

Tortocollis

This leaflet gives you information about tortocollis and what you can do to help manage the symptoms you are experiencing.

What is Tortocollis?

Tortocollis means 'twisted neck' and is often called 'wry neck'. It refers to the sudden onset of neck pain and stiffness, and often occurs without any particular cause. This leads to muscle spasm in the neck that is often painful and causes the head to twist to one side.

It can affect people with no previous history of neck pain

How is Torticollis Diagnosed?

Most people do not need investigations as the diagnosis is made on clinical grounds alone. Tortocollis is accurately diagnosed from the signs and symptoms you describe, alongside a physical examination.

What's wrong with me?

Tortocollis often occurs without particular cause and is a common cause of neck pain in younger people. Although the cause is often not known, people often report their symptoms followed;

- Sitting or sleeping in an unusual position without adequate neck support
- Poor posture when looking at a computer screen
- Carrying unbalanced loads (for example a heavy shopping bag)
- Exposure to the cold

How can this affect me?

Infrequently torticollis can lead to neck pain that lasts for several weeks. You should expect this could take 6 weeks to settle. Neck pain that persists after tortocollis symptoms first start is due to factors such as posture, inactivity and avoiding movement rather than damage to the neck. The most effective way you can prevent this from happening is by implementing self-management strategies when your symptoms first start.

What are the main symptoms of Tortocollis?

The symptoms of tortocollis usually develop quickly over a period of a few hours or overnight. Pain is usually felt on one side of the neck with spasm and tightness of the muscles in that area.

Occasionally pain may be felt in the middle of the neck, spread to the back of the head or to the shoulder. The affected muscles are often painful and tender to touch. Movement is usually restricted by muscle spasm, particularly on one side.

How long will it take to get better?

The prognosis for tortocollis is very good as most symptoms will resolve within a week from the time they started.

What I can do to help myself get better?

What can I do to help my symptoms?

Although tortocollis can temporarily affect your quality of life, it is not serious or dangerous. Your neck is still strong and you should remain as active as possible.

Most people can successfully manage their symptoms with simple treatments, called conservative treatment options.

While it is common that people with neck pain will look for someone to get rid of their pain, it is more effective to find a strategy that allows you to be in control and manage your symptoms.

Conservative treatment options

1. Managing pain

You can take over the counter painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. Your GP or Pharmacist can provide further guidance on the risks of these and how to use them effectively. Pain medication is usually most effective when combined with an exercise programme.

2. Pace yourself

Pacing is a strategy to increase activity without increasing your symptoms. Plan your daily activities in advance and perform them in manageable chunks through the day. While your symptoms are irritable avoid sustained static postures and heavy lifting of weights, particularly over head as this may increase your pain. However, it is really important that you return to your normal levels of function as soon as possible. People who fail to do this and avoid activity due to fear of pain, are more likely to develop longer term symptoms.

3. Exercise

Exercising with neck pain may seem daunting, but it is one of the most important elements of managing cervical. Improving your flexibility, strength and overall level of fitness is important in helping you manage your pain and reduce the risk of future episodes.

There is no evidence that one type of exercise is better than another, however, you should enjoy what you are doing. You may find using a warm heat pack on your neck before exercising, makes the neck feel more comfortable.

It is important to perform your neck exercises regularly through the day. This will mean that you see results quicker and will feel less stiff through the day.

You may find the exercises uncomfortable at first, this is normal. Use the pacing principles to judge how much exercise you should start with, and to increase your exercise over time. It is better to do a few exercises several times a day rather than all at once.

4. Lifestyle

Lifestyle can significantly impact upon the amount of pain and physical restrictions cervical spondylosis can cause.

Although it can be difficult to be cheerful or optimistic if you are in pain, it's important to stay positive as this can help you recover faster. Low mood, stress and poor sleep are all known to increase pain by making our nerves more sensitive.

Ensuring that you have a regular sleep pattern, taking steps to reduce stress, such as relaxation and mindfulness can help you to better manage your symptoms.

Being overweight is a risk factor for developing longer term pain. Even if you have neck pain, you can still lose weight in the same way everyone else can: by reducing the calories you consume and increasing exercise.

Create a calorie deficit by cutting empty calories from your diet. Reduce the amount of sugar, processed food, saturated fat, fizzy drinks and alcohol you consume. Replace these foods with lean meats, fruit, vegetables, whole grains, nuts and seeds.

Smoking causes the release of harmful chemicals into our bodies that slows healing and makes nerves more sensitive to pain. Smoking also increases the level of stress hormones, which also increases nerve sensitivity. Visit www.smokefreewestsussex.co.uk to find out more about stopping smoking.

5. Posture

Slouched and head forward postures can place extra strain on the neck and contribute to pain. Take steps to improve your posture by improving your seating position and avoid slouching. It is important that you make sure you have good posture when sitting and standing.

Take regular breaks from your desk, driving or any activity where your neck is held in the same position for a long period of time. Correcting your posture may feel awkward at first because your body has become so used to sitting and standing in a particular way. A firm supporting pillow seems to help some people when sleeping.

6. Physiotherapy

People with torticollis do not usually need to see a physiotherapist as symptoms normally last for a week and can be managed successfully by the individual. If pain persists for longer than 6 weeks then you may find seeing a physiotherapist helpful.

Physiotherapists are experts in helping people develop self-management strategies and developing exercise routines for individuals with pain and medical problems. Although hands on treatments may help to reduce pain in the short term, you need to engage with self-management strategies if you are going to gain long term benefits.

How can a clinician help?

What about scans?

If your symptoms are consistent with the typical presentation of torticollis then scans are not required. Only in individuals with neurological symptoms, such as weakness in the arms may

magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the neck be needed, to determine whether there is any nerve irritation.

Should I be concerned?

Tortocollis will improve on its own with time. In **very rare cases** a disc bulge could result in a cluster of symptoms that requires immediate attention. This is called cervical myelopathy, and is the result of compression of the spinal cord in your neck and can lead to symptoms that affect both arms and or legs, and affect the muscles and sensation to your bladder, bowel, genital area.

When this happens you may experience:

- Bilateral pain, pins and needles or numbness in both arms or legs
- Loss of feeling or pins and needles between your legs, around your genitals or back passage
- Changes to bladder and bowel function, such as loss of sensation, loss of control or an inability to empty your bladder
- Sexual problems such as loss of vaginal sensation and inability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- Weakness in the legs affecting walking

If you think you are experiencing any of these symptoms you should attend your nearest A&E department.

Summary: what are the key take home messages?

- Tortocollis is not serious, and can be effectively managed without surgery or injections
- Symptoms normally resolve within a week, however you may experience some neck pain after this period
- Good days and bad days are normal
- Remain as active and undertake exercise to improve your fitness
- Painkillers with exercise are more effective than on their own
- Use pacing strategies, rest and medication to increase your function
- Although activity maybe painful, you are not harming your neck