Migraine Trigger Guide:

Neck

Explanation

A 2010 study of 113 patients found that neck pain occurred with migraine attacks more often than nausea, even though nausea is closely associated with migraine.¹

Another informal poll was taken from 144 migraine patients with neck pain:²

- 69% felt tightness
- 17% experienced stiffness
- 60% said the neck pain came first

Neck pain can include the muscles or nerves in the neck. Neck discomfort can also occur in the bones of the spine or the discs that cushion the areas between the spinal bones. It can also feel like the migraine attack is in the base of the neck.

Others say it feels like a migraine attack that radiates from the neck to the head.

As with so many things, when it comes to neck pain, an ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure.

It’s true that some causes of neck pain, such as age-related wear and tear, are not under your control. On the other hand, there are many things you can do to minimize your risk.

One place to start is to look at how you sleep and what effect this may have on neck pain.

Neck-related headache, called Cervicogenic Headache or Cervical Headache, is most often felt in the back of the head and upper neck, where muscles extending along the skull are contiguous with neck muscles that may become

tense or go into spasm.

Neck-related headache pain is typically dull or aching, rather than sharp. It is aggravated by neck movement and often accompanied by stiffness and tenderness of neck muscles.

Warning: A stiff neck can be a sign of a more serious or potentially life-threatening condition. Seek immediate medical assistance if you experience a stiff neck along with fever and headache.

Sometimes pain starts with the bang of a rear-end collision, but more often the neck and its surrounding structures begin to ache after years of normal use, overuse, and misuse.

Without knowing it, you may be encouraging neck and shoulder pain by the way you perform everyday activities.

In general, try to keep your neck in a neutral position, which means your head balances directly over your shoulders and is not leaning forward or cocked to one side.

Trigger causes

There are many triggers for neck pain or discomfort.

- Poor posture (when sitting, sleeping, or standing)
- Sports injury to the neck, back, or shoulder(s)
- Muscle strain in the neck, back, or shoulder(s)
  - Overuse, such as too many hours hunched over a steering wheel, may trigger muscle strains.
  - Even such minor things as reading in bed or grinding your teeth can strain neck muscles.
- Trauma to the neck, back, or shoulder(s)
  - Rear-end car collisions often result in whiplash injuries, which occur when the head is jerked backward and then forward. This stretches the soft tissues of the neck beyond their limits.
- Compressed nerves
  - Herniated disks or bone spurs in the vertebrae of your neck can take up too much space and press on the nerves branching out from the spinal cord.
- Worn joints
  - Just like all the other joints in your body, your neck joints tend to undergo wear and tear with age, which can cause osteoarthritis in your neck.
- Ruptured disks
- Fractures
Osteoporosis
- Whiplash
- Fibromyalgia
- Bone spurs
- Dystonia
  - This a state of abnormal muscle tone resulting in muscular spasm and abnormal posture, typically due to neurological disease or a side effect of drug therapy.

Diseases
- Neck pain can sometimes be caused by diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis, meningitis, or cancer.
- Spinal stenosis (narrowing of the spinal canal).
- Infection of the spine.

How do you know if this is an issue?

Stiffness, pain, or discomfort in the neck, upper back, or shoulder region is typically a good indicator that there may be something there that could be contributing to your migraine attacks, particularly if you notice this discomfort increasing around the times you have an attack.

Options to try

Most neck pain is associated with poor posture on top of age-related wear and tear.

To help prevent neck pain, keep your head centered over your spine so gravity works with your neck instead of against it.

Some simple changes in your daily routine may help. Consider:

When using an iPad or tablet:

- Get a tablet case that props up your device at a comfortable viewing angle
  - Take a break every 15 minutes
  - Shift your hands and your weight, stand up or sit down
- When using a laptop or desktop computer, same tips as above for a tablet, plus:
  - Use an external keyboard.
  - Keep shoulders relaxed and elbows close to your body.
  - Keep hands, wrists, forearms and thighs parallel to the floor.
  - Keep your head balanced directly over your spine as much as possible when working at the computer or at a desk. That means setting your chair height so both feet rest on the ground, and sitting with your buttocks far back in your chair, using a small pillow to support your lower back, if needed.
Properly adjusting the keyboard and monitor may be difficult or impossible with a laptop computer. You can plug a separate, full-size keyboard into a laptop to help you achieve better positioning.

But no matter how perfect your office-chair posture, it’s important to get up, stretch, and move around every half hour. If you tend to get lost in your work, program your computer to flash a reminder.

- Walking
  - Avoid high heels, which change the alignment of your body from the ground up, characteristically ending in a head-thrust-forward position that stresses neck muscles. This may be one reason women have neck pain more than men do.

- Carrying a bag
  - Choose a lightweight purse or backpack and don’t overload. Don’t sling a backpack over one shoulder. Try switching to a fanny pack or a backpack designed to put weight on the hips instead of just the upper back.
  - With heavier loads use a wheeled pack or briefcase. If you must hoist a purse on your shoulder, alternate which shoulder you use.

- Driving
  - Posture is a factor in whether a collision will cause whiplash. Your headrest should be high enough and close enough to catch your head in a rear-end collision.
  - Position the seat so you can sit up straight with your head no more than two to four inches in front of the headrest. Adjust the headrest so its upper edge is level with the top of your head: the back curve of your skull should meet the cushion of the headrest.

- Lifting
  - Avoid improper lifting techniques that put stress on the neck as well as the lower back. Bend your hips and knees instead of your back.
  - Keep the object close to you while straightening your legs. When lifting something over your head, don’t tilt your neck backward.

- Watching TV
  - Sit far enough from a TV or movie screen that you can watch without tilting your head back.
  - Don’t sit off to the side, forcing you to turn your neck for long periods.

- Take frequent breaks
If you drive long distances or work long hours at your computer, keep your head back over your spine, to reduce neck strain. Avoid grinding your teeth.

On the phone
- Avoid tucking the phone between your ear and shoulder when you talk. If you use the phone frequently or for extended periods, use a headset or earphones with a mouthpiece.

Reading at home
- If you are sitting in a chair, try to maintain an upright posture. Hold the book so that you don’t have to lean down or forward to see it. A pillow on your lap may help. If you must read in bed, sit up straight, or use a specially designed wedge pillow, or lie on your side with your neck straight and hold the book in front of you.
- Using a Kindle is preferable to reading a heavy book or a bright tablet or phone. The Kindle’s light weight and unique lighting screen make it well suited for those with migraine.

Stretch frequently
- When you work at a desk, shrug your shoulders up and down. Pull your shoulder blades together and then relax. Pull your shoulders down while leaning your head to each side to stretch your neck muscles.

Avoid sleeping on your stomach
- This position puts stress on your neck. Choose a pillow that supports the natural curve of your neck.
- Two sleeping positions easiest on the neck are on your side or on your back. If you sleep on your back, choose a rounded pillow to support the natural curve of your neck, with a flatter pillow cushioning your head. This can be achieved by tucking a small neck roll into the pillowcase of a flatter, softer pillow, or by using a special pillow that has a built-in neck support with an indentation for the head to rest in.

Additional tips for side and back-sleepers:

- Try using a feather pillow, which easily conforms to the shape of the neck. Feather pillows will collapse over time, however, and should be replaced every year or so.
- Another option is a traditionally shaped pillow with “memory foam” that conforms to the contour of your head and neck. Some cervical pillows are also made with memory foam. Manufacturers of memory-foam pillows claim they help foster proper spinal alignment.
• Avoid using too high or stiff a pillow, which keeps the neck flexed overnight and can result in morning pain and stiffness.
• If you sleep on your side, keep your spine straight by using a pillow that is higher under your neck than your head.
• When you are riding in a plane, train, or car, or even just reclining to watch TV, a horseshoe-shaped pillow can support your neck and prevent your head from dropping to one side if you doze. If the pillow is too large behind the neck, however, it will force your head forward.
• Stomach sleepers are out of luck. Unless you sleep with your face in the cradle of a massage table or without a pillow, there's no way to sleep on your stomach without wrenching your neck.
• Once you've decided on density, pillow material is an individual choice. There's no one best material — what matters is to find one that's comfortable for you. If you are sensitive to odors, be sure to smell pillows, especially those made of synthetic material, before buying one. Many stores do not accept returns on pillows for hygienic reasons.

Treating the pain and discomfort:

• Alternate heat and cold
  o Reduce inflammation by applying cold, such as an ice pack or ice wrapped in a towel, for up to 20 minutes several times a day, or alternate the cold treatment with heat. Try taking a warm shower or using a heating pad on the low setting. Heat can help relax sore muscles but it sometimes aggravates inflammation, so use it with caution.

• Rest
  o Lie down from time to time during the day to give your neck a rest from holding up your head. Avoid prolonged rest, since too much inactivity can cause increased stiffness in your neck muscles.
  o Over-the-counter pain relievers
    – Consider over-the-counter pain relievers, such as aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin IB, others), naproxen (Aleve), and acetaminophen (Tylenol, others).

• Gentle stretching
  o Gently move your neck to one side and hold it for 30 seconds. Stretch your neck in as many directions as your pain allows. This may help alleviate some of the pain.

Talk to your doctor if you're interested in trying alternative treatments for your neck pain. Your doctor can discuss the benefits and risks. Alternative treatments include:

• Acupuncture
  o Acupuncture involves the insertion of thin needles into various
points on your body. Studies have found that acupuncture may be helpful for many types of pain. Studies in neck pain have been mixed. For best results, you may need to undergo several acupuncture sessions. Acupuncture is generally considered safe when performed by a certified practitioner using sterile needles.

- **Chiropractic**
  - Given mainly to the spine, a chiropractic adjustment applies a controlled, sudden force to a joint — moving it beyond its normal range of motion. Chiropractic treatments to the neck may slightly increase your risk of stroke.

- **Massage**
  - During a massage, a trained practitioner manipulates the muscles in your neck with his or her hands. Little scientific evidence exists to support massage in people with neck pain, though it may provide relief when combined with your doctor's recommended treatments.

- **Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS).**
  - Electrodes placed on your skin near the painful areas deliver tiny electrical impulses that may relieve pain.

- **Physical therapy**
- **Remedial massage**
- **Osteopathy**
  - Can be used to correct misalignments which may cause migraine attacks.

- **Bowen treatment**
  - Bowen is a holistic remedial body technique that works on the soft connective tissue (fascia) of the body

- **Botox therapy for neck.**
- **Oil blends (essential oils, natural oil, peppermint oil)**
- **Epsom salt bath**
- **Exercise**
  - If you’re interested in using exercise to help relieve neck or shoulder pain, make sure to see your doctor for evaluation.
  - Ask if you can get help from a physical therapist or other professional who can create an individualized exercise program based on your pain severity, limitation of movement, and current strength.
  - Ideally, if you are working with a therapist, he or she will guide you through appropriate exercises, motivating you to work hard enough to see results but not so hard as to cause further injury.

**Watch-outs**

Sleeping on your stomach puts added strain on your spine, because the back is arched and your neck is turned to the side. Preferred sleeping positions are often set early in life and can be tough to change, not to mention that we don’t often
wake up in the same position in which we fell asleep. Still, it’s worth trying to start the night sleeping on your back or side in a well-supported, healthy position.

Most neck pain doesn’t stem from anything medically serious, making it safe to try self-care strategies before seeking medical help. However, if your neck pain is so severe you can’t sit still, or if it is accompanied by any of the following symptoms, contact a medical professional right away:

- Fever, headache, and neck stiffness. This triad of symptoms might indicate bacterial meningitis, an infection of the spinal cord and brain covering that requires prompt treatment with antibiotics.
- Pain traveling down one arm, especially if the arm or hand is weak, numb, or tingling. Your symptoms might indicate that a herniated cervical disk is pressing on a nerve.
- Loss of bowel or bladder control. This might indicate pressure on the spinal cord or spinal nerve roots, needing immediate attention.
- Extreme instability. If you can suddenly flex or extend your neck much farther than usual, it might indicate a fracture or torn ligaments. This usually occurs only after significant impact or injury, and is more likely to be detected by your doctor or on an x-ray than by your own perception.
- Persistent swollen glands in the neck. Infection or tumor can result in swollen glands and neck pain.
- Chest pain or pressure. A heart attack or inflamed heart muscle can cause neck pain along with more classic heart symptoms.

More reasons to manage this trigger

Apart from potentially fewer migraine attacks, a healthy neck area provides freedom of movement and the ability to pursue daily movements and tasks comfortably, free from pain.