



## DISEASES & CONDITIONS

# Neck Sprain

The seven bones of the spinal column in your neck (cervical vertebrae) are connected to each other by ligaments and muscles--strong bands of tissue that act like thick rubber bands. A sprain (stretch) or tear can occur in one or more of these soft tissues when a sudden movement, such as a motor vehicle collision or a hard fall, causes the neck to bend to an extreme position.

## Symptoms

A person with a neck sprain may experience a wide range of possible symptoms.

- Pain, especially in the back of the neck, that worsens with movement
- Pain that peaks a day or so after the injury, instead of immediately
- Muscle spasms and pain in the upper shoulder
- Headache in the back of the head
- Sore throat
- Increased irritability, fatigue, difficulty sleeping, and difficulty concentrating
- Numbness in the arm or hand
- Neck stiffness or decreased range of motion (side to side, up and down, circular)
- Tingling or weakness in the arms

## Doctor Examination

To diagnose a neck sprain, your doctor will perform a comprehensive physical examination. During the physical examination, your doctor will ask you how the injury occurred, measure the range of motion of your neck, and check for any point tenderness.

In order to look closely at the bones in your neck, your doctor may request x-rays. This evaluation will help your doctor rule out or identify other sources of neck pain, such as spinal fractures, dislocations, arthritis, and other serious conditions.

# Treatment

All sprains or strains, no matter where they are located in the body, are treated in a similar manner. Neck sprains, like other sprains, will usually heal gradually, given time and appropriate treatment. You may have to wear a soft collar around your neck to help support the head and relieve pressure on the ligaments so they have time to heal.

Pain relievers such as aspirin or ibuprofen can help reduce the pain and any swelling. Muscle relaxants can help ease spasms. You can apply an ice pack for 15 to 30 minutes at a time, several times a day for the first 2 or 3 days after the injury. This will help reduce inflammation and discomfort. Although heat, particularly moist heat, can help loosen cramped muscles, it should not be applied too quickly.

Other treatment options include:

- Massaging the tender area
- Ultrasound
- Cervical (neck) traction
- Aerobic and isometric exercise

Most symptoms of neck sprain will go away in 4 to 6 weeks. However, severe injuries, may take longer to heal completely.

## Last Reviewed

December 2013

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