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Cervical disc injuries - a real pain in the neck!

By Jill Calkin

The neck is an amazing piece of machinery but it can also cause an amazing amount of pain if something goes wrong! Many people come to see a physiotherapist with neck pain due to disc injuries or related nerve root injuries. They complain of pain in the neck, shoulder, arm, and in between the shoulder blades. They may feel tingling in their hand and in severe cases weakness in the arm muscles.

Our neck is made up of seven bones and in between each bone lays a disc designed to absorb shock and to stabilize the neck – these are our cervical discs. Each disc has a stiff outer ring that surrounds a jelly-like centre that shifts as we move our neck. There are small passageways in the spine which provide a path for the nerves to exit and run down the arm. These nerves can be compressed when there is a disc injury such as a disc rupture or herniation. A cervical disc rupture or herniation occurs when the tough, outer ring breaks open or cracks, allowing the more fluid inner material to escape. This creates a bulge in the disc that can press up against the root of the nerve as it exits the spine. Even if the bulge is not big enough to physically push on the nerves, the body reacts to the injury with inflammation which can irritate the nerve and cause similar symptoms.

There are many factors that increase the chances of getting a disc injury. Lifestyle choices such as tobacco use, lack of regular exercise and poor nutrition contribute to unhealthy discs. Ageing happens to all of us and natural changes occur that gradually dry out the disc, affecting its strength and elasticity. Additional stress is placed on the neck with poor posture combined with incorrect body mechanics. Think about how you are sitting as you are reading this article. Is it the best position for your neck? Unfortunately, one of the common causes of bad posture correlates with the technological age – too much time spent in front of the computer.

Disc and nerve root injuries may develop gradually over weeks or months, or they may appear suddenly. They can originate from overuse, unusual activity, heavy labour or trauma. A minor car accident, packing and moving out of a house, or long work hours are all contributing factors that we see in clients coming to a physiotherapist with neck pain.

The majority of people with cervical disc injuries find their symptoms are relieved *without* surgery in four to six weeks. Physicians may prescribe medications to help

reduce pain, muscle spasm and swelling. Physical therapy is recommended for any disc injury or related shoulder and arm pain. The goals of physical therapy are to decrease swelling and pain while increasing flexibility and function. Hands-on manual therapy is very effective along with ice and heat therapy, and traction. Electrical current and acupuncture are additional methods that are very effective in controlling pain. As the pain decreases, physical therapists teach strengthening and postural exercises to encourage healing and reduce the chances of reoccurrence.

With the high prevalence of neck pain in today's society, everyone can benefit from proper disc fitness. A healthy lifestyle including adequate exercise and nutrition, combined with proper body mechanics and posture, will go a long way in reducing neck problems. Fortunately, if neck pain due to a disc injury does strike, there are a variety of non-surgical techniques available to help relieve the symptoms and to help prevent it from happening again.

For further information on this topic please contact the Fawzia Sultan Rehabilitation Institute (FSRI) in Hawally at 264-2862, or check out our website at www.rehabinstitutekuwait.com

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