



Neck Injuries in Sports: What You Should Know

Getting tackled two yards before the end zone with your team down six points and less than one minute to go in the game is a pain in the neck -- literally. Not only will a hard tackle nix your chances of winning the game, but it may also leave you with a neck injury.

To play it safe you need to think with your head, and you need to think about your neck.

Keep reading to learn why your neck is so important, and what you need to do to protect it.

Your Neck: An Introduction

Your neck is the part of your spine that connects your head to the rest of your body. Some necks are big and wide, others are long and thin. However it's shaped, your neck has a big job. It needs to be flexible enough to move, but also strong enough to support the weight of your head. Pick up a 10-pound bowling ball and you can feel how heavy a load your neck has to carry.

The seven spinal bones, or vertebrae that make up your neck are what give it stability. In between each vertebra are disks that act like cushioning shock absorbers. There are also muscles, which support the neck and give it flexibility.

Your Neck - On Sports

Playing sports regularly can put a lot of wear and tear on the muscles and ligaments of your neck.

Direct blows to your head or shoulder can lead to head injuries, as well as disc and nerve damage, strains and sprains, and other neck injuries.

Your neck takes a pounding every time you get tackled or fall. A high-speed collision that throws your head forward or backward can put a lot of force on your neck, just like getting whiplash in a car accident. When the neck is flung backward past its normal limits, it's called hyperextension. When the neck is flung forward beyond its limits, it's called hyperflexion. These sudden movements can tear ligaments -- the thick, rubber band-like tissues that connect the vertebrae in your neck -- causing a sprain or strain.

When the force of a hit or fall pushes your head to one side, you can get a neck injury called a burner or stinger. Named because of the shock-like jolt of pain it sends racing from your shoulder down your arm, a burner or stinger is caused by damage to the brachial plexus -- the bundle of nerves that supplies feeling to the arm. Burners and

stingers are common: Up to 70% of college football players report having had one of these injuries.

When a Pain in the Neck Is More Than Just a Pain

Minor neck pain is annoying, but it should eventually get better on its own or with treatment.

A serious neck injury, on the other hand, is more than just a pain in the neck. If your spinal cord is damaged, you can be paralyzed for life.

Some signs of a serious neck injury:

- Pain that doesn't go away or is severe
- Shooting pain in your arms or legs
- Numbness, weakness, or tingling in your arms or legs
- Trouble controlling your bladder or bowels

If you have taken a hard hit or fallen, seek emergency medical help right away. An X-ray, MRI, or CT scan may be needed to pinpoint the cause of the problem in the nerves, bones, and tissues of your neck.

Relief for Neck Pain

Popping a couple of over-the-counter pain relievers -- like aspirin, acetaminophen (Tylenol), or ibuprofen (Motrin) -- might be enough to relieve mild neck pain. But avoid giving aspirin to children who are under age 19. If pain relievers don't do the trick, talk to your doctor. They will want to check you over. Depending on your symptoms, your doctor may prescribe a stronger pain medicine or muscle relaxant. Corticosteroid injections may also help ease neck pain and swelling.

Another way to reduce swelling is to put an ice pack on the painful area of your neck for about 15 to 20 minutes at a time, several times a day during the first couple of days after the neck injury. Place a towel or cloth between the ice pack and your skin. After a few days you can switch to a heating pad if it feels good on your neck.

When your neck starts to feel better, ask your doctor about some easy stretches. Keeping your neck stretched and limber may increase your range of motion. Gently bend your neck to one side and then the other. Hold it for about 30 seconds on each side.

Your health care provider might recommend other stretching options such as traction -- using weights and pulleys to stretch your neck. Don't forget to also ask about strengthening exercises to build up the muscles that support your neck.

No matter how much your team needs you, rest your neck for a few days or even weeks after a neck injury to give it time to heal. Depending on the injury, you might need to wear a soft collar or brace for a couple of days to relieve pressure on your neck while it heals. Your doctor will tell you what is best for you.

When you do get back on the field, take it easy on your neck by wearing protective equipment, like shoulder pads and a helmet. Also, use the right techniques. That means no spearing -- running helmet to helmet into another player -- in football. No diving in water less than 12 feet deep. And no sliding headfirst into home plate, no matter how many runs your team is down.

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