



UNDERSTANDING NECK PAIN

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Introduction

Pain from the joints and soft tissues of the neck (or cervical region) is common. Pain from this region is usually felt in the neck or upper shoulder but can also cause headache, shoulder pain and arm pain.

The aim of this e-book is to provide an overview of neck pain, as well as what to expect from a treatment provider. It is not a diagnose yourself or treat yourself guide. There are several potential sources of neck pain, most of which are not medically serious. However pain is often a warning sign and sometimes serious pathology can cause neck pain. **If you have a problem you need to be professionally assessed.**

Historically treatment for the neck has primarily concentrated on attempting to find a diagnosis and then treat the diagnosis.

Our current knowledge of neck pain indicates that we can only find a diagnosis in about 20% of cases.

This may seem problematic, as anybody who is used to seeing a doctor will normally expect a diagnosis, however with neck pain this is not the case. **Most neck pain is not caused by any serious pathology, it will settle and the long term outlook is good.**



Basic anatomy

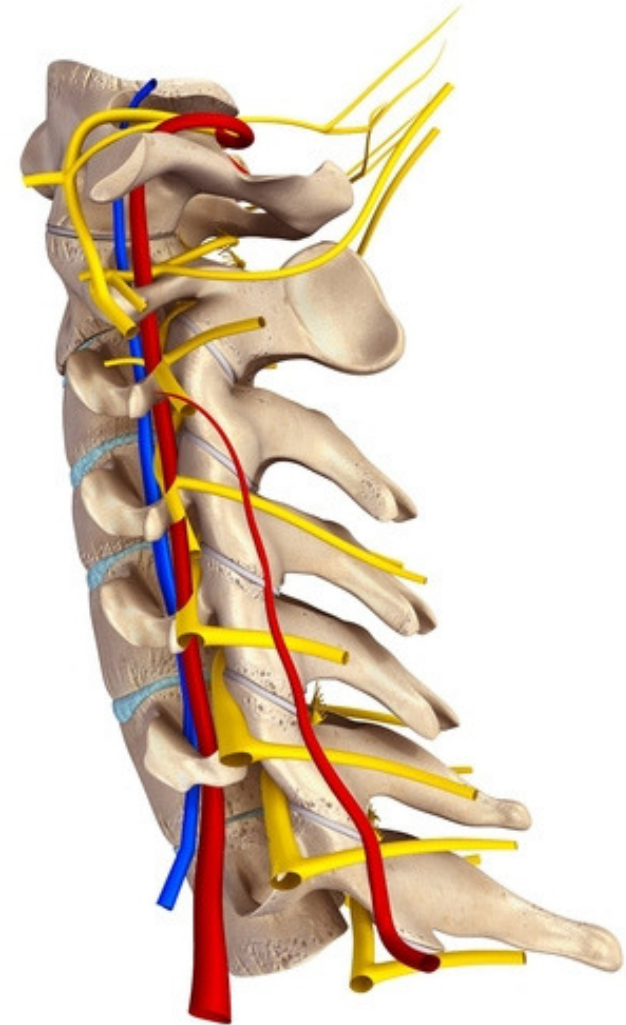
The neck is made up of a series of vertebrae or bones which are joined together by discs, facet joints and ligaments. The vertebrae are large and strong, and are similar in width to your knee.

These structures are designed to absorb load and to move, and as with most human tissues are kept healthy with the right level of activity. This means that active people have less neck pain on average than non-active people. **It also means that people who stay active during and after an episode of neck pain do better than those who do not.**

You can overdo it, but neck pain is more common in people who are not active.

Causes of neck pain

The most common cause of neck pain is probably poor posture. This has become more common with modern life with the increased times spent on computers and mobile devices.



As the head moves forward (**fig 1**) the stress felt by the soft tissue supports of the spine dramatically increases and the ability of the muscles to cope with this load decreases. These soft tissue supports such as the ligaments are not designed to support prolonged gravitational load.

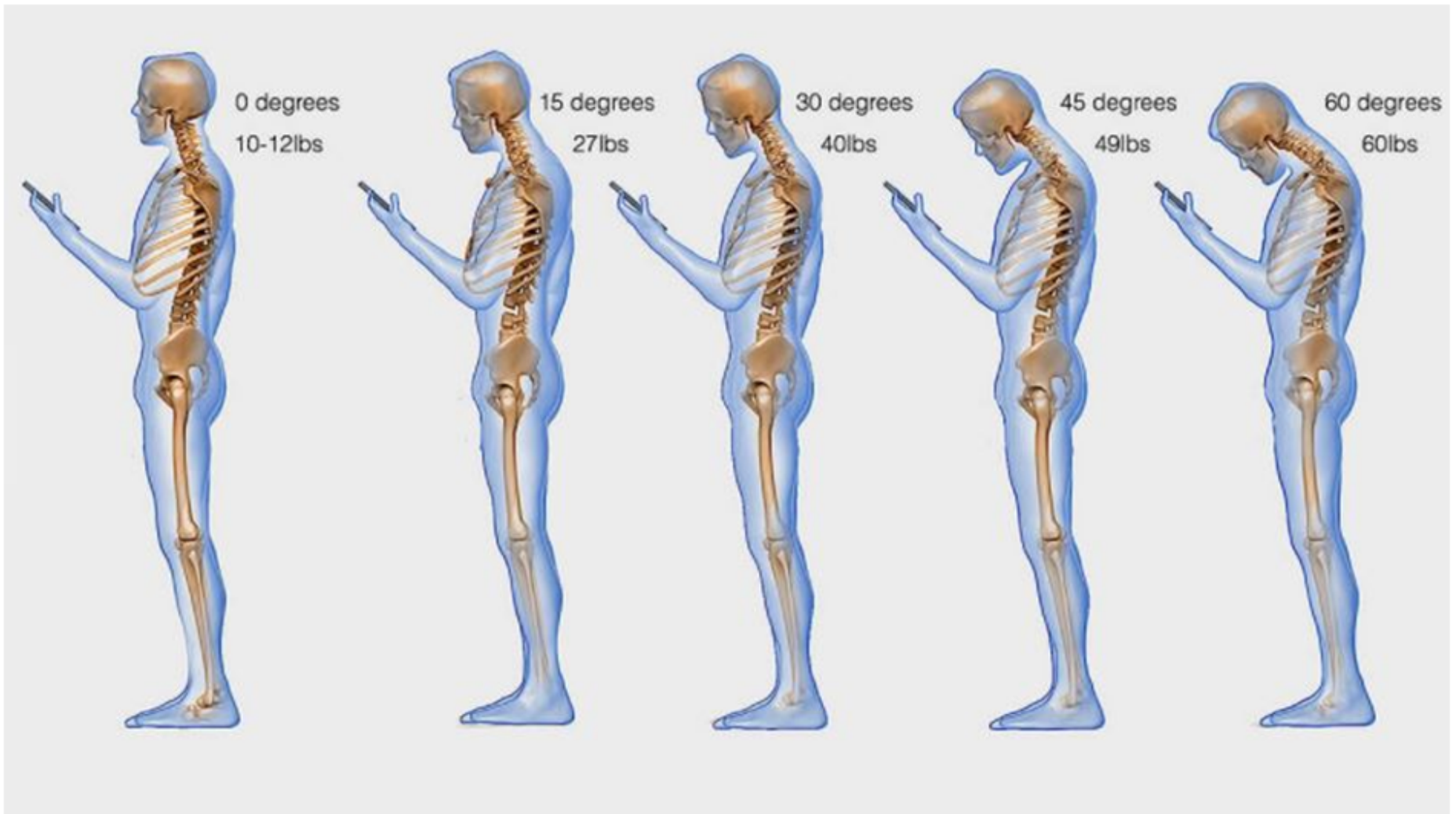


Figure 1



Other causes include:

- Poor sleeping posture
- Use of a backpack
- Osteoarthritis
- Trauma such as seen in motor vehicle accidents or sport
- Some medical disorders
 - Tumors
 - Autoimmune disorders
 - Viral infections

What to do if you have an attack of neck pain?

01

Let a professional assess you. Neck pain can have causes other than the low back such as the organs and only a trained person can assess this.

02

Manage your pain. This can include medication, support strapping or bracing or some exercises and hands-on treatments. It should also include sensible activity modification.

03

Don't stress about it. Psychological stress can actually increase pain. Relax, most back pain settles if looked after correctly.

04

Don't expect to avoid everything that is painful. We know that unless you are in severe pain, bed rest is not appropriate. The quicker you get going the quicker you recover. Pain is a warning signal but it will occur well before any further damage occurs.

What if this pain radiates into my arm?

If this is the case it is possible that one of the cervical nerves is compressed, although this is not always the case. The disc is one common cause of nerve compression.

What to expect from your treatment provider



01

An explanation of your problem with alternative explanations if the actual diagnosis is not clear

02

Advice on what to do and what to avoid

03

An estimate of how long treatment will take and how much this will cost

04

A discussion of your goals for this problem and whether they are realistic

05

A program tailored to your needs. Everyone's situation is different. No single treatment is effective for all neck pain

06

A discussion with other treatment providers, who can assist in your management.

What to avoid from treatment providers

01

Electrotherapy. Ultrasound, electric current and other modalities have at best temporary effect and will not help you heal. There are better ways for your therapist to spend their time.

02

Unnecessary use of medical imaging. X-rays and MRI are very useful in some situations but routine imaging of all back pain is not necessary. Your health professional should discuss why imaging is required.

03

Permanent treatment. Stating that you need to come back periodically to keep your neck healthy is not required. Telling that your back is out of alignment and needs regular treatment is simply not understanding the current evidence.

04

Unfounded diagnoses. These are common, and are not founded in any science. They are often elegant explanations, and are sometimes used to encourage unnecessary treatment. One reason they have been popularised is that people expect a diagnosis, and it is easier for a provider to make up a story than admit that no diagnosis is possible. Some common ones are:

- a. A hip or pelvis “out of alignment” or “twisted”
- b. A vertebrae has moved or subluxed, and can be put back

What to do in the event of an episode of neck pain

Getting active early is important, but if you are in pain your usual activities may require some modification. The basic principles are:



Figure 3

01

Reduce the time spent in aggravating postures.

02

Don't stay in one place too long

03

If the pain worsens change position

04

Don't allow yourself to stiffen up

05

Ensure you're seating is comfortable including your car seat. This may include the use of a lumbar role (*see fig 3*). This can be attached to your chair, office chair and car seat. You should ask your physiotherapist if they are likely to help you. Improving your lumbar posture will improve your neck posture

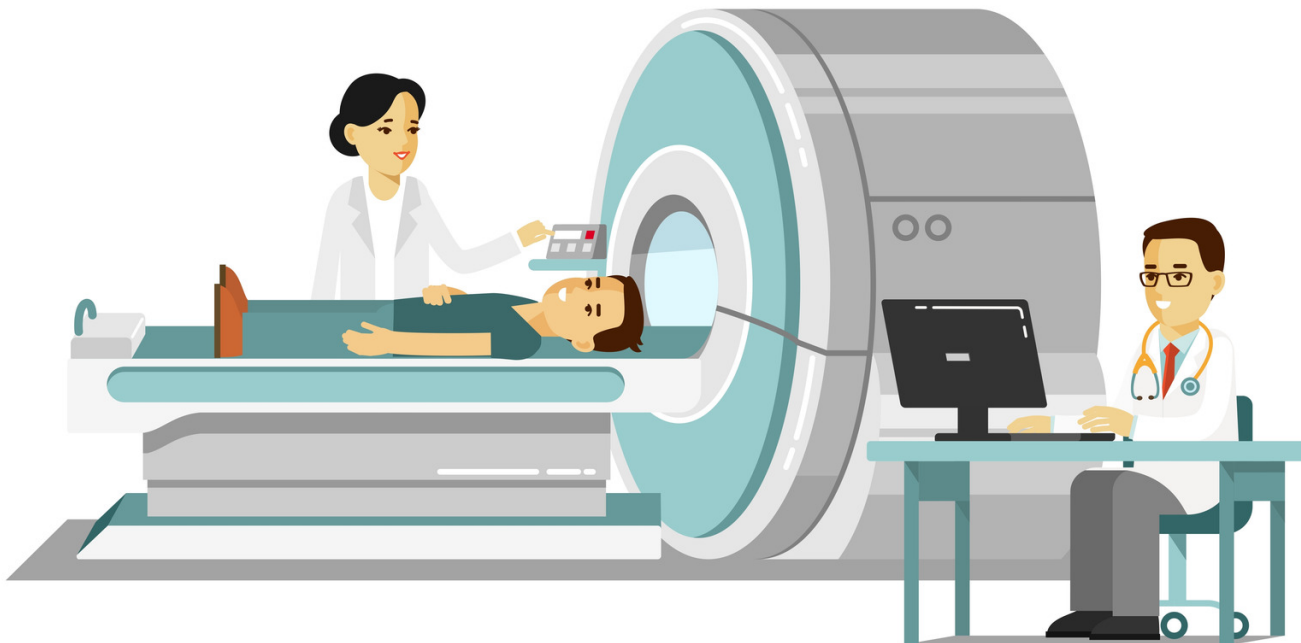
06

Seek professional help. Don't try to figure this out for yourself. Using the internet for a resource is not useful.

Medical imaging

X-Rays, MRIs and CT scans are commonly used in neck pain. They are vital tools in the diagnosis of some problems. However they produce a lot of misleading information. Just because you have a disc bulge or arthritis on MRI, does not for example mean that is the cause of your neck pain.

Remember, always seek professional advice. Your Physiotherapist is the best person to guide your treatment. We hope this guide is helpful. Please feel free to share it with anyone you think would benefit from it.



References

- Hansraj K.K., Assessment of stresses in the cervical spine caused by posture and position of the head
- Kyeong-Jin Lee. The effect of forward head posture on muscle activity during neck protraction and retraction



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