



Pain in the neck

Poor posture can lead to headaches, but they are common, easy to treat

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Got a headache?

Before you reach for the painkillers, take a quick look at your posture.

Headaches have many causes, but most people don't know that cervicogenic headaches, or headaches that originate in the neck, are now both the most common and the most easily treated, says physiotherapist Carol Kennedy, a partner at Treloar Physiotherapy Clinic in Vancouver who teaches post-graduate courses on treating neck pain.

The usual cause? Prolonged hunching over a computer or video game.

Treatment for neck pain and neck-related headaches has advanced dramatically the last few years. Anything published before 2002 is going to be out-of-date, Kennedy says.

Neck pain or neck-related headaches may begin with a car accident, sitting at a desk or computer, a cricked neck, osteoarthritis, a ski fall, or even sports such as biking which put the neck in a forward, poking position, Kennedy says. But no matter what the original cause, it's now known that deep within your neck, you'll have a muscle imbalance problem you can neither see nor feel.

Turns out that once you upset the workings of these core neck muscles, they stay upset until consciously fixed, even if the neck pain stops. This means you're left with a hidden weakness that may rise to trouble you again.

Until very recently, neck pain would have been treated by strengthening superficial muscles, along with some postural correction and stretching. You might have been asked to push your hand against your head, for instance. Football players would have used weights to increase neck bulk.

"Now the focus is more on control rather than brute strength and bulk," Kennedy says.

We now know that if you have neck pain, you're most likely overusing your superficial muscles. They'll kick in early, work too hard and won't shut off. At the same time, deep core muscles that lie next to the spinal column will weaken.

It's only natural to guard your neck with the superficial muscles especially when you can't even feel or see the core muscles. If your neck is bothering you, you'll likely turn your whole body and move rigidly.

Why is this a bad thing?

The neck has seven cervical vertebrae stacked in a column with a 10-pound weight balanced on top -- the head. Deep core muscles run from vertebra to vertebra.

The superficial muscles mostly attach to the head and shoulder, but not the neck.

Think of an old-fashioned tent. If the vertebrae form the tent pole and the guy ropes are

the superficial muscles, you can easily see how a weak tent pole is a bad thing. Guy ropes can just about keep the tent up, but not for long and certainly not well.

You've heard about the role of core stability in lower back problems. The same concept applies to the neck.

Treatment

Treatment is non-invasive and two-pronged. Manual therapy will mobilize your neck joints, and exercises will strengthen the core muscles and correct the imbalance. Pain will be reduced or eliminated and range of motion increased.

Treatment can also relieve stiffness due to normal aging and increase your range of motion if you have trouble doing a shoulder check when driving, for instance.

"We can do a lot about osteoarthritis of the neck even if you don't have headaches," Kennedy says.

If you have trouble controlling your neck and keeping it from poking out when doing crunches or other exercises in the gym, your core neck muscles probably need attention. Just gritting your teeth and working those crunches will eventually make them easier, but you're simply encouraging more use of your superficial muscles and putting your neck at risk.

One day you may turn your head quickly, take a long bike ride, wake up with a crick in your neck and end up with an injury or neck pain.

How do you know if your headache originates with your neck? Tender neck muscles and joints will often accompany a cervicogenic headache.

A core neck exercise to try

Lie on the floor with a pillow under your head and a small rolled towel supporting the normal curve in your neck. Put a hand across the front of your neck, just above your collar bone and feel the muscles there.

Now test to feel what it's like when you cheat: Gently lift your head off the pillow and you'll immediately feel muscles bulge under your fingers. This is what you don't want.

Now, keeping your head on the pillow, nod your chin slowly down toward your throat.

You don't want to feel anything under your hand. Stop just before you feel those muscles kick in and hold 10 seconds. Repeat 10 times.

You won't feel anything at all if you're doing the exercise correctly, Kennedy says.

The goal is to get to two-thirds or three-quarters of your full nodding range of motion without the superficial muscles kicking in. If you can't nod at all without those muscles firing up, don't worry, a trained physiotherapist will have other exercises for you.

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