

Neck Problems

Self-Care Tips



For more information, look up the = **topics in bold** in the index of your *Healthwise Handbook*.

Neck pain and stiffness are often caused by posture problems, strain or spasm of the neck muscles, or inflammation of the neck joints. It may occasionally be due to arthritis or damage to the discs between the neck (cervical) vertebrae. Neck movement may be limited, usually more to one side than the other. Headaches often come with neck problems.

Prevention

Good posture, body mechanics, and exercise are important to preventing neck problems. Most neck problems that aren't due to arthritis or an injury are completely avoidable.

If pain is worse at the *end of the day*, evaluate your posture and body mechanics during the day.

- Sit straight in your chair with your low back supported. Avoid sitting for long periods without getting up or changing positions. Take mini-breaks several times each hour to stretch your neck muscles.
- If you work at a computer, adjust the monitor so that the top of the screen is at eye level. Use a document holder that puts the copy at the same level as the screen. The screen should be about an arms length from your eyes.



- If you use the telephone a lot, consider a headset or speakerphone.
- Adjust your car seat to a more upright position that supports your head and low back.

If neck stiffness is worse *in the morning*, check your sleeping posture (and your activities the day before).

- Improve your sleeping support. A hard mattress or special neck support pillow may solve the problem. Try before buying. Or you can fold a towel lengthwise into a four-inch wide pad, wrap it around your neck, and pin it for good support.
- Avoid pillows that force your head forward when you sleep on your back.
- When sleeping on your side, make sure your nose is in line with the center of your body.
- If stress is a factor, practice the **progressive muscle relaxation** (📖) exercises.
- Strengthen and protect your neck by doing neck exercises once a day. (See other side.)

Home Treatment

Much of the home treatment for **back problems** (📖) is also helpful for neck problems, including the guidelines on posture, body mechanics, ice, and moist heat.

- Place a cold pack or moist heat over painful muscles for up to 20 minutes at a time. Do this as often as once every two

Please turn over

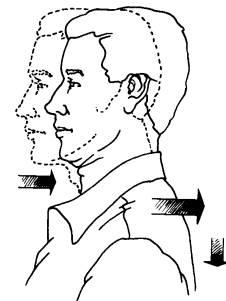
hours. It will help decrease any pain, muscle spasm, or swelling. If the problem is near the shoulder or upper back, it will usually help more to place ice or moist heat on the back of the neck.

- Keep your head and neck centered over your body. Avoid slouching or forward head posture.
- Acetaminophen, aspirin, or ibuprofen can help relieve pain.
- Walking is also helpful in relieving and preventing neck problems. The gentle swinging motion of your arms often relieves pain. Start with short walks of 5 to 10 minutes, three to four times a day.
- The exercises on this page will help maintain your flexibility and strength. Start with five repetitions twice a day. Gradually increase to 10 repetitions.
- If neck problems occur with headache, see “**Tension Headaches**” (📖).
- Once the pain subsides, do the prevention exercises every two to three hours. Stop doing any exercise that causes pain.

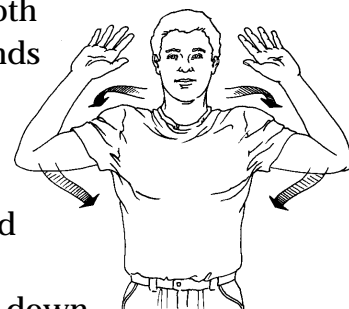
Neck Exercises

Stop any exercise that increases pain. Start with five repetitions twice a day. Do each exercise slowly.

1. Dorsal glide: Sit or stand tall, looking straight ahead (a “palace guard” posture). Slowly tuck your chin as you glide your head backwards over your body. Hold for a count of five, then relax. Repeat 6 to 10 times. This stretches the back of the neck. If you feel pain, do not glide so far back.



2. Chest and shoulder stretch: Sit or stand tall and glide your head over your body as in Exercise 1. Raise both arms so that your hands are next to your ears. As you exhale, lower your elbows down toward your sides and backward. Feel your shoulder blades slide down and together. Hold for a few seconds. Relax and repeat.



When to Call Kaiser Permanente

Call your doctor **IMMEDIATELY**:

- If stiff neck occurs together with headache and fever. (📖 “**Encephalitis and Meningitis**”)
- If the pain extends or shoots down one arm, or you have numbness or tingling in your hands.
- If you develop new weakness in the arms or legs.
- If a blow or injury to the neck (whiplash) has caused new pain.
- If you are unable to manage the problem with home treatment.
- If the problem has lasted two weeks or longer without improvement despite home treatment.



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For complete information on this and hundreds of other health topics, see your *Healthwise Handbook*.

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