



# Neck pain

## Your questions answered

### Q. What is neck pain?

A. Neck pain is a common problem many of us will experience at least once in our lives. The good news is that most cases of neck pain get better within a few days.

### Q. How does the neck work?

A. It helps to know how your spine works to understand some potential causes of neck pain.

Your spine (or backbone) is made up of bones called vertebrae, stacked on top of each other to form a loose 'S'-shaped column.

Each vertebra is cushioned by a spongy tissue called an intervertebral disc. These discs act as shock absorbers. Vertebrae are joined together by small joints (facet joints), which allow the vertebrae to slide against each other, enabling you to twist and turn. Tough, flexible bands of soft tissue (ligaments) also hold the spine in position.

Layers of muscle provide structural support and help you move. They're joined to bone by strong tissue (tendons).

Your spine is divided into five sections: 7 cervical or neck vertebrae, 12 thoracic vertebrae, 5 lumbar vertebrae, 5 fused vertebrae in your sacrum and 4 fused vertebrae in your tailbone (or coccyx) at the base of your spine. Your doctor may sometimes refer to them by letter and number, for example, C1 - the 1st vertebrae in the cervical spine, to C7 – the 7th vertebrae in the cervical spine. Or T1 – the 1<sup>st</sup> vertebrae in the thoracic section. And so on.

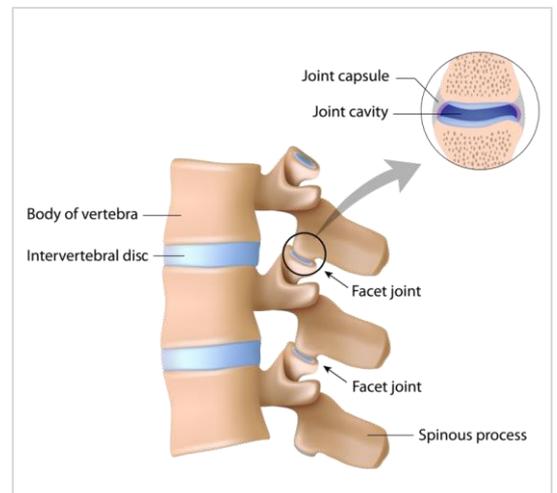
### Q. What causes neck pain?

A. In most cases, the exact cause of neck pain is unknown or unclear. This is 'non-specific' neck pain. While this may sound frustratingly vague, the good news is that most neck pain isn't caused by a specific condition, illness or serious damage to the spine.

Non-specific neck pain may occur due to:

- poor posture, e.g. long periods spent bent over a laptop or phone
- poor neck support while sleeping
- sporting injuries
- anxiety and stress.

Or it may not be obvious what has triggered your neck pain. Fortunately, this won't affect your treatment.



Neck pain with a specific cause is less common and includes things such as:

- other musculoskeletal conditions such as [osteoarthritis](#), [rheumatoid arthritis](#), [fibromyalgia](#), and [osteoporosis](#).
- [herniated disc](#) (also called a ruptured disc). This occurs when the tough outer layer of a disc tears or ruptures, and the soft jelly-like inside bulges out and presses on the nerves in your spine.
- [whiplash](#) - this is a form of neck sprain caused when the head is suddenly whipped backward and forward. This stretches the neck muscles and ligaments more than normal, causing a sprain. Whiplash most commonly occurs following a car accident.

### **Q. What are the symptoms of neck pain?**

**A.** Neck pain causes pain and/or stiffness in the neck and shoulders. You might also experience pain when moving or when you hold a position for an extended period (e.g. looking down at your phone). Other common symptoms include difficulty turning your head and headache.

In most cases, neck pain goes away in a few days. But if your pain doesn't improve or you develop other symptoms, you should see your doctor.

### **Q. How is neck pain diagnosed?**

**A.** If you have neck pain that's causing you distress or affecting your ability to do your daily activities, you should see your doctor. Your doctor will:

- ask you questions about your neck pain, including potential causes or triggers, if you've experienced it before, and how it affects you
- ask about any other symptoms or health issues you have
- do a thorough physical examination.

In most cases, imaging (e.g. x-rays, CT or MRI scans) isn't helpful or recommended unless there's an obvious injury or problem (e.g. following an accident or fall). A thorough examination by your doctor will decide whether any scans are appropriate.

It's also important to know that many investigations show 'changes' to your spine that are likely to represent the normal passage of time, not damage to your spine.

For more information about questions to ask your doctor before you get any test, treatment or procedure, visit the [Choosing Wisely Australia website](#).

### **Q. How is neck pain treated?**

**A.** Most cases of neck pain will get better within a few days without you needing to see your doctor. During this time, keep active and continue your normal activities as much as possible. Some people may need to use [medicines](#) for a short period to help them get back to their usual activities.

### **Q. What can I do to manage my neck pain and prevent future problems?**

**A.** There are many effective things you can do to manage neck pain.

**Keep moving.** When you first develop neck pain, it may help to rest it briefly, but don't rest it for too long. Too much rest can stiffen your neck muscles and make your pain last longer. Try [gentle exercises](#) and stretches to loosen the muscles and ligaments as soon as possible. Exercise will also strengthen the area, which can help prevent future problems. If in doubt, talk with your doctor, a physiotherapist or an exercise physiologist.

**Sleep on a pillow** that provides comfort and adequate support.



**Use [heat or cold](#).** This can help relieve pain and stiffness. Some people prefer heat (e.g. heat packs, heat rubs, warm shower, hot water bottle), while others prefer cold (e.g. ice packs, a bag of frozen peas, cold gels). Always wrap them in a towel or cloth to help protect your skin from burns and tissue damage. And always follow the instructions for use.

**Be aware of your posture.** Poor posture for extended periods, for example, when bent over your phone or computer, can cause neck pain or worsen existing pain. This puts stress on your neck muscles and makes them work harder than they need to. So whether you're standing or sitting, make a conscious effort to be aware of your posture and adjust it if necessary, or do some gentle stretches.

**[Massage your neck](#).** This can help you ease your physical pain, and it also helps relieve stress and muscle tension. You can give yourself a massage, see a qualified therapist or ask a family member or friend to give you a gentle massage.

**Take time to relax.** Things such as relaxation exercises (e.g. [mindfulness](#), [visualisation](#), [progressive muscle relaxation](#)), taking a walk, [deep breathing](#) etc., can help reduce muscle tension in your neck and shoulders.

### **Q. What medicines are used to treat neck pain?**

**A.** Medicines may help reduce the pain you're experiencing when combined with neck exercises and other self-care activities. All medicines have side effects, so it's best to use the lowest dose for the shortest period.

Talk with your doctor or pharmacist for advice about pain medicines. There are different types available, both over-the-counter and by prescription. They include:

- [Paracetamol](#).
- [Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs](#) (NSAIDs).
- [Topicals](#). These are rubs, gels, ointments, sprays, patches and creams applied to your skin (topically). Some topicals contain medicines such as NSAIDs and corticosteroids.
- Injections. Some people with persistent neck pain may benefit from a long-acting steroid injection into the affected area. Talk with your doctor about whether this is right for you.

*Note:* Opioids are powerful pain-relieving medicines that effectively reduce acute pain, such as the pain resulting from an injury or surgery. They have serious side effects and can be addictive, so they aren't commonly used to treat non-specific neck pain.

### **Q. What about surgery?**

**A.** Surgery is rarely needed for neck pain. However, it may be required in cases where severe pain interferes with daily activities or the spinal cord or nerves are affected.

### **Q. Are there any red flags I need to be aware of?**

**A.** Although it's very rare, neck pain can be caused by something more serious. Signs you should be aware of include:

- dizziness
- nausea
- pins and needles or numbness
- changes to your vision or hearing
- problems concentrating
- difficulty swallowing.

If you experience these symptoms, contact your doctor, or call the [healthdirect](#) Helpline on 1800 022 222. Registered nurses are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to provide advice.



## Q. Where can I get more help?

A. Many people and support organisations can help you manage your musculoskeletal condition. They include:

- your doctor
- [physiotherapist](#)
- [exercise physiologist](#)
- Musculoskeletal Australia | [msk.org.au](http://msk.org.au) | National Arthritis and Back Pain+ Help Line: 1800 263 265

## Q. How can Musculoskeletal Australia help?

A. Our nurses are available for you to speak with about neck pain or any other musculoskeletal issues you have. You can contact them on weekdays between 9am-5pm. Phone 1800 263 265 or email [helpline@msk.org.au](mailto:helpline@msk.org.au). We also have a range of services – including free webinars – you can access on our [website](#).

## More to explore

- [Neck pain](#)  
healthdirect
- [Neck pain](#)
- Versus Arthritis
- [Patient education: Neck pain \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)
- UpToDate
- [Neck pain or spasms: self-care](#)
- MedlinePlus

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