

Whiplash

Whiplash is most common with motor vehicle accidents. The sudden collision causes your head to be pushed backward and then forward in a rapid motion causing stress to your neck (cervical spine). Common symptoms are pain and stiffness in the neck and/or shoulders and headache.

It is important not to panic and to follow the next 4 steps to minimize discomfort and give you the best recovery.

1. Pain Relief - Heat +/- Medication

It is common to have pain and/or stiffness in your neck and shoulders with a whiplash injury. While the neck discomfort is only minimal at the time of the accident, it often builds up over the next 48-72 hours. This is normal and expected. It is important to anticipate this increase in discomfort over the days following the accident and keep your pain to a minimum. Do this by using a heat bag for 20 minutes 4-5 times throughout the next 5 days. Your doctor may also prescribe anti-inflammatories or other pain medication to help reduce the pain, stiffness and/or headache.

2. Gentle Neck Exercises

You may be scared to move your neck after a whiplash because you are worried to make things worse, but studies show that gentle neck movements actually help to reduce pain and stiffness and get you back on track faster. Your physio will give you specific exercises tailored to you, but in the initial stages it is safe and encouraged to gently

- a. look up and down (look to ceiling then to floor)
- b. look side to side (look over each shoulder)
- c. tilt your head side to side (ear toward your shoulder)

Attempt 5 in each direction 4-5 times a day. In the first couple of days, your movements may only be small, that is okay. Just work within your comfortable range. You should never push through pain.

Note - It can be more comfortable to try these exercises after you have applied heat to your neck and shoulders.

3. Work and Home

Being involved in a car accident can be frightening and some people may want to stay in bed and rest. For a speedy recovery, we encourage you to try to continue with your usual daily activities like going to work

and cooking dinner. If your work is particularly physical, you may require a few days off - talk to your GP or physio about this. In most cases, staying at work will benefit your recovery. If possible, take your heat bag to work and look to modify your workstation to make your neck more comfortable.

4. Exercise

Don't be in a hurry to get back into heavy exercise like footy, rugby, netball where you are whipping your head from side to side and/or are likely to get tackled. When you can move your head in all directions pain free and you are not suffering from headache or stiffness, then you can return to these more active sports.

Lighter exercise like walking, Pilates, Yoga and very gentle gym work is usually okay however this depends on the severity of your whiplash. Never push through pain and if unsure, check with your GP or physio.

When to see the physio -

Every whiplash is different. Some are milder, and only take a few days to recover without any physio treatment. Other cases can take longer. It is important to seek help from your physio if your neck **discomfort/headache persists more than 3 days or if your collision was at high speed. Early treatment is one of the greatest indicators for a faster recovery.** Your physio will be able to help by reducing pain with massage, heat treatment, ultrasound, dry needling and acupuncture. Once your pain is better managed, treatment will reduce and you will be given exercises to continue with at home to keep your neck improving and your pain at bay.

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