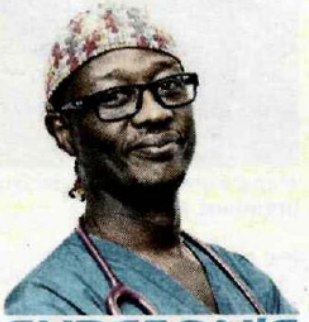
Pain in your neck



SURGEON'S CORNER

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Neck pain is one of the most common physical complaints worldwide, affecting approximately one in five adults annually. While it often feels like a minor nuisance, it can range from a nagging ache to a life-altering disability. Understanding your specific risk profile and knowing how to manage symptoms is the first step toward a pain-free life.

Neck pain does not discriminate, but it does favour certain groups. Globally, women report neck pain more frequently than men, with prevalence often peaking between the ages of 45 and 49.

THE MOST AFFECTED PEOPLE

Different sub-populations face unique challenges:

- **Office and tech workers:** The "Text Neck" generation is at high risk due to prolonged sitting, poor workstation ergonomics, and repetitive movements like typing.
- **Manual labourers:** Those who perform overhead work or operate vibrating tools often experience strain from physical overexertion.
- **The older persons:** Aging brings degenerative changes, such as arthritis of the neck, which becomes more prevalent after age 45.
- **Students:** Even young adults are increasingly affected by improper laptop use and the weight of heavy backpacks.
- **Rural women and girls:** Women who carry heavy loads (such as water, firewood, or crops) on their heads day after day face a unique set of physiological challenges. While this method is culturally significant and necessary for survival in many regions, it leads to high rates of neck pain and accelerated spine/back bone wear. These women often carry loads equivalent to 25% to 50% of their body mass. The average weight for essential supplies like water and wood typically ranges from 15kg to 20kg.

HOW THE PAIN MANIFESTS

Neck pain presents differently depending on the underlying cause: Pain felt only in the neck itself, often described as a dull ache or stiffness.

A "pinched nerve" often causes sharp, shooting, or burning sensations that travel down the arm or into the hand, often accompanied by 'pins and needles'.

Muscle Spasms: Sudden, painful tightening of the muscles that can lock the neck in one position.

Referred Pain: Discomfort that starts elsewhere, such as a tension headache, but is felt in the neck.

The causes can be physical. These could include; poor posture or sedentary lifestyles of long periods of sitting or lying down with minimal energy expenditure.

Sleep deprivation can also be another physical cause.

Psychosocial causes of neck pain can be stress, anxiety, and depression.

The environmental origin of neck pain can be poor office lighting causing you to crane your neck and cold climates that lead to muscle bracing.

If you experience loss of bowel or bladder control, sudden weakness or clumsiness in the hands and severe headache, fever, or unexplained weight loss; see a doctor because these are red flags.

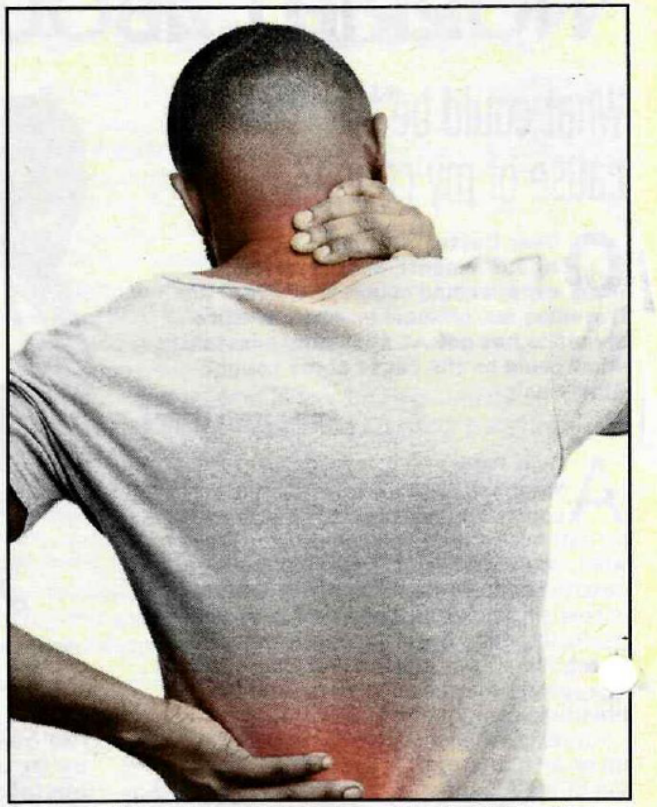
COMMON MISTAKES

The biggest contributor to modern neck pain is related to the daily use of laptops and mobile phones:

1. **using a laptop directly on a desk without accessories:** Laptops force a trade-off–either the screen is at the right height and the keyboard is too high (straining shoulders), or the keyboard is right and the screen is too low (straining the neck).

2. **When your keyboard or mouse is too far away:** Your arms "float" without support from armrests or the desk. Your neck and shoulder muscles (specifically the trapezius) must stay constantly contracted just to hold your arms up. Keep your mouse and keyboard close enough that your elbows stay tucked at a 90-degree angle by your sides.

3. **Cradling a phone between your ear and shoulder:** This is an "ergonomic disaster" that causes instant muscle spasms. It forces the neck into extreme lateral flexion and compresses nerves. Always use a headset or speaker-phone for calls longer than a minute.



A man rubbing his painful neck and back. Neck pain can result from poor posture and a sedentary lifestyles of long periods of lying down with less energy expenditure

TREATMENT OPTIONS

Selfcare: Heat or ice packs can soothe acute strain. Over-the-counter pain relievers like paracetamol are common, though their effectiveness varies.

Physical therapy: Specialised exercises to strengthen neck muscles and improve range of motion are highly effective.

Advanced options: In rare cases, injections or surgery may be needed if a nerve is severely compressed.

PREVENTION TIPS

Ensure your computer screen is at eye level and your keyboard is at a comfortable height.

Take frequent breaks to stretch and avoid "static" postures.

Regular exercise (at least three times a week) and managing stress can significantly reduce your risk.