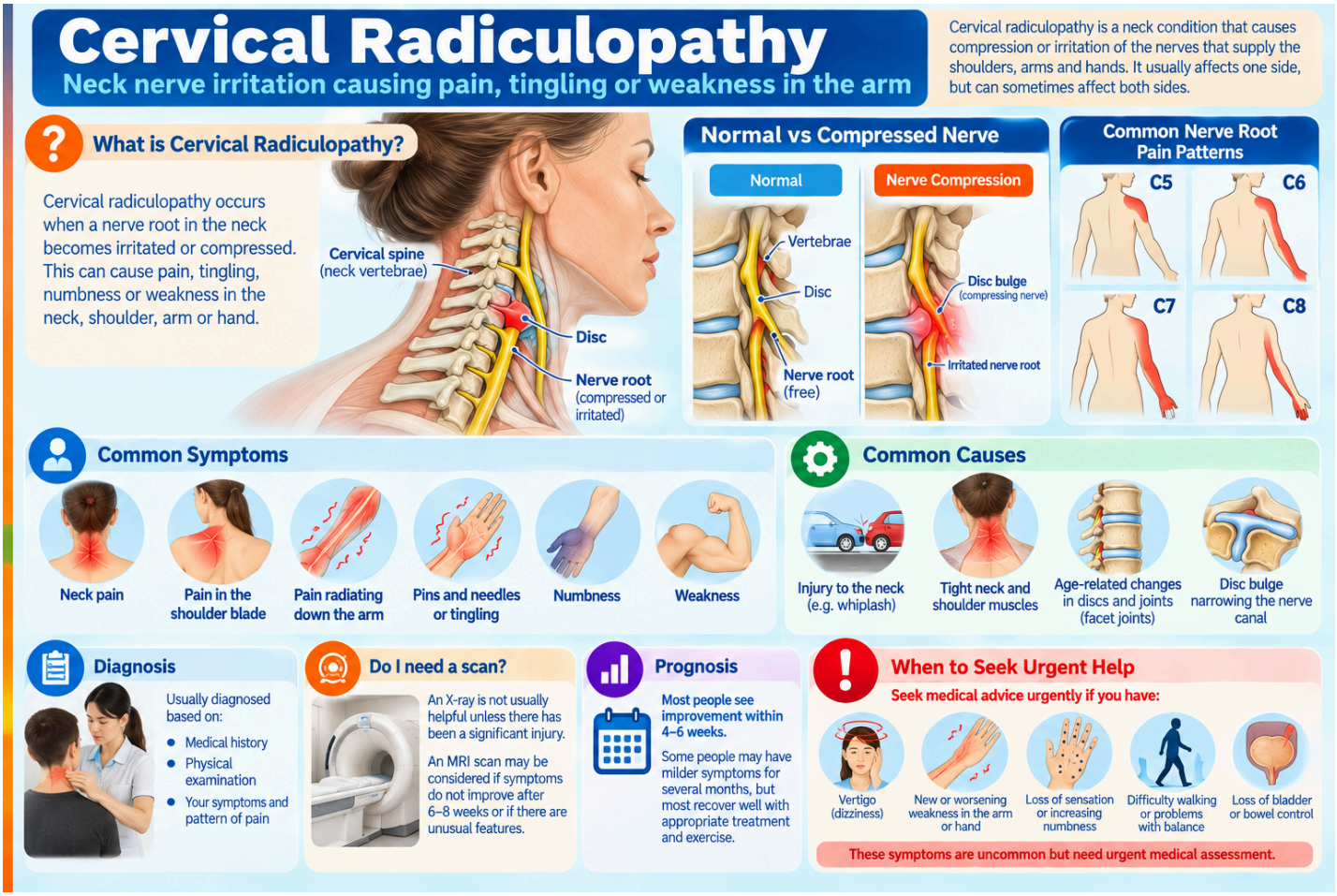
Cervical Radiculopathy

Understanding neck nerve irritation and arm symptoms



What you need to know

Symptoms may include neck or shoulder pain, tingling, numbness or arm weakness.

Most people improve with time, gentle movement and appropriate rehabilitation.

Important safety advice

Seek urgent assessment for worsening weakness, walking or balance problems, or changes in bladder or bowel control. In an emergency, call 999.

Understanding your condition

Why does it happen?

A disc bulge, age-related changes around the joints, or an injury can narrow the space around a nerve root. The nerve may become inflamed and sensitive. Your clinician can usually assess this from your symptoms and examination.

Do I need a scan?

X-rays do not show nerves or discs. An MRI is not routinely needed at the start, but may be considered if symptoms persist or examination findings suggest further investigation is necessary.

What can I do to help?

- **Keep moving**
  Try short walks and gentle daily activity. Avoid prolonged bed rest and change position regularly rather than holding the neck rigid.
- **Find comfortable positions**
  Support the painful arm on a pillow when sitting or lying down. Adjust pillows and seating to reduce pulling or heaviness in the arm.
- **Pace your activities**
  Take regular breaks. Temporarily reduce heavy lifting, repeated reaching and positions that clearly increase arm pain. Build activity up gradually.
- **Manage symptoms**
  Discuss suitable pain relief with a pharmacist or clinician. Gentle protected warmth over tense neck muscles may provide short-term relief.
- **Look after general wellbeing**
  Prioritise sleep, relaxation, hydration and avoiding smoking. Stress and poor sleep may make pain harder to manage.

EXPECTED RECOVERY

The source leaflet reports that many people improve in the first 4-6 weeks, although symptoms can take several months to settle.

Progressive exercise programme

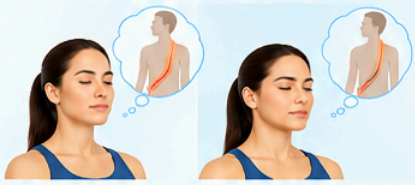
Cervical Radiculopathy – Progressive Exercise Programme

Gentle exercises to reduce symptoms, improve nerve tolerance, restore movement and build strength

1 Level 1: Visualisation and Eye Movements Exercises

Helps to calm the nervous system, reduce nerve sensitivity and improve tolerance to movement.

1. Neck and Arm Visualisation



- Sit comfortably and close your eyes.
- Imagine your neck, shoulder and arm moving without pain.
- Spend 1–2 minutes, 2–3 times daily.

2. Eye Movements



- Keep your head still and move your eyes to the left, right, up and down.
- Then try gentle diagonal eye movements.
- Repeat 5–10 times in each direction, 2–3 times daily.

Key points

- Keep your head and body relaxed.
- Move your eyes slowly.
- Stop if symptoms increase.
- These exercises help to reduce nerve sensitivity.

2 Level 2: Gentle Neck Activation Exercises

Helps to improve neck control, reduce muscle tension and support the neck.

1. Chin Tucks



- Sit or stand upright with shoulders relaxed.
- Gently draw your chin back (like making a double chin).
- Hold for 5 seconds, repeat 10 times.

2. Neck Range of Movement



- Gently turn your head to the left and right.
- Look up towards the ceiling and down towards the floor.
- Move within a comfortable range.
- Repeat 5–10 times in each direction.

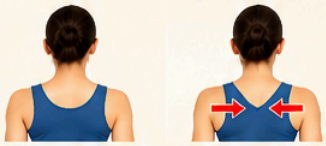
Key points

- Keep movements slow and controlled.
- Do not push into pain.
- Practice little and often throughout the day.
- Maintain good posture during exercises.

3 Level 3: Shoulder and Grip Control Exercises

Helps to improve shoulder function, arm control and hand strength.

1. Shoulder Blade Squeezes



- Sit or stand upright with arms by your sides.
- Gently squeeze your shoulder blades together.
- Hold for 5 seconds, repeat 10 times.

2. Shoulder Movements



- Gently shrug your shoulders up, then relax.
- Gently move your arms out to the sides and back.
- Repeat 5–10 times.

3. Grip Strength



- Squeeze a soft ball or putty.
- Hold for 5 seconds, then release.
- Repeat 10–15 times.

Key points

- Keep your neck and shoulders relaxed.
- Start with low resistance and build gradually.
- Stop if symptoms increase.
- These exercises help improve arm and hand function.

4 Level 4: Mobility and Functional Strength Exercises

Helps to restore movement, build strength and return to everyday activities.

1. Upper Back Mobility (Thoracic Extension)



- Sit on a chair with good back support.
- Place your hands behind your head.
- Gently lean back, opening your chest.
- Hold for 5 seconds, repeat 10 times.

2. Neck and Shoulder Strength



- Use a light resistance band.
- Keep your shoulders down and back.
- Slowly pull the band out to the sides or back.
- Repeat 10–15 times.

3. Functional Activities



- Gradually increase everyday activities such as lifting, carrying and walking.
- Maintain good posture and keep movements controlled.
- Build up duration and resistance as tolerated.

Key points

- Progress gradually based on your symptoms.
- Focus on good posture and control.
- Aim to return to normal daily activities.
- Stop if symptoms increase and seek advice if needed.

Posture advice, recovery and support

Comfortable supported positions may help ease arm symptoms.

Posture Advice for Cervical Radiculopathy

These positions can help reduce nerve irritation, ease arm symptoms and improve comfort

1 Sitting with 2 pillows supported under elbow



- Sit comfortably with good back support.
- Keep your neck in a relaxed, neutral position.
- Place 2 pillows under the affected arm to support the elbow and forearm.
- This can help reduce the "pull" or stretch on the irritated nerve.
- Use this position when resting, reading or sitting at a table.

2 Side lying with top arm supported on 2 pillows



- If you prefer to lie on your side, lie on your unaffected side or back.
- Place 2 pillows in front of you and rest your top (affected) arm on the pillows.
- Keep the pillows parallel to your face and chest.
- Adjust the height and position of the pillows to get adequate comfort.
- This helps to support the arm, reduce strain on the neck and ease symptoms.
- Some people may only need one pillow instead of two.

3 Sitting in a chair with 3–4 pillows on your lap



- If sitting is uncomfortable, a chair with good back support is recommended.
- Place 3–4 pillows across your lap.
- Rest both forearms on the pillows to support the arms and shoulders.
- This position can help reduce muscle tension in the neck and shoulders.
- Keep your neck relaxed and avoid holding it in one position for a long time.

Key Points

- These positions can help ease arm symptoms and reduce nerve irritation.
- Keep your neck and shoulders relaxed in all positions.
- Use pillows to support the arm and maintain a comfortable position.
- Avoid staying in one position for a long time.

When to seek urgent medical help

New or worsening weakness, loss of hand coordination, difficulty walking, or changes in bladder or bowel control need urgent assessment.

For emergencies call 999; for urgent NHS advice call 111.

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Patient information and physiotherapy support