Whiplash

What is whiplash?
Whiplash is a term that is used to describe a neck injury caused by a sudden movement of the head forwards, backwards or sideways. The vigorous movement of the head causes strain on the ligaments and tendons in the neck. Tendons are tough bands that connect muscles to bone. Ligaments are the connective tissues that link two bones together at a joint.

Whiplash facts
- Permanent damage is rare
- Most injuries are not serious
- Serious injuries are usually detected early
- What you do in the early stages is very important; resting for more than a day or two may prolong pain
- The people who cope best with whiplash are those who stay active, exercise their neck and get on with life despite the pain

Symptoms of whiplash
Following an accident the symptoms of whiplash often take a while to develop. Any inflammation (swelling) and bruising that occurs in the neck muscles will not usually be noticed at the time of the accident.

It may take 6-12 hours for the symptoms of whiplash to become apparent, and neck pain and stiffness is often worse on the day after the injury. The pain
may continue to worsen for several days afterwards.
Whiplash typically causes pain, stiffness and a loss of movement in the neck. Headaches, muscle spasms and pain in the shoulders or arms are also possible symptoms.

The common symptoms of whiplash include:

- neck pain and stiffness
- swelling
- tenderness along the back of the neck
- reduced movement in the neck
- headaches

Other symptoms of whiplash can include:

- lower back pain
- pain, numbness or pins and needles in the arms and hands
- muscle tightening
- dizziness

What can I do to help myself?

- use something to control the pain; ask your pharmacist for advice
- start regular neck exercises
- stay active and carry on with normal activities even if you have to modify these activities for a time

The sooner you get your neck moving the better.

Exercise

Below are some appropriate exercises to start. You should try and do them little and often during the day. It is common to experience a stretching sensation or discomfort when first exercising. Do not push exercises into pain and stop if pins and needles or arm pain become more frequent.
1. Gently pull your head back, 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, then 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.
Spasms
Spasms are when your neck muscles suddenly tighten uncontrollably. If you experience these symptoms speak to your GP who may wish to prescribe a short course of muscle relaxants to help.

Collars
A collar is sometimes given for support, but research now suggests that it may delay recovery if worn for more than a few days. The faster you get your neck moving the better.

Additional information
For more information on how to adjust the headrests in your car correctly, and advice about preventing whiplash as a result of a road traffic accident see the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) road safety information. http://www.rospa.com/

To find out more about whiplash refer to:
www.nhs.uk/conditions/Whiplash

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