

## How to Apply Traction (Decompression) to the Neck/Pinched Nerve with an Over-the-Door Traction Device (Inexpensive option)

Neck (cervical) traction is sometimes appropriate for a pinched nerve or arthritis. The traction might take pressure off the nerve if caused by a disc or bony type encroachment. Neck traction may also give you some temporary relief from the discomfort of arthritis by decreasing the pressure on your neck joints.

Before using your over-the-door traction device, speak with your physical therapist or doctor to ensure that neck traction is a safe treatment for you. Also, before you try traction, I would suggest you watch and try the exercises in the video [#1 Stretch and Exercise Program for Neck Pain, Pinched Nerve, etc.](#) You might get relief from your pain with these exercises and not need to perform traction.

Finally, before you perform any traction on your neck you will want to know if traction would be of any benefit.

The opposite of traction is compression. First, we will determine if compression increases your neck pain or symptoms.

Take both hands and place them on your head. Lock the fingers and push gently down on your head while maintaining good upright neck posture. Did compression make it worse?

*Traction:* The best way to test to see if traction would be beneficial is to do the following: You should be seated. Find the prominent bumps behind each ear. These are known as the mastoid processes (shown in red).



Using the area of your palm between the two meaty parts hook onto the bump with your fingers facing up. This should be done on both sides. Cup your fingers over your ears. Apply even pressure between your two palms attempt to gently pull up on the head. Did decompression or traction improve your neck pain or symptoms? If yes you can proceed to applying traction.

### *Over-the-door traction unit:*

The benefit of the over-the-door method is that it is relatively inexpensive. A downside is you are limited to 20 pounds of traction. Some people may benefit from up to 30 pounds of traction. Another downside is a poor fit by the harness (as indicated by many poor reviews). So, we bought a separate harness to go with the traction unit. Total cost for the two devices was about \$35. The device can also be a bit difficult to use.

### *How to use the over-the-door traction unit.*



**Reminder:** Before using a traction device, you should check with your health care provider to determine if appropriate.

**Warning:** Traction should not be performed on anybody with a tumor in the cervical spine, or anybody with rheumatoid arthritis or an infection. We would also advise against traction for people who are pregnant, claustrophobic, have osteoporosis, or a hiatal hernia.

There are five parts to the over-the-door traction unit: a hook-and-two pulley component that hangs over your door, a nylon cord that is fed through the pulley, a spreader bar that the cord attaches to, a water bag that hangs on the

end of the cord to provide traction force, and a harness to wear on your head. The harness and spreader bar attach to the end of the nylon cord that is opposite the weighted water bag. The water bag can be filled with 2 to 20 pounds of water.

You want to set up the unit so that your neck is slightly flexed. Flexion of 20-30 degrees is optimal to stretch your neck muscles and open the neck joints.

Remove any jewelry (especially earrings), eyeglasses, and anything else in the cervical region that may get in the way or create discomfort. Loosen the shirt collar to better expose the neck region.

It is important to use a door that is not going to be used while you are applying the traction. A closet door may work well. Place the traction device over the door and lock the door if possible. The following is much easier to do if you have someone helping you.

Feed the cord through the two pulleys and attach one end to the weighted bag and the other to the spreader bar. The bag should be filled with water. Many people start with 10 pounds as a trial. However, the literature indicates that 25-30 pounds of traction may be “eventually” needed to produce a measurable separation of the neck joints. Again, this is a limitation of the over-the-door traction because it only goes up to 20 pounds. You could buy an additional 5-pound cuff weight to add to the weighted bag. The traction force must be at least the weight of the head to produce any significant decompression.

Adjust the harness. If set up properly you should be taking pressure evenly between your occiput (base of skull in the back of your head) and your jaw. Adjust the harness using the Velcro straps. You should perform traction in a seated position. Traction can be performed with you facing the door or facing away from the door. Just set it up to flex your neck slightly to 20-30 degree. **See Photo.**

Pull down on the spreader bar and attach your harness to it. Slowly release the spreader bar and you will feel the pull on your head. The first session should not be over 3-5 minutes. Determine how your neck feels during and after the

traction with 10 pounds. If it makes your pain worse- STOP. If your pain remains the same or improves you can continue. You may work up to 20 pounds of traction applied for 15-20 minutes if you desire. You can perform traction 1-3x per day.

Remember traction does not take the place of exercises to improve range of motion, strength, or posture. Those exercises should be continued.