

Cervicogenic headache:

A headache that comes from your neck

A headache that is caused by the structures (muscles, joints or nerves) of the upper neck is called a cervicogenic headache. This type of headache is different than a migraine or tension headache. You can suffer from more than one type of headache.

What are the symptoms?

Cervicogenic headache pain usually starts on one or both sides of the upper neck area, and then spreads to different areas in your head. The most common headache area is the back and side of your head but may also include your forehead and your face. The pain can vary from dull to very intense but is usually not throbbing or stabbing. Your neck can feel stiff and achy. Specific neck movements, or keeping your neck in one position for a long time, may increase your headache.

What causes cervicogenic headache?

- Poor posture while sitting, standing, walking, or using a computer.
- Neck and upper back muscle tension or tightness.
- Normal wear and tear related changes in the joints of your neck.
- Stress.
- Neck muscle weakness.
- Trauma such as a whiplash (injury to the soft tissues of the neck).
- Sleeping on your stomach.

What can I do?

Use good posture

- Avoid holding your neck still or keeping it in one position. Even a “good position” will cause muscle fatigue if maintained for too long. Set a timer to remind you to take a break.
- Use good posture during all activities. Be ‘tall’ as you sit, stand or walk.
- Have a good set-up for your desk or computer at work and at home. The top of your head should be level with the top of your screen.
- Be aware of your neck position when using a laptop or texting on a cell phone.
- Avoid stress on your neck when reaching or lifting by keeping objects close to your body. If sitting, place objects you need within easy reach.
- Avoid cradling the phone between your ear and shoulder.
- Sleep on your side or back with your neck and head supported by pillows.

Eye Wear

Use eyewear with the correct prescription strength; get your eyes checked regularly for changes.

Make sure you are not tilting your head up to use the computer.

Stress

Manage your stress. Find stress-reduction ideas in your Health Education department or KP.org.

Pain Control

Take medication if prescribed by your doctor.

Place a heat or cold pack on your neck for 10-15 minutes to help manage your headache. Place a thin cloth layer between your skin and the heat or cold pack. You may have to repeat this several times per day when it is flared up.

Do the recommended exercises to maintain movement, strength, and flexibility in your neck.

Posture and movement:

These positions and movements will help ease muscle tension in your neck and shoulders.



Correct postural position

- Start by sitting tall, legs uncrossed and feet flat on the floor.
- If you are standing, straighten up and “be tall”.
- Gently draw your shoulder blades back and down.
- Gently nod your chin down as if you are saying ‘yes’.
- Make sure the back of your neck is taller than the front.
- Hold this position or add a stretch by moving your arms and shoulders backwards while you maintain the correct posture. Do one of these for 15 seconds every 15 minutes.
- Repeat regularly, at least every 30 minutes during the day, or more often if you work sitting at a desk.

Movement:

- Perform these exercises when you are doing one task that does not allow you to move around such as driving, working at a computer, cooking or watching T.V.
- First get into the “correct postural position” (see above).
- Add neck movements such as turning to the left and right, rolling your shoulders backwards, or

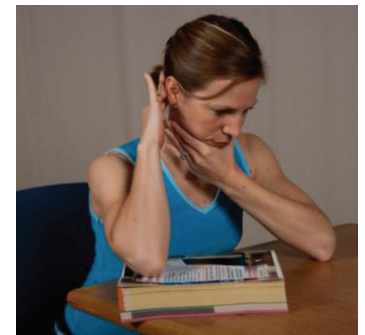
raising your arms overhead. Repeat 10 times every 15 minutes.

Head nod/holding:

Lie on your back in a comfortable position for your head and neck with your knees bent. Place a small towel roll under the back of your neck for support. Look at a spot on the wall just above your knees. Follow with a slow and gentle nod of your head as if you were saying ‘yes’. Hold the position for 10 seconds and then relax. Repeat the exercise 10 times. If this position increases your symptoms you can try it in sitting.



Self massage: Gently support your chin or forehead with your one hand. Use the fingertips of your other hand to gently massage the tender muscles at the top of your neck under your skull on the side of your headache. You can also do this massage lying on your back.



Walking: Make a goal of walking a total of 30 minutes per day. Use good posture and gently swing your arms during your walk.

Consult with your physical therapist or doctor if you experience an increase in your symptoms with recommended exercises, or if you develop new symptoms of numbness, tingling, or a spread of the pain. This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.