

Acute neck sprain

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What is an acute neck sprain?

Acute neck sprain is caused by rapid movement of the head forwards or sideways causing stretching of the muscles and ligaments of the neck. This stretching causes soft tissue damage, inflammation and pain in the neck muscles. It is sometimes referred to as whiplash.

What causes an acute neck sprain?

Neck sprain commonly happens following low speed car accidents when your head goes forward without restraint, but can happen following recreational accidents or simple falls.

What are the symptoms?

Soreness and discomfort in the neck. This can take a few hours to develop, and is usually worse the next day. The pain is normally worse down the sides of the neck.

Difficulty turning the neck from side to side.

Soreness in the shoulders or down the arms.

Sometimes people suffer from headaches, dizziness and poor concentration.

How is it diagnosed?

The practitioner will have examined your neck for any evidence of tenderness over the bones of the spine and surrounding muscles, and will have assessed the movements of your neck. You may have had an x-ray if there was any concern during the examination about a bone injury. However, an x-ray is not required to make this diagnosis.

How is it treated?

Normally the pain and other symptoms should start to improve over the course of a few days with simple exercise and painkillers. You may find that the stiffness and discomfort is worst the following day.

Once the immediate pain has settled during the first few days, you are encouraged to start moving your neck. Gently start moving your neck forwards and backwards and from side to side on a regular basis throughout the day. You should aim to avoid letting your neck stiffen-up by not moving it and try to get back to normal activity.

Painkillers can be useful; simple tablets such as Paracetamol and Ibuprofen are often the best. On occasions, some people may not be able to take certain tablets due to allergy, other medications or medical conditions. If in doubt, ask your doctor or pharmacist.

Formal physiotherapy is not usually required as simple exercise is effective. However if your problems persist, your GP may want to refer you for some physiotherapy.

Evidence suggests that soft collars are not useful in the management of acute neck sprain.

What is the prognosis or expected outcome of treatment?

Over the course of the next few weeks the damage should repair itself, but full recovery can take six weeks and in some much longer.

When can I drive again?

You need to have the ability to turn your head quickly to drive safely. It is therefore advisable to start driving again when the pain has settled and you have a good range of movement.

Are there any possible complications?

If your symptoms worsen significantly or you develop any weakness, numbness or tingling in your limbs, you should seek medical attention.

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email ndht.pals@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

Have your say

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'Care Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at www.careopinion.org.uk.

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