

Physical Therapy Exercises & Stretches for Acute Neck Muscle Spasms

Acute neck pain is almost always due to a muscle spasm or “stuck” facet joint. These typically happen after being in one position for too long and then moving awkwardly, immediately resulting in the muscles spasming and “locking-up” so that it’s difficult to turn your head one or both directions or look up or down. They also tend to happen when picking something up (such as deadlifting) or doing a heavy upper body workout, likely secondary to 1) poor form or 2) muscle fatigue, as spasms tend to happen toward the end of a workout—just like hamstring strains tend to occur more often at the end of practice or a game.

Many patients are understandably afraid that they’ve herniated a disc and that’s what is causing their severe pain and the muscle spasm. However, research doesn’t support that assumption. Research has found that you only need to be worried about a disc herniation if you felt the pain AND had an immediate onset of severe, burning pain down only one arm or develop a severe, sudden onset of significant weakness. If this happened, definitely go see your PCM! But it’s also important to remember that about 70-90% of adults without any neck pain have 1-3 disc herniations. Remember that disc degeneration and herniation are a normal part of aging and that aging process begins much earlier in life than most people expect.

So if you’re suffering from acute neck pain and muscle spasm you should know that there is often an associated “referred” pain into one or both shoulder blade and/or arm regions.

What can I do to get some relief?

You get rid of muscle spasms just like athletes get rid of cramping muscles during a game or practice—by stretching out the muscles - immediately - through the pain!!! It seems counterintuitive that stretching into a very tight, painful muscle is what you should be doing, but that’s exactly right.

1. **You want to gently but firmly begin stretching into the pain.** Begin with the stretches on the following page. Slowly progress from the easier ones to the rotational ones.
2. **Stay active.** Stretching is very effective, but muscles that getting worked stretch out even better, so keep moving and stretch out again after. Often, the exercise will help the muscles return to normal quicker than if you only stretch or just rest.
3. **Do NOT lie down or sit down and not move!** This was common advice about 100 years ago... and somehow persists to this day! But now we know that makes the pain last longer!



Begin gently - but firmly - stretching your neck in all directions

I would hold each stretch for only 3-5 seconds and ONLY stretch while you breathe out, this helps you relax. So breathe in deeply and then as you exhale slowly, gently and firmly stretch your neck. Do 3-5 reps of each stretch in various positions as shown. Gently stretch into the pain as able!

