

Patient information from BMJ

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Whiplash

Whiplash is a neck injury that happens when the head is suddenly and forcefully jolted. It usually gets better on its own within a few weeks or months. But simple treatments may help with the pain and speed up your recovery.

What is whiplash?

Whiplash is a neck injury that can happen if your head is suddenly jolted backwards and forwards in a whip-like movement. When this happens the muscles, ligaments, and tendons in your neck stretch more than normal and may be sprained. Ligaments and tendons are tissues that connect your bones and muscles together.

The most common cause of whiplash is being in a vehicle accident. Other causes of whiplash include:

- falls (especially in older people)
- getting hurt in a physical fight
- sports injuries.

What are the symptoms of whiplash?

The main symptoms of whiplash are neck pain and neck stiffness. But often people don't feel these symptoms at the time of their injury. The pain and stiffness will probably be worse a day or two afterwards.

Other symptoms of whiplash you may experience include:

- Headaches
- Pain in your upper back, arms, or shoulder
- Pain in your lower back
- Trouble concentrating
- Dizziness
- Ringing in your ears (tinnitus)
- Blurred vision.

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Your doctor will ask you questions about your injury and how it happened. This will help them better understand if your symptoms are because of whiplash. They'll also want to do a physical examination.

A severe whiplash injury can cause more serious problems that need hospital treatment. You should tell your doctor if you notice:

- any weakness in your limbs
- numbness, tingling, or pins and needles in your limbs
- you're losing control of your bladder or bowels.

These could be signs of an injury to the nerves in your spine.

Most people with whiplash won't need any scans. But your doctor might recommend a CT scan of your spine if they think you have a more serious injury.

What are the treatment options for whiplash?

Most cases of whiplash can be treated at home with medicines to target pain and stiffness. But if your doctor suspects you've injured your spine, then you will need to stay in hospital for treatment.

You might feel as though you should rest and move as little as possible after whiplash. But it's important that you carry on with your normal activities as much as possible for your recovery.

You should also avoid wearing a neck brace. This stops your neck moving freely, and won't help your pain and stiffness.

Medicines

Painkillers can help with the pain and stiffness from whiplash. Your doctor will usually recommend you try paracetamol first. If this doesn't help, they may suggest you try ibuprofen instead.

Ibuprofen is a type of painkiller known as an **NSAID** (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug). It works to target both pain and inflammation (swelling).

But NSAIDs can cause side effects in some people, like irritation of your stomach lining. So it's important that you follow your doctor or pharmacist's advice about taking this medicine.

If you cannot take ibuprofen for any reason, your doctor might recommend a course of stronger painkillers called **opioids**. These medicines are only recommended for short periods. This is because there is a chance people can become dependent on them if they're taken for longer.

What happens next?

Whiplash usually gets better within a few weeks or months. In very mild cases, you may even start feeling better after a few days.

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You can usually manage whiplash at home with painkillers and follow-up with your doctor every few weeks. But you will need to stay in hospital if you have a more serious injury.

It's important to keep up with your normal activities as much as possible, even if you're feeling pain and discomfort. This will help speed up your recovery.

If your symptoms don't seem to be getting better, or they're getting worse, then speak to your doctor. In some people, the pain and stiffness from whiplash can be chronic (i.e., long-lasting). Chronic pain lasts for more than 3 months. Your doctor will be able to give you more advice about how to manage this type of pain.

If you notice any **new** neurological signs or symptoms, seek **immediate** medical attention. These can include:

- weakness in your limbs
- numbness, tingling, or pins and needles in your limbs
- losing control of your bladder or bowels.

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