

SAVE YOUR NECK

Question: My neck often bothers me and can become quite painful. At times, I get headaches in the back of my neck that radiate into my head. Is there anything I can do to avoid this pain?

Answer: Neck pain is extremely common because our neck must balance and support our heads, which weigh 8-12 pounds. Think of balancing a bowling ball on a stick. Our spine is a small narrow structure in comparison to a large round head. Therefore, our neck muscles are very busy trying to keep things balanced. This can result in a chronic strain to these muscles, resulting in pain and potential headaches.

In addition to the neck muscles, there is a complex nervous system involving the spinal cord and the nerves that travel throughout your arms, trunk and legs. It is not unusual to pinch a nerve in your neck, causing arm numbness and pain.

Proper posture is essential to keep your neck feeling good. Many slouch forward, which throws your head in front of your body and causes your neck muscles to strain when holding your head up. Your head should sit squarely over your shoulders and not be thrust forward. This position allows your neck muscles to be under normal tension, but not straining. Other neck saving strategies include:

Do NOT sleep on your stomach. This causes you to twist your neck repeatedly and can increase neck pain. Sleep on your side or back.

Do NOT lay on your side on the armrest of the couch. This will put stress on your neck sideways.

Do NOT jam your neck forward when reading in bed or watching TV. You can place a pillow on your chest and put your book on top of this. This will bring the reading material towards your eyes rather than bending your neck forward.

Position your computer monitor so that your neck remains neutral. That is, do not have your neck twisted to the right or left and do not have your neck bent forward or backward. For most people, the center of the screen should be even with your chin. If you wear bifocals, this may need to be lower.

Use a telephone headset or speaker phone if you spend much time on the phone. Do not balance the phone between your ear and shoulder.

If you're carrying shoulder bags frequently, switch the shoulder that carries the weight. When using a backpack, use both traps to distribute the weight.

Keep your neck muscles relaxed. Your doctor of chiropractic can prescribe stretches. Take regular breaks from activities such as computer work or driving in a car. This will help neck muscles from tightening.

Unfortunately, whiplash injuries are common in many car accidents. Common symptoms of whiplash include neck pain, headache, dizziness, visual changes or simply a lot of stiffness. Symptoms may not appear until days after the accident. If you have neck pain that worsens when you cough, laugh or sneeze, spreads into the shoulders or arms, or if you also have nausea, headache, visual disturbances or dizziness, you need to seek care from your chiropractor, family doctor or emergency room.

Chiropractors are successful in treating many neck conditions, including whiplash and neck-related headaches. Treatment involves physical examination and often a series of neck x-rays. CT or MRI may also be needed to determine your exact diagnosis. Chiropractors are trained to perform safe treatment and may or may not manipulate your spine. Other forms of treatment include ultrasound, electrical muscle stimulation, moist heat or ice therapy. Consult a doctor of chiropractic for neck pain that simply won't go away.

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Dr. Tom Konicki is a board certified chiropractic orthopedist and has practiced for 17 years in South Dayton. You can reach him at www.kschiro.com or mail your questions to Ask the Chiropractor, 2165 Miamisburg-Centerville Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.