

# neck pain

## WHAT YOU CAN DO



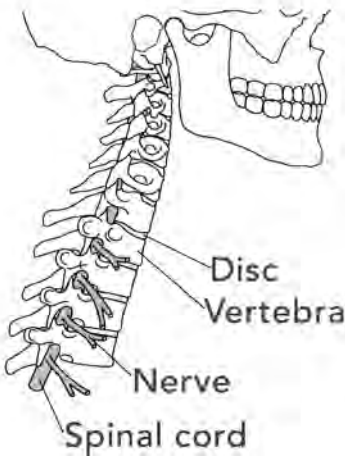
# Neck pain

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Neck pain is a common problem. Nearly 25 percent of adults will experience neck pain at some time in their lives. Most of the time, neck pain improves within 4 to 6 weeks. Even though neck problems can be painful and frustrating, they are rarely caused by serious diseases. While there is no “quick fix” for neck pain, the good news is that you can manage your neck pain successfully.

## Where does neck pain come from?

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The neck is made up of many different parts, including bones, joints, ligaments, discs, muscles, and nerves. Neck pain can begin in any of these areas. It can be felt in the neck, upper back, shoulders, or sometimes down the arm. Neck problems can also cause headaches.

**Bones** – The bones in the neck are called vertebrae.

**Joints** – A joint is formed where the vertebrae meet. These joints allow

the spine to bend and move. Joints lose some of their ability to move as you age.

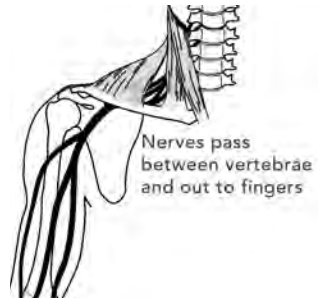
**Ligaments** – Ligaments are strong bands that hold the bones together.

When ligaments are pulled or over-stretched, it is called a sprain.

**Discs.** Discs are made up of many layers. They separate the vertebrae and allow the neck to bend.

**Muscles.** The muscles surrounding your neck give it support and allow you to move. The muscles in the neck and upper back area are very important in helping to maintain good posture. When muscles are pulled or overworked, it is called a strain.

**Nerves** – Nerves carry messages to the brain and control the muscles. The spinal nerves pass through small openings between the vertebrae. When irritated, they can cause pain, numbness, or tingling in the arm.



## What makes it hurt?

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Most neck pain results from irritation or injury to one or more of the parts of the neck described above. Most commonly this is caused by:

- Poor sitting posture while working at your desk or computer; or while reading or driving.
- Stressful work or home situations that increase the tension in the neck muscles.
- Sleeping in an awkward position.
- Looking up repeatedly while doing tasks such as painting or trimming trees.
- Changes in neck alignment due to eye wear.
- Changes to the normal condition of the joints and discs over time.

## What can I do to help my neck?

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### FIRST AID



Use **ice** to reduce pain and inflammation.

Apply ice for 10 to 20 minutes, several times per day. You may use heat to ease muscle tension and pain. If you have diabetes or circulatory problems, limit use of ice or heat to 10 minutes.

**Take medications as directed.** Common medications are acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (such as Motrin / ibuprofen or Aleve / naproxen sodium). When taking anti-inflammatory drugs as prescribed, it will take 10 to 14 days for them to become fully effective. Talk to your doctor about prescription medication.

## Reduce the stress and strain on your neck

Use **good posture and body positions**. Proper alignment of your head, neck, and back is the key to spinal comfort. If you slouch, your chin will tend to protrude forward and cause your shoulders to round. This “forward head posture” can **produce** or **increase** neck and shoulder tension and pain.

### SITTING

- Limit sitting unsupported or in one position to less than 30 minutes.
- Sit all the way back in the chair with your feet flat on the floor (or, use a foot stool).
- Place a rolled towel between the chair and your lower back.
- Keep your chest up. (Think about making yourself taller.)
- If a chair with armrests is not available, place 1 or 2 pillows on your lap to support your arms.



### COMPUTER USE

- Sit up straight with hips, shoulders, and head facing the monitor.
- Adjust your chair to bring your hips slightly higher than your knees.
- Keep both feet flat on the floor or on a footrest.
- Adjust your monitor so the top fourth is level with your eyes. (If you wear progressive lenses, you may need to adjust the monitor lower.)
- To avoid eye strain: For every 20 minutes of computer use, look at least 20 feet away for 20 seconds.



## READING

- Avoid reading in bed with your head and neck propped on pillows.
- Hold materials up to allow you to look straight ahead.
- Use a slant board for desktop activities.
- Use arm rests or pillows to support your arms.

## TELEPHONE USE

- Avoid tilting your head sideways to hold the phone.
- Use a headset.



## STANDING

- Use good standing posture to protect your neck.
- If you have arm pain, place your hand on the counter or in your pocket.
- Place one foot on a stool.

## REACHING

- Avoid repetitive reaching or looking up for long periods of time.
- When reaching, stand as close to the item as you can.
- If you have to reach for a shelf higher than your head, stand on a stool.
- Tighten your stomach muscles when reaching up.
- Look up with your eyes; avoid tipping your head back.



## BENDING

The “hip hinge” is used to move correctly while bending or lifting. Some examples include brushing your teeth, vacuuming, or gardening. To perform the “hip hinge,” bend from the hips rather than the low back.



Avoid bringing your head forward and rounding your back when you bend and lift.



## LIFTING

To maintain good alignment while lifting:

- Bend your knees and lift with your legs.
- Gently tighten your stomach muscles.
- Keep the load as close to your body as possible.
- If you must lift large or awkward loads, get help.
- Do not attempt lifting if your symptoms are new or severe.
- If you experience pain with lifting, *stop*.



## SLEEPING

### On your back

Lying on your back can be the best position when you have neck pain:

- Support the curve of your neck with a small towel roll. If you use a pillow, place the towel roll inside the pillow case at its base.
- Use 1–3 pillows under your thighs and knees to keep your spine in a more comfortable position.
- If you have a painful shoulder/arm, use a pillow to prop the arm up and allow your hand to rest across your chest or stomach.



### Side-lying

In side-lying, it is important to maintain your neutral spine position. Your head and neck should be in the same position, as if you were standing up looking straight ahead.

- Place a pillow and towel roll supporting your neck and head.
- Place a pillow between your knees.
- Place your arm on a pillow.



### On your stomach

You should *not* lie on your stomach, since this position places your neck at an awkward angle and may increase your symptoms.

## EXERCISE REGULARLY

It is okay to rest for 1 to 3 days after a new injury. Too much bed rest can make your neck pain worse and delay your recovery. People who are physically active recover more quickly, and have less frequent neck problems. It is helpful to continue light and easy activity, as long as your symptoms don't worsen.

Your exercise program should include:

- aerobic exercise (walking, stationary bike)
- hourly postural exercises
- neck range of motion exercises
- strengthening (as you improve)
- relaxation

# Exercises to improve your neck pain

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## AEROBIC EXERCISES

### WALKING

- Take short walks several times during the day.
- Wear athletic shoes.
- Avoid carrying heavy items on your shoulders or in your arms.

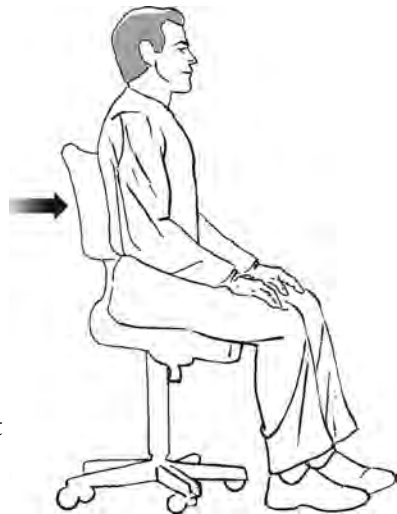
## HOURLY POSTURAL EXERCISES: STEPS 1 – 4

It is important to maintain good posture throughout the day. Good posture means maintaining the natural curves in your neck and back or the “neutral spine” position. This is also the most comfortable position for your neck and back. The following steps will help you to find and maintain good posture throughout the day. Your posture will improve if you continue to do these exercises.

**DO THE FOLLOWING FOUR STEPS IN ORDER.  
REPEAT 5 TIMES EACH HOUR.**

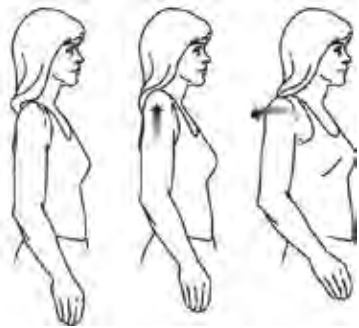
### STEP 1: FIND YOUR NEUTRAL BACK POSITION

- Sit near the edge of your chair.
- Rock your hips forward until your back arches.
- Rock hips back, noticing the arch disappears.
- Rock forward and back until you find the amount of arch that is comfortable for you. This is your neutral position for your low back.
- Keep your chest up. (Think about making yourself taller.)



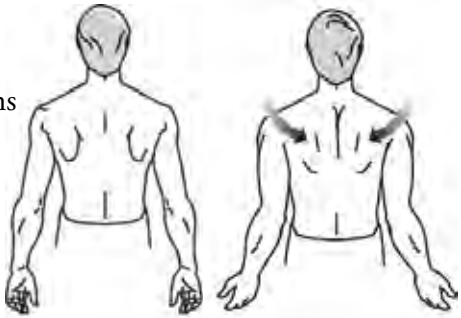
## STEP 2: SHOULDER CLOCK

- Start with your arms relaxed at sides.
- Raise shoulders toward your ears.
- Hold for 2 seconds.
- Rotate shoulders back and down.
- Hold for 2 seconds.
- Slowly return to start position.



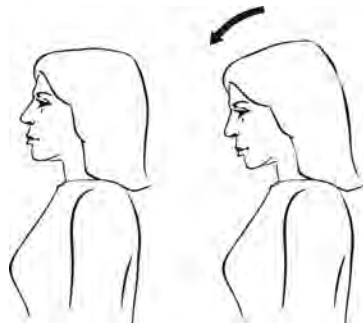
## STEP 3: SHOULDER BLADE SQUEEZE

- Start with your arms relaxed at your sides.
- Rotate your arms outward, palms forward while gently squeezing your shoulder blades.
- Hold for 5 seconds.
- Slowly return to start position.



## STEP 4: DROPPING YOUR CHIN

- Gently drop your chin
- Think about lengthening the back of your neck to become tall.



## NECK RANGE OF MOTION EXERCISES

These gentle exercises are used to restore or maintain neck movement. You should feel a gentle pull with no increase in your symptoms. Remember to breathe normally and relax.

For each of the exercises, do the following:

- Begin each exercise with good posture.
- Begin with small movements.
- Hold 5 seconds.
- Repeat 5 times.
- Do 2 times per day.

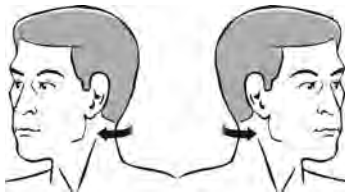
### CHIN TO CHEST

- Gently move your chin towards your chest.
- *Optional:* Focus your eyes on a stationary object throughout movement.



### HEAD TURNS

- Start facing forward.
- Turn your head to look towards one shoulder.
- Repeat for both sides.
- *Optional:* Focus your eyes on a stationary object throughout movement.



## NECK STRENGTHENING EXERCISES – Isometrics

Isometric exercises cause gentle contraction of the muscles without movement. These exercises should not cause an increase in your symptoms. Remember to breathe normally and relax.

For each of the isometric exercises, do the following:

- Begin exercise with good posture.
- Hold for 5 – 10 seconds.
- Repeat 5 times.
- Do 2 times per day.

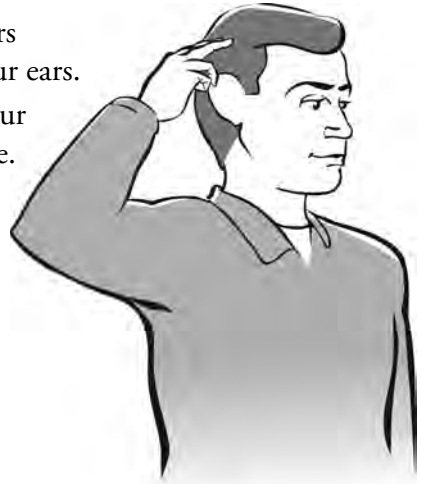
### ISOMETRIC HEAD NOD

- Start facing forward.
- With thumb supporting your chin, gently nod your head while applying gentle pressure upwards.
- Your head should not move.



## ISOMETRIC SIDE BENDS

- Start facing forward.
- Place your index and middle fingers on the side of your head above your ears.
- Gently press your head towards your fingers as you apply gentle pressure.
- Your head should not move.



## ISOMETRIC TURNING

- Start facing forward.
- Place your index and middle fingers on the side of your head by your eyebrow.
- Move your eyes towards your fingers as you apply gentle pressure.
- Your head should not move.



## RELAXATION EXERCISES

### DEEP BREATHING

- Find a comfortable position sitting, standing, or lying on your back.
- Place one hand on your lower stomach and the other hand on your upper chest.
- Breathe in through your nose. As you breathe in, you should feel your stomach rising. (If you can't breathe in through your nose, then breathe in through your mouth.)
- Breathe out slowly through your pursed lips. Let the airflow slowly. Do not force it out. It should take twice as long to exhale as it does to inhale.



## Headache pain related to the neck

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Some headaches may start in the neck. These headaches are often caused by prolonged poor posture or stress. Increased tension in the neck muscles or neck injuries may lead to headaches.

Helpful techniques to reduce headache pain:

- Self massage the base of your skull.
- Apply gentle pressure to points where you feel pain or tightness.
- Apply an ice pack to the base of your skull.
- Lie with a rolled towel under your neck and gently nod your head.

## THE ROLE OF STRESS IN NECK AND HEADACHE PAIN

An increase in stress may cause more muscle tightness in your neck. This can cause neck and headache pain. There are a number of stress reduction methods that may help:

- Walking
- Deep breathing
- Relaxation exercises
- Guided imagery – this uses body awareness and visualization of pleasant or positive images
- Meditation
- Self hypnosis
- Gentle yoga stretching

To listen to or to download podcasts about some of the topics mentioned above, visit your physician's Home Page at [kp.org/mydoctor](http://kp.org/mydoctor). Click on "Podcasts" under "Healthy Living Resources" on the left side of the screen.

Get a personalized headache program. "Managing Your Headaches" is an online, interactive education program that provides you with prevention information, self-care tools, and action plans that can help you manage your headache symptoms. Visit your physician's Home Page at [kp.org/mydoctor](http://kp.org/mydoctor) and get started today.

## Smoking

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People who smoke tend to have more neck and back problems, and it takes longer for them to get better. Smoking interferes with the blood flow and the healing of tissues. Quitting smoking is one of the best things you can do to improve your health. We know that quitting smoking is hard to do. That's why Kaiser Permanente offers effective support through quit smoking classes, over the phone, online, or in person with a counselor. These services are available at no additional cost. When you participate, you are able to get smoking cessation medications at your drug benefit co-pay. Call your Health Education Department or visit [kp.org/quitsmoking](http://kp.org/quitsmoking) for more information.

## Call your doctor if:

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- You develop new symptoms (weakness, numbness or pain) in the arms or legs.
- Your pain has lasted 2 weeks or longer despite home treatment.
- You have a severe headache that strikes suddenly without apparent cause or is very different from previous headaches.

## Other resources

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For more health information:

- Connect to our Web site at [kp.org](http://kp.org) to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.



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