

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Katie Gravesen, DC

Prevent Neck Pain

A whopping two-thirds of adults experience neck pain at some point in their lives (Am Fam Phys 2004;69:1275). The intensity can range from mildly nagging to completely debilitating.

Dr. Gravesen often cares for patients with neck discomfort. This is because misaligned spinal bones (vertebrae) are a well-known cause of neck pain. To learn more about the spine's connection to neck pain — and ways you can prevent being immobilized by it — read on!



Acute Neck Pain

There are essentially two broad classifications of neck pain: acute and chronic.

Acute neck pain, most often injury-related, is sudden and intense. Acute neck pain tends to dissipate within a few days, weeks or months. However, once the pain resolves, lingering spinal misalignments may predispose patients to subsequent conditions, including neck pain, shoulder pain, headaches and carpal tunnel syndrome.

Acute neck discomfort has a variety of instigators.

Whiplash is one of the most common causes of acute neck injury. Many people are not aware that whiplash

victims frequently don't experience immediate pain. In fact, symptoms may be delayed for months, or even years. And by that time, permanent damage may have occurred.

Regular chiropractic care can lessen the impact of whiplash by strengthening the immune system and promoting overall good health. A study found that "fair or poor health before the collision was associated with severe neck pain in females." A history of prior headaches and being unaware of the head's position at the time of the collision also worsened whiplash (*Spine* 2006;31:E98-E104).

Another common cause of acute neck pain is torticollis — a condition commonly known as "wryneck." This disorder ensues when the head is suddenly twisted to one side. For instance, following a difficult birth, newborns often suffer from wryneck. That's why Dr. Gravesen suggests scheduling baby's first appointment as soon as possible.

Traumas such as falls and sports injuries also result in acute neck pain.

Chronic Neck Pain

Chronic pain, on the other hand, is typically characterized by tenderness and aching lasting more than three months. Poor posture, such as im-

proper ergonomics while working at a computer, can lead to chronic neck pain.

The Spinal Connection

The spine is actually a chain of intricately arranged bones (vertebrae) connected to form a single functional unit. This bony framework houses the spinal column. Nerves to all parts of the body enter and exit the spinal column through channels between vertebrae. When vertebrae are misaligned, transmission of nerves may be affected, sparking not only neck pain, but also a host of conditions, such as headaches, backaches, attention problems and infantile colic.

Dr. Gravesen corrects misaligned vertebrae — a phenomenon known as **vertebral subluxation** — with safe and gentle maneuvers called **chiropractic adjustments**.

A Multifaceted Approach to Preventing Neck Pain

Doctors of chiropractic, like Dr. Gravesen, employ a multifaceted approach to prevention. In addition to suggesting regularly scheduled chiropractic care for neck pain, your doctor may encourage you to:



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Exercise Neck Muscles

Doctors of chiropractic often instruct patients to exercise neck muscles. Extensive research shows that strengthening these muscles may lead to a reduction in chronic neck pain and prevent relapses.

In one evaluation, researchers divided a group of 180 women (between the ages of 25 and 53) into three groups: (1) strength muscle training, (2) endurance muscle training and (3) a control group that participated in stretches and aerobic exercise not targeted for muscle strengthening.

“Endurance trainees exercised neck muscles with head lifts, and strength trainees used an elastic rubber band to strengthen flexor muscles. Both groups performed dynamic shoulder and upper-extremity strengthening exercises using dumbbells, as well as trunk and leg muscle exercises and stretching exercises. Participants were encouraged to exercise at least three hours a week at home.” (*Am Fam Phys* 2004;69:427.)

Those who underwent strength training enjoyed a 73 percent drop in pain. The endurance group demonstrated a 59 percent pain reduction. In contrast, the control group reported a 21 percent reduction in pain.

Another scientific example of how exercise helps relieve neck pain involved 145 patients who received electromagnetic (infrared) therapy and advice on neck care. Of that number, 67 patients also participated in an exercise program with activation and strengthening of the deep neck muscles. After six weeks, the exercise group demonstrated “significantly better improvement” in disability score, pain and muscle strength than the control group (*Spine* 2005;30:E1).

Before rushing out to the nearest gym, however, ask the doctor which exercises are best for your current condition.

Perk up Your Posture

A study from Finland focused on the body postures of 3,185 girls and 2,808 boys as they related to neck pain. All of the youngsters were between the ages of 15 and 16.

The researchers discovered that prolonged sitting was associated with a high prevalence of neck, occipital and shoulder pain in girls. The same conditions sparked neck or occipital pain in boys. (The occipital bone is a curved structure that forms the lower portion of the back of the skull.)

Surprisingly, it wasn't only sitting — but also what the adolescents were doing while they sat — that initiated pain. Watching television and reading books generated the most pain in girls, whereas playing or working with a computer was associated with an increase in neck or occipital pain in boys (*Spine* 2007;32:1038-44).

A plethora of scientific studies also link poor posture with neck pain in adults.

Stop Stressing

Stress raises blood pressure, sparks headaches and increases the risk of developing a host of diseases. It's also a leading cause of neck pain.

While preventing stress is key, how you deal with it when it occurs also plays a significant role. Researchers find that “coping strategies involving self-assurance resulted in better disability outcomes, whereas getting angry or frustrated resulted in worse pain and disability outcomes.” (*Disabil Rehabil* 2006;28:1319-29.)

But here's something that may surprise you: Scholars also discovered that participants with high levels of social support were more likely to experience clinically meaningful reductions in pain and disability.

Need to incorporate a stress reduction strategy into your daily routine? Ask the doctor for specific recommendations that will fit your lifestyle.

Work on the Work Woes

A wealth of research indicates that individuals who are unhappy with their work environment, especially those who feel that they have a lack of control over their work lives, are at a heightened risk of neck pain. If your work is emotionally disabling, consider making productive changes — before it becomes physically disabling.

Purchase a New Pillow

There are a number of pillows specifically designed to reduce neck pain. The key is to find one that keeps your neck in perfect alignment with your spine.

And less is *definitely* more when it comes to the number of pillows you sleep with. Using an overstuffed pillow, or piling up more than one pillow, causes undue neck strain.

If you aren't sure if you need a new pillow, bring your current one to your next chiropractic visit. The doctor will be happy to advise you.

The Chiropractic Solution to Neck Pain

Life can sometimes be a pain in the neck! But it doesn't have to be. Chiropractic's all-natural prevention strategy can help keep you and your family pain free.

Don't let the agony escalate: Schedule an appointment today. And don't forget to do the same for the youngest — and oldest — members of your family.

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