

Number

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# Acute Neck Pain

→ A partnership approach to pain management

## > What Is Acute Neck Pain?

Acute neck pain is pain felt in the region of the neck that lasts for a short time (i.e. less than three months).

Statistics show that around 10–15% of the population has neck pain at any given time. While the duration of symptoms varies from person to person, it is not uncommon for neck pain to be persistent. The pain intensity can range from mild to severe.

## > What Causes Acute Neck Pain?

In most cases it is not possible to pinpoint the cause of the neck pain, or it may be the result of an injury. In either case, it is not necessary to have a specific diagnosis of the cause in order to manage the pain effectively.

There is a less than 1% chance that the pain is due to a serious medical condition.

## > What Should I Do When I Have Acute Neck Pain?

If your pain bothers you, it is important to see your health practitioner, to work with them to manage your pain, and to stay active.

### 1 See your health practitioner

A history and a physical examination are needed to assess for any serious medical conditions that may be associated with your pain, although these are rare.

Your practitioner can provide you with information about your pain after you have been assessed. Ask for an explanation if unfamiliar

### MAIN MESSAGES

- Work with your health practitioner to manage your pain and address your concerns
- Stay active

### WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

**A panel of experts recently reviewed the scientific studies on the effectiveness of treatments for acute neck pain. They found that there is both a lack of evidence (i.e. few or no scientific studies conducted) and a lack of high quality studies on pain-relieving treatments in this area.**

The findings of this review are published in the report *Evidence-Based Management of Acute Musculoskeletal Pain* available at [www.nhmrc.gov.au](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au). The results of this review are summarised below.

#### **Effective**

Measures that are effective for relieving acute neck pain are: staying active and keeping the neck moving;

gentle neck exercises (these can be started soon after the pain starts); combined (or 'multi-modal') treatments involving cervical passive mobilisation with exercises, or exercises with other types of treatments; and pulsed electromagnetic therapy (reduces pain in the short term).

#### **Inconclusive\***

Studies on TENS, electrotherapy and micro-breaks (small breaks from computer work) for acute neck pain have not tested these treatments against placebo.

#### **No studies done\***

There are no studies that have looked at: acupuncture, pain-relieving medication (analgesics), anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), cervical

manipulation, cervical passive mobilisation, gymnastics, multi-disciplinary treatment in the workplace, muscle relaxants, neck school, patient education, spray and stretch therapy and traction for the treatment of acute neck pain.

#### **Not effective**

There is scientific evidence that neck collars are not effective for acute neck pain.

**\* It is important to note that these findings do not mean that these measures will not help you; they indicate that more research is needed.**



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terms are used. Sometimes a diagram can be useful.

Additional investigations, such as xrays and blood tests, are not needed in the majority of cases of acute neck pain. They do not help with your pain or your ability to move your neck.

It is normal to worry about the cause of your pain and the impact it may have on you. Talking to your health practitioner about your concerns can be helpful. You will usually find there is no serious cause and that there are ways to relieve neck pain.

## 2 Work with your health practitioner to manage your pain

The goal is to help you find ways to manage your pain and return to your usual activities.

Most people find that their neck pain settles down over time as healing occurs. Pain-relieving measures may help you cope with your symptoms while nature takes its course.

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**There is a range of pain-relieving measures available. While there are few scientific studies proving their effectiveness, this does not mean that a particular measure will not help you (see What the Research Says).**

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When considering what measures to use for your pain, it is helpful to discuss the following with your health practitioner:

- Your pain level and your concerns

- What measures are available to relieve acute neck pain (what they involve, how they work, their benefits and risks, their effectiveness)
- Your need for additional information

## 3 Stay Active

Your pain may make it difficult for you to carry out your usual activities, and you might want to avoid moving your neck.

However, it is important to resume normal activities as soon as possible. Maintaining the use of your neck helps to prevent long-term problems.

You may need to use pain-relieving measures to help you return to your usual activity level. If you are working, the plan could include a program of selected duties or reduced hours of work. This applies to work at home as well.

### Follow-up visits

It is important to maintain contact with your health practitioner.

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**If the pain is not settling down or is getting worse, you may need further assessment.**

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Follow-up visits provide you with an opportunity to obtain more information. If you have any questions to ask your health practitioner, write them down and discuss them at your next visit.

The content of this information sheet is based on: Australian Acute Musculoskeletal Pain Guidelines Group (2003). *Evidence-Based Management of Acute Musculoskeletal Pain*, available at [www.nhmrc.gov.au](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au)

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