

A Pain in the Neck?

Neck pain is extremely common and can affect anybody, at any age and at any time. The majority of sufferers will describe no injury and, those who are still of working age, will often have a sedentary occupation, such as working with computers.

The term neck pain is not, in itself, a diagnosis. It describes pain that is arising from the structures around the neck including joints, muscles, ligaments, discs, nerves and other soft tissues. However, the symptoms that can be felt as a result of neck pain can range from severe pain, muscle spasm, dull aching, pins and needles, numbness, headaches and restricted neck movement. The site of the pain can be felt locally around the neck or radiate to the shoulders, shoulder blades, chest, arms and hands. However, a neck problem does not necessarily mean pain in the neck as the symptoms are often felt elsewhere. This is called referred pain. Pain is also, often, felt predominantly on one side or the other depending on whether the structures on the left or the right of the neck are involved.

For some there will be an obvious trauma that triggers the pain, such as a whiplash injury. The strain results in some of the neck structures becoming inflamed, tight and painful. For others, where there is no trauma, the structures become painful as a result of a repetitive activity or loading, more commonly, due to poor sitting posture at work.

But where you get your symptoms will be dependent on where the problem lies and which structures are involved. The pain from neck joints and muscles is likely to be felt locally in the neck but can radiate towards the shoulder. Nerve involvement can result in pain and pins & needles radiating from the neck and down the arm to the fingers. A problem with the upper part of the neck can lead to headaches.

When assessing someone with neck pain it is important to ascertain which structures are involved and the factors that are influencing the pain, such as work posture and lifestyle. Treatment is aimed at restoring normal movement of all the

structures involved, promoting healing and tissue repair and, very importantly, teaching the individual about self management and exercises that will assist with their recovery.