

Exercises and Stretches for a Healthier Neck

Following is a group of exercises and stretches that may be beneficial to relieve and prevent neck pain. This group of exercises is not intended to substitute for any that may have been prescribed by your healthcare practitioner. If you experience increased pain while performing these activities, stop immediately and seek medical attention.

Isometric Neck Strengthening - Isometric exercises are performed by contracting a muscle against resistance, without joint movement. When performing the following exercises, begin by applying light pressure for 10-20 seconds. The correct manner to perform this group of exercises is to apply pressure with the hand and meet the resistance with the hand. Do not forcibly push your head into the hand. As the muscles begin to strengthen, more pressure may be applied. It is important to begin these exercises in an erect position. So, sit up straight and slightly tuck your chin before beginning.



Neck extension strengthening - Place the fingers over the back of the head and apply light forward pressure. Meet the resistance with the head.

Side bending strengthening - With your head in a neutral position, spread your fingertips above / around the ear. Add light pressure with the hand and meet the resistance with the head.



Isometric neck flexion strengthening - With your index and middle fingers placed between your eyes, apply light backward pressure and meet the resistance with your head and neck.

Trapezius/Levator Scapulae - With your hands behind your back, grasp the wrist of the side that you would like to stretch with opposite hand and pull down lightly. Sit upright, turn your head away from the side that you would like to stretch and allow your head to drop forward slowly. A light stretch should be felt along the root of the neck. If additional stretch is desired, tuck your chin forward. For added stretch, reach over the top of the head and lightly pull on the head to stretch.

The levator scapulae is stretched by placing the opposite hand behind the neck and flaring the elbow behind the ear. Pull the head diagonally forward.





Scalene stretch - While standing or sitting (photo below), reach down with one hand and reach over the top of the head with the other. Place your fingers over the ear. Pull the head to the side.



Wall Angels - Lean your back against the wall with the feet about two feet from the wall. Perform a 1/3 squat and maintain a slight curve in the low back. Place your wrists and elbows flat against the wall (if possible). (If you are unable to touch the wrists and elbows against the wall, please perform the pectoralis stretches first). Next, brush the wrists and elbows up and down against the wall while maintaining contact with the back, wrists and elbows (similar to the snow angels that you did as a child). Muscle contractions should be felt between the shoulder blades.
Frequency and repetitions: 10 in the morning, afternoon and evening.

***After mastering wall angels, you may progress to a more difficult exercise (usually within 23 weeks). Lay on your stomach with a towel beneath your forehead. With the palms facing the floor, reach toward your feet. Lift the hands from the floor and squeeze your shoulder blades together. *Hold for 10 seconds. Repeat 10 times.*

Neck Curls - Think of this exercise as sit-ups for the neck. Lay on a firm surface with a thin pillow behind the head. Turn your hands palms up, reach toward the feet and sit on your hands. This will keep the shoulder blade depressed. Perform a chin tuck and raise the head slowly. Keep the chin tuck and lower the head. During the early stages, you may need to place a thicker pillow behind the head and perform an isometric muscle contraction. Later progress to the full range of motion.
Repetitions: to fatigue.



*** this exercise is too strenuous, begin by performing a seated chin tuck and applying light pressure above the eyes. A deep muscle contraction will be experienced.



Pectoralis Stretches - The pectoral muscles may be stretched in a doorway, or in the corner of a room. The key factor to remember is that you cannot properly stretch a muscle that is contracting (tightening). Therefore, be sure to relax the chest muscles and allow the stretch to slowly occur. If this stretch bothers your shoulders, drop the elbow below shoulder height. Otherwise, be sure to perform this stretch with the elbow at different heights (above the shoulder, at shoulder height and below shoulder height). *Hold for 30-60 seconds and repeat 3 times.*

Postural Correction/Stabilization [AKA Brugger's relief positioning]

In order to correct an improper posture, repetitive reinforcement is necessary. This exercise should be performed hourly for approximately 10 seconds. [Realize that, initially, you are likely to develop soreness in the lower neck, anterior chest and mid-scapular areas (between the shoulder blades) if performed correctly.

1. Sit upright
2. Lift your sternum upward [like a pump handle]
3. Brace your shoulder blades down, back and together
4. Perform a light chin tuck [try to give yourself a double chin].



When performed correctly, you should experience some mild pulling at the root of the neck. Many people report some soreness and pulling across the front of the chest and between the shoulder blades.

Photos Courtesy of PhysioVideo