

# A simple guide to whiplash for consumers



## What is whiplash?

'Whiplash' is a term used to describe neck pain following an injury to the soft tissues of your neck (such as ligaments, tendons and muscles). It is usually caused by a sudden motion or force that causes the neck to move back and forth beyond its normal range of motion.

The most common cause of whiplash is a car accident. Whiplash can also be caused by sporting accidents or accidental falls.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of whiplash vary from person to person. They may include:

- headaches
- neck pain and stiffness
- pain in the neck, shoulders and arms
- difficulty turning the head
- drowsiness, dizziness, pins and needles
- weakness or numbness in the arms.

The symptoms of whiplash can occur immediately, or within minutes to hours after an accident. In some cases symptoms may not be noticeable until a few days later.

## Will I get better?

Whiplash has a good recovery rate. Most people find that their neck pain or headache clears within a few days to a few weeks. Some people might have symptoms for a few months.

Usually the pain and discomfort associated with whiplash does not greatly interfere with day-to-day activities. Although it is unpleasant, pain is a normal stage of the recovery process.

## Summary

Most people with whiplash recover quite quickly. You can increase your chances of making a good recovery by changing how you view your neck pain.

If it is a few days since your whiplash injury, it is safe to start returning to your normal activities. Light activity will not further damage the disc, ligament, joint or other structures. We know from research that light activity speeds up recovery.

## What should I do?

If you notice symptoms of whiplash, have a check up with your doctor in the first instance.

Tell your doctor if there are any other health professionals involved in your care (such as physiotherapists, chiropractors, osteopaths and medical specialists). By working together, the health professionals managing your care are more likely to achieve good results.

If your pain is mild, your doctor will advise you continue your usual daily activities.

You may need to use a basic pain-relieving medication for a short time. If pain is more severe, a stronger pain-relieving medication may be necessary, but only as recommended by your doctor.

It is important to keep doing light exercise and staying active. You may need to modify the way you do some tasks for a short while.

You should also do some specific exercises to help restore movement and flexibility in your neck and shoulders, and help your muscles to support the neck. Recommended exercises (shown overleaf) are very gentle, and usually take about 10 minutes each day to complete. Ask your doctor about these exercises.

Aim to get back to your normal routine as soon as possible, but be sensible, and avoid overdoing things. You might need to change the way you do things for a short time. For instance, only lift what you can comfortably manage, without straining the neck. Spread out housework or other tasks across the day, or divide up heavy loads.

Remember that it is normal to experience discomfort during the recovery process. It is also normal to have good days and bad days.

Try to avoid holding your neck still or keeping it in one position. Although this might seem like the right thing to do, holding the neck in one position can increase the muscle tension in the neck and actually increase the pain you might feel. The best thing to do is mobilise your neck with gentle activity, and set reasonable goals for returning to work and other activities. People who rest, take time off work, and avoid tasks are less likely to recover.

## What is the best treatment?

### Treatments that are recommended



- Gently exercising the neck and shoulder area, and maintaining light activity to help maintain strength and flexibility in the muscles.
- Remember to 'act as usual'. Aim to return to your normal activities as soon as you can. Talk to your doctor if you need education and reassurance about what you can and can't do.

### Treatments that might help

- Heat, ice and massage
- Simple pain killers and anti-inflammatories
- Passive joint mobilisation / manipulation (provided by a qualified chiropractor or physiotherapist)
- Multimodal therapy (provided by a qualified physiotherapist or osteopath)

### Treatments that are NOT recommended



- Wearing a medical collar and/or prescribed rest
- Surgery (except where there has been a fracture or dislocation of the neck)
- Cervical pillows
- Steroid injections

#### Important

The information on this fact sheet should be discussed with the people assisting your recovery. This information should not be used as a substitute for the personal advice of a health professional.

If you experience intense neck pain in the recovery phase, this does not mean you have re-injured your neck. This is normally a strong muscle spasm, and you should treat it with stretching and light activity. Remember to seek advice from your health professional if you have ongoing strong pain.

For further information and a whiplash consumer guide, visit [www.mac.sa.gov.au](http://www.mac.sa.gov.au).

# Recommended exercises

An exercise program for the neck and back can greatly assist your recovery. The exercises below will help you to regain normal neck movement and strengthen your muscles.

## Make sure you do all the exercises in a slow and controlled manner.

Stop and contact your doctor or health professional if you notice:

- dizziness, light headedness, blurred vision, fainting or disorientation
- sudden pain shooting down your arm, or numbness or weakness in your arm or hand
- unusually severe neck pain
- that the exercises cause a persistent headache.

For each exercise:

- move smoothly and slowly, without sudden jerks. The key is precision and control.
- keep your mouth and jaw relaxed. Keep lips together, teeth slightly apart and let your tongue rest on the roof of your mouth.
- gently hold your shoulders back and down so that they are relaxed while doing all exercises.
- expect some discomfort, but remember exercises should not cause severe pain.

With movement exercises, try to move the same distance on each side. If one side is stiffer, move gently into the stiffness. Move to that direction a little more often.

## How long should I exercise for?

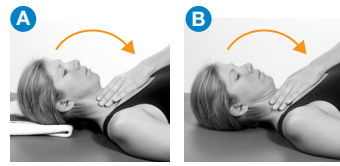
It is important to remember that everyone is different and that you need to feel comfortable with the amount of exercise you are doing. Exercises should not cause an increase in your pain when you are completing them.

## The exercises recommended should not take longer than 10 minutes to perform.

It is a good idea to do them first thing in the morning and last thing at night. If you want to do them more often, a couple of times during the day would also be suitable.

This product may be downloaded from [www.mac.sa.gov.au](http://www.mac.sa.gov.au)

## Neck exercises lying down



### 1. Head nod/holding exercise

This is an important exercise to retrain the deep neck muscles of your neck for pain relief.

Lie on your back with knees bent without a pillow under your head and neck.

- If this is not comfortable, place a small folded towel under your head for support.
- With your eyes, look at the spot on the wall just above your knees. Follow with a slow and gentle nod of the head as if you were indicating 'yes'.

While doing the exercise, place your hand gently on the front of the neck to feel the superficial muscles. Make sure they stay soft and relaxed when doing the head nod movement, stop at the point you sense that the muscles are beginning to harden.

Hold the position for 10 seconds and then relax. Look up to a point on the ceiling to resume the starting position. Repeat the exercise 10 times.

### 2. Head rotation

Gently turn your head from one side to the other. Look where you are going. Progressively aim to turn your head far enough so your chin is in line with your shoulder and you can see the wall in line with your shoulder. Repeat 10 times to each side.

### 3. Shoulder blade exercise



This exercise will relax and ease any tension in the muscles on top of your shoulders. It will give you pain relief.

Lie on your left side with your arm resting up on two pillows.

Roll your right shoulder blade back and across your ribs towards the centre of your back. Hold the position for 10 seconds. Repeat 5 times. Repeat lying on the right side for the left shoulder blade.

## Exercises while sitting



### 4. Correct postural position

Correct your posture regularly by gently straightening up your lower back and pelvis (sit tall) with your legs uncrossed and feet flat on the floor. Now gently draw your shoulder blades back and down (women towards their bra clip). Gently tuck your chin in. Hold the position with ease for at least 10 seconds. This position will prevent and ease muscle pain and tension in your neck and shoulder muscles. Repeat the correction regularly, every half hour during the day. You can do this exercise at work, in the car, train or bus and sitting at home.

### 5. Neck retraction

Sit in the correct postural position. Gently draw your head back, sliding your chin back horizontally and keeping your nose pointing straight ahead. You should feel the retraction movement at the base of your neck and your neck should stay long. Repeat this 10 times every hour when sitting.

## Neck movement exercises

Sit in the correct postural position. Repeat all exercises below 10 times to each side.

### 6. Rotation

Gently turn your head from one side to the other. Look where you are going, progressively aim to see the wall in line with your shoulder. This exercise is similar to the one you did lying down. This time you do it sitting.



### 7. Side bending

Gently tilt your head towards your shoulder and feel the gentle stretch in the muscles on the side of your neck. Perform the movement to both sides.



### 8. Bending and extension

Gently bend your head towards your chest. Lead the movement with your chin. Moving the chin first, bring your head back to the upright position and gently roll it back to look up towards the ceiling. Leading with your chin, return your head to the upright position.

## Neck strengthening exercises (isometric, no-movement exercise)

Neck strengthening exercises should only be started later in your recovery. If unsure when to begin this, ask your health professional.

Sit in the correct postural position. Make sure your chin is relaxed and slightly down. Place your right hand on your right cheek. Gently try to



turn your head into your fingers to look over your right shoulder but allow no movement. Hold the contraction for five seconds. Use a 10% maximum effort, no more! Repeat with the left hand on the left cheek. Do 5 repetitions of the holding exercise to each side.

## Neck strengthening exercises whilst on hands and knees (4-point kneeling)

**Safe 4-point kneeling position:** Begin by ensuring your knees are directly under your hips, and your hands under your shoulders. Your low back should be in a neutral position, that is, with a natural arch. Gently draw your belly button to your spine (10% effort). Push gently through your shoulder blades, so that your upper back is level. Draw your shoulders gently away from your ears, or toward your hips. Lift your head up so that it is level with your shoulders, but maintaining a gentle chin tucked or nod position.

Once you can hold the safe 4-point kneeling position then proceed with the neck movement exercises as described below:



### 9. Neck bending and extension in 4-point kneeling

Adopt the safe 4-point kneeling position. Slowly look up toward the ceiling as far as you can go. Hold for 5-10 seconds. Follow this by slowly bending your neck, leading the movement with a chin tuck or nodding action. Continue the neck bending movement as far as possible, aim for your chin to touch your chest. Throughout this movement you should hold the neutral lower back and shoulder blade posture described above.

Perform 5-10 repetitions.

### 10. Neck rotation in 4-point kneeling

Adopt the safe 4-point kneeling position. Slowly rotate (turn your neck to one side). It is important to maintain the gentle chin tuck or 'nod' position throughout the movement. Also, make sure your head stays level with your body, and does not drop down. If you do this exercise correctly, you should be looking over your shoulder at the end of the movement. It helps to do this exercise side on to a mirror so that you can check your head position. Repeat to the other side.

Perform 5-10 repetitions.