

# Hold On. Pain Ends.

## About this Online Series

This online series, delivered by qualified physiotherapists from *PhysioAsia*, emphasises the need to exercise responsibly while raising awareness of the need to recognise and manage common injuries, body aches and pains.

It also throws light on the nature of common injuries, how they can be prevented and the importance of knowing when to seek professional help.

## Shoulder and Neck

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about many changes to our daily routines. Many of us started working from home and converted our living rooms into office spaces, often using unsuitable home furniture for extended hours. The change in pace also saw many of us become more conscious of the need for physical activity as we took to walking and running or yoga and pilates through online fitness portals.



The first session focusses on the neck and shoulder area and discusses a few simple exercises to alleviate tightness in the neck and shoulder muscles.

The tips and exercises suggested should not be used in reference to a specific injury or concern. Participants are advised to stop/skip the movement should they experience any pain or discomfort while following the instructions for specific movements.

## Neck and Shoulder

There are many manifestations of physical uneasiness



### What does physiotherapy do?

Physiotherapy helps restore mobility and function when one is affected by injury, illness or disability through a set of simple exercises that need to be performed consistently.

Individuals of all ages (including children and seniors) can benefit from physiotherapy. It helps one manage pain and recover from injury. Physiotherapy heals through movement and exercise, manual therapy, education and advice.

### Knowledge is the Key to Prevention



Knowledge



Mindfulness



Self-management

Some aches and pains can be prevented through having access to the right information (knowledge) and being mindful of applying that knowledge to self-manage a potential source of injury or pain. This is particularly applicable in everyday situations and most useful when one is prone to certain postures or movements while working or exercising.

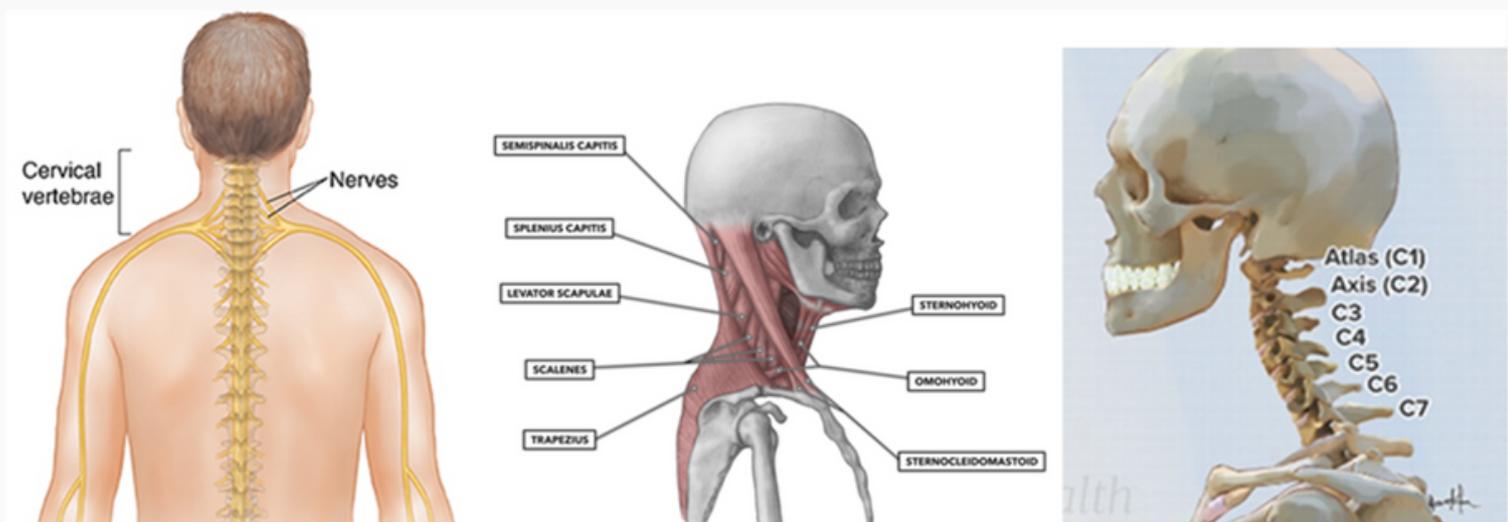
## Neck and Shoulder

### What is neck pain?

Neck pain is general discomfort in the neck region. It specifically affects structures in the neck including muscles, nerves, bones (vertebrae), joints and the discs between the bones.

Approximately 1 out of 2 people will experience at least one episode of neck pain in their lifetime. Neck pain targets women more than it does men and tends to most affect individuals in the 40-45 age group.

There are bones at the back of the neck similar to those on the spine. We have seven bones at the back of the neck. The discs are situated in the area in between the bones.



### Presentation & Symptoms

- Pain down the arm to the fingertips or down the arm up to the elbows
- Numbness in the hands
- Tingling sensation with pins and needles
- Burning sensation in the arms
- Headaches or pressure in the head or behind the eye and/or nausea
- Arm weakness, pain in the shoulder blades, shoulders or mid-back region
- Sensory and movement dysfunction – changes in how one part of the arm feels in comparison to another and resulting changes in movement

## Neck and Shoulder

### How does neck pain present itself?

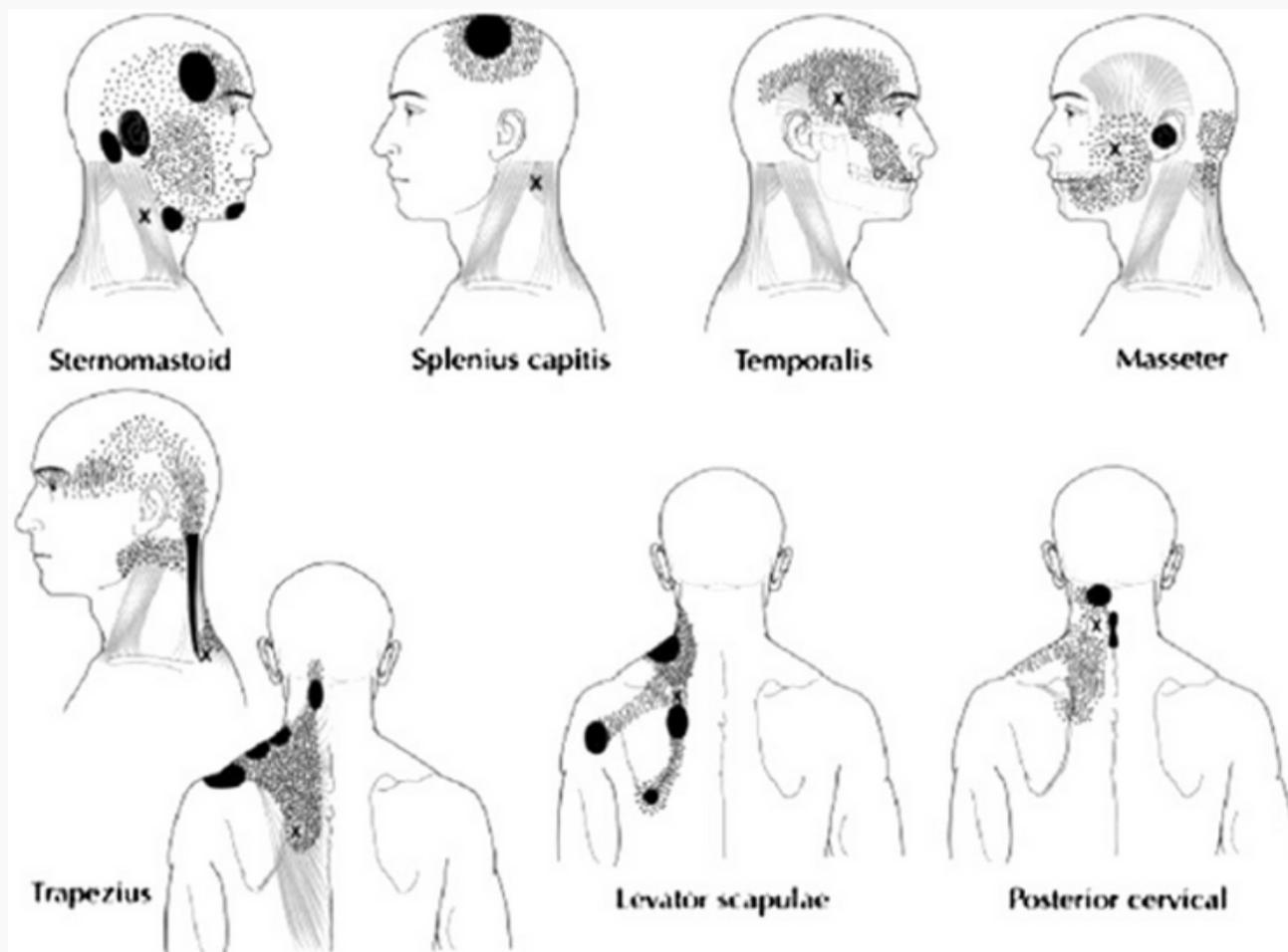
You may not be able to turn your neck or you may suddenly lose the range of movement you have in the neck area. You may not be able to move your head up or down or tilt your head sideways to the left or right.

This may present itself as discomfort, stiffness, pain or a sense of being uncomfortable in the neck area with or without any symptoms.

Neck pain can present itself either at the top of the head, around the eyes or jaw area, at the back of the head, back of the neck, down the shoulder and mid-back region and back up the shoulder.

It may also be localised in the neck area itself as seen in the following diagrams.

### Presentations and Symptoms of Neck Pain



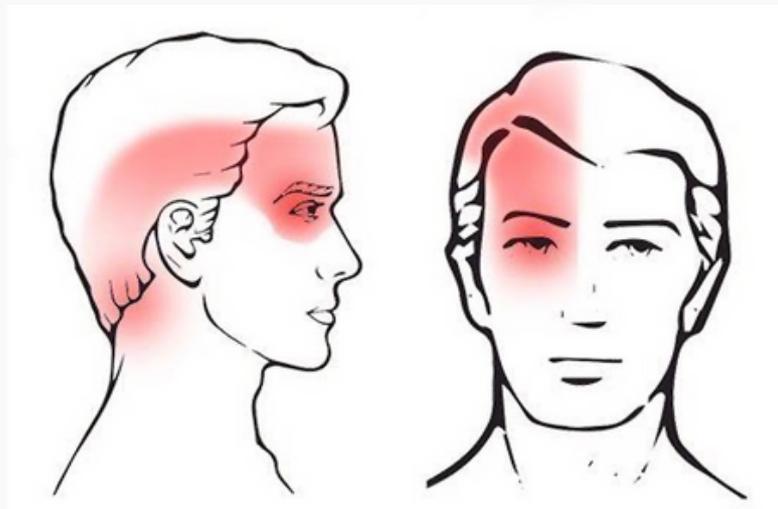
## Neck and Shoulder

### 1 Cervicogenic Headaches

Cervicogenic headaches typically occur when the area at the top of the neck is tight or stiff or movement is restricted in the bones at the top of the neck.

It may present itself as a chronic, one-sided headache and result in shoulder or arm pain.

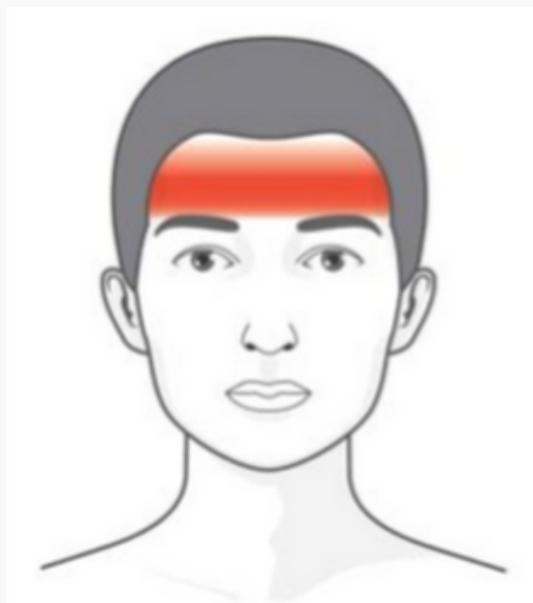
This kind of a headache is often a result of poor posture or poor ergonomics and may be the result of, for example, an incorrect sleeping posture leading to a throbbing headache on one side of the neck.



### 2 Tension Headaches

Tension headaches are not chronic and feel like a band or pressure squeezing the head, leading to constant tension and pressure either on the head or just behind the eyes.

Tension headaches are largely triggered by stress and an unhealthy lifestyle. They can cause shallow breathing and a tightening of the neck muscles.



## Neck and Shoulder

### Common Causes of Neck Pain

- Incorrect posture (constant hunching or slouching over desks or incorrect angling of the neck while staring at handphones and other mobile devices).
- A sedentary lifestyle (with little or no physical activity) leading to a tightness in the muscles.
- Acute injuries or trauma (whiplash injuries in a car accident) or sporting injuries caused by overusing certain muscles.
- Excessive stress leading to a posture that tightens the muscles in the neck. This is often a gradual build-up of tension in the area that becomes more intense with time.
- Repetitive strain as a result of maintaining incorrect postures for prolonged periods of time.
- Autoimmune conditions like rheumatoid arthritis.
- Degenerative changes caused by wear and tear and aging.

For every inch that your head leans forward and is not aligned, it gains 4.5 kgs of additional weight.

### Neck Posture

These are the most common postures we adopt while looking at a handphone or working at a desk.

For every inch that your head leans forward and is not aligned (right diagram), it gains 4.5 kgs of additional weight.

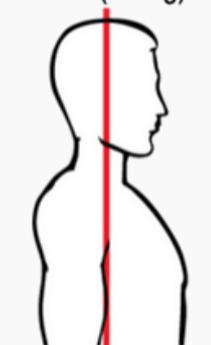
If your head is 2 inches off centre, it weighs an additional 15 kgs and if it is 3 inches off centre, it weighs an additional 19 kgs. This additional weight is borne by the tiny muscles in the neck area and can eventually lead to tightness and pain.



12 lbs. (5.4 kg)

32 lbs. (15 kg)

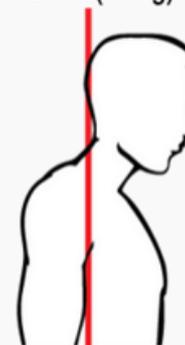
42 lbs. (19 kg)



NORMAL POSTURE



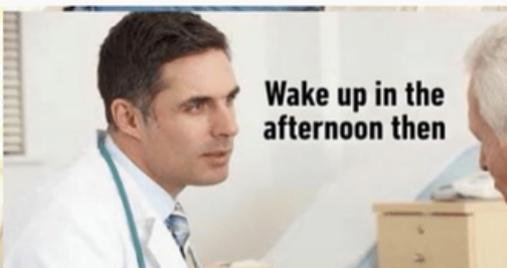
2 IN (5 CM) FOWARD



3 IN (8 CM) FOWARD

## Neck and Shoulder

We need to pay attention to pain. We cannot ignore it.



### Before You Begin...

Please follow these general instructions prior to trying any of the following movements/stretches:

1. Hold each movement for a minimum of 20 seconds and repeat two to three times on each side.
2. You can try repeating these exercises at least two or three times daily if you are working a job that requires you to sit at a desk for long hours and stare at a computer screen.



### Simple Neck rotation

1. Position your left arm behind you on your lower back and completely relax the shoulders.
2. Turn your head as far as you can towards the right and feel a very mild stretch along the side of the neck. Hold and count to 10 and then gently bring the head back to the middle. Repeat.
3. Position your right arm behind you on your lower back and completely relax the shoulders.
4. Turn your head as far as you can towards the left and feel a very mild stretch along the side of the neck. Hold and count to 10 and then gently bring the head back to the middle. Repeat.



## Neck and Shoulder

### Upper Trapezius Stretch

1. Position your left arm behind you on your lower back (as above) and completely relax the shoulders.
2. Slowly tilt the head towards the right shoulder (as shown). Gently pull the head to the right with your right hand. You should feel a stretch at the side of your neck. Please make sure that you pull your head sideways and not forward.
3. Do not continue with the exercise if you feel any pain or discomfort at this point.
4. Hold and count to 15 before you let go slowly and bring the head back to the middle.
5. Position your right arm behind you on your lower back (as above) and completely relax the shoulders.
6. Gently tilt the head towards the left shoulder and continue as above.



### Scalene Stretch

1. This stretches the front of the neck.
2. Place your hands (as shown) on your right collarbone and firmly pull the skin down so it's taut and tight.
3. Turn as far as you can to the left. When you have turned as far as you can, tilt your head backwards a little and look to your left. You should feel a stretch from the back of your ear to your fingertips.
4. Hold and count to 15 and then slowly bring the head back to the middle.
5. Repeat on the other side.
6. It is important that the head is turned as far to the left or the right as possible before it is tilted slightly backwards.



## Neck and Shoulder



### Levator Scapulae Stretch

1. Position your left hand behind you (as shown).
2. Turn your head at a 45-degree angle to the right and rotate your head so you are looking down at your armpit. Make sure that your shoulders are completely relaxed and not hunched and that your head is not dropping forward while you rotate it to look down at your armpit.
3. Hold and count to 15 and then slowly bring your head up and back to the middle.
4. Repeat on the other side.



### Sternocleidomastoid Stretch

1. Position your left hand behind you (as shown). Keep your shoulders completely relaxed.
2. Tilt your head to the right and gently rotate your head up to the ceiling. Try to maintain the sideways movement without moving your head backwards.
3. Gently pull your head (as shown) to the side without pulling it back and feel the stretch at the side of the neck.
4. Hold and count to 15 and then slowly bring your head back to the middle.



## Neck and Shoulder



### Pectoral Stretch

1. This stretch can be done in a seated position. You can also do it with your back to the wall or doorway for a deeper stretch.
2. Keep your shoulders completely relaxed.
3. Place your left arm on your thigh (as shown). Move your right arm so it is behind your right shoulder (as shown) with your palm facing forward.
4. Gently turn your head to the left.
5. Hold and count to 15 and then slowly bring your hand back to the front and release.
6. Repeat on the other side.



### Thoracic Rotation Stretch

1. Cross your arms across your chest (as shown).
2. Slowly twist your body to the right so you are looking behind you (as shown). Try and do this as slowly as you can to avoid pulling a muscle.
3. You should feel the movement only in the mid-back area and not in the hips or lower back. You should feel the weight of your upper body on your hips and buttocks while you are seated.
4. Rotate back to the middle.
5. Repeat the movement 10 times on the right side.
6. Follow the instructions to repeat the movement on the left side.

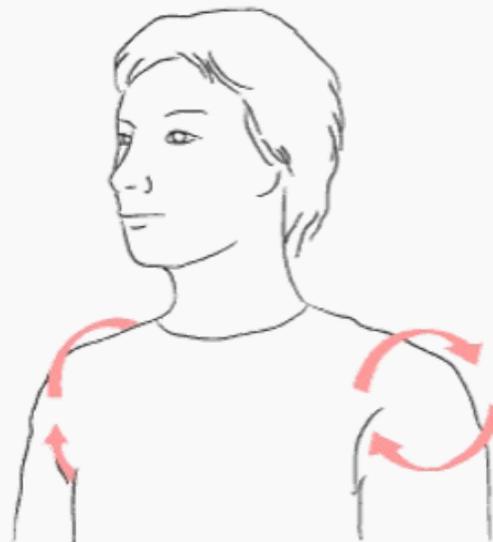


## Neck and Shoulder



### Shoulder Rotation Stretch

1. Let your arms hang loosely at both sides of your body.
2. You are going to draw a huge circle with your shoulders.
3. Lift your shoulders up towards the ears. Then move your shoulders back so your shoulder blades are squeezed behind you. Drop the shoulders back down and then bring them forward as much as you can.
4. Repeat this movement 10 times in the clockwise direction and 10 times in the anti-clockwise direction.



### Shoulder External Rotation

1. Place your hands against the sides of the body. Keep your shoulders completely relaxed.
2. Bend your hands at the elbows so they are at a 90-degree angle in front of you (as shown).
3. Turn your palms to face the ceiling and rotate your forearms away from your body.
4. Make sure that your elbows and upper arms are in contact with the body. Repeat the movement 10 times.



## Neck and Shoulder



### Triceps Stretch

1. Keep your shoulders completely relaxed.
2. Reach for your right shoulder blade with your right hand (as shown).
3. Use your left hand to gently push your right hand backwards.
4. Feel the stretch at the back of your arm.
5. Hold and count to 15 and release your arm.  
Relax.
6. Repeat on the other side.



### Training Deep Neck Muscles

Perform a chin tuck or nod to realign your cervical spine. This strengthening exercise targets the deep muscles of the neck.

1. Sit comfortably like you are in deep thought with your hand across your chest and place your elbow under your chin (as shown) so your chin rests on your elbow.
2. Perform a gentle chin tuck or nod that allows you to nod into your fist. This gentle nodding motion will help train the muscles that support the neck.
3. Try not to push your head backwards. Try nodding gently about 10 times and look down when your head nods down.



## Neck and Shoulder



### Life Hacks for Everyday Use

#### Ice packs

Ice is typically used to numb pain and reduce inflammation or swelling. It is most effective for about three days after you have had an injury, especially if you notice some swelling and/or bruising with tenderness and sharp pain.

Ice packs should be used for about 10 minutes at a stretch. It is important to wrap the ice pack in a towel or pillowcase to prevent burns.

#### Heat packs

Heat packs are great for soothing tired and aching which are stiff after a long day of activity.

Heat packs can be used for about 20 minutes at a stretch. It is important to wrap the heat pack in a towel or pillowcase to prevent burns.



#### Towels

Towels are very handy to promote good posture when one is seated on a chair which does not offer ergonomic support. They can be placed at the lower back level (as shown).

They can also be placed at the mid-back level (around the bra line for ladies). It helps push the body upright so one is less likely to slump. It can also be used to create a contour for the neck area so the collar area is supported.

This is particularly useful if the pillow is too thin or too flat and can provide much-needed support to the neck when one is lying on one's back or sideways.



## Neck and Shoulder



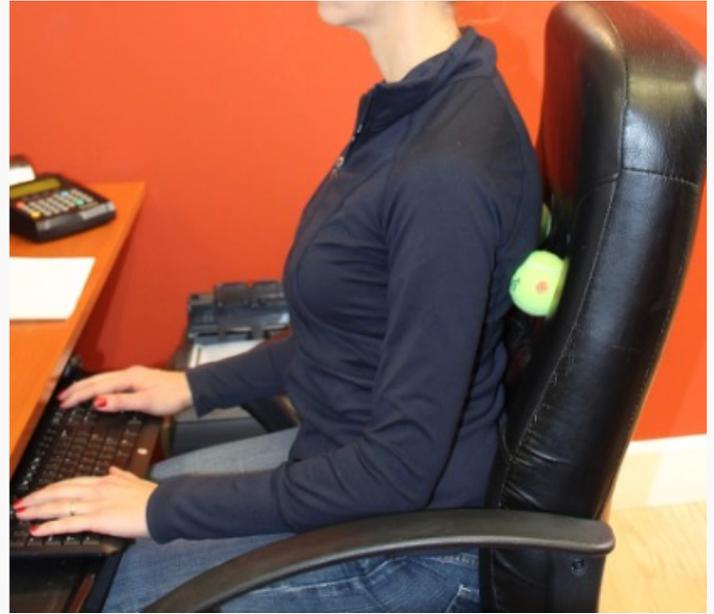
### Life Hacks for Everyday Use

#### Tennis balls

Tennis balls promote good posture when they are placed at the mid-back level as they remind one to sit straight.

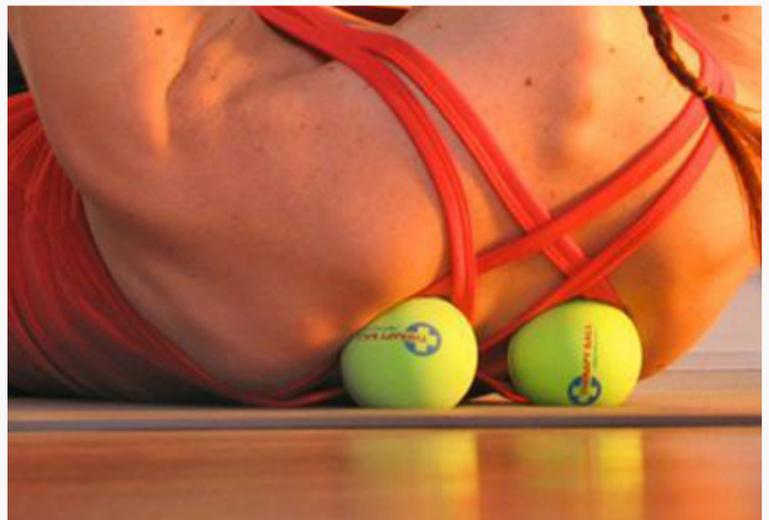
They are also handy to release knots in the shoulder area. This can be done against a wall (as shown) or when you are lying down.

Can be used to release tight muscles. A massage ball can also be used in a similar manner but golf balls are best avoided as they can be painful.



Do not use them if you are experiencing sharp pain as their use might further irritate the injury.

They are only to be used to relax stiff or tight muscles.



## Neck and Shoulder



### Seek Professional Help

If the symptoms do not go away within a few days and:



1

The pain gets worse with activities such as sitting, standing, walking, or lying down.

2

You have such excruciating pain that it restricts your normal activities.



3

You have numbness, tingling, burning pain or weakness in your limbs.



### When do you see a Doctor?

- You have continuous pain that prevents you from sleeping on your back.
- Your pain is related to a recent injury or impact to the neck (such as a whiplash injury after a car accident).
- You have numbness, tingling or weakness in the arms.
- You have double vision, dizziness, nausea, persistent headaches, fainting or any difficulty with speech or swallowing.



## Neck and Shoulder

### Take Away Message

1. Exercise is generally known to prevent aches and pains. Lack of exercise can lead to muscle weakness and general muscle tightness which can result in pain

It is therefore important to try and have small periods of activity, particularly if one is prone to being seated for long periods of time.



2. It is important to maintain good posture, exercise regularly so some amount of physical activity is included in one's daily routine and stretch if you are seated for long periods of time.



3. It is equally important to recognise the signals our body is sending us and seek professional help at the right time.

