

pain in the neck?

BY SANDRA SUMMERFIELD KOZAK

Feel like you're carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders? At times, you may be. But even on a good day, you are balancing a seventh of your weight on top of your neck.

Your neck is the most mobile part of your spine: whether you are driving golf balls, cleaning windows, or just exercising, your neck is constantly turning, bending, arching, twisting, holding, and jerking—making it vulnerable to muscular strain. Driving a car, working at a desk, watching a movie, or engaging in any other form of prolonged sitting also fatigues the neck. These ordinary, often unavoidable activities can produce neck stiffness, pain, and even muscle spasms. No wonder so many people report having neck problems.

In my thirty years of teaching yoga to diverse groups and cultures, I have seen an increase in reports of neck pain. At the beginning of class, I ask my students how many of them experience this condition. I ask them how many times a year, a month, or a week they are uncomfortable, how long it lasts, and what causes it. On average, between ten and twenty-five percent of my students now talk about experiencing recurring neck problems, and more often than not they haven't discovered the source of the problem.

There are many causes of neck pain. Fortunately, most of them are easily corrected—poor posture, prolonged sitting, unnatural sleeping positions, bad mattresses, and big pillows are some of the most common culprits. Remove them or address them and the pain will usually go away. However, when these circumstances are prolonged, or prior injuries to tendons, bursa, or ligaments are left untreated, they become sources of chronic neck pain. Neck pain can also stem from conditions such as arthritis, whiplash, and pinched nerves. But whatever the cause, most neck problems can be eased or eliminated by the practice of hatha yoga.

The following neck-care program begins with simple stretching exercises that will increase bloodflow in the injured area and lengthen and relax tight or strained muscles. To speed the healing process, this series also incorporates yoga postures that create strength and flexibility, and a basic breathing practice to reduce emotional and physical stresses.

Be sure to move slowly and deliberately. If at any time you feel discomfort or pain, back off and reduce the movement.

Enhancing Circulation

These exercises will speed up the healing process by increasing bloodflow. Proper circulation in the injured area nourishes the tissues and carries away toxins that are a by-product of stress. It is important to do them every two hours for the first two weeks. If you are experiencing chronic pain, continue until the pain is gone.

head turns

Position yourself on your back with the knees bent. Holding the back in neutral with the lower back nearly touching the floor, move the head slowly from side to side—4 to 6 inches to each side is plenty. This movement soothes the muscles of the upper spine and neck and increases the flow of blood to those areas. If you feel any pain, reduce the range of motion until it vanishes. Turn continuously 25 times; rest for a minute and repeat a second time.

shoulder rolls

The shape of our chairs, sofas, and car seats tend to round our back. These backward shoulder rolls help restore muscular balance and reduce tension in the neck.

Standing up straight, roll the shoulders in a circle—up, back, and down. After 20–25 repetitions, rest for a minute and repeat. Roll the shoulders *backward only* to open the chest and lengthen the diaphragm.

- Avoid movements that aggravate the injury.
- Massage the neck several times a day.
- Gently stretch stiff muscles.
- Rest lying on your back.
- Use a cervical (neck) pillow.
- Apply cold packs to the neck (packages of frozen peas work great).
- Take a private lesson with an experienced yoga teacher.
- Drink lots of water—at least 80 ounces daily.
- Investigate vitamin supplements that support healing.





Easy Stretches

Learning to stretch and relax the neck muscles can immediately reduce tension and visibly lengthen the neck. The following movements should help.

shoulders-to-ears

Sitting or standing with the spine straight, raise the shoulders up to the ears as high as possible and hold for 3–5 seconds. Release the shoulders back down and relax. Repeat several times.

two neck stretches

ear-to-shoulder stretch. Sitting or standing erect, drop the right ear toward the right shoulder. To increase the stretch, lower the left shoulder and reach the arm and hand down toward the floor. Hold for 5–15 seconds. Repeat on the other side.

looking over your shoulder. With the spine straight, turn the head and look to the right until you feel a stretch in the left side of the neck. Hold for 5–15 seconds. Repeat on the other side.

chin extensions

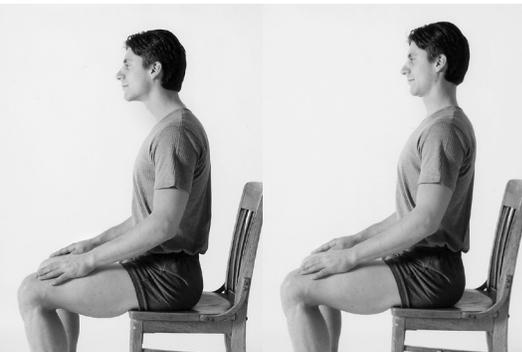
To release and relax the tight jaw and stiff neck that often accompany prolonged desk work, try this.

Sit up straight and move the chin and jaw as far forward (*not up*) as you can. Then pull the chin back as far as possible, lengthening the back of the neck. Repeat 5–10 times.

tension reliever

Contracting the shoulder and neck muscles in this dynamic stretch allows for an effective release of muscle tension.

Stand up straight. Interlock the hands behind the back and straighten the arms. Keeping the spine erect, draw the hands back behind you and lift the arms straight up as high as possible. Lift the head and bring it back to touch the shoulders. Hold for 5–15 seconds. Release the hands and relax the shoulders. Shake out the arms. Repeat 2–3 times.



Classical Poses

The following asanas will realign and balance the body, preventing injury by keeping the muscles strong and flexible.

tree pose (vrikshasana)

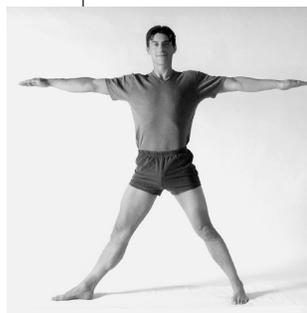
Stand erect with the arms hanging at the sides. Shift the weight to the right foot. Keep the hips facing forward and level the entire time you practice this pose. Bend the left knee and place the left foot on the inside of the right thigh. Open the left knee as far as possible without shifting the hips. Keep the arms straight as you bring them out to the sides and up over the head. Keep the shoulders down and the elbows straight. Stay in the pose for 10–30 seconds before returning to a standing position. Repeat on the other side.



triangle pose (trikonasana)

Open the legs 3–4 feet apart. Keep the hips facing forward as you turn the right leg and foot 90° out to the right. Turn the ball of the (back) left foot 35° in to the right. Establish straight, strong legs by contracting the thigh muscles (quadriceps) to pull the knees up. Keep the weight evenly distributed between both legs. As you lift the arches of the feet, rotate the legs outward, opening them away from each other.

Bring the arms up to shoulder height, stretching from the shoulder blades to the fingertips. Shift the rib cage to the right until the torso comes down to be parallel with the floor. It is more important that the spine is straight than that it is parallel with the floor. The right hand rests on the right leg or the floor. Hold for 15–30 seconds. Repeat on the other side.



downward-facing dog pose (adho mukha shvanasana)

The dog pose lengthens and relaxes the neck. It strengthens all of the back muscles, relieves stiffness in the neck and shoulders, and strengthens the muscles that hold the shoulders back.

With the knees on the floor directly under the hip joints, place the feet hips-width apart. Place the hands on the floor under the shoulders. Now move the hands one hand-length forward and spread the fingers. The arms remain straight as you push the hands against the floor and straighten the legs to lift the hips up. Come up onto the balls of the feet. Holding the heels up, lengthen the arms, shoulders, torso, and hips up and away from the floor. Holding the straight line of the upper body and keeping the sitting bones lifted, let the heels come down. Breathe and hold for 10–30 seconds.





cobra (bhujangasana)

This pose opens the chest and contracts the upper back muscles (rhomboids and trapezius), relieving neck stress by keeping the shoulders from rounding forward.

Lie face-down on the floor with the legs together. Begin with the forehead on the floor and the hands interlocked behind the base of the head. Tighten the buttocks and leg muscles, pressing the tops of the feet into the floor. Lift the elbows, head, and shoulders. Draw the shoulders back. Remember to work with the legs together and touching the floor. Hold for 10–20 seconds to begin.



hero pose (virasana) with chin lock (jalandhara-bandha)

With the knees together on the floor, sit on the heels. The weight is evenly balanced on each foot with the front of the hips (the hip bones) slightly lifted. The shoulder joints are directly over the hip joints and pulled back and down from the ears.

To apply the chin lock, suspend the breathing and stretch the neck up to bring the head forward and down (the chin comes toward the chest). Just as the chin is about to arrive at the chest, pull it in and up toward the throat as much as possible. Hold for a few seconds, release the chin lock, and lift the head and breathe.



corpse pose (shavasana)

When lying stretched out on the back for an extended period of time in shavasana, the muscles and the fascia covering them begin to lengthen. With a cervical pillow under the neck, lie on the back with the shoulders pulled down from the ears and the arms resting slightly out to the sides, palms up. The feet are 6–14 inches apart and comfortably relaxed. Keep the face parallel to the floor so the chin is neither up nor pulled into the throat.

Shavasana is relaxing and energizing—it is always the best way to complete your yoga practice.

There are many causes of neck pain—poor posture, prolonged sitting, unnatural sleeping positions, bad mattresses, and big pillows are some of the most common culprits. Remove them or address them and the pain will usually go away. However, when these circumstances are prolonged, or prior injuries are left untreated, they become sources of chronic neck pain.

Breath Work

A simple breathing practice with breath retention can calm an irregular or rapid breathing pattern that is a by-product of stress and anxiety.

Placing a cervical pillow under the neck, lie in shavasana. If you have lower back discomfort, keep the knees bent or place a bolster under them. Inhale smoothly and completely to a count of 6. Hold the breath in for a count of 3. Exhale slowly, smoothly, and completely for a count of 12. Hold the breath out for a count of 3. Continue this breathing pattern for 10–20 minutes to experience its full benefit.

Other therapies that can be added to this program are: massage to relieve the soreness and fatigue in the muscles; heat and ice packs to reduce spasm and inflammation; and supplemental vitamins to give nutritive support for the nerves and tissues.

This neck-care program has a lot to offer anyone who tries it. You can practice any of these movements simply as exercises and achieve a decent result. Or you can do each of them as yoga—joining the body, breath, and mind, moving with absolute concentration and with full awareness of the breath. ●

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