

Pain in the Neck?

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Did you know that the average human head weighs about 8 pounds? Imagine carrying 8 pounds around in your hand for 50 odd years? Not only would your arm be muscular but it would also get pretty tired by the end of the day. Our neck has the difficult task of carrying our head around and also being able to support it through such a wide range of movement. The difficult task is accomplished by a complex connection of muscles, ligaments and bones. Over time these tissues become stressed resulting in muscular tension, headaches, joint problems, and degeneration to the bony structures. However, we don't have to concede defeat and assume our necks will eventually stiffen up and become sore. There are some simple tricks and tips that can help keep you moving with less chance of pain now and in the future.

One of the most important factors for neck pain is posture. Imagine holding an 8-pound bowling ball in your hand. How would you do it? I imagine that most of you would hold it close to your body; after all the further it is away from your body the harder it would be to hold. Our posture works in the same way. If your head and shoulders are slouched forward your muscles have to work much harder to keep your head up. Add years of working over a desk or computer and your muscles are sure to let you know. A good rule of thumb is that your ears should run approximately in line with the bony part of your shoulder. Also think of the posture of your trunk: tummy in and lift up as if a string is pulling you up from your breastbone. A final tip with posture is to take a deep breath and feel how it straightens you up, now try to keep this position without holding your breath. Work on holding the position longer and longer until it becomes second nature.

The neck is made up of more muscles than you want to count and seven vertebrae or spine bones. The bones of the spine work like an anchor for the muscles and allow for movements in different directions. We often become patterned in our movements resulting in some muscles and bones becoming more practiced to move in a certain way. (This is partly why it is so hard to change habitual tasks like posture.) Some of the joints are allowed to become stiffer while others become more mobile and less stable because they are always moving the same way. Eventually this process leads to degeneration of the joints and cartilage (a.k.a. arthritis) and loss of movement, pain, and discomfort ensue.

Different types of treatment to different parts of the neck, shoulders, and trunk can help to alleviate and reverse some most of these symptoms. For example, turn your head from side to side; now try to tuck in your chin a little bit and turn it again. If it feels different it is because you are moving your joints and muscles in ways that they are not used to. A physiotherapist can help you learn to move joints that are too stiff (stretching and specific movement), control joints that are too mobile (think core stability) and help you work on your posture. So remember, keep your chin up and balance your bowling ball over top of your shoulders and you can save yourself a pain in the neck!