

Physical Therapy Exercises & Stretches for Chronic Neck Pain

Chronic neck pain is the 2nd most common chronic pain and causes of disability in America.

Chronic neck pain is very similar to chronic back pain in that there's no established cause and effect relationship between findings on imaging and symptoms.

Rather, chronic neck pain is more consistent with repetitive job tasks and prolonged positioning. We often call this type of pain a "postural pain syndrome" as many people who have chronic neck pain (especially if it's associated with headaches) work relatively undemanding jobs but spend long hours staring at a computer or driving.

There are some common denominators among people with chronic neck pain:

1. **You must strengthen your neck muscles!** Almost everyone with chronic neck pain has been found to have weaker neck muscle strength and worse endurance as compared to people without neck pain. Our neck and upper back muscles must hold our heads up all day long—and that requires a lot of strength and endurance. Strengthening the neck and midscapular (between your shoulder blades) muscles is critical to reducing neck pain, especially in people with chronic headaches.
2. **Changing positions is a must.** When we sit down to work at the computer, drive, or watch TV we often find ourselves with a stiff or painful neck after a while. Why? Because our tissues don't like being in one position for too long. We have receptors in our joints, ligaments, and muscles that begin firing the longer we're in one position. This explains the pain that's present after 20 minutes of sitting despite no other changes in positioning. So get in the habit of standing up, looking up/down, left/right, and just stretching and moving around throughout the day.
3. **Posture is somewhat important.** There's no great research on the importance of posture, but when it comes to bench press and pushups, people with neck pain tend to get some relief when they squeeze their shoulder blades together while performing those exercises because when you squeeze your shoulder blades together you reduce the tension in your neck from the upper trapezius and levator scapulae muscles. So throughout the day, work on maintaining a good neutral posture, especially if you're using your arms to work overhead or have a physically demanding job.



Strength Circuit for Neck Pain

SET YOUR SHOULDER BLADES!

Before doing any upper body or shoulder exercise, *set* your shoulder blades by squeezing them “in” and “down”

Think of pinching a pencil between your shoulder blades and not dropping it throughout the entire set of exercise.



Exercise #1 - Bilateral External Rotations

Goal: Do 3 sets of 15-25 reps (in a controlled speed)



#3 Deep Neck Flexor Muscle Strengthening

Goal: Do 3 sets of 5 reps of 5-10 second holds (start in the left position and gently lift the head 1-2 inches as shown in the right)



#2 Prone Locust with Neck Retraction

Goal: Hold the position x 30-60 seconds, focusing on keeping your shoulder blades squeezed together, your head up, and your chin “tucked” so that you feel a “double chin”



Recovery
stretch



Exercise #4 - Rows

Goal: Do 3 sets of 15-25 reps (in a controlled speed)



Recovery Stretches—do 5-10 min of stretching before & after exercise

Pick 3-5 stretches and do them every day after you get home or when your pain increases. Hold the stretch for 20-30 seconds and slowly push yourself further.

