

Dear Patient

Neck Pain Whiplash

WHIPLASH

Whiplash injury occurs when a force is applied to the neck involving a sudden forwards and backwards whipping movement such as during vehicular collision. Whiplash may also result from a blow to the head or from the head hitting the ground. Damage occurs to one or more of the structures in the neck resulting in pain and inflammation and is usually associated with restricted movement as the muscles around the neck spasm to protect the region from further injury. Pain will vary depending on the type of damage incurred, and is usually worse with movement.

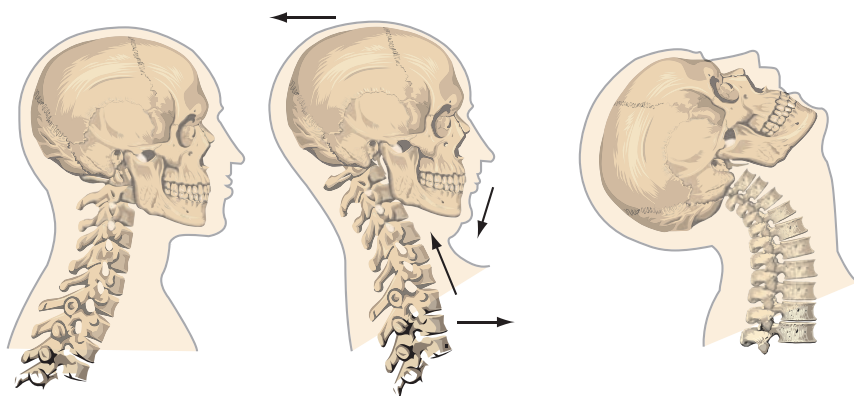
Pain and dysfunction associated with whiplash injuries may last from one week to months or even years and often the exact source of pain is difficult to determine. Damage does not appear to be related to the speed of collision but rather the person's response just before and at the time of injury.

ANATOMY

The main function of the neck is to provide support and mobility to the head.

The neck is made up of seven vertebrae with a disc between all except the top two. Discs are mainly comprised of fibrous material that act as shock absorbers, evenly distributing the weight of the head through the neck. The muscles of the neck are constantly working to help hold up the head, whilst the bones house and protect the spinal cord. The neck is also very mobile making it highly susceptible to injury.

Damage may occur to any of the structures in the neck including the joints, discs, muscles, nerves, ligaments and blood vessels.



Above: The Whiplash Motion occurs in a split second, potentially causing damage to all structures in the cervical spine.

TREATMENT AND PROGNOSIS

In the initial phase following a whiplash injury, treatment is directed at reducing pain through rest, ice or heat, physiotherapy (including mobilisation, electrotherapy & massage) and anti-inflammatory medication which may be prescribed by your doctor. The initial phase usually lasts 2-4 weeks and during this time, pain is highly variable.

Following the initial phase, the neck becomes less painful and stiffness becomes the main symptom. Treatment to improve movement may include gentle stretching, strengthening, massage and mobilisation of tight joint structures.

In the final phase, persistent joint stiffness may be accompanied by postural changes as a result of compensation and altered function.

Education and active exercises are most effective in this phase.

Most whiplash injuries recover well although, in severe cases, improvement may be evident for up to two years following the accident. The degree of recovery may be influenced by maximising rest in the early stages and, once the initial inflammation has subsided by about the 4 - 6 week mark, by performing exercise and other activities which improve strength and movement.



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