Cervical spondylosis

What is cervical spondylosis?
Spondylosis, or spinal arthritis, is a medical term for the general wear and tear that occurs in the joints and bones of the spine as people get older. Cervical spondylosis refers to these age related changes that occur in the neck (the cervical spine).

What are the causes?
The spine is made up of vertebrae, discs, spinal cord and nerve roots. As you get older, the discs dehydrate, become thinner and become harder. They then provide less support to the vertebrae resting on the discs.

Your body compensates for this by producing small lumps of extra bone to better support your spine and stiffen the spine. The extra bone is known as a bone spur or osteophyte. Osteophytes can cause the spine to become too rigid leading to the symptoms of stiffness and pain.

Changes in bone structure can also compress nearby nerves and blood vessels, which cause symptoms of more widespread pain.

Symptoms of cervical spondylosis
Almost everyone develops cervical spondylosis as they get older however it usually does not cause many symptoms. Most people with symptoms only experience short episodes of neck pain and stiffness. Pain usually comes and goes, with flare-ups followed by symptom-free periods.

Spondylosis can occasionally cause headaches.
Other more severe symptoms usually only occur if:
- A slipped disc or other bone pinches or irritates a nearby nerve
- The spinal canal (bones that surround and protect the nerves) become narrower, compressing the spinal cord inside.

Common myths
The biggest misunderstanding about cervical spondylosis is that it always
causes symptoms. In fact, people with a lot of neck pain don’t seem to have much more cervical spondylosis than people without neck pain.

How is it treated?
Exercise can help loosen the stiff joints and strengthen neck muscles.

1. Gently retract your head, so it is in line with your shoulders. Hold for 5-10 seconds. Repeat 3-5 times.

2. Slowly move your head to the left, with your ear moving towards your shoulder. Now repeat on the right side. Repeat 3-5 times.

3. Slowly move your head forwards, feeling a slight stretch in the back of your neck. Then return to a relaxed posture. Slowly move your head backwards, the return. Repeat 3-5 times.

4. Slowly turn your head to the left until you feel a slight stretch. Then return to a neutral posture and relax. Now repeat on the right side. Repeat 3-5 times.

You should start exercising gently and gradually increase the number you are able to do. It is normal to experience some discomfort at first.

Lifestyle changes
You could consider:
- Low-impact exercises such as swimming or walking,
- Ensure your pillows at night keep your head and neck in line with the
spine. See our video for preventing back strain ‘you and your back’

- Correcting your posture when standing and sitting. Ensure you hold your head on top of your shoulder not in front of the line of the shoulders.

The long-term use of a neck brace or collar is not recommended as it can make your neck stiffer and symptoms worse. Do not wear a brace for more than a week, unless your GP specifically advises you to.

**Pain relief**
Taking painkillers may help to reduce mild pain. Please seek advice from your GP or pharmacist regarding appropriate pain medication for you.

**Other**
If you experience spasms, when your neck muscles suddenly tighten uncontrollably, your GP may prescribe a short course of muscle relaxants to help.

**Physiotherapy**
You may benefit from a physiotherapy assessment if the advice given in this leaflet has not changed your symptoms.

*If any of the exercises or advice in this leaflet causes your symptoms to worsen please stop the activity and seek advice from your doctor.*