

## Neck Ache and Pain

This leaflet describes some simple ways of dealing with neck pain.

Neck ache is often caused by poor posture and minor injuries. This can cause over-stretching of the ligaments and tissues surrounding the joints between the vertebrae. Full recovery occurs in most cases and the usual advice is to keep the neck mobile and return to a normal, active lifestyle. You can help prevent the development of neck pain by following this advice.

### Sitting Postures

- Sit upright and avoid working with your head bent or turned for long periods of time. You may need to modify the angle or height of your working surface or chair to avoid this.
- It is important to maintain the gentle curve or hollow of the back of the neck. Avoid letting your head protrude or droop when reading, knitting or performing desk tasks. This will place further strain on the already over-stretched or injured tissues.
- To help maintain the curve in your neck, wind a soft rolled towel around your neck for extra support.
- Slouching will encourage your head to protrude. A small lumbar roll or rolled towel in the small of your back will counteract this tendency.
- When sitting for long periods support your neck with your hands and regularly look up to the ceiling five or six times.
- You may need to change desk and chair heights to help maintain a good posture.
- If you have pain radiating down your arm, support the arm on one or two pillows. Neck supports such as collars, if used, should be used for as short a time as possible.

### Lying postures

If you wake up with a stiff and painful neck, it could be as a result of a poor sleeping position. Sleep with your neck in a position so that your head is in a straight line with your body.

Always roll onto your side and tuck your chin in, before moving your head off the pillow.

- Use a pillow that supports the hollow of your neck.
- A firm supporting pillow may be used when lying on your back; a second may be required when lying on your side. Do not sleep with more pillows than necessary.
- You may find it better to use a feather or polyester / hollow-fibre pillow. Feather pillows need to be changed regularly – at least annually. Solid foam pillow can often be too hard.
- A towel rolled to three inches in diameter can be placed in the pillow cover and used to support the hollow of the neck.
- Do not sleep on your stomach as this places great strain on the neck.

## Other Advice

- It is better to keep your neck active, rather than rest it a lot in a collar.
- Slow stretches are better than making quick movements especially when turning your head. Avoid rolling your head round in a circular motion.
- Avoid lying in the bath or reading in bed for any length of time as this can bend the head and neck forward excessively. If your neck pain occurs suddenly or gives you a burning sensation, it may help to place a cold compress on the affected area.
- To drive safely you must be able to turn your head quickly. It is best not to drive until any bad pain or stiffness has settled.

## Achieving the correct posture

Pull your chin in as far as possible and then releasing the last 10% of this movement. Try at all times to maintain this correct posture and alignment.

## Exercises

Aim to keep your neck moving as normally as possible. You should not let it stiffen up. Simple exercises can help to restore your range of movement, promote strength, ease stiffness and help get your neck back to normal. As far as possible continue with your normal activities.

When beginning gentle stretching exercises you can expect some discomfort. This should lessen as you repeat the movements. Gently try to increase the range of neck movements in each direction. Do this several times a day.

### Basic neck exercises

Head retraction

Pull your chin in keeping you neck and back in a straight position. Remain looking straight ahead throughout the exercise and do not tip your head backwards or forwards. Hold this position for a few seconds – then relax.

Pull your chin in (as in the first exercise) then tilt your head backwards looking towards the ceiling – maintain this position for a few seconds – then relax. You may clasp your hands gently behind your neck while you do this exercise.

### Rotations

Pull your chin in (as in previous exercises) and turn your head as far to the right as possible until you feel a gentle stretch. Maintain this position for a few seconds – then relax. Repeat to the left.

STOP the exercise if it makes the pain worse.