

Cervicogenic Headache



What is a Cervicogenic Headache?

A cervicogenic headache is a type of headache that originates from structures in the neck such as the joints, muscles, discs, or nerves. Although the pain is felt in the head, the true source of the problem is the cervical spine (neck).

These headaches are often linked to poor posture, neck injuries, muscle tension, or age-related wear and tear.

Why Does It Happen?

The upper part of the neck shares nerve pathways with the head. When structures in the neck become irritated, inflamed, or tight, they can send pain signals upward, causing a headache.

Common causes include:

- Poor posture (e.g., prolonged computer use, looking down at devices)

- Whiplash or past neck trauma
- Osteoarthritis or age-related changes in the neck
- Muscle tension or tightness
- Reduced movement or stiffness in the upper cervical joints

Typical Symptoms

People with cervicogenic headache often experience:

- One-sided headache that starts in the neck
- Pain that may spread to the forehead, temples, or around the eyes
- Neck pain or stiffness
- Increased headache with neck movements or long periods in one position
- Reduced range of movement in the neck
- Tenderness in the upper neck or shoulder muscles

Less common symptoms:

- Lightheadedness
- Pain into the shoulder or upper back
- Difficulty maintaining posture

How Is It Diagnosed?

Diagnosis is usually made by a healthcare professional through:

- Your symptom history
- Physical examination of the neck and shoulders
- Assessing posture and neck movement
- Identifying pain patterns linked to the neck

Most people **do not need scans** unless symptoms are unusual or severe.

Treatment Options

1. Physiotherapy (Main Treatment)

A physiotherapist may offer:

- Manual therapy to improve joint movement

- Soft tissue therapy for tight muscles
- Exercises to strengthen and stabilise the neck
- Posture correction
- Stretching programmes

Physiotherapy is highly effective and improves symptoms in most people.

2. Exercise and Self-Management

Regular movement and specific exercises can reduce pain and prevent flare-ups.

Helpful strategies:

- Gentle neck stretches
- Strengthening the deep neck muscles
- Shoulder and upper back strengthening
- Regular breaks from screens
- Good ergonomic setup at work



Neck Flexion

Tuck your chin in and then roll your head forwards. You should feel a gentle stretch at the back of your neck. Return to the start position.

Sets: 2 | Repetitions: 10



Neck Rotation

Sit or stand upright with good posture. Rotate your neck slowly to the left by looking over your left shoulder. Take your neck to a comfortable end of range. Repeat to the right. Make sure you keep your shoulder and back relaxed. This is an excellent exercise to improve rotation and mobility in your neck.

Sets: 2 | Repetitions: 10 | Both sides



Neck Side Flexion Mobilisation

Sit or stand in an upright position with good posture. Ensuring your nose is pointing forwards, bend your neck as if you were taking your left ear towards your left shoulder. Now repeat to the right. Keep the movement gentle and rhythmical. This exercise will help improve mobility to your neck.

Sets: 2 | Repetitions: 10 | Both sides

3. Pain Relief

These may help short-term:

- Paracetamol
- NSAIDs (e.g., ibuprofen) if suitable
- Heat packs for muscle tension
- Ice packs if pain is inflamed or acute

Always check medication suitability with a pharmacist or GP.

4. Injections (In Select Cases)

If pain persists despite physiotherapy, some patients may benefit from:

- Cervical facet joint injections

- Occipital nerve blocks
These are usually arranged through specialist pain services.
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Self-Help Tips

Improve Posture

- Keep screens at eye level
- Avoid cradling the phone between your ear and shoulder
- Support your lower back when sitting
- Switch positions regularly

Reduce Muscle Tension

- Apply heat to the neck and shoulders
- Try gentle circular shoulder movements
- Avoid long periods of immobility

Ergonomic Advice

- Ensure your chair supports your back
- Keep feet flat on the floor
- Use a separate keyboard/mouse if working on a laptop

Lifestyle Advice

- Regular physical activity such as walking, swimming, or Pilates
 - Adequate sleep and hydration
 - Stress-management techniques such as breathing exercises or mindfulness
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When Should I Seek Further Help?

Contact a healthcare professional if:

- Symptoms are worsening or not improving with treatment
- Headaches become severe or change suddenly
- You have weakness, numbness, or tingling in arms or hands
- You experience dizziness, visual changes, or unsteadiness

- You develop headaches after a significant injury

Seek urgent medical help if you have:

- Sudden severe “thunderclap” headache
- Fever or neck stiffness
- New confusion or neurological symptoms
- Headache with vomiting that will not stop

Prognosis

Most people recover well with physiotherapy and self-management. Improvement is gradual and may take several weeks. Maintaining good posture and doing regular exercises reduces the risk of future episodes.