



Northern Health  
and Social Care Trust

*Physiotherapy Service*



# Whiplash injury



SCAN ME

## What is a whiplash injury?

A whiplash neck sprain is common after a road traffic accident when hit from behind or from the side by another vehicle, after a sporting injury or less commonly following a trip or fall. It occurs when your head is suddenly jolted backwards and forwards in a whip-like motion, or suddenly and forcibly rotated. This



can cause some neck muscles and ligaments to over stretch and cause a sprain. Severity of symptoms can vary from person to person and depend on the mechanism and force which leads to the injury. With time symptoms will usually settle without any specific treatment, particularly if you try to keep your neck active and moving. Painkillers can also help ease pain and make movement and exercise easier.

## What are the symptoms of whiplash?

- Pain and stiffness when turning or bending your neck.
- You may feel pain or stiffness in your upper back, on top of your shoulders or down your arms.
- Symptoms often increase in the hours and days after an accident or injury.
- Headache is a common symptom.
- Some people feel tired and irritable for a few days and find it difficult to concentrate.

## **When should you seek advice from a medical professional following a whiplash injury?**



- If you have been involved in a new and significant trauma, for example a fall from a height; a direct blow to the head or neck area; or involved a road traffic accident, particularly if you are over the age of 65, or have a diagnosis of osteoporosis.
- If there is a significant reduction in your neck range of movement.
- If there is numbness, pins and needles or weakness in one or both arms or legs after the incident or is worsening over time.
- If there is sudden "electric shock" feelings in your neck and back which may also go into your arms and legs
- If there are problems with your balance or walking since your neck pain started.
- Dizziness, blurred vision, pain in the jaw or pain on swallowing, and unusual sensations of the facial skin may occur for a short period. These should resolve quickly over a few days but if they persist you should speak to a Doctor or Physiotherapist.

### **Diagnosing whiplash**

Your Doctor or Physiotherapist will usually be able to diagnose whiplash from the description of your accident, the typical symptoms, and by performing a physical examination on you. Further tests and investigations will be recommended if there is suspicion of more serious injury to the bones of your spine or your spinal nerves.

## How do I manage a whiplash injury?

For the first few days after your injury you may have to take it easy. However, the most recent research would indicate that it is most beneficial to keep yourself active and moving as soon as you can to help speed up recovery.

To help manage your symptoms you can:

- Seek advice from your GP or Pharmacist regarding appropriate pain medications.



- Use ice or heat packs on your neck. Try to avoid using heat for the first 48 hours after your injury.
- Be mindful of your posture. Try to avoid holding a rigid and overly protective posture. It is advisable to regularly move and change position.



- Remain active with your daily activities and gradually try to increase your range of neck movements. Gently move your neck in each direction and do this several times a day. Some examples of basic exercises are shown later.
- If symptoms fail to improve over a number of weeks, then a referral for further physiotherapy interventions may be required.



## What is the outlook following a whiplash injury?

Depending upon on the severity of the initial injury, the outlook is generally very good in most cases. Symptoms often begin to improve after a few days, but can fluctuate in severity from time to time which is normal. Most people make a full recovery within a few months. However, in a small number of people, some more long-term symptoms can persist. If symptoms fail to settle over time following treatment and appropriate investigations, then you may be referred to other services such as a multidisciplinary pain management programme or pain clinic. Some individuals may require referral to psychology if they experience longer term post-traumatic stress disorder which negatively impacts their symptoms and recovery.

## Exercises

Range of movement exercises:



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Chin retraction

Hold 10 secs x 5 times



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Lateral flexion

Hold 10 secs x 5 times



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Neck rotation

Hold 10 secs x 5 times



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Neck flexion

Hold 10 secs x 5 times



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Shoulder rolls

10 times each direction

## Strengthening exercises:



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Isometric flexion



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Isometric extension



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Isometric side flexion

Resist each neck movement with your hand as shown. Hold for 30-45 secs x 5 times.



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### Chin tuck head lift.

Progressively increase the length of time you can hold this position & repeat x 5 times

## Useful resources:

[Whiplash - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](http://www.nhs.uk)

[Neck pain - whiplash injury | Health topics A to Z | CKS | NICE](#)

[Whiplash | The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy \(csp.org.uk\)](http://csp.org.uk)



[Physiotherapy Service \(MSK Outpatient Service\) | Northern Health and Social Care Trust \(hscni.net\)](#)

*The information in this booklet is for guidance only and is in no way intended to replace professional clinical advice from a registered Physiotherapist. Updated March 2023*