



# Shoulder & neck pain



## SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

- The pain can be mild to severe. It can be felt in one spot, in a large area, or travel to another area. Movement can cause the pain or make it worse.
- Stiffness and/or swelling may occur.

## CAUSES

- Overuse and wear and tear on neck and shoulder muscles and joints
- Strains. Broken or dislocated shoulder.
- Poor posture. Awkward sleeping positions. Sleeping on a soft mattress.
- Pinched nerve. Pain from a pinched nerve usually runs down one side of the arm.
- Whiplash injury
- Tendinitis. This is swelling of a tendon (tissue that connects a muscle to bone). Left untreated, tendinitis can turn into “frozen shoulder.” “Wry” neck is a similar problem.
- Torn rotator cuff. This is a tear in a tendon that holds the shoulder in place. Symptoms are pain at the top and outer sides of the shoulders, especially when you raise or extend your arm. You may also feel or hear a click when the shoulder is moved.
- Bursitis. This is swelling of the sac (bursa) that surrounds the shoulder joint. Bursitis (impingement) can be caused by injury, infection, overuse, arthritis, or gout.
- Osteoarthritis
- Infections that cause swollen lymph nodes in the neck

## TREATMENT

Treatment for shoulder pain and/or neck pain depends on the cause. Emergency medical care is needed for:

- Serious injury
- Broken bone
- Heart attack
- Meningitis. This is an infection of the membranes that surround the brain.

Self-care can treat less serious causes of shoulder pain and/or neck pain.



## TRIAGE QUESTIONS



With shoulder or neck pain, do you have any of these problems?

- A serious head or neck injury
- Any heart attack warning signs
- Any symptoms of meningitis

**NO**  
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**YES** ► **GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE**



After an injury to the neck or shoulder, do you have any of these problems?

- The shoulder popped out of place and back into place.
- A burning, shooting pain or weakness is felt in the shoulders.
- The shoulder looks misshaped.
- The pain is very severe.
- Your arm is numb and can't be moved at all.

**NO**  
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**YES** ► **GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE**



Do you have any of these problems?

- Severe or persistent pain, swelling, or spasms in a shoulder
- Painful and stiff shoulder that is very hard to move at all
- Pain, tenderness, and limited motion in the shoulder

**NO**  
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**YES** ► **SEE DOCTOR**

**CONTINUE IN NEXT COLUMN**



Do you have any of these problems?

- Throbbing shoulder pain or numbness that goes down the shoulder into the arm
- A possible whiplash injury after being hit from behind in a vehicle crash.
- Fever and redness or swelling around the shoulder

**NO**  
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**YES** ► **SEE DOCTOR**



Do you have both of these signs of a gallbladder attack?

- Pain in the right shoulder
- Pain in the right upper abdomen

**NO**  
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**YES** ► **SEE DOCTOR**



Is your neck pain or shoulder pain severe enough to interfere with sleep? Or, does the pain not get better after using self-care for 7 days?

**NO**  
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**YES** ► **SEE DOCTOR**



**USE SELF-CARE**



## SELF-CARE / PREVENTION

- Take an over-the-counter medicine for pain and/or swelling.
- To help relieve tension and improve circulation, regularly take walks. Gradually increase walking times.
- Avoid repeated activities that twist or put strain on the neck and shoulders. When you do repeated tasks, use proper posture, equipment, and techniques.
- Wear seat belts in vehicles. Use protective gear when you participate in sports.
- If you have a low fitness level, strengthen your muscles gradually.
- Don't sleep on your stomach. Use a firm pillow, a neck pillow, or a rolled towel under your neck.
- Practice good posture. Stand straight. Don't let your shoulders slump, your head droop, or your lower back slouch.
- Don't prop a phone between your ear and shoulder.
- When you carry things, such as a shoulder bag, switch from one shoulder to the other.
- Stretch and warm up before activities that require joint movement, such as sports.
- Do stretching and strengthening exercises to keep your shoulder, neck, and arm muscles strong and flexible. See exercises below.
  - **Shoulder Stretch:** Reach your right arm across your chest. With your left hand, grasp your arm just above the elbow. Gently pull your arm farther across your body until you feel a stretch in the back of your shoulder. Hold for 30 seconds. Rest and repeat with other arm.
  - **Neck and Shoulder Stretch:** Tilt your head forward and let it hang. Relax your neck and shoulders. Slowly, roll your head to one side then back to the front and then slowly roll it to the other side. (Do not roll your neck backward.) Repeat 10 times.
- **Bursitis, Tendinitis, or an Injury That Does Not Appear Serious**
  - Use R.I.C.E.
    - Rest the injured area for 24 to 48 hours.
    - Ice the area as soon as possible. Keep doing this for 10 minutes every 2 hours for the first 48 hours. Use an ice pack, ice in a heavy plastic bag with a little water, a bag of frozen vegetables, etc. Put a thin towel between the ice pack and the skin.
    - Compress the area. Wrap with an elastic bandage. Do not cut off circulation. Remove the bandage every 3 to 4 hours, for 15 to 20 minutes each time.
    - Elevate the area above heart level, if possible. Place it on a pillow or folded blanket.
  - Try applying balms. These provide a cooling or warming sensation, but only mask the pain. They do not promote healing.
- **Treat Neck Pain from a Whiplash Injury or Pinched Nerve**

See a doctor anytime your motor vehicle is hit from the rear because the crash can cause a whiplash injury. After first checking with your doctor, do these things to ease neck discomfort:

  - Wear a neck brace as instructed.
  - Rest for a day or two after the injury. Too much bed rest may slow healing.
  - Use cold and hot packs. Do not use heat if there is swelling.
  - Improve your posture. Use a chair with a straight back. Make sure your buttocks go all the way to the chair's back. When you stand, pull in your chin and stomach.
  - Sleep with a cervical (neck) pillow or a rolled hand towel under your neck.
  - Avoid activities that may aggravate your injury.
  - Don't spend too long in one position. Take short breaks and do gentle neck stretches.