General advice

**Be active:** Perform general exercise and activity to maintain your wellbeing and health.

**Be aware:** Make a conscious effort to maintain good posture during your daily activities. Practise postural correction when sitting. Maintain good posture when standing and walking.

**Be adaptable:** It is good for you to undertake normal physical exercise despite any neck pain and headache. If necessary, adapt to a way that allows you to continue, for example:

- Riding a bike - lift up the handlebars so you can ride with a better posture for your neck
- Running - run on grass at a park rather than on the hard surface of the road
- At the gym - seek advice from your health professional or trainer on a program which will not place adverse strain on your neck

Specific exercises for Neck Pain and Cervicogenic Headache

These exercises were chosen specifically to assist you to regain or maintain your normal neck movement and flexibility. The exercises will also help restore the muscle control necessary to support your neck during normal activities. Muscle control means control of pain and reduced headaches.

- Perform all exercises in a slow and controlled manner.
- Do each exercise as precisely as you can:
  - with each repetition, make sure the movements are smooth and slow, not quick or jerky
- Ensure you start with a good posture.

During the movement exercises, try to achieve the same distance to each side. Notice if one side is stiffer, try to gently work into the stiffness to regain your normal movement. Try to complete the repetitions for each exercise as they are prescribed.

It is normal to experience some discomfort during the exercises, though pain is not. Go to the point where pain is just felt and then return to the starting position. Exercises should not increase your pain or any other symptoms.

How often?

Perform exercises daily. If you want to do more often, an additional session a day would be helpful. Include exercise in your daily routines. You can exercise while you work. The exercise program will take no longer than 10 minutes to perform.

The postural correction exercise should be performed regularly throughout the day while sitting or standing.

Postural Correction

Keeping a good position of your spine in everyday activities will help relieve your pain. It is not possible to sit in a perfect posture all day as it becomes tiring. Instead, make sure that your chair and working area help you to keep a good supported posture. At regular times during the day, assume the ‘ideal posture’:

Straighten your spine out of any slumped position, gently bring your shoulder blades back and across towards the centre of your spine and gently lift the base of your skull off the top of your neck. Hold the position for 10 seconds.

Repeating this postural correction throughout the day is essential. Correct posture takes load off your neck and stimulates the muscles to work. It reduces the tension or stress in the neck and shoulder muscles. Regularly correct your posture throughout the day (e.g. every 15 -30 minutes). It takes only a few seconds to do.

Once you have mastered the exercise, try continuing your work while you hold your shoulders in the correct position; it eases the strain on the top of your shoulders.

Find cues to remind you to perform postural correction repetitively throughout the day - choose events that happen regularly throughout the day.

For example, think ‘correct my posture’:
- before you answer the phone
• before you answer each new email
• each time you send or receive a text message
• at every red traffic light
• during every ad on television
• anytime you drink or eat

Range of motion exercises

Side bending
Ensure correct postural position. Start with your head centred and gently bring your right ear down towards your right shoulder. You may feel a normal stretch of the muscles on the side of your neck. The exercise should be pain-free. Perform this exercise on the left side.

For each of the following exercises, complete 5-10 repetitions in each direction.

Forward and backward bending
Ensure correct postural position before starting.

A. Look down and gently bring your chin down towards your chest. Lift your chin up and return to the starting position.

B. Slowly roll your head and neck backwards to look up at the ceiling as far as it is comfortable.

C. Come back up by tucking your chin down and bringing your head back to the upright position.

Avoid letting your chin poke out. Each movement should be done slowly and purposefully taking about 2 – 4 seconds to perform. Repeat each exercise 5 – 10 times.
Exercises to retrain muscle control

**Head nod and holding exercise**
This is an important exercise to retrain the deep neck muscles of the front of your neck for pain relief and muscle control. Lie on your back with knees bent without a pillow under your head and neck - if this is not comfortable, place a small, folded towel under your head for support.

Start by looking up at a point on the ceiling. Then with your eyes, look at a spot on the wall just above your knees. Feel the back of your head slide up the bed as you perform a slow and gentle nod as if you were indicating ‘yes’.

While doing the exercise, place your hand gently on the front of the neck to feel the superficial muscles. Make sure they stay soft and relaxed when doing the head nod movement. Stop at the point you sense the muscles are beginning to harden, but keep looking down with your eyes. Hold the position for 10 seconds and then relax. Look up to a point on the ceiling to resume the starting position. Repeat the exercise 10 times.

**Head and neck exercises**
These are important exercises to retrain the muscles at the back of your neck for pain relief and muscle control. There are three exercises to perform, which ensures you exercise the upper and lower parts of your neck.

A. Just concentrate on your chin. Tip it up and down as if saying ‘yes’. It is a gentle but important exercise for the small muscles in the upper part of your neck.

B. This time, gently turn your head from side to side as if you were saying ‘no’. In other words, you only need to turn your head about 30 degrees to each side. Again it is a gentle but important exercise for other small muscles in the upper part of your neck.

C. For the third exercise, first lower your head and neck to look at your chest. Then raise and curl your neck back up. Pretend you have a book between your forearms. As you lift your head back, keep reading your book. This helps to keep the upper neck in a neutral position to focus the exercise on the lower region of your neck.

Lie on your stomach, propped up on your elbows. Push through your elbows to prevent your chest from sagging between your shoulder blades. To begin, perform each exercise five times as one set. Try to build up to three sets (and eventually three sets of 10 repetitions each). Remember to keep pushing through your elbows to keep your chest raised for the whole set. Have a rest between sets.
Shoulder blade exercises
Poor muscle control around the shoulder blades can increase pain and strain on the neck. Below are 3 exercises to help with this.

This first exercise will relax and ease any tension in the muscles on top of your shoulders. It can give you pain relief.

First exercise – photo below
Lie on your left side with your arm resting on two pillows. Roll your right shoulder blade back and across your ribs towards the centre of your back. Hold the position for 10 seconds. Repeat five times. Repeat lying on the right side for the left shoulder blade.

Second exercise - Pictures right
Make sure you are in correct posture. Concentrate on holding your shoulder blade position. Then move your arms (A) forwards and backwards; (B) out to the side; and now (C) turn your forearms outwards. Do not lift your arms more than 30 degrees in exercises A and B (that is, about a quarter of the way up).

When you feel confident that you can do the exercise keeping your shoulder blades gently back, hold a 250 gram can in each hand as a small weight.

Perform each exercise (A, B and C) five times and repeat this set three times.

Third exercise, pictures below
This exercise is simply raising alternate arms forward as far up as you can go. Make sure that you maintain a good posture, especially
concentrating on lifting the base of your skull off the top of your neck and then as you raise your arm, keep your thumb facing upwards.

**Neck isometric exercise (no movement)**
Ensure you are in the correct postural position and then gently raise the back of your head. Place your right hand on your right cheek.

Without moving your head, turn your eyes to look to the right and gently push your head into your hand as if to look over your shoulder and push back with your hand so that no movement occurs. Hold this muscle contraction for 5 seconds then relax. Should be done smoothly and gently – use only 10% effort.

Perform the same exercise on the left side – using your left hand to left cheek, eyes looking to the left. Hold each muscle contraction for 5 seconds. Perform 5 times each side.

**Coordination and balance exercises**
Some people feel a little light-headed or unsteady in association with their neck pain and headache.

These symptoms can be helped by exercises which involve co-ordinating eye and head movement and by practising balance. If you have these symptoms, try the next three exercises.

**Head moves, eye still**
Hold a pen at a comfortable distance in front of your eyes or focus on a spot on the wall.

Keep looking at the pen or spot and gently turn your head from side to side.

Turn 10 times to each side. Stop if you feel dizzy but try to for one more turn the next time you practise this exercise.

**Head still, eyes move**
Keep your head still and move the pencil about 20-25cm from the midline to one side and then the other side – make sure the pen stays within your field of vision.

Follow the pen with your eyes but keep your head still.

Move the pen 10 times to each side. Stop if you feel dizzy but try to move the pen one more time the next time you practise this exercise.
Test your balance
Aim to keep a steady balance for 30 seconds in each of the 3 positions listed below. If unsteady in a particular position, practise that position until you can hold it for 30 seconds, then progress to the next position on the list.

For safety – stand by a wall, only touch it if absolutely necessary.

Position 1 – stand with feet close together, looking straight ahead with eyes open.

Position 2 – stand with feet close together, looking straight ahead with eyes closed.

Position 3 – stand with one foot in front of the other, heel touching toes with eyes open. Use both right and left foot as the front foot (one will be easier than the other).

This information has been adapted for patients with cervicogenic headache from the Queensland Government Motor accident insurance commission 'Whiplash Injury Recovery - a Self Help Guide' developed by The University of Queensland