support you to return to normal activities. Perhaps you could simply start by trying to walk for 10 minutes per day.

Alcohol

Avoid alcohol in the early stages of healing (first three days). Evidence has shown this can slow down recovery and increase the chances of re-injury. <https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/>

Sleep

Sleep is very important for your wellbeing. Poor sleep quality, and lack of sleep can make managing pain more difficult. Consistently getting 6-9 hours is recommended. Get help and tips here:

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/>

Nutrition and weight

Being overweight can increase the physical strain on the body and also contribute to inflammation in your body. Make sure you eat a balanced diet. Adult weight management services are available free to Essex residents here: <https://acelifestyle.org/weight-management>

Smoking

Smoking is also linked with an increased susceptibility to back pain and slower healing. For help with stopping smoking <https://www.essexlifestyleservice.org.uk/stop-smoking/> <https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking/>

**How long will it last?**

Mechanical neck pain is common but most cases aren’t caused by a serious problem. As there is often not one specific cause to mechanical neck pain the amount of time it takes to recover can vary a little. However with the right advice and exercises we would hope you should start to show some improvement within a couple of weeks with symptoms feeling much recovered by 6 to 8 weeks.

If your symptoms have persisted or worsen despite following the advice and exercise provided in this leaflet you will need to visit your GP surgery again.