

Whiplash

- Permanent damage is rare and most injuries are not serious. Usually injuries just affect the muscles, ligaments and small joints that repair themselves. Rarely is there damage to the bones, discs or the nerves of the spine.
- Rest for more than a day or two usually makes the pain worse and increases your chances of having long-term problems.
- If you stay active, exercise your neck and get on with your day-to-day life you stand a much better chance of recovering fast and fully.

About two in three people involved in a car crash develop neck pain. Even seemingly minor, or slow, car crashes can cause whiplash. More occasionally neck sprains can happen when you fall or trip.

What is whiplash?

Whiplash is form of neck sprain. It is caused when your neck is suddenly whipped backwards and then forwards, which stretches your neck muscles and ligaments more than normal.

The most common cause of whiplash injuries is when you are in a car and are hit from behind by another car, although being hit from the front or the side can also cause whiplash injuries.

What are the symptoms of whiplash?

Symptoms may take a day or two to develop and include:

- Pain and stiffness in the neck. Half of people get the pain on the day and the other half the day after.
- Turning or bending your neck may be difficult.
- Your shoulders and arms may become stiff or painful.
- You may develop dizziness, headaches, blurred vision or pain on swallowing. If these carry on for more than a day or two see your doctor.

When to see your doctor?

Most cases of whiplash are not serious, but damage to the neck can cause serious injuries. If you have any of these symptoms you should see your doctor:

- Your pain becomes worse.
- Your pain continues for more than 4 to 6 weeks.
- You get any numbness, weakness or pins or needles in your arms or hands.

What's the outlook?

Most people recover fully from whiplash injuries, with pain and other symptoms starting to fade within a few days.

- Three out of five people find their pain gone or much better within four weeks.
- In about a quarter of people pain or stiffness lingers for more than six months.

How do I treat whiplash?

Keeping active

Years ago, 'resting' following back pain was thought to help. We now know this is wrong. Studies have shown that by keeping active – stopping your neck stiffening up – you are much less likely to develop long-term neck problems.

If the pain is bad you may need to rest for a day or two, but resting for more time is likely to make matters worse.

Try some gentle neck exercises – such as gently rotating your neck – and start to build up.

Neck collars may help for a day or two, but for most people neck collars may actually make things worse.

Medicines

The main drug treatments for whiplash are painkillers and medicines to stop any swelling (anti-inflammatories) to be used to control the pain so you can stay active (see our factsheet *Drugs for back pain* for more detailed information):

- paracetamol
- anti-inflammatories, including ibuprofen.

If you are still in pain talk to your doctor, who may prescribe:

- stronger painkillers, including codeine or tramadol
- muscle relaxants, such as diazepam.

Non-medical treatments

- **Mobilisation or manipulation**, carried out by a fully trained osteopath, chiropractor or physiotherapist can help, particularly in the early stages of your injury.
- **Physiotherapy** may or may not help, but a physiotherapist will be able to give you a selection of neck exercises to do at home.

Helping yourself

You may find some of the following helpful:

- Make sure you have a good posture – keep your shoulders slightly back with your back straight. Try walking ‘like a model’.
- Check that your bed pillow gives your neck support, keeping the neck in a straight line with the rest of your back.
- Some people find that hot or cold presses, especially in the first 48 hours, help them. A hot bath, shower or a hot water bottle held to the neck. If you prefer a cold pack, try putting a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a towel against your neck for five to 10 minutes.

Relevant Information

- BackCare Factsheets – Long Term Pain Support Groups, Drugs for Back Pain Relief
- BackCare Booklets - Managing Back Pain, Basic Back Care, Active Back Care
- Other Publications – “The Whiplash Book” by Gordon Waddell from the Stationery Office, www.tso.co.uk

Evidence Base

- PRODIGY Guidance – Neck Pain – Last revised April 2002
- Whiplash Neck Sprain – PRODIGY PILS; September 2001
- An active exercise and posture protocol reduced pain in acute whiplash injuries: ACP Journal Club. V134(3):p111, May/June 2001
- Back and neck pain – spinal degenerative disease and related disorders, British Brain & Spine Foundation, 1998.

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