

Spine & Sport Rehabilitation, PA

Simple Exercises to Promote Healthy Neck Muscles and Ligaments:

If you experience intermittent neck pain and/or stiffness, you may benefit from a simple routine of stretching and strengthening the dozens of skeletal muscles and ligaments that line your neck.

The most important requirement for healthy ligaments and muscles is steady blood flow to these tissues. And stretching the ligaments and muscles that line your neck is the most effective way to promote and maintain a rich supply of blood in this region.

What follows are six simple stretches that you can perform to help keep the muscles and ligaments in your neck healthy and less prone to getting injured.

1. Forward Flexion

Allow your head to fall forward so that your chin approaches the top of your chest.

Once you feel a stretch or pull in the muscles that line the back of your neck or once the joints of your neck won't allow you to bend forward any further, whichever comes first, hold this position for as long as is comfortable, up to 30 seconds.

2. Backward Extension

Allow your head to bend backwards so that you can look at the ceiling or sky.

Once you feel a stretch or pull on the front side of your neck or once the joints of your neck won't allow you to go back any further, whichever comes first, hold this position for as long as is comfortable, up to 30 seconds.

3. Rotation to Right

With your shoulders facing forward, turn your head to your right.

Once you feel a stretch or pull anywhere in your neck or once the joints of your neck won't allow you to rotate any further, whichever comes first, hold this position for as long as is comfortable, up to 30 seconds.

4. Rotation to Left

Repeat the same steps described above, but with your head turning to your left.

5. Lateral Flexion to Right

With your shoulders facing forward, allow your head to fall toward your right shoulder so that your right ear approaches the top of your right shoulder.

Once you feel a stretch or pull along the left side of your neck or when your neck won't allow any further lateral flexion, hold this position for as long as is comfortable, up to 30 seconds.

Be sure that your left and right shoulders remain level; for some people, there's a natural tendency to bring the right or left shoulders up while doing this stretch.

6. Lateral Flexion to Left

Repeat the same steps described above, but with your head falling toward your left shoulder. Remember to keep both shoulders level; it's your head that should bend down to approach your shoulder, not your shoulder that's raised to approach your head.

To strengthen your neck muscles, use your hands to resist your head as you try to move it in the six directions described above.

For example, to strengthen the muscles that line the front of your neck, place both of your palms against your forehead and gently push your head against your palms, trying to take your chin down to meet your chest. Maintain this resistance for as long as is comfortable, or up to 10 seconds. Repeat for all directions.

What follows are some pointers to keep in mind as you stretch and strengthen your neck:

1. Never stretch to a point where you experience pain; the goal is to feel a comfortable stretch.
2. Try to stretch later in the afternoon or evening, when your blood circulation is at its peak.

Blood circulation is at its worst first thing in the morning, a consequence of your heart not having to work very hard in the absence of significant gravitational force while you are sleeping in a horizontal position. As you go about your daily activities, your blood circulation naturally improves as your heart begins working harder, making the muscles and ligaments in your neck and throughout your body more receptive to being stretched and strengthened.

3. If possible, save stretching and strengthening sessions for after you have been physically active, like after you have gone for a walk or engaged in any type of cardiovascular workout.

The more you exercise or warm up before you stretch, the more blood flow your muscles ligaments will have, which decreases the risk of suffering a sprain, strain or tear.

4. Do not bounce or bob with your stretches. Move your neck slowly and gradually into a position that allows you to feel a solid stretch in the target muscles, then hold this position and focus on keeping your breathing steady.
5. Never stop breathing while you stretch. If you find yourself holding your breath as you stretch, consider this a sign that you are putting too much stress on your tissues and ease back on the intensity of your stretches.