



What is it?

Whiplash is when a sudden movement or jolt to the body or head results in pain, stiffness and loss of movement in the neck.

Symptoms

Whiplash symptoms often don't appear when the injury is caused. It may take hours, to a few days, for symptoms to show and they may get worse in the first days after the injury. Symptoms may include:

- Neck pain and stiffness/loss of movement.
- Tenderness along the back of the neck.
- Pain in the shoulders or arms.
- Headaches.
- Pain in the lower back, and
- Pain, numbness, or paraesthesia (pins and needles/numbness) in the arms or hands.

Usually, symptoms begin to improve after a few days and in around 60% of cases, symptoms completely disappear after four weeks. Sometimes it takes a few months for symptoms to completely go away and some people will still have some stiffness and pain some time after the injury occurred.

What causes it?

Whiplash happens when a sudden jerk or jolt to your body or head makes your head move away from the body. This can strain the ligaments, tendons, nerves and muscles in your neck and cause pain. Whiplash is common after motor vehicle accidents, when a collision jolts the head. However, the condition can also result from a blow to the head.

What should you do?

Apply an ice pack soon after the injury occurs to help reduce swelling. Do not apply ice directly onto your skin. Use a towel to wrap the ice to provide a protective barrier. Apply the ice for around 15-20 minutes at a time and repeat 2 hourly.

Taking a painkiller such as paracetamol or an anti-inflammatory painkiller such as ibuprofen, will reduce pain and swelling. Always follow the instructions and ask your GP or pharmacist for advice if you have any other conditions or if you are taking any other medication.

In the first few days to a week you may need to rest your neck, but as the pain eases, try to exercise your neck as much as possible. You should avoid absolute rest, and do not wait for the pain to disappear before you start moving again. Gradually try to increase your neck movements and continue with normal activities and work where you can, this will assist your recovery.

You will also find it helpful to support your head with a good pillow when you sleep, and to have good posture - walk with your back and neck straight and sit upright. Your physiotherapist can provide advice on exercises and other strategies which will aid your recovery.

You should avoid wearing a neck brace and research suggests that long term use of a neck brace is not helpful. In fact by immobilizing your neck in this way you then avoid exercise and movement and the muscles around your neck may become weakened.

Treatment may vary and you should seek professional advice:

- If the pain becomes worse.
- If your function remains limited despite attempts to remain active.
- If significant pain persists beyond 4-6 weeks.
- If any numbness, weakness, or pins and needles develop in an arm or hand.

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