

Physiotherapy and neck pain

Get the right relief



What is neck pain?

Neck or cervical spine pain is a common problem affecting all age groups, cultures and socio-demographic levels. The societal cost of neck pain is high in terms of lost income, decreased productivity and reduced quality of life. Neck pain can range from being mild and nuisance value, to severely disabling and incapacitating. Recurrences of acute bouts of neck pain are common and neck pain may become persistent or chronic.

Pain associated with disorders of the neck may be felt locally in the neck or referred to other areas such as the head (cervical headache), arms or the upper back.

Causes of neck pain

The onset of neck pain may be associated with traumatic event, such as whiplash injuries or sports trauma, or it may have a gradual onset not associated with any triggering events.

Although rare, neck pain may be caused by serious pathology such as tumours, infections or damage to the arteries in the cervical region. More commonly, neck pain is associated with disorders of the cervical musculoskeletal system including the intervertebral

discs (principal joints between two vertebrae in the spinal column), ligaments, muscles and joints. Pins and needles and numbness are symptoms associated with irritation or compression of the cervical nerves and are often felt in the arm, hands and fingers. This is known as 'radiculopathy' or 'radicular pain'.

In some cases, the cause of the neck pain is able to be identified during a clinical examination with a physiotherapist and confirmed by appropriate investigations or imaging. However, in many cases the exact cause of the pain is unclear and these cases are known as 'non-specific pain'. This does not necessarily mean that there is no physical problem, rather a simple source cannot be reliably identified. Physiotherapy is still appropriate and effective for helping treat non-specific neck pain.

It is important to acknowledge that neck pain is not merely a signal that there is a problem with or damage to the structures in the cervical spine. Emotional state, social factors and past experiences all play a significant role in the pain experience. Sleep disturbances, anxiety, stress levels and immune system dysfunction can influence neck pain and in turn, be adversely affected by the pain experience, potentially setting up a reoccurring cycle that may lead to chronic or persistent pain.



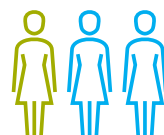
4th
in significant
disability

Neck pain ranks fourth behind low back pain, depression and arthralgias as a cause of significant disability.



30-50%
of cases range
for 12 months

The 12 month prevalence of neck pain ranges from 30-50% with up to 12% of cases classified as activity limiting.



50yr
old lifestage

Neck pain is more common in women with prevalence peaking in middle age.



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How can physiotherapy help?

Physiotherapists are highly-trained and competent in the assessment and management of neck pain. A physiotherapist will perform a comprehensive interview to identify your symptoms and how your neck pain affects your activity levels and quality of life. A skilled examination will identify musculoskeletal problems that might be a cause of or a contributing factor to your neck pain. They will screen you for non-musculoskeletal causes of your pain and refer you for a medical assessment if required. A physiotherapist will also take into account your personal situation, your goals and what understanding you have of your neck condition.

Treatment

Physiotherapy for neck pain involves evidence-based treatment options which are non-pharmaceutical and non-surgical in nature. A physiotherapist will work with you to explore possible interventions and work out what treatment type is best for you and your specific condition. This may include hands-on treatment or an exercise program to reduce pain, improve flexibility and strength and regain normal neck function. Work and lifestyle advice may be an important part of your treatment. A physiotherapist will be able to answer your questions and clear up any confusing advice you may have received about your neck condition. Physiotherapy treatment is always 'patient-centred', ensuring you are informed and respected in the decision-making process.

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