

Neurology for You

Cervical Spondylosis

More than just a pain in the neck

Cervical spondylosis is a common condition that increases in frequency as we age. The spinal cord is protected by bone segments (vertebra) and cushions (discs) that allow for flexibility when moving (tilting the neck and back in a variety of directions). However, the discs lose integrity over time, and just like pillows, they flatten and widen. When this occurs, the nerves traveling between bone segments to the neck and arms can be pinched, and the discs themselves can press against the spinal cord (the nerve fibers traveling down to the rest of the body). This can produce a wide variety of symptoms including *neck pain*, *muscle spasm* (with tender muscles on the neck and shoulders), *shooting pains* (into the arms and along the neck), *headache* (arising from the base of the neck up the back of the head, sometimes to the forehead), *weakness* in the arms and hands (especially with buttoning clothes and gripping utensils) and sometimes even the legs, “*pins and needles*” sensations or *paresthesias* in the hands and arms,



numbness or loss of sensation, *urinary frequency* (the feeling of having to go to the bathroom often), *gait imbalance* (difficulty staying steady while walking), and *cervical vertigo* (a brief sensation of continued movement when stopping quickly or turning the head). These symptoms typically wax and wane with time.

WHAT TO AVOID WITH CERVICAL SPONDYLOSIS

Cervical spondylosis worsens whenever the neck is kept in positions that excessively flex, extend, or tilt the neck. This includes poor posture when sleeping, driving, and reading.

Certain forms of exercise may worsen this as well such as treadmill running (due to the jostling of the neck and high impact) and lifting or pulling weights behind the neck (pull-down bars). Alternative forms of

exercise may be more comfortable and safer (elliptical, biking, swimming).

At all times, excess manipulation of the neck should be avoided. This includes deep massage and chiropractic manipulation of the neck (twisting, pulling). At worst, excess twisting may tear arteries in the neck and cause a *stroke*.

How to Manage Cervical Spondylosis

- Be mindful of the position of your neck in relation to your back at all times.
- Use a hard, sturdy pillow when you sleep that helps maintain your neck in alignment with your back.
- Sleep on a firm mattress that keeps your back straight.
- If you drive long distances, arrange your head and neck in a neutral position with your back.
- When reading (especially smartphones and tablets), lift your reading material to a position such that your neck does not need to tilt forwards. If needed, prop the book or device on a table or cushion.
- If prescribed for you, wear a soft collar on the neck to maintain the alignment. Unless otherwise instructed, this can be worn at night while sleeping and kept off during the day to allow the muscles to strengthen.
- If the neck or shoulder muscles are sore, place a hot compress or heat pack on the muscles to relax and soothe them. Hot showers are also useful.
- If prescribed, muscle relaxants may be taken as needed but may cause drowsiness (avoid with driving or operating machinery).