**Whiplash Management and Treatment**

Whiplash refers to the sudden head movement of a person forwards, then backwards or sideways. This quick whip-like movement can injure the neck resulting in pain.

A whiplash injury often occurs during a car crash, commonly when your car is hit from behind. At collision, your head keeps moving in one direction while your body comes to a sudden stop; then it swings back in the other direction to realign with your neck. This sudden jolting movement causes the muscles, tendons and ligaments in your neck to overstretch. A whiplash injury can also occur when your car is hit from the side or front-on, as well as during high impact sports such as rugby or boxing.

**What should the pain feel like?**

People who have had a whiplash injury will often experience neck pain and stiffness. These symptoms can be present straight after the incident or take a few days to come on. For most people, it does not interfere with their normal activities, and the pain gradually gets better. Mild injuries should resolve within one to four weeks. Research shows that people who continue to move their neck and carry on with their normal activities recover much faster than those who stay home to rest.

Other symptoms can include:

- Headaches
- Pain and stiffness in the shoulders or arms
- Neck and Shoulder Muscle spasms
- Tingling in the hands or fingers
- Dizziness
- Discomfort during swallowing
- Weakness in the arm

Your symptoms should only last a few days. If they are severe or do not improve within 1 week, you should seek medical assistance either from your doctor or a physiotherapist.

**How is whiplash treated?**

Seeing your doctor is the first step. Your doctor can assess you for any serious injuries associated with whiplash and refer you to get scans if necessary.

The second step is to keep your neck moving as much as you can. Exercising the neck regularly will help you recover faster. See below for recommended neck exercises and tips on how to help your injury resolve quicker.

Other recommended treatments include:

- **Medications** – you can take paracetamol to help relieve the pain. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDS) can also help with the swelling and damage in your neck. You may also need muscle relaxants depending on the severity of your injury. See your doctor for more advice.

- **Ice/heat therapy** – Ice can help reduce further damage to the soft tissues in your neck. It should be wrapped up in a damp towel before applying onto the skin and left on for up to 15 minutes. Heat can help the muscles relax and can be applied for longer periods of time; it is especially helpful at night.

- **Traction** – research shows that this may suitable for some whiplash patients, but only those who have radiating pain into the arm or hand. Speak to your doctor or a physiotherapist who will assess your injury and help you decide whether this treatment might be suitable for you.

- **Physiotherapy** – a physiotherapist can help you regain any movement loss by doing hands-on therapy including joint mobilizations to the spine, and performing massage to specific muscles. They can also show you exercises to strengthen weak muscles and ligaments which
have been stretched out.

**What can I do to recover more quickly?**

- Stay active and perform regular gentle neck exercises
- Avoid heavy lifting, strenuous sports or heavy exercise for the first few weeks to prevent further injury
- Avoid long periods of sitting – this applies to watching TV, driving and especially if you are working at a desk
- Maintain correct posture when sitting or standing – make sure your back and neck is upright and not bent or slouched over
- Sleep on a supportive pillow – this will help you maintain a neutral spine and make sleeping more comfortable

**Recommended neck exercises**

The following exercises should be done slowly, without sudden jerks. Expect to experience some discomfort whilst performing the exercises but they should not cause severe pain. Perform the exercises seated with your back straight and shoulders pulled back.

- **Flexion and extension exercise**
  - Bend your head forward as far as you can go, leading with your chin
  - Bring the head back to the starting position
  - Gently roll your head backward and look up at the ceiling, and then return to the starting position
  - Repeat the exercise 5 times in each direction

- **Rotation exercise**
  - Gently turn your head as far as you can go to look over one shoulder
  - Slowly turn your head back to the middle and repeat the turn to the opposite side
  - Repeat until you have performed 5 rotations to each side

- **Side stretch**
  - Gently tilt your head sideways, bringing your ear to your shoulder
  - Hold for 3 seconds
  - Slowly bring your head back to the start position
  - Repeat exercise moving to the opposite side
  - Repeat until you have performed 5 stretches on each side


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For more information, please contact your Family Doctor