

What is Whiplash or Whiplash Associated Disorder (WAD)?

Whiplash is a term used to describe a common injury to muscles and ligaments in the neck caused by a sudden movement of the head in any direction. This often happens during a motor vehicle accident, but can also result from a blow to the head during contact sports for example. Tests and scans are not usually required in order to diagnose WAD.

Research shows that recovery from WAD is improved by returning to normal activities and moving your neck normally as soon as possible. This may be painful but will improve with time. Try to relax and follow the instructions below. In most cases the symptoms will improve significantly within 4 weeks.

Symptoms

Symptoms of WAD may take some time to develop after the injury. Pain and stiffness may increase the day after an injury and may initially continue to get worse during the days following injury. If neck pain is severe it may be necessary to rest for a few days until severe pain has subsided. After this it is very important to start moving your neck so that it doesn't stiffen up anymore.

WAD typically causes

- Pain
- Stiffness

- Temporary loss of movement in the neck.

Other possible symptoms include headaches, pain in the shoulders and arms, low back pain, jaw pain, pins and needles in the arms and hands, dizziness, tiredness, difficulty swallowing, blurred vision, tinnitus (ringing in the ears), poor concentration and irritability MSK

What you can do to help

1. Support your head with one comfortable pillow at night. If you sleep on your side make sure that your head and neck are in line with the rest of your back.
2. Apply an ice pack to your neck for 10-30 minutes to reduce the swelling and pain which is normal after an injury. Wrap the ice in a towel to provide a protective barrier. Do not apply ice directly to your skin as this can cause an ice burn.
3. Take painkillers as prescribed by your GP regularly, rather than only when pain is severe. This will help to prevent pain getting worse and allow you to move and sleep more comfortably.
4. Exercise your neck by moving it gently in each direction, forwards and backwards, turning to look from side to side and tilting from side to side. This movement will be painful but it will not harm your neck. Aim to move every few hours, 5 times in each direction. This will help to break the cycle caused by an inability to move the stiff neck, which can result in more pain and stiffness. When the initial pain has subsided it may be more useful to use heat than ice, before and after doing these

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movements. This can be done by standing under a hot shower or using a hot water bottle or heat pack.

5. Exercise your neck muscles by lying flat on your back without a pillow, with your knees bent up and feet flat on the floor. Keeping your head on the floor make a small movement to tuck your chin in a quarter of the way to your chest as if nodding to say yes. Hold this position still for 10 seconds. Do not lift your head or clench your teeth as you do this. Aim to repeat this 10 times. If done correctly this exercise will not be painful.
6. Use of shoulder exercises – some research in this helping neck pain.

Further information

Should your symptoms not be improving or if they start to worsen it is important you speak to a medical professional.

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