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Wry Neck: The Sudden Stiff neck

What is a Wry Neck?

A wry neck is characterized by a locking or “jamming” of the spinal joints in the neck causing a painful and protective spasm of the neck muscles as a result.

This event causes the head to twist and turn to one side (usually away from the painful area). In addition, the head may be pulled forward or backward. Most often, it develops between the ages of 30 and 60 years but can be seen in children and young adults.



What is the cause of a Wry Neck?

The exact cause of a wry neck remains unclear, but it may result from a sudden, quick movement of the head or upon waking after sleeping in an unusual position or sustaining prolonged abnormal postures prior to the onset of pain.

An acute wry neck is most often seen in middle aged individuals usually with a history of an underlying degenerative joint or disc disease in the cervical spine. Despite the high predisposition in adults, infants and children can usually suffer from an episode of wry neck secondary to a trauma or inflammation of the lymph glands.

Signs and Symptoms

- Severe pain localized to the middle or, more usually, on one side of the neck.
- Pain is referred to the head or shoulder region during acute stages.
- Neck feels “locked” in one position and any attempted movement to free it usually results in sharp spasms of pain.
- The neck is usually bent away from the painful site.

Physiotherapy Management

- Use of anti-inflammatory and/or muscle relaxant medication is sometimes necessary for the first 72 hours.
- Gentle mobilization to free up the locked joint structures.
- Muscle energy and soft tissue release techniques to relieve muscle spasm.
- Thermal and electrotherapeutic modalities can be used to manage the presence of intra-articular swelling.
- Gentle range of motion exercises to keep the affected joints mobile.
- **Temporary** use of a soft collar to provide relief in severe cases.
- Long-term neck and postural strengthening exercises to avoid recurrences.
- Use of a low, firm/orthopedic pillow to keep the cervical spine neutral during sleep.

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