

A whiplash injury is normally caused by an accident or fall and causes pain and stiffness in the neck. Your whiplash injury may cause hot, burning, shooting or stabbing pains in your neck and sometimes into one or both of your arms. You may also get pins and needles. This can be due to nerve pain. Whiplash injuries are rarely due to any serious disease or damage.

**Whiplash injuries should settle within 3 months of following the advice provided here.**

You will not normally need an X-ray or an MRI scan.

## Should I be resting or moving?

- Keep moving, even if it is hard at first.
- Do whatever you normally would and stay at, or return to work. This is important and is the best way to get better.
- Change positions regularly wherever you are.
- Try to move your neck, slowly and gently for 10 to 20 seconds every hour when you are awake.
- Try to stay active, but remember not to carry out activities which aggravate any pains you have in your neck and/or arm(s).
- Try to find a position that reduces any pains you may have in your neck and/or arm(s).
- Wearing a collar will slow down your recovery. Collars should never be worn when driving.
- Exercise really help your whiplash injury and can relieve your pain.
- It is normal to feel some discomfort when you start any exercise, but try and stick with them for a couple of weeks.

## Should I take painkillers?

**Painkillers can help you keep moving. However, it is important that if you are already taking medication for something else or have other health problems you check with the pharmacist at your local chemist before taking painkillers for your whiplash injury.**

- You can use simple, over-the-counter painkillers (such as paracetamol) or anti-inflammatory medicines (such as ibuprofen) to help your pain. You can take both these medicines together.
  - Always follow the instructions on the packet.
  - You can only take two 500mg paracetamol every four to six hours, and no more than eight 500mg paracetamol in 24 hours. You should not take any more than this amount.
  - You can only take three 400mg ibuprofen a day. You should not take ibuprofen if you have stomach problems such as ulcers, have had a previous allergic reaction to ibuprofen or an injury in the last 48 hours. Always take ibuprofen with or just after food. Don't take ibuprofen if you are pregnant.
  - If you have asthma, ibuprofen may make it worse, but if you have taken it before with no problems then you can safely take it again. If you are not sure, speak to your pharmacist.
  - Take them regularly, not just when you are sore, for the next three to four days only.
- **If you feel you still need pain relief after four days then speak to your pharmacist for advice.**

## Should I use ice or a heat pad?

If you have had an injury or a flare-up of an old problem in the last two days, wrap crushed ice in a damp towel and hold it for five to ten minutes against the part of your neck that hurts. You can do this every two to three hours. Make sure you use a damp towel between the ice and the skin to avoid ice burn.

Alternatively, you could try sports sprays and gel packs, which do a similar job.

After two days, you may find that heat is more relaxing. You could use a heat pad or a hot water bottle with an insulated cover on it. Make sure this is not too hot and not directly touching your skin. You should do this for 10 to 15 minutes, three to four times a day.

## What about work?

You will recover faster and everybody will benefit if you can stay at or get back to work as early as possible. Don't worry if your neck still hurts, as you may only have to do light work at first. Try to stay active and remember to keep moving. Speak to your manager about any concerns you may have.

For free and confidential advice about work, call the **Healthy Working Lives Adviseline** on 0800 019 2211.

## What about sports?

You should take time before you take part in any sports after a whiplash injury. If you take part in sports too soon you could be flare things up again. You should only take part in sports when you can move freely. Be prepared however for slight discomfort at first. Remember to stretch and warm up fully before sports.

## Can my whiplash injury cause trouble anywhere else?

Your whiplash injury can sometimes cause altered feelings in one or both of your arms. This can be due to nerve pain, which often feels hot, burning, shooting, or stabbing. If you have any of these for over one week, you may be able to take other, more appropriate medication. You should speak to your doctor about this.

Your whiplash injury can also cause headaches or dizziness. This should improve, as your whiplash injury gets better. You should discuss this with your doctor if they have not improved within six weeks.

## Do I need to see my doctor?

**Not normally.** If you follow the right advice and take the right medication, your whiplash injury should improve over the next three months.

**If you experience any of the following, you need to speak to your doctor as soon as possible.**

- Blurred vision, ringing in your ears, dizziness that does not go away within six weeks.
- Numbness, pins and needles, or weakness in one or both arms that has not improved after one week.
- Problems with your balance or walking.
- Loss of consciousness or memory loss since your whiplash injury.
- Pain that becomes worse and worse.
- Your whiplash injury has not improved within three months.

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## Further information

- ➡ **Scottish Centre for Health Working Lives ([www.healthworkinglives.com](http://www.healthworkinglives.com))**
- ➡ **NHS 24 self help guide ([www.nhs24.com/selfhelpguide](http://www.nhs24.com/selfhelpguide))**
- ➡ **Arthritis Research UK ([www.arthritisresearchuk.org](http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org))**
- ➡ **Whiplash information from NHS inform ([www.nhsinform.co.uk](http://www.nhsinform.co.uk))**
- ➡ **Musculoskeletal Zone and smartphone app from NHS inform ([www.nhsinform.co.uk/msk](http://www.nhsinform.co.uk/msk))**

## Facts and figures

- Each year in Scotland approximately 25,000 people suffer a whiplash injury.
- The majority of people with a whiplash injury are pain free after three months.