

# Whiplash

Whiplash is part of our modern lives. One in 200 of us will suffer from it at some point but it is rarely serious.

Most people make a full return to health. What you do about your pain makes a big difference to your recovery. Take control of the pain and you will get better faster and feel better sooner.

This leaflet will give you the best available information based on scientifically researched evidence and you will get better faster, if you follow the advice given.

## What is whiplash?

Whiplash is an injury to the neck resulting from a sudden thrusting forwards followed by a snapping back of the neck. It may be caused by rear-end or side-impact motor vehicle collisions. The immediate result can be injury to bone or soft tissue. These injuries may then lead to secondary problems (called whiplash associated disorders or WAD) for example, headaches and increased anxiety.

Most whiplashes do very little lasting damage and there is no need for further investigations such as X-rays and scans. They don't help in recovery. The exact reason for your symptoms is often not known, only that nerve endings are being stimulated and your brain interprets these as pain.

- Symptoms can take a few days to come on. This is a good sign; it means the injury was not serious
- Symptoms are a normal reaction to injury of the working parts of your neck. You will recover. It usually takes a few days or weeks for the acute pain to lessen
- Whiplash is a short term problem. Your neck likes movement and, if injured, is able to repair itself. Very few people suffer with long-term symptoms. Some take longer than others to recover and can have problems lasting over 12 weeks.

## Whiplash is rarely serious

However, if you have a violent accident or constant unremitting pain in your neck then go to the Accident and Emergency or see your GP for a check-up. This is especially important if you have:

- Been unconscious
- Headaches, disturbed vision, drowsiness, nausea, vomiting or confusion
- Widespread, odd sensations like pins and needles or weakness
- Severe neck stiffness or odd neck posture
- Problems with balance or walking.

These symptoms may mean that you have WAD so seek advice from your GP or Physiotherapist if you can't get back to normal activities quickly. They can help identify factors that may get in the way of your recovery and can give you advice on what to do.

Read this leaflet carefully. Being informed helps reduce the stress and anxiety associated with whiplash.

Remember hurt does not necessarily mean harm.

# What to do if you have whiplash

## **Stay active if possible**

Your neck likes movement. Try to keep working and taking part in normal life, it will help you to recover faster. You may need to make temporary changes to how you work; ask for help from your employer.

Your Physiotherapist can advise you on how to get back to work as soon as possible.

## **Exercise**

Physiotherapists are experts in rehabilitation and can help you with getting moving again. Exercise helps to reduce pain allowing you to get on with life. People respond to exercises differently.

Your Physiotherapist will show you the correct programme of exercises to suit you.

Getting your neck to move and work properly again helps your body to recover naturally. Try to think: movement is good and the sooner you move, the faster you'll get better.

## **Control the pain**

Use pain killers or anti-inflammatories. You will probably have one that works for you or take advice from your GP or Pharmacist.

Regular pain control allows you to move your neck more freely and get better faster. Remember to follow the instructions and precautions given. You may need to take them for a week or two.

A collar may be suggested for pain-relief but should not be used for more than 48 hours. Further use may delay recovery.

## **Hot or cold**

Use the one you prefer. Local heat can give short term relief or try a cold pack wrapped in a damp towel and leave it on for 15 minutes. Either method helps to reduce pain and muscle spasm.

## How can Physiotherapy help?

### **Advice and education**

Physiotherapists help to teach you self-management skills and guide you back to health. They can advise on different strategies, to reduce pain, increase activity levels and help you cope. They will individualise these exercise programmes to incorporate all aspects of the rehabilitation process, making it as effective as possible.

Your Physiotherapist will provide you with postural advice that may help your sleep.

### **Manipulation/Mobilisation**

Your Physiotherapist may decide to use mobilising techniques to help restore normal movement to your neck. Manipulation and mobilisation have been shown to help especially when used shortly after the whiplash injury. They still need to be combined with specific exercises to be effective.

### **Massage and relaxation**

Your Physiotherapist may use massage to reduce pain and lessen tension in the muscles. Relaxation and breathing techniques may also be taught to help reduce stress and anxiety.

### **Other treatments**

Research is continuing in these areas. Electrotherapy, acupuncture and other treatments have helped. The main point is that if they help to get you moving again, then they will be beneficial.

Physiotherapists are experts in rehabilitation.

## Stopping your pain becoming long-term or chronic

Consulting a Physiotherapist early will minimise the risk of a poor recovery.

Your attitude and the actions you take are the most important factors in preventing long-term problems.

Try to:

- Remember that your pain is due to nothing serious
- Remember that hurt does not mean harm
- Accept the advice and reassurance that you are given
- Stay active
- Be in charge of your pain and be active in your treatment
- Remain positive.

Try to get back to work as soon as possible. If you are still off work after 3-6 weeks, then this increases the chance of long-term problems.

The day you stop work because of pain gives you a 10% chance of still not being at work in a year's time.

## Remember: help yourself to health

### How?

- By reading this leaflet
- Know that you are in charge of your pain
- Get or keep moving
- Control your pain
- Know that you are likely to get better
- Know that pain is an experience and you can influence it.

If you need any further help, speak to your Physiotherapist or GP.

Words by Paul Johnson  
MSc, BSc, MMACP, MCSP

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