

Emergency Department Discharge Advice



The Information Standard Certified Member

Information

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Acute Torticollis

Torticollis means 'twisted neck' and is also known as 'wryneck'. The twisting of the neck occurs when the muscles supporting the neck on one side go into spasm.

'Acute' means that the symptoms have developed quickly, over a period of hours, or often overnight. It is common for people to go to bed feeling fine and to wake up the next morning with an acute torticollis.

Acute torticollis causes neck pain and stiffness. The pain is usually on one side of the neck and stiffness of the muscles in that area twists the neck to one side. Occasionally, the pain is in the middle of the neck. The pain may spread to the back of the head or the shoulder. The muscles of the affected side may be tender usually with the head held to one side. Attempts to straighten the neck are difficult due to pain.

What causes acute torticollis?

The cause is often not known. It can happen in people with no previous neck symptoms. It is a common cause of neck pain in young people. There is usually no obvious injury.

However, a minor sprain or irritation of a muscle or ligament in the neck may have been caused by:

- sitting or sleeping in an unusual position without adequate neck support
- poor posture when looking at a computer screen
- carrying heavy unbalanced loads, for example, a briefcase or shopping bag
- allowing certain muscles of the neck to be exposed to cold: 'sleeping in a draught'

Do I need any tests?

The diagnosis of acute torticollis is made from the typical symptoms, and an examination of the neck. Tests such as an X-ray are only needed if a condition other than acute torticollis is suspected.

Please turn over:

What is the treatment for acute torticollis?

It usually goes away on its own over a few days, sometimes longer. The muscle spasm often improves within 24-48 hours. However, it may take up to a week for the symptoms to go completely. Occasionally, the symptoms last longer or come back (recur) at a later time for no apparent reason.

The aims of treatment are to relieve the pain and try to reduce the stiffness in the muscles. Gentle neck exercises are usually advised. Painkillers may help to enable this exercise. Heat packs which can help relax the stiffness in the affected muscles are useful for some people. A good posture may help, and prevent symptoms recurring.

Exercise your neck and keep active

Aim to keep your neck moving as normally as possible. At first the pain may be quite bad, and you may need to rest for a day or so. However, gently exercise the neck as soon as you are able. You should not let it stiffen up.

Gradually try to increase the range of the neck movements. Every few hours gently move the neck in each direction. Do this several times a day. As far as possible, continue with normal activities. You will not cause damage to your neck by moving it.

Check that your sitting position at work or at the computer is good with a straight neck and back (not stooped, flexed or twisted). Sit upright on chairs or the sofa. Yoga, Pilates, and the Alexander technique all improve neck posture, but their value in treating neck pain is uncertain.

A firm supporting pillow seems to help some people when sleeping. Try not to use more than one pillow.

Medicines

Painkillers are often helpful. To work most effectively they need to be taken regularly, before the pain becomes unbearable. Paracetamol or an anti-inflammatory painkiller such as Ibuprofen used either alone or in combination is often sufficient.

If you are not improving after a few days you should see your doctor. Occasionally stronger painkillers or a muscle relaxant drug may be required if the stiffness in your neck muscles is severe, these must be prescribed by a medical professional.