

Neck pain

Neck pain is a common complaint treated by physiotherapists. Studies show that neck pain affects up to 50% of the population annually, however only 15% of these people experience chronic neck pain (pain lasting more than 3 months).

Risk factors include long periods of sitting or computer work (especially with poor posture), stress and previous neck/shoulder injury.

Your physiotherapist will assess your neck injury and determine which diagnosis your symptoms fit into:

- Non-specific neck pain (NSNP): 90%
- Nerve root compromise: 5-10%
- Serious pathology: <1%

NSNP is the most common type of neck pain experienced. This can occur with or without a specific injury. It can be accompanied by pain down the arm, known as referred pain. This diagnosis does not require any scans and usually resolves within a few weeks if treated appropriately.

The most important treatment tool for neck pain is to keep moving. In fact, inactivity and bed rest will make your pain worse and potentially cause the neck pain to become chronic. Movement will eliminate any stiffness of the joints in your neck and will ensure the muscles don't tighten up. Heat is also a good adjunct to treatment as it relaxes the muscles and makes it easier to keep moving.

It is important to remember that experiencing pain does not equal further damage. It is similar to poking a bruise, it causes discomfort but doesn't make the problem worse.

Nerve root compromise is far less common than NSNP. It is characterised by pins and needles into the arms and changes in strength, sensation and reflexes. Physiotherapy can often be very helpful for this type of neck pain, however if it is unsuccessful, further investigations may be necessary.

Serious pathologies are extremely rare when presenting with neck pain. If your physiotherapist suspects this may be your problem, you will be referred to your doctor for further investigation.

Physiotherapy treatment for NSNP and nerve root compromise often involves soft tissue releases, joint mobilisations, stretching and strengthening exercises. Your physiotherapist will also guide you through a home exercise program to ensure a speedy recovery which will allow you to get back to your normal daily activities and sports as soon as possible.