

Whiplash

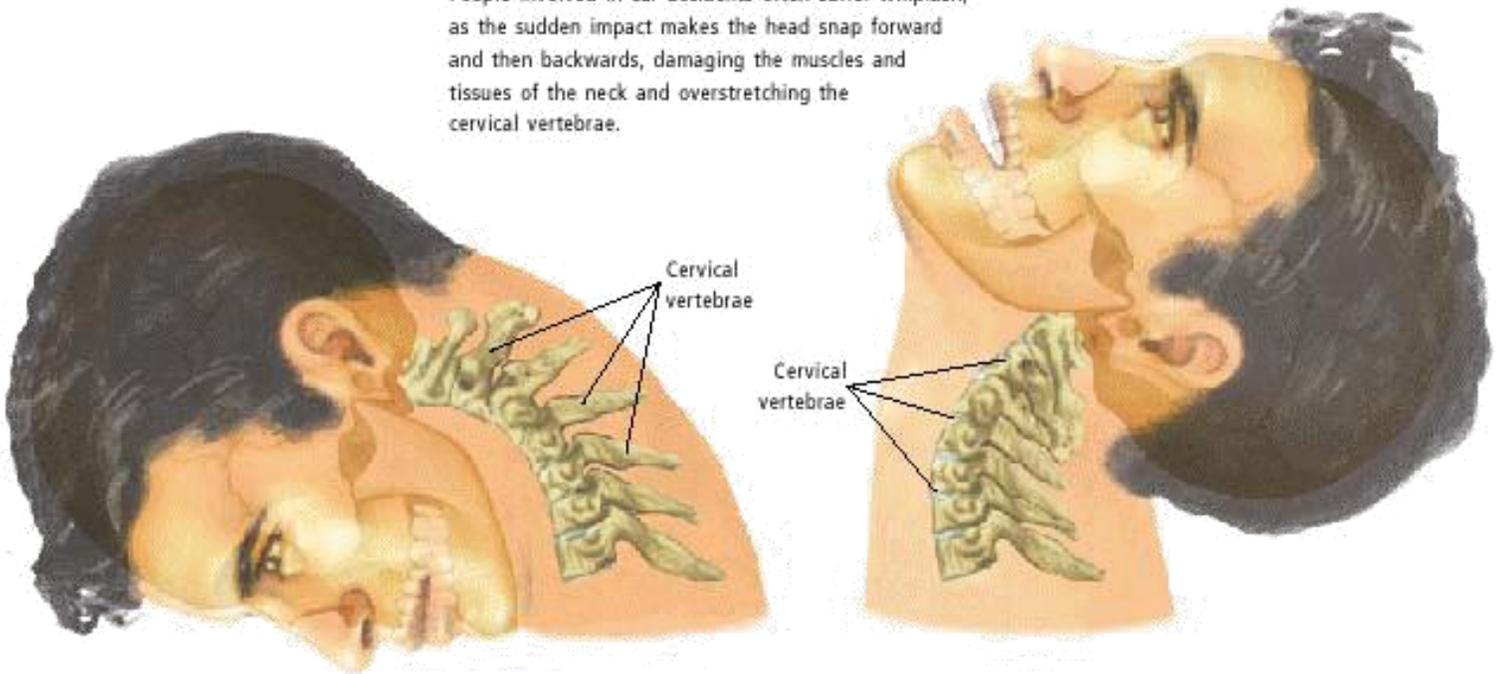
What is Whiplash?

Whiplash occurs when your head is suddenly jolted backwards and forwards in a whip-like movement. This can cause some neck muscles and ligaments to stretch more than normal (a sprain).

(Damage to the spine or spinal cord sometimes occurs from a severe whiplash injury. This is uncommon and is not dealt with in this article. Only the common whiplash sprain to neck structures is discussed in this article.)

Whiplash

People involved in car accidents often suffer whiplash, as the sudden impact makes the head snap forward and then backwards, damaging the muscles and tissues of the neck and overstretching the cervical vertebrae.



What Causes Whiplash?

The common cause is when you are in a car which is hit from behind by another car. Being in a car hit from the side or front can also cause whiplash sprains. About 2 in 3 people involved in car crashes develop neck pain (with or without other injuries). Some people are surprised at having symptoms when the car crash was minor. Even slow car bumps may cause enough whipping of the neck to cause symptoms. Less commonly, whiplash neck sprains can occur with everyday activities such as jolting the neck when you trip or fall.

What are the symptoms?

- **Main Symptoms-** Pain and stiffness in the neck. It may take several hours after the injury for symptoms to appear. The pain and stiffness often become worse on the day after an injury. In about half of cases, the pain first develops the day after the injury. This may be because the inflammation or bruising around the affected structures can take a while to develop.
- Turning or bending the neck may be difficult.
- You may also feel pain or stiffness in the shoulders or down the arms.
- Dizziness, headache, blurred vision, or pain on swallowing may occur for a short while, but soon go. Tell a doctor if any of these persist.
- Some people become irritable for a few days and find it difficult to concentrate.

Other possible symptoms -You may also get pain or stiffness in the upper and lower back and very occasionally symptoms referring into the legs.

What will physiotherapy consist of?

Physiotherapy will consist of the treatments below to reduce the inflammation and pain coupled with an exercise / postural programme to retrain the neck muscles.

Massage encompasses a variety of techniques and is given with sufficient pressure through the superficial tissue to reach the deep lying structures. It is used to increase blood flow, decrease swelling, reduce muscle spasm and promote normal tissue repair.

Mobilisation is a manual technique where the joint and soft tissues are gently moved by the physiotherapist to restore normal range, lubricate joint surfaces, and relieve pain.

Ultrasonic Therapy transmits sound waves through the tissues stimulating the body's chemical reactions and therefore healing process, just as shaking a test tube in the laboratory speeds up a chemical reaction.

It reduces tissue spasm, accelerates the healing process and results in pain relief.

Interferential Therapy introduces a small electrical current into the tissues and can be used at varying frequencies for differing treatment effects. E.g. pain relief, muscle or nerve stimulation, promoting blood flow and reducing swelling/inflammation.

Exercise Programmes encompassing a wide range of techniques to stretch and strengthen muscles, lengthen tissues, improve postural alignment, develop co-ordination and balance.

Other treatments that could be used

Short Wave Diathermy emits electromagnetic waves deep into the tissues. This results in increased blood flow to the area to promote healing, gives pain relief and can produce a heating effect to soften the tissues in preparation for mobilisation/manipulation.

Taping/Strapping may be used if thought necessary to restrict abnormal movement and prevent further damage.

Deep friction is an aggressive massage technique. It is applied across the tissue fibres. Pressure is given as deeply as possible. This technique is initially painful but can cause a numbing effect. It can be used to break down scar tissue, restore normal movement and prepare the injured structure for mobilisation or manipulation.

Laser Therapy emits beams of light into the tissues of the body, stimulating chemical reactions and having a similar effect to ultrasound though using light energy instead of sound energy.

Manipulation is a high speed, short movement thrust given at the end of available range. It is used to break down adhesions, remove a blockage within a joint and restore full painless movement. A click or noise may be experienced during this treatment.

Acupuncture is an oriental technique of introducing needles into the skin to increase or decrease energy flow to promote pain relief and healing.

What should the patient do to help their condition?

Active Rest – keep active but avoid activities that aggravate your condition.

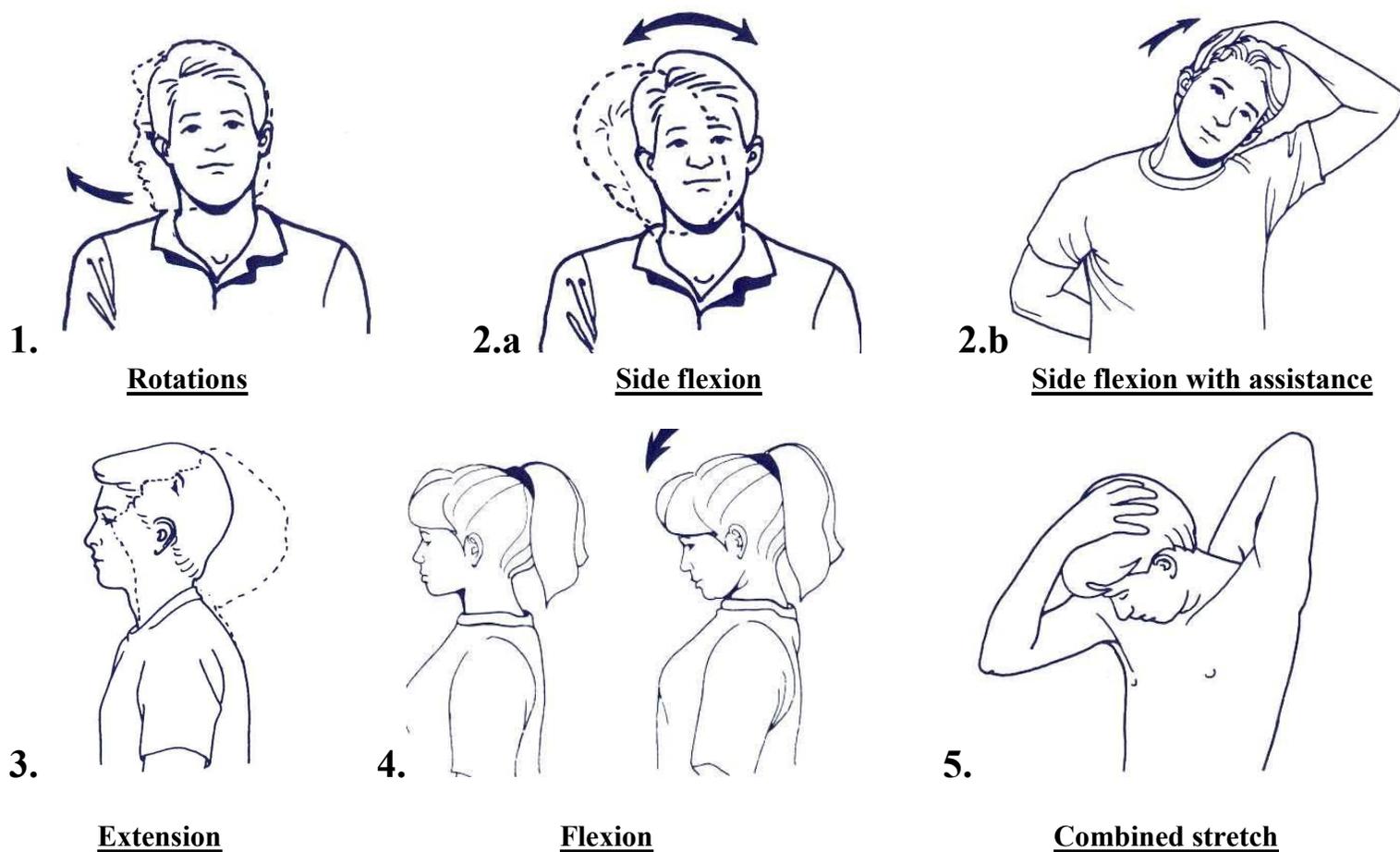
Apply an ice pack - for a maximum of 20 minutes. A bag of frozen peas wrapped in a damp cloth works well because it moulds to the shape of the neck. Ensure that you do not apply ice directly to the skin as this can cause an ice burn.

A firm supporting pillow seems to help some people when sleeping.

Take ibuprofen/ analgesia - according to the directions on the packet, up to the maximum daily dose. It is not suitable for people who have a history of stomach ulcers, or for some people with asthma. If in doubt, ask your pharmacist for advice.

Ergonomics - ensure that your workstation is encouraging you to attain good posture and keep the neck in a neutral position.

Exercise/Postural programme – comply with the prescribed exercise/postural programme. Your physio will instruct you as to which of the above exercises to begin with, when to add the others, as well as how to progress the exercises.

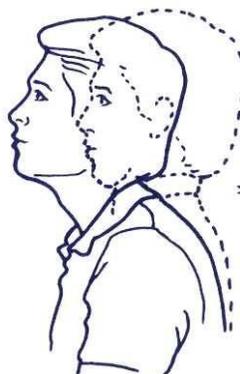


Exercises 1 -5 take the head as far as possible in the desired direction without pain, hold this position for 20-30 secs during this period the pain should ease and you should keep taking the head gradually further. Repeat on opposite side if appropriate and perform two to three times daily.



Shoulder Circles

Slowly rotate the shoulders in a clockwise direction ten times making as big a circle as possible and then repeat anti-clockwise. Do this exercise two to three times per day.



Retractions

Slowly pull the head backward as if pulling away from a bad smell, hold this position for approximately 5 seconds and repeat ten times. Do this exercise at least three times per day.

What if physiotherapy does not help or resolve my condition? It is very rare that physiotherapy does not give great benefit, in the more severe whiplash cases it may just be a case of adhering to the exercise / postural advice and waiting for time to fully resolve the symptoms.