

Whiplash Information Leaflet

Whiplash is the common name for an injury/strain to the neck caused by an acceleration/deceleration trauma such as a car accident. As the neck jerks to and fro at speed the soft tissues in your neck are overstretched and strained.

Whiplash is diagnosed if you are suffering from a stiff, painful neck after an accident. You may also have a headache, shoulder pain and /or arm pain. All of these can be common after neck injury and please try not to let them worry you. Because of the high number of nerves and therefore greater sensitivity around the neck your pain may feel quite severe and worrying but again this is common and should settle quickly. For the majority of people these symptoms will settle in a couple of weeks, similar to recovery of other strained joints such as ankles. In the neck there are a number of joints, so it is normal for pain to be more severe in this area after strains than other single joint areas. This doesn't mean the injury is any more worrying or severe. Most people make a full recovery and quickly return to normal activities and work.

Being positive and quickly returning to the activities you would have done before the injury will improve the speed and extent of your recovery.

It is best to try not to be afraid/worried about returning to work and other activities/sports, just do as much as you can manage. Little and often is usually the best way to do things, for example taking short walks to keep exercising or sitting only for short periods, changing position regularly to keep comfortable. The worst thing you can do is nothing, as this will make things worse rather than better!

The correct management of your injury in the early stages will ensure that it settles as quickly as possible and prevents future neck problems. Remember that having a positive outlook and making a quick return to activities you performed before the injury will improve the speed and extent of your recovery. If, however, you start to suffer from any of the following symptoms please seek further medical advice:

- Dizziness/ Fainting.
- Changes in your vision, speech or swallowing
- Falls and/or lack of co-ordination
- Numbness, weakness and/or altered sensations in the arms, legs and/or saddle area.
- Difficulty passing urine.
- Reduced bowel control.

Management advice:

Early stages : One-Two weeks

Rest and take adequate pain relief and anti-inflammatories. Letting your body suffer discomfort without taking pain relief can lead to more long term pain and disability. This is because pain reduces the ability of your postural muscles to work and so more stress is put through the joints of the spine. If over-the-counter pain relief is not adequate, ask your GP for stronger pain relief until you have got your neck moving again.

Recent research shows that using a collar will lead to a slower recovery. Ideally, you should use a collar for no more than the first 24 hours in very serious whiplash cases. If you do use a collar you should stop using it as quickly as possible as it will make the neck weaker and increase the likelihood of future problems.

Using an ice pack may help in the first 24-48 hours. Remember to wrap the ice pack in a towel before applying to the skin. Rest with the ice pack on your neck for at least 20 minutes. If the ice pack is painful, remove it immediately to prevent ice burn.

Begin neck exercises within the first four days of the whiplash. These should all be carried out gently and should include:

- a. tilting head to left and right
- b. rotating head to left and right to look over shoulder
- c. looking to floor then up to ceiling
- d. circling shoulders
- e. circling arms

The exercises must be done whilst you are sitting or standing with good posture. You should have a small inward curve in the lower back and shoulders positioned directly above the hips.

Try not to lift your chin up when sitting/standing up tall but try to imagine stretching upwards with the base of your skull. You should repeat the exercises three times a day and as many times as you can.

If the exercises are uncomfortable try to continue to do them but a little less vigorously. Also aim to do them when your pain killers are working best. Please continue to use pain relief for as long as you are suffering pain. Remember the body takes a number of weeks to heal, so pain in the first few weeks is common and not an indicator of serious problems.

Ongoing management:

Begin general exercising and return to normal activities as soon as possible: if necessary continue with pain relief to enable you to carry out normal activities. You should certainly return to normal activities including work and hobbies within the first two weeks. If you cannot achieve the level of activity you would normally, try gentler activities to begin with, e.g. walking/swimming/cycling instead of running.

Should you continue to have problems after the first few weeks of your recovery ask your GP to refer you to a physiotherapist for specialist advice, reassurance and rehabilitation. Sometimes, if your accident was particularly frightening, you may find yourself thinking about it quite often. Any anxiety or concern of this kind may slow your recovery. Your GP may be able to refer you for counselling or support to help you to resolve these issues and anxieties, and assist your body in the healing process.