

## **Neck Pain? Should You wear a Neck Brace? If so, You Should Do This**

Neck braces are also known as cervical collars or C collars. The brace is used to support your neck, spinal cord, and head, and to limit motion. They are generally meant for short term use to assist with recovery from surgery, injury, or pain.

Some conditions that may require the use of a cervical collar include the following:

- Whiplash and trauma: If you have sustained a neck injury from a fall, sporting event, or motor vehicle accident, your doctor may recommend using a cervical collar.
- Neck Surgery: The collar is used to limit movement of the neck while it heals.

Others have been known to also use a C collar for a pinched nerve in the neck, neck arthritis, general neck pain, or stiffness. We agree C collars are appropriate in the treatment some cases of whiplash, trauma, and after neck surgery. However, we generally do not use C collars for the treatment for a pinched nerve in the neck, neck arthritis, general neck pain, or stiffness. We feel the collar is not effective with those treatments.

In whiplash patients there are studies that suggest that early movement of the neck after whiplash is better than immobilization (using a soft cervical collar). Other studies have suggested no long-term benefit of early movement after whiplash. Therefore, we take the approach that if a patient finds symptom relief using a soft cervical collar, they may use it for 10 days or less. No adverse effects have been noted with this approach.

In trauma patients, or patient who have underwent neck surgery, the decision as to wearing a rigid cervical collar is made by the surgeon or physician in charge.

Hard collar versus soft collar: Cervical collars come made with soft or hard materials. Soft collars are made from felt, foam, and rubber. They tend to be more comfortable, but they are not highly effective in preventing motion.

Hard collars are generally made from plastic or plexiglass. They often have a chin support built into the brace. Hard collars are much more effective in limiting neck movement. Hard collars are often prescribed for neck whiplash or trauma, and for neck surgery.

*Long-term use:* Studies have shown that long term use of a cervical collar may lead to stiffening and weakening of your neck muscles. In cases of whiplash, trauma, and neck surgery this may be unavoidable. Motion and strength need to be regained after the collar is permanently removed. The loss of neck strength and motion is another reason we do not use cervical collars with our patients who have a pinched nerve in the neck, neck arthritis, general neck pain or stiffness.

Exercises to regain motion in the neck. *NEEDS TO BE APPROVED BY DOCTOR.*  
Start in chair with excellent posture.

1. Chin Tuck to warm up neck.
2. Neck extension: extend head back as far as pain allows. Use towel for support if needed. Repeat 10x.
3. Neck rotation. May apply manual OVERPRESSURE if able to tolerate. (10x). Use both hands. See photo. GENTLE stretches!
4. Neck side bending. Apply gentle pressure using fingertips of hand. (10x)

Exercises to regain strength in the neck. These exercises will be performed isometrically (strengthen without movement). **NONE OF THESE EXERCISES SHOULD INCREASE YOUR PAIN.**

1. Isometric flexion. Place a palm on your forehead-palm facing head. Attempt to bend the head forward but do not allow the head to move (using your palm). Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 10x.
2. Isometric extension. Place your hand on the upper back part of your head-palm facing head. Attempt to extend head backward but do not allow head to move (using your palm). Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 10x.
3. Isometric rotations. Place your right hand flat along the right jaw line. Attempt to turn your head to the right, but do not allow the head to move (using your palm). Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 10x. Perform the same exercise on the left side.
4. Isometric side bending. Place your hand on the right side of your head near the upper part-palm facing toward the head. Attempt to side bend your

head to the right, but do not allow the head to move (using your palm).  
Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 10x. Perform the same exercise on the left side.