

NECK PAIN & North East Physiotherapy



A pain in the neck

If you know someone who has had a car accident, or you've had one yourself, it would be a good idea to ask a physio to check for signs of whiplash – particularly if it was a rear-end crash.

What is whiplash?

Whiplash is defined as neck pain, usually as the result of a car accident, although it is possible for some sporting injuries to result in whiplash. Whiplash is quite common, even in people wearing seatbelts, and very difficult to diagnose and treat. In whiplash the damage occurs to the soft tissues, such as discs, muscles, and ligaments, and any or all of these structures may be involved

Is it real?

For many years 'whiplash' was a dirty word. People who complained of neck pain after a motor vehicle accident were thought to be making it up to build a case for compensation because the damage rarely shows up on X-rays. However, physiotherapy research in the 1980s used other ways to show clearly that damage to the neck does occur and whiplash is real. Some statistics estimate that around a third of road accidents result in a whiplash injury; tens of thousands of Australians experience it each year at great personal cost, and cost to the community.



What are the symptoms?

Common symptoms are stiffness or soreness in the upper back, headache, and pain in the neck. These symptoms may not appear until several days after the accident, but the good news is that for most people they clear in a few days or weeks.

Can it be treated?

It was once the case that most people who had suffered whiplash were advised to rest and wear a soft collar to support and protect the neck and keep it immobile. These days the thinking is that recovery will occur earlier and more completely if people keep moving and continue to exercise sensibly. As with many conditions, early mobilisation is the key.

For some people (and their health professionals) whiplash can be a real problem. It seems that about one-third of people involved in a car accident will feel no symptoms, one-third will develop some symptoms that clear up in a few weeks, and one-third will develop quite severe symptoms which may linger as chronic pain for years.

There is no single treatment for whiplash, because there is no single injury. Depending on the circumstances heat, ice, massage, exercises, traction, or ultrasound may be helpful.

Physiotherapists can offer some treatments that will assist recovery, but it is not always clear which structures have been damaged.



Can I help myself?

A team of Queensland physiotherapists have done extensive research into whiplash for a number of years, and have produced a self-help booklet that explains whiplash and provides an exercise program that has been proven to assist in reducing neck pain. Their advice is that people can help their own recovery, but they should consult their health care provider before starting the exercise program. The *Whiplash Injury Recovery - a Self-Management Guide* booklet is available for free download from the Queensland Government Motor Accident Insurance Commission website.

Your physio at North East Physiotherapy will help you decide which exercises are right for you and give you some tips about how to recover safely from whiplash. So, if you are unfortunate and have an accident that results in whiplash, you will be in safe hands when you consult your physiotherapist.

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