
Education

Neck Injuries

What are neck injuries?

Neck injuries can be minor or very serious, especially when there is damage to the spinal cord. Common neck injuries include spasms, strains, stingers, and fractures. Common causes of neck injuries include car or motorcycle accidents, sports injuries, and whiplash from amusement park rides.

- **Spasm:** Neck spasms are contractions of the muscles in your neck. The muscles become tight, hard, and painful. Neck spasms may occur from an injury, overuse, poor posture, or stress. For example, it is common for a person doing a lot of computer work to feel his or her neck stiffen. Spasms may even occur from an uncomfortable night's sleep.
- **Strain:** A strain is a tear of a muscle or tendon in your neck. Your neck is surrounded by small muscles, which run close to the vertebrae, and larger muscles. Neck strains most often occur when the head and neck are forcibly moved, such as in a whiplash injury or from contact in sports. Pain may start right after the injury or may take a few hours or days to develop. Other symptoms may include neck stiffness, headache, dizziness, or unusual sensations, such as burning or a pins-and-needles feeling.
- **Stinger:** A stinger, or burner, is an injury to the nerves that travel from your neck and down your arm. This injury often happens while playing contact sports, like football. It may occur when the shoulder is pushed down while the head is forced to the opposite side. It can also happen when the head is moved quickly to one side or the collarbone is hit directly. Stingers cause a burning or stinging feeling between the neck and shoulder and possibly in the arm. The arm or shoulder may feel numb, weak, and tingly.
- **Fracture:** The most serious neck injury is a fracture of a bone or bones in the neck. A fracture of the neck means that a bone (vertebra) of the neck is broken. A high-energy force or impact (like a motor vehicle crash, fall, or sports activity) can break bones in the neck. A fracture can cause the body to be paralyzed from the neck down if the broken bone injures the spinal cord. A fractured bone in the neck can cause severe pain, numbness and tingling, or complete paralysis.

What is the treatment?

Treatment depends on the type of neck injury.

- Neck spasms and strains are often treated with heat, ice, muscle relaxants, and physical therapy. Medical care for strains caused by whiplash may require wearing a soft neck collar for a short period of time. Most people recover from minor neck spasms and strains in a few days, but sometimes it takes months to recover.
- Stingers usually get better on their own. They usually last a few minutes, but may take several days or weeks to heal. Physical therapy may be needed to stretch and strengthen the muscles.
- Neck fracture treatment depends on the seriousness of the injury. A compression fracture, with the bones pushed into each other, can sometimes be treated by wearing a neck collar for 6 to 8 weeks. A more serious fracture may need traction, surgery, or a rigid frame to keep the neck from moving.

Anyone with a neck injury, even one that seems very minor, needs to remain lying down or, if standing, lie down carefully. Never remove a helmet from anyone wearing a helmet who may have a possible neck injury. The head, shoulders, and neck must not be turned. Movement may mean more injury to the spinal cord, which could be the difference between a minor injury and paralysis.

If you think someone has broken or injured their neck, do not move the person unless there is an immediate threat to their life. Call 911 immediately for emergency help. If moving becomes absolutely necessary to save the person, support the head and neck so it is in a straight line with the body and move the entire body, including the head and neck, as a single unit.

How can I prevent a neck injury?

There are many ways to lower your risk of having a neck injury.

- Always wear your seat belt when riding in a car.
- Never dive into a shallow pool or unknown lake, river, or other body of water.
- Always wear the right protective equipment when playing a sport.
- Follow the safety rules for sports and recreational activities.
- Avoid riding motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles.
- Do not drink when driving, swimming, or diving.

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