



Whiplash – patient information

What is whiplash?

Whiplash is a term used to describe an injury to the neck. It is caused by a sudden movement of the head backwards, forwards or sideways.

What causes whiplash?

Whiplash occurs when there is a sudden jolt or jerk to the head which causes it to move violently away from the body. The force of this movement makes the neck extend beyond its normal range of movement causing the tendons, ligaments and muscles of the neck to become overstretched (tendons are tough, fibrous bands which connect muscles to bones and ligaments are fibrous connective tissues that link two bones together at a joint).

Motor vehicle accidents

Car and motorcycle accidents are the most common cause of whiplash because they often involve a collision or sudden stopping force which causes a vigorous movement of the neck away from the body and may develop following a collision to the back, front or side of a motor vehicle or motor cycle. Collisions at slow speed can cause whiplash.

Other causes

In addition to motor vehicle accidents, other causes include:

- a sudden blow to the head (eg during contact sports such as rugby or boxing)
- a slip or fall where the head is jerked backwards
- being hit on the head by a heavy object

Symptoms

The symptoms of whiplash may take some time to develop following an accident (inflammation or bruising of the neck muscles are not usually obvious at the time of the accident). It can take up to six to 12 hours for the symptoms of whiplash to become evident - pain and stiffness is usually felt on the day after the injury and may become worse on the days following the injury.



Common symptoms of whiplash:

- neck pain and stiffness
- neck swelling
- tenderness along the back of the neck
- reduced or loss of neck movement
- headaches
- difficulty swallowing
- vertigo
- tinnitus
- pain, numbness or pins and needles in the arms or hands
- pain in the shoulder or across the shoulder blades
- lower back pain
- muscle spasms in the side or the back of the neck
- dizziness
- tiredness
- memory loss, poor concentration and irritability

Diagnosis

Whiplash diagnosis does not usually require any tests or scans and can normally be diagnosed from a description of symptoms and details of how the injury occurred. Tests such as an xray, computerised tomography (CT) and/or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans may be recommended if another problem such as a spinal injury is suspected.

Treatment of whiplash

Treatment of whiplash focuses on dealing with the pain and stiffness in the neck and by healing damage to the affected area. Treatments in the acute (early) stage of whiplash include:

- ice packs
- exercise
- physiotherapy
- pain medication

The symptoms of whiplash will usually begin to improve within a few days. In about 60% of cases the symptoms should considerably improve or disappear within one to four weeks. It may take up to a few months for the symptoms of whiplash to disappear completely. In some cases the pain caused by a whiplash injury can become chronic (ie continuing for greater than six months).