Is it okay to crack my neck? [1]

Dear Alice,

As a college student, I sometimes spend long hours reading books or looking at computer screens, and often my neck gets stiff. Like many of my joints that get stiff, sometimes I crack my neck, like I would crack my knees or fingers when they feel stiff. I often wind up doing this several times a day.

My question is, could I do irreparable damage to my spinal system if I continue using this method to soothe a stiff neck? Could I wind up a paraplegic if I continue to crack my neck? Leak spinal fluid, etc.?

Sincerely,

Stiff-Necked Student

Answer

Dear Stiff-Necked Student,

What a pain in the neck a stiff neck can be! There hasn't been any conclusive research on whether cracking one's own neck is dangerous or contributes to long term health problems; however, given the risks associated with having a professional perform the procedure, it seems that self-neck manipulation is to be avoided.

Having your neck cracked by a professional is called cervical spine manipulation. It can be dangerous because it involves a small risk of compressing one of the major arteries bringing blood to the brain, leading to stroke. Someone who gets their neck cracked is 3.6 times more likely to have a stroke than someone who doesn't, but this still means that there are only 1.3 cases per 100,000 people who receive the treatment. Some experts believe that multiple treatments could have accumulatively damaging effects. The procedure can be especially dangerous for someone who has artery abnormalities. Although the general consensus is that having a trained professional perform these procedures is safe, these are still risks that need to be discussed with patients before undergoing the procedure.
Stiff neck is a common affliction. For possible causes and ways to reduce strain on your body, see Is neck and back cracking all it’s cracked up to be [2].

Here are some ways to treat a stiff neck:

- Take over-the-counter pain relievers such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen
- Apply heat or ice to the painful area. One good method is to use ice for the first 48-72 hours, then use heat after that (hot showers, hot compresses, or a heating pad)
- Stop normal physical activity for the first few days, which can calm your symptoms and reduce inflammation
- Perform slow range-of-motion exercises with your neck: up and down, side to side, and from ear to ear in order to gently stretch the neck muscles
- Have a partner gently massage the sore or painful area
- Try sleeping on a firm mattress without a pillow or with a special neck pillow

You should contact a medical provider if your pain is severe, does not go away in one week with self-care, or is accompanied by numbness, tingling, swollen glands, a lump in your neck, difficulty swallowing or breathing. Also seek medical care if your pain was caused by a fall, blow, or injury, if the pain gets worse when you lie down or wakes you up a night, or if you lose control over urination or bowel movements.

When it comes to neck pain, prevention is the best approach. Make sure to be aware of your neck and body during a long day, and keep your body in natural and comfortable positions as much as possible.

Related questions

Stress is a pain in the neck – literally! [7]
Health benefits of yoga [8]
Head and muscles ache from stress: What can be done? [9]
Free backrubs at Columbia [10]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [11]
Stressbusters (Morningside) [12]
Medical Services (CUMC) [13]
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