

## Emergency Department Discharge Advice

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# Information

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Publication Date: 04/14  
Review Date: 04/17

## Whiplash Neck Sprain

A whiplash neck sprain is common after a road traffic collision. Symptoms usually ease and go without any specific treatment. It is best to keep the neck active and moving. If required, painkillers can ease pain.

### What is a whiplash neck sprain?

A whiplash neck sprain occurs when your head is suddenly jolted backwards and forwards (or forwards then backwards) in a whip-like movement, or is suddenly forcibly rotated. This can cause some neck muscles and ligaments to stretch more than normal (sprain).

The common cause is when you are in a vehicle that is hit from behind by another vehicle. Being in a vehicle hit from the side or front can also cause a whiplash sprain. Whiplash neck sprain can also occur after a sporting injury or sudden movement.

### What are the symptoms of a whiplash neck sprain?

- Pain and stiffness in the neck. It may take several hours after the accident for symptoms to appear. The pain and stiffness often become worse on the day after the accident. In about half of cases, the pain first develops the day after the accident
- Turning or bending the neck may be difficult
- You may also feel pain or stiffness in the shoulders or down the arms
- There may be pain and stiffness in the upper and lower part of the back
- Headache is a common symptom
- Dizziness, blurred vision, pain in the jaw or pain on swallowing, unusual sensations of the facial skin may occur for a short while, but soon go. Tell a doctor if any of these persist
- Some people feel tired and irritable for a few days and find it difficult to concentrate

# What are the treatments for a whiplash neck sprain?

## Exercise your neck and keep active

Aim to keep your neck moving as normally as possible. At first the pain may be bad, and you may need to rest the neck 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 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.

## Medicines

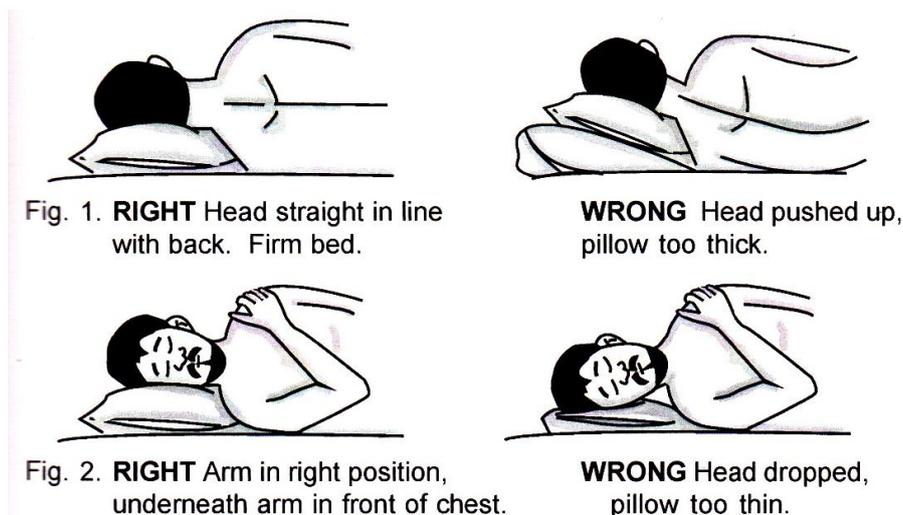
Painkillers are often helpful and may be recommended by your doctor.

- Paracetamol at full strength is often sufficient. For an adult this is two 500 mg tablets, four times a day
- Anti-inflammatory painkillers such as ibuprofen. These may be used alone or at the same time as Paracetamol.
- If pain is not controlled by the above your doctor may prescribe you stronger pain relief or a medicine to help with muscle spasm.

## A good posture may help

If you sleep on your back you should put a rolled-up towel at the back of your neck at night – it might help you to feel more comfortable.

If you sleep on your side do the following:



## **A firm supporting pillow**

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

## **Physiotherapy**

Most people recover quickly from whiplash (within two weeks) by performing their own physiotherapy in the form of neck exercises as previously described. However, if there is no improvement after two weeks from injury you may benefit from being referred to a physiotherapist. Your GP can arrange this with you.

## **Treatment may vary and you should go back to see your GP:**

- If the pain becomes worse
- If the pain persists beyond 4-6 weeks
- If other symptoms develop such as loss of feeling (numbness), weakness, or persistent pins and needles in part of an arm or hand