



Treatment of acute neck pain

P a t i e n t I n f o r m a t i o n

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

You have come to the hospital because you have suddenly or recently developed severe neck pain. With neck pain the first step is always to investigate indications of a serious underlying disorder such as a tumour or fracture. The doctor will have talked to you, thoroughly examined you and on the basis thereof will consider it unlikely that your pain is caused by a serious underlying cause, which could be harmful – without immediate treatment. Neither do you have signs of nerve root irritation in your arm.

Despite the fact that you are suffering severe pain, nothing untoward has been found. It is a case of 'non-specific mechanical neck pain', which means that the pain is probably caused by excessive stress on the joints, ligaments and/or muscles in the neck. As a result you may also suffer from pain radiating into your arm, headaches or dizziness.

Non-specific mechanical neck pain is different from whiplash injuries as a result of an accident. If you ever had an accident – even if it was a long time ago – don't forget to tell your doctor about it.

WHY HAS NO RADIOLOGICAL EXAMINATION BEEN CARRIED OUT?

Previous experience and studies have shown that radiological examination (RX, CT or MRI scan) does not produce any useful additional information in the case of non-specific acute mechanical neck pain. These images would not have a significant impact on your treatment or recovery.

HOW WILL THE PROBLEM BE DEALT WITH?

The neck pain will probably improve relatively quickly of its own accord (after a few days to a week). The best way to promote this improvement is to take into account the following measures:

- ✗ Take up your daily activities again as soon as possible. Take note of any (pain) signals from your body and moderate your activities if necessary.
- ✗ No particular posture or activity is really forbidden, but avoid activities that subsequently increase the pain for several hours.
- ✗ Our experience has shown that walking and regularly changing your posture usually tend to relieve the pain. Warmth can also offer relief. Looking up for long periods and working in the same posture for a long time with your head bent forward will tend to increase the pain.

- X If you need medication an anti-inflammatory may be useful during the initial stages of the pain. If necessary you could take paracetamol (1 gram maximum four times a day) as an additional painkiller. Always consult a doctor before taking medication. Painkillers are meant to help you carry out your daily activities more easily, but it is important to take the correct dose. You are not meant to overexert yourself by taking painkillers.
- X Avoid using a neck brace.
- X Return to work as soon as possible.
- X Research has shown that other aspects of your life may have an impact on the pain. For example, emotions such as despondency and/or excessive anxiety when carrying out activities or movements may have an adverse effect on your recovery. Consult your GP if you have symptoms of this kind.

Remain active as that offers the best guarantee for a speedy recovery.

Your GP will also be aware of these medical insights and will have been notified in writing of your visit to A&E.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN NOW?

It is highly likely that the pain will gradually disappear of its own accord.

If the pain persists for a week, visit your GP. They will provide support and assistance. Be patient. It is still highly likely that the pain will improve spontaneously.

If the pain persists and does not improve after six weeks, you must take additional measures. During this stage your GP will have fast track access to UZ Leuven, more specifically to arrange a consultation with the physical medicine unit of the spinal disorder care programme. To make an appointment call 016 34 25 60.

WHAT SHOULD I PAY SPECIFIC ATTENTION TO?

Consult your GP

- If you develop nerve root pain in one or both arms. Nerve root pain is a stabbing, shooting or sharp, severe pain radiating from the neck to one or both arms.

Go to A&E without delay

- If you develop weakness in one or both arms.
- If you become clumsy or intricate finger movements become difficult.
- If you develop problems when walking (unsteady on your feet, falling easily).
- If you have problems urinating and/or passing stools.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Practical tips and exercises are available in the brochure entitled 'Acute klachten aan rug of nek: houdings- en bewegingsadvies' or via www.uzleuven.be/zorgprogrammawervelkolomaandoeningen.

Obviously you can also contact your GP about any questions you may have.

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