Acute neck sprain

A neck sprain is an over-stretch of the spine, which can damage joints, ligaments, muscles, blood vessels and nerves. This causes an acute inflammatory reaction, which may progress over the next few days after the injury. Consequently, your symptoms may worsen over this period.

The first 3 days

During the first 3 days after your injury you must exercise your neck every hour. Only move your neck as far as it is comfortable to do so.

Do not push yourself through any pain barriers.

Repeat each exercise 2-3 times.

The exercises are:

- Look down to the floor
- Look up at the ceiling
- Turn your head to the right
- Turn your head to the left
- Take your right ear down to your right shoulder

Make sure you are moving your neck during these exercises.

Take any painkillers recommended regularly to relieve the discomfort until this starts to improve.

After the first 3 days

After 3 days you should start to progress the exercises. Increasing the number of repetitions to between 5-10 each hour to prevent stiffness and improve your range of movement.

In addition, you will need to add the exercise below, 2 to 3 times a day.

1. Sit with your back and the back of your head resting against a wall or closed door
2. Keep your hands resting on your lap to keep your shoulder relaxed
3. Slide your head up the wall so that your chin tucks downwards and inwards, keeping your head in contact with the wall
4. Repeat this 10 times and gradually increase the length of the hold of the stretch to 1-2 seconds, or as you are able

Again, do not push yourself through any pain barriers.

Correct sleeping posture to avoid neck pain:

- Always sleep on a firm bed either on your back or on your side. Do not sleep face down
- If you sleep on your side, there are two points that are important;
  1. Make sure that your head and neck are straight i.e. in line with the rest of the spine (as in fig 1 and never as in fig 2 or 3). The number of pillows may be one or more, depending on their thickness and firmness, but just the right number to keep the head straight
  2. The arm on which you are lying must be kept in front of your chest, not under it or behind it (see fig 4)

Follow up:

Most people find their symptoms have not settled within 2 weeks. If your pain and symptoms are not resolving, please see your GP or return to the Emergency Department.