

Neck Pain — Exercises That Help



WHAT IS HAPPENING?



Most neck pain comes from the muscles and joints of the neck, and that kind of neck pain is not dangerous. It usually gets better with gentle movement and steady exercise, and the exercises below build the deep muscles that hold your head up and the shoulder-blade muscles that take load off your neck.



READ THIS BEFORE YOU START

Read this first. These exercises are general education, not a diagnosis. If you have not been examined for this problem, call us before starting. Stop and read "Stop and get help" on the last page now, so you know the warning signs before you begin.

KEEP THE SUPPORT SHOWN IN THE PICTURE

Where a movement picture is shown, it shows the complete person and the complete safety setup.

How Your Week Fits Together

● WHY THESE MOVEMENTS HELP

- **Chin Tuck (Lying Down):** to wake up and strengthen the deep muscles at the front of your neck that hold your head up all day
- **Shoulder Blade Squeeze with a Band:** to strengthen the upper back and shoulder blade muscles so they carry the load instead of your neck
- **Slow Neck Turns:** to keep your neck moving freely so turning your head — like checking your blind spot — stops feeling scary
- **Recumbent Bike:** gentle whole-body exercise turns down how loudly your body signals pain, and it helps your blood pressure, blood sugar, and weight at the same time
- **Seated Row (Chest-Supported):** to build the mid-back muscles that hold your shoulder blades steady, so your neck muscles do not have to work overtime
- **Lat Pulldown (Pulled Down in Front):** to build the big back muscles that pull your shoulder blades down, so the overworked muscle on top of your shoulder can stop doing all the work

Side-of-Neck Stretch (the big muscle that runs from your neck to the top of your shoulder)

Match the setup first. Then move slowly toward the end-position reference.

1 START / SETUP



MATCH THIS SETUP

2 END POSITION



MOVE TO HERE

WATCH THIS

Do not put your hand on your head and do not pull — the hand gripping the chair is doing the work.

SET UP

Sit tall in a firm chair with both feet flat on the floor. Grip the front edge of the seat with your RIGHT hand, beside your right thigh — this holds your right shoulder down and is what makes the stretch work. Let your LEFT hand rest in your lap, palm up. Keep it there the whole time.

DO THIS

Gently tip your LEFT ear toward your LEFT shoulder until you feel a comfortable pull down the RIGHT side of your neck. Keep your nose pointed straight ahead; do not turn your head or tip it backward. Then switch: grip the seat with your LEFT hand, rest your RIGHT hand in your lap, and tip your RIGHT ear toward your RIGHT shoulder.

HOW MUCH

Hold 30 seconds. Do it 2 times on the left, then 2 times on the right. Once or twice a day, 7 days a week. Start this in week 1.

FORM CHECK

Do not put your hand on your head and do not pull — the hand gripping the chair is doing the work. Keep your nose pointed straight ahead; do not turn your head or tip it backward. This should feel like a mild stretch, about a 3 out of 10, where 0 means no pain and 10 means the worst pain you can imagine. If you feel tingling or shooting pain down your arm, stop right away.

Back-Corner-of-Neck Stretch (the muscle that runs from your neck down to your shoulder blade)

Match the setup first. Then move slowly toward the end-position reference.

1 START / SETUP



MATCH THIS SETUP

2 END POSITION



MOVE TO HERE

WATCH THIS

Keep both hands off your head — let the weight of your head do the stretching.

SET UP

Sit tall in a firm chair with both feet flat on the floor. Grip the front edge of the seat with your RIGHT hand. Let your LEFT hand rest in your lap, palm up, and leave it there.

DO THIS

Turn your head about 45 degrees toward your LEFT — about halfway to looking over your left shoulder. Now let your head drop forward on its own, looking down toward your left armpit, until you feel a gentle pull in the back right corner of your neck where it meets your shoulder. Then switch: grip the seat with your LEFT hand, rest your RIGHT hand in your lap, turn your head 45 degrees to the RIGHT and look down toward your right armpit.

HOW MUCH

Hold 30 seconds. Do it 2 times on each side. Once or twice a day, 7 days a week. Start this in week 1.

FORM CHECK

Keep both hands off your head — let the weight of your head do the stretching. The direction is down and away, toward your armpit, never up toward the ceiling. If you feel an electric or buzzing feeling shoot down your back or arms when you bend your neck forward, stop and see the "Stop and get help" list.

Chin Tuck (Lying Down)

Match the setup first. Then move slowly toward the end-position reference.

1 START / SETUP



MATCH THIS SETUP

2 END POSITION



MOVE TO HERE

WATCH THIS

Keep breathing normally the whole time — never hold your breath, because that raises your blood pressure.

WHY IT HELPS

to wake up and strengthen the deep muscles at the front of your neck that hold your head up all day

SET UP

Lie on your back on a BED, not the floor, with your knees bent and both feet flat. Put a folded towel under the back of your head — use however much you need so your face is level with the ceiling and your chin is not pointing up. Some people need a thin towel; some need a thick one or a small pillow. If lying flat is uncomfortable — for example if you get short of breath or heartburn lying down — do this sitting instead, with the back of your head resting lightly against a wall.

DO THIS

Slowly nod your chin down toward your throat, like you are making a gentle double chin. Keep the back of your head resting on the towel the whole time — this is a nod, not a head lift. To get up afterward, roll onto your side first and push up with your arms. Do not sit straight up from your back.

HOW MUCH

Hold 5 seconds, then relax 5 seconds. Do 10 in a row, twice a day — morning and evening — 5 to 7 days a week. After 2 to 4 weeks, build the hold up to 10 seconds. Start this in week 1.

FORM CHECK

Keep breathing normally the whole time — never hold your breath, because that raises your blood pressure. This is a small, gentle nod at about one-fifth of your effort. If the muscles on the front of your neck stand out like cords, or your head lifts off the towel, you are pushing far too hard.

Shoulder Blade Squeeze with a Band

Match the setup first. Then move slowly toward the end-position reference.

1 START / SETUP



MATCH THIS SETUP

2 END POSITION



MOVE TO HERE

WATCH THIS

Bands are not color-coded the same way from brand to brand, so do not go by color.

WHY IT HELPS

to strengthen the upper back and shoulder blade muscles so they carry the load instead of your neck

SET UP

Sit tall in a firm chair with both feet flat on the floor, back away from the chair back. Hold a light resistance band with both hands straight out in front of your chest, hands about shoulder-width apart, palms facing down. Look the band over before every use — if you see a nick, crack, cloudy spot, or thin patch, throw it out and get a new one.

DO THIS

Keeping your elbows almost straight, pull your hands apart and out to your sides so the band stretches across your chest. Squeeze your shoulder blades (the flat bones on your upper back) together, then slowly let your hands travel back together.

HOW MUCH

10 to 12 pulls, 2 sets, resting 1 minute between sets, 3 days a week. Start this in week 3, after two weeks of the chin tucks, neck turns, and stretches. Once you begin the gym exercises, skip this one on gym days — the seated row trains the same muscles.

FORM CHECK

Bands are not color-coded the same way from brand to brand, so do not go by color. Pick a band you can pull apart 12 times without shrugging, without your chin poking forward, and where the last pull still feels like you had 2 or 3 more in you. If you cannot, the band is too strong. Keep the band below eye level, and never anchor it to a door or under your feet for this exercise. Keep your shoulders pulled down and away from your ears.

Slow Neck Turns

Match the setup first. Then move slowly toward the end-position reference.

1 START / SETUP



MATCH THIS SETUP

2 END POSITION



MOVE TO HERE

WATCH THIS Keep your chin level, as if your nose is tracing a flat tabletop.

WHY IT HELPS to keep your neck moving freely so turning your head — like checking your blind spot — stops feeling scary

SET UP

Sit tall in a chair with your feet flat on the floor, shoulders relaxed and level, looking straight ahead. Stay seated for this one.

DO THIS

Slowly turn your head to look over one shoulder, keeping your chin level, until you feel a gentle pull but no pain. Pause there, return to the middle, then turn slowly to the other side.

HOW MUCH

5 slow turns to each side, pausing 2 to 3 seconds at the end of each turn. Do this 2 to 3 times a day, every day. Start this in week 1.

FORM CHECK

Keep your chin level, as if your nose is tracing a flat tabletop. Never tip your head back and turn at the same time. Turn only as far as is comfortable and never force it. If you feel dizzy, stay seated until it passes completely before you stand up.

Recumbent Bike

Match the setup first. Then move slowly toward the end-position reference.

1 START / SETUP



MATCH THIS SETUP

2 END POSITION



MOVE TO HERE

WATCH THIS

If you take insulin, a sulfonylurea, or a GLP-1 shot, do not ride on an empty stomach, keep water with you, and check your sugar if you feel shaky, sweaty, or confused.

WHY IT HELPS

gentle whole-body exercise turns down how loudly your body signals pain, and it helps your blood pressure, blood sugar, and weight at the same time

SET UP

MACHINE: Recumbent stationary bike — the one with a wide seat and a backrest, where the pedals are out in front of you instead of underneath. Every Planet Fitness, LA Fitness, and YMCA has these.

Sit all the way back so your whole back is supported by the backrest. Slide the seat forward or back so that when a pedal is at its farthest point, your knee is still slightly bent. Put a water bottle in the holder before you start.

DO THIS

Pedal at a steady, easy pace that you could still hold a conversation through. Rest your hands lightly on the side handles beside your hips and let the backrest do the work of holding you up.

HOW MUCH

Start with 10 minutes and add 2 to 3 minutes each week until you reach 20 to 30 minutes, 3 to 5 days a week. Work up to 30 minutes on 5 days — 150 minutes a week is the goal for your blood pressure, blood sugar, and weight. You can start this one in week 1; it does not have to wait.

FORM CHECK

If you take insulin, a sulfonylurea, or a GLP-1 shot, do not ride on an empty stomach, keep water with you, and check your sugar if you feel shaky, sweaty, or confused. Your neck feels better when your head is not hanging forward, so if you want to watch something, raise it to eye level rather than looking down into your lap.

Seated Row (Chest-Supported)

Match the setup first. Then move slowly toward the end-position reference.

1 START / SETUP



MATCH THIS SETUP

2 END POSITION



MOVE TO HERE

WATCH THIS Breathe out as you pull.

WHY IT HELPS

to build the mid-back muscles that hold your shoulder blades steady, so your neck muscles do not have to work overtime

SET UP

MACHINE: Seated row machine — the one with a padded chest rest you lean against. Planet Fitness labels it "Seated Row." At LA Fitness or the YMCA it may be a Hammer Strength, Cybex, or Life Fitness chest-supported row.

Adjust the seat up or down so the handles sit at about the height of your lower chest. Sit with your breastbone resting lightly against the chest pad, feet flat, and hold one handle in each hand with your arms straight.

DO THIS

Pull the handles straight back toward your ribs, leading with your elbows and letting your shoulder blades slide together behind you. Then let the handles travel slowly back out until your arms are straight again.

HOW MUCH

Start with the lightest plate on the stack. Do 10 to 12 pulls, 2 sets, resting 1 to 2 minutes between sets, 2 days a week with at least one rest day in between. Move up one plate only when you finish all 12 easily AND your neck was quiet the next morning. Start this in week 5 or later, once the home exercises are going well.

FORM CHECK

Breathe out as you pull. Never hold your breath. Keep your chest on the pad and your chin gently tucked. The most common mistake is throwing your head and chin forward to help move the weight — if your neck is doing the pulling, the weight is too heavy.

Lat Pulldown (Pulled Down in Front)

Match the setup first. Then move slowly toward the end-position reference.

1 START / SETUP



MATCH THIS SETUP

2 END POSITION



MOVE TO HERE

WATCH THIS Breathe out as you pull the bar down.

WHY IT HELPS

to build the big back muscles that pull your shoulder blades down, so the overworked muscle on top of your shoulder can stop doing all the work

SET UP

MACHINE: Lat pulldown machine — a tall machine with a seat, a padded roller that holds your thighs down, and a long bar hanging overhead from a cable. Planet Fitness, LA Fitness, and the YMCA all have one.

Set the weight to the lightest plate on the stack. Adjust the thigh roller so it presses firmly down on your thighs when you sit, which keeps you from being lifted off the seat. Stand up, take hold of the bar with both hands a little wider than your shoulders with your palms facing away from you, then sit down with your thighs under the roller and both feet flat on the floor.

HOW MUCH

Start with the lightest plate on the stack. Do 10 to 12 pulls, 2 sets, resting 1 to 2 minutes between sets, 2 days a week — the same 2 days you do the seated row, with at least one rest day in between. Move up one plate only when you finish all 12 easily AND your neck was quiet the next morning. Start this in week 5 or later.

DO THIS

Sit tall with your chest lifted and lean back only slightly. Pull the bar down in **FRONT** of your face until it touches the top of your chest, driving your elbows down toward your hip pockets. Then let the bar rise slowly back up until your arms are straight.

FORM CHECK

Breathe out as you pull the bar down. Never hold your breath. The bar comes down in **FRONT** of you — never behind your head or neck. Keep your chin level and gently tucked; if your chin pokes forward, or you have to swing backward to move the bar, the weight is too heavy. If you feel pinching in the front or top of your shoulder, stop this one and tell us. The first time, ask a staff member to set the thigh pad and show you the bar height — it takes 30 seconds and they are used to the question.

Do Not Do These

- **Do not start this program at all — call us first — if any of these are true:**
- You have pain, numbness, tingling, or weakness going down an arm. That points to a nerve, not a muscle, and needs a different plan.
- Your neck pain started after a fall, a car crash, or a blow to the head. A bone injury has to be ruled out first.
- You have had neck surgery. Your neck may not be built to move the way these exercises ask.
- You have been told you have rheumatoid arthritis in your neck, a neck fracture, or a loose or unstable neck. These need clearance from us before any neck exercise.
- You were told your neck pain comes from a pinched nerve or from pressure on the spinal cord. This sheet is not written for that.
- **Once you have started, do not do these:**
- Full neck circles, or rolling your head all the way around. Tipping your head back and turning at the same time squeezes the small joints at the base of your skull and reliably brings on pain and dizziness. There is no benefit to it. Move in one direction at a time instead.
- Behind-the-neck lat pulldown and behind-the-neck shoulder press. Pulling a bar down behind your head forces your neck forward under load and strains the muscles along the top of your shoulder. Always pull the bar down in FRONT, to your upper chest.
- Heavy shoulder shrugs, upright rows, and the heavy overhead shoulder press machine. These load the muscle on top of your shoulder that is already overworked and tender in most neck pain, and overhead pressing pushes many people into arching the neck backward.

Do Not Do These

- The 4-way neck machine, a padded machine you push your head against, if your gym has one. It loads your neck at the very end of its range with nobody watching your form, and it is very easy to overdo.
- Sit-ups or crunches with your hands laced behind your head. Almost everyone ends up yanking their own head forward. If you do abdominal work, cross your arms over your chest instead.
- Carrying something heavy on one side — groceries, a purse, a tool bag on one shoulder. One-sided loads pull on the same overworked muscle at the top of your shoulder. Split the load between both hands.
- Cracking or twisting your own neck to make it pop. It feels good for a few minutes but does not fix anything, and it tends to make you do it more and more often. Move through your range gently instead.
- Holding your breath and straining while you lift. This spikes your blood pressure. Breathe out on the effort, every rep.
- Long stretches of looking up and turning: painting a ceiling, working overhead, or lying with your head tipped back over a sink. Take a break every few minutes and bring your head back to level.
- Buying a soft collar on your own. Resting your neck in a collar makes the muscles weaker, which is the opposite of what you need — unless we specifically told you to wear one.
- Buying an over-the-door or hanging home neck traction device. Traction does help some people, but only for the right diagnosis and the right setup. Ask us first.
- Any exercise that sends pain, numbness, or tingling **DOWN YOUR ARM** — stop that exercise, whether or not it appears on this list, and tell us about it. But if arm pain comes together with chest pressure, jaw pain, sweating, or shortness of breath, call 911. That is a heart warning, not a neck problem.

Warning Signs and What to Do

- Pressure, tightness, squeezing, or pain in your chest, jaw, throat, or down either arm during or right after exercise; unusual shortness of breath; breaking out in a cold sweat; or feeling like you might pass out. Do not wait to see if it goes away. Women, older adults, and people with diabetes often have little or no chest pain when the heart is the problem. **Call 911.**
- Dizziness that comes along with ANY of these: double vision, slurred speech, trouble swallowing, numbness on one side of your face, or suddenly dropping to the ground — especially if it starts when you turn your head or look up. **Call 911.**
- Sudden face drooping, weakness on one side of your body, or trouble speaking or understanding speech. **Call 911.**
- A sudden, severe headache or neck pain unlike anything you have ever had before. **Call 911.**
- Neck pain with a fever, especially if you also have a stiff neck you cannot bend forward, a bad headache, light hurting your eyes, confusion, or you just feel very sick. Go now if you have diabetes, take steroids or chemotherapy, are on dialysis, or recently had an infection or a shot in your spine. **Go to the ER today.**
- New trouble controlling your bladder or bowels, trouble starting your urine stream, or numbness in the groin or inner thighs. **Go to the ER today.**
- Weakness in an arm, hand, or leg that is clearly getting worse over days, or new unsteadiness with actual falls. **Go to the ER today.**
- Neck pain that started right after a fall, a car crash, or a blow to the head — and go even if you feel fine, if you hit your head while taking a blood thinner. **Go to the ER today.**
- Stop these exercises: your hands have become clumsy — you drop things, or buttons, zippers, coins, or your handwriting have gotten noticeably harder. **Call the office today.**
- Stop these exercises: your walking has changed — you feel unsteady or you have started walking with your feet wider apart. **Call the office today.**

Warning Signs and What to Do

- Stop these exercises: new numbness or tingling in BOTH hands, or new numbness or tingling in your legs or feet. **Call the office today.**
- Stop these exercises: new weakness in an arm or hand. **Call the office today.**
- Stop these exercises: an electric shock, buzzing, or zinging feeling that shoots down your back, arms, or legs when you bend your neck forward. **Call the office today.**
- You get dizzy or lightheaded during an exercise or when you stand up, and nothing else is going on — no double vision, no slurred speech, no facial numbness. Stop, sit down until it passes completely, and drink some water. **Call the office today.**
- Neck pain with night sweats, unexplained weight loss, neck pain that wakes you from sleep every night, or any neck pain if you have a history of cancer. **Call the office this week.**
- New pain, numbness, or tingling that runs down one arm. Stop the exercises. **Call the office this week.**
- Pinching in the front or top of your shoulder during the lat pulldown or the seated row. Stop that exercise. **Call the office this week.**
- Your neck is no better after 6 weeks of doing these exercises. **Call the office this week.**

How to Adjust or Stop

- Some soreness is normal and safe. It does not mean you are causing damage.
- Use the "quiet by morning" rule: mild discomfort up to about 3 out of 10 during or after these exercises is fine, as long as it settles down within about 30 minutes and your neck is no worse the next morning. On this scale, 0 means no pain and 10 means the worst pain you can imagine.
- Back off — fewer reps, less weight, a smaller range of motion — if the pain is sharp, climbs above 4 out of 10, spreads down your arm, or is still worse the next day.
- If you have had to keep backing off for two weeks in a row, call the office. Something needs to change.
- Stop right away and sit down if any exercise makes you dizzy, lightheaded, or sick to your stomach. If you take insulin, a sulfonylurea, or a GLP-1 shot, check your blood sugar and drink some water — low blood sugar and not drinking enough are the two most common causes.
- Stop and call 911 if you get chest pressure, jaw or arm pain, a cold sweat, or unusual shortness of breath during or right after exercise.

When We Recheck Your Plan

- Give these exercises a fair trial for 4 to 6 weeks. Most neck pain improves a lot over 6 to 12 weeks, so call the office at 6 weeks to tell us how you are doing — sooner if you are getting worse. Keep doing the exercises after you feel better, because the benefit fades if you stop.