Steps To Relieve Neck Pain

By Dr. Alyssa Musgrove

Neck pain is a common complaint and, when you take a moment to consider the anatomy of the body, it’s easy to understand why. The neck is comprised of a relatively small muscle group whose main purpose is to hold and support the head. Depending on a person’s frame, the head can weigh anywhere between 10 to 16 pounds -- about as much as a bowling ball.

Imagine holding a bowling ball above your head all day long. It would be natural – and expected – for your muscles to get fatigued. Now imagine holding that bowling ball above the head, but slightly in front of your shoulders. If you actually tried maintaining that position (which mimics the poor posture we exhibit when the neck moves forward of the shoulders), you would quickly notice a tremendous amount of tension and stress in the neck and upper back.

Poor posture is one of the biggest causes of neck pain and tension, and it has become an epidemic in today’s society – especially with the widespread use of computers, tablets and mobile phones. When we stand or sit correctly, our ear should line up with the center of our shoulder. Any time the ear moves forward of the shoulder, such as when you look down, it strains the muscles and increases stress to the neck and spine.

Chronic poor posture can lead to problems with discs, muscles and joints in our neck, as well as cause constricted blood vessels and pressure on the nerves. Slouching also results in 30 percent less oxygen intake, leading to poor energy and fatigue.

Taking steps to improve our posture can help relieve neck and back pain, while also helping us look younger and more confident. Studies have also shown that adopting an upright posture helps improve mood and self esteem, allowing people to more effectively manage their stress.

To practice good posture, use a door or wall as a guide. Place your back against the wall with your heels and the back of your head against the wall. Your ear, shoulder, hip, knee and ankle should all be in alignment. This is the proper postural alignment to maintain once you step away from the wall. It may feel awkward at first because your muscles have become accustomed to poor posture, however, the more you practice this alignment the more natural it will become.

Here are a few more simple fixes for common posture problems that lead to neck pain.

1. **Sleep posture**. Sleeping on your stomach is one of the worst postures for your neck and back. The best sleeping postures are on your side with both knees bent (some people like to put a pillow between their knees) or on your back with a pillow under your knees. Make sure you have a pillow that properly supports your neck while sleeping. The key is to ensure the head stays level when you are lying on your side. The spine should be in proper alignment, without the head tilting up or down. If you are on your back, your chin should be in a neutral position.
2. **Slouching**. People often sit this way because they feel it is more comfortable. In this position your muscles do not work as hard, but your back and neck muscles, as well as your discs and nerves, are under tremendous stress. To correct this, you must adjust your posture and learn to sit up straight. Exercises to help improve this posture include core, back extension exercises and exercises that strengthen your buttocks/glutes. Planks, back extensions and bridges are all helpful.
3. **“Text Neck” or Hunched back**. This posture results from sitting at a computer, using a tablet for long periods of time, or texting on your mobile phone. It can also develop in those who spend a lot of time reading, quilting or doing any type of work that requires looking down. This posture leads to tight chest muscles, weak upper back muscles and a forward head posture. To help correct this posture, it is important to stretch the chest and neck muscles on a daily basis. Try these exercises to strengthen the upper back and neck muscles:

* **Neck range of motion exercises.** Slowly turn your head from left to right, looking over each shoulder. Do this 10 times in each direction. Next, tilt your ear toward your left shoulder and then your right shoulder. Do this 10 times slowly to each side. In addition to tilting your head toward your shoulder you can then slowly rotate your chin toward your armpit to increase stretch in back of neck and then rotate chin toward ceiling to further stretch the front of the neck. Finally, jut your chin forward and then tuck your chin backward (like a turtle). Do this 10 times in each direction.
* **Chest stretch.** Stand in an open doorway and grasp the doorframe on each side. Lean forward while holding on to the doorframe. This will help stretch your chest muscles.
* **Exercise** on a rowing machine, making sure to use good form. This will help strengthen your back muscles and the rear shoulder muscles helping to reduce the hunched back posture.

So, sit up straight, stop slouching and utilize the recommended exercises. The more you practice good posture, the more it will become second nature, while helping you to finally get rid of that pain in your neck.

*Pathways to Healing specializes in holistic chiropractic care. Dr. Alyssa Musgrove draws on a variety of techniques, including chiropractic, kinesiology, nutrition, food allergy testing and lifestyle counseling to assist clients in achieving optimal health and wellness in one setting. Pathways to Healing is located at 1022 Founders Row, Lake Oconee Village, Greensboro. The office can be reached at 706-454-2040.*