NECK PAIN IN RUGBY

Painful or stiff necks are extremely common, and can affect your life in many different ways. Whether it's a sharp neck pain, dull muscular aches, headache, or an inability to fully move your head, a sore neck can be very frustrating, yet with some physical therapy the majority of cases can be easily resolved. Headaches are often a symptom of a neck problem.

In rugby catastrophic neck injuries are devastating and a real risk which can result in permanent nerve damage, quadriplegia or even death. However, changes to rules, abiding by the rules to avoid foul play, scrumming laws, better education about how to handle an injured player with suspected neck injury, and rapid medical response, have all made a significant difference in drastically reducing the number of these injuries. Discussing this type of injury is clearly beyond this advice leaflet.

For the purpose of this leaflet we are dealing with neck injury and neck pain without the involvement of severe nerve injury or cervical spine fracture.

WHAT CAUSES NECK PAIN IN RUGBY?

There are many causes of neck pain. It is important to make an accurate diagnosis of the cause of your pain so that appropriate treatment can be directed.

- A traumatic injury may lead to neck pain – a bad fall during a tackle, a whiplash injury following a concussion or tackle
- Wrenching your neck in a tackle, ruck, or scrum
- Repeated overloading and chronic strain on your neck, common in front row players
- High tackle
- Poor posture (at work or school) causing neck dysfunction, exacerbated by rugby stresses
- Stress and anxiety (don't always blame the sport).

NECK JOINTS AND MUSCLES

Commonly the neck joints (cervical spine) become stiff or locked, much like a rusty hinge, if they are repeatedly overloaded. Following a single traumatic injury the ligaments holding the joints become inflamed and stiff. This in turn causes protective muscle spasm of neck and shoulder muscles. Poor postures can also lead to lack of use of certain muscles leading to weakness and often spasm too. The longer this abnormal scenario exists, the harder it is to reverse the habit. Your neck posture alters, which strains adjacent joints and muscles, and the condition cyclically deteriorates. Ultimately you end up with a sore neck.

There is normally a combination of:

- Neck joint stiffness and inflammation, where ligaments may have been traumatically strained or a chronic repetitive abnormal loading have caused injury.
- Muscle spasm as a protective response, or muscle spasm due to weakness. These can often develop trigger points and cause headaches.
- Underlying imbalance of short tight overused muscles and long weak underused muscles commonly due to poor technique and posture.

SYMPTOMS OF NECK PAIN

- Pain in the neck, referring to the head, or down the arm and shoulders
- Sharp pain on movement or a constant dull ache
- Reduced movement in a direction or on rotation
- Pins and needles, numbness in the arm
- Headache

Your neck pain may not be solely about stiff joints or tight/weak neck muscles. A physical therapist will collect and analyse a whole range of information during your diagnostic consultation. They'll also consider other systemic conditions that can cause neck pain such as cancer, and direct you towards the appropriate healthcare practitioner if appropriate.

WHAT IS THE BEST TREATMENT FOR NECK PAIN?

The best treatment for your neck pain is determined entirely by the specific reasons for WHY you are suffering neck pain.

1. The vast majority of neck pain does come from your neck joints and muscles. Physical therapy can aid in relieving pain and improving joint mobility through
   - Massage, soft tissue mobilisation, trigger point therapy
   - Joint mobilisation or manipulation
   - Electrotherapy
   - Neural mobilisation
   - Acupuncture, dry needling
   - Strapping or tapping
2. Posture correction is important but it does depend upon the availability of enough joint and muscle flexibility to attain a good posture, plus muscle strength and endurance to maintain your good posture. Any deficit will need to be addressed.
3. Strength training is essential. To maintain good alignment of the cervical vertebra and off-load the joints, muscles must be balanced in strength, co-ordination and endurance. Similarly weak muscles that fatigue easily are prone to muscle spasm.
4. Sports-specific training – this includes education on safe tackling and scrumming techniques to prevent injury. Specific strengthening for front row players is crucial to reduce neck injury risk.

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