What Causes a Headache With Neck Pain?

Written by Janie McQueen | Medically Reviewed by Sravani Chintapalli, PharmD on October 21, 2026

What Are Some Kinds of Headaches and Neck Pain?
What Causes Headaches and Neck Pain?
What Are the Symptoms?
How Is It Diagnosed?

7 min read

Headaches with neck pain can make you feel miserable. But not all of them are the same. Sometimes, neck problems are the cause of a throbbing head, or it could be that the headache has another cause that leads to neck issues.

What Are Some Kinds of Headaches and Neck Pain?

Cervicogenic headaches

The pain from a cervicogenic headache can feel like it's coming from your head. It's a type of secondary headache, though, because the discomfort starts in your neck.

"Your nervous system interprets the upper neck irritation as pain in your face, head, forehead, or behind your eyes," says Jason W. Siefferman, MD, a headache medicine and pain medicine specialist and founder of Manhattan Pain Medicine in New York City. This happens because the upper cervical nerves in your neck and the trigeminal system — the nerve network in your head — share a pain processing pathway.

Occipital neuralgia

Occipital neuralgia starts with irritation or inflammation in your occipital nerves on each side of your head. You'll feel sharp shooting pains that often start in your neck and travel up the back of your head.

Though it can seem to come out of nowhere, occipital neuralgia can be triggered by a pinched nerve root in your neck, as with arthritis, or a prior injury or surgery to your scalp or skull.

Migraine

A migraine can cause intense throbbing pain or a pulsing feeling, usually on one side of your head. You might also have nausea, vomiting, and extreme sensitivity to light and sound. Auras, such as blind spots or light flashes, also can signal an oncoming migraine.

"Neck pain is one of the most common migraine symptoms, and it can show up before, during, or after the headache," says Nicholas Tzikas, MD, a headache medicine specialist with Interventional Neuro Associates and

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founder of the Center for Interventional Headache Medicine on Long Island, New York.

Because migraine can start with a tense neck, many people mistakenly think it's a tension headache, he notes.

Tension headaches

People who have tension-type headaches often report feeling as if there's a tight band around their head. While it's the most common type of headache, it can be hard to trace the cause.

However, triggers can include muscle tension and how your body processes pain.

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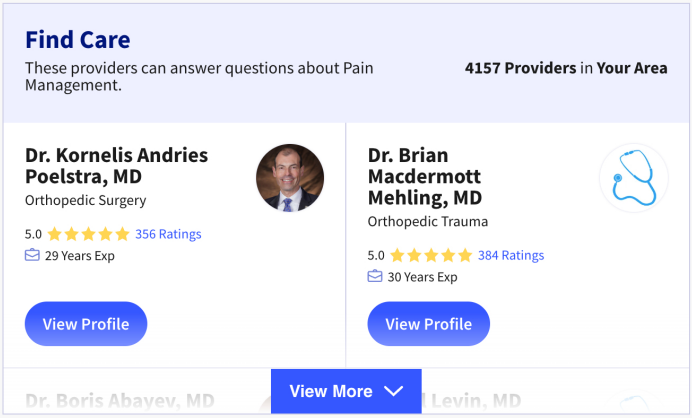
What Causes Headaches and Neck Pain?

Poor posture and overwork. Muscle tension, poor posture, long hours in front of a screen, and stress are all common reasons for headaches that come with neck pain.

Hernia (herniated disk). "The first thing I think of as a spine surgeon is the potential for herniated or worn disks, arthritis, bone spurs, or narrowing" in the upper neck, which can irritate the nerves and contribute to a headache, says Edward Scheid, MD, lead spine surgeon and founder of NeuroSpine Plus in Paramus, New Jersey.

Stiff or strained muscles or injury. Many people who have a neck disorder or have had neck injuries will have cervicogenic headaches. Sometimes, something as simple as having tight neck muscles or trapezius muscles from bad posture can cause them, too.

Rheumatoid arthritis. Disorders involving your upper cervical spine or neck soft tissues can cause pain that radiates to your head.



Lifestyle factors. Poor work habits can cause tension or neck strain. "Stay hydrated, get enough sleep, keep moving, stretch, fix your workstation setup, and watch your screen time," advises Nathaniel Carlton Law, MD, an anesthesiologist and founder of Doctors First Staffing in Campbell, California.

A tear in a blood vessel or an aneurysm. Sometimes, issues with blood vessels in your head and neck, such as the carotid arteries or the vertebral arteries, can lead to neck pain linked to a headache. "This is especially if there is a severe sudden headache associated with neck pain," says Daod Pak, MD, a neurologist at Stony Brook Medicine in Stony Brook, New York.

Spinal fluid leak. If a headache and neck pain build up the longer you sit or

Spinal fluid leak: If a headache and neck pain build up the longer you sit or stand, and ease when you lie down, describe it to your doctor. This can help guide them to less common diagnoses, like a spinal fluid leak.

What Are the Symptoms?

- Stiff neck. You have limited movement or range of motion in your neck. Your headache may get worse with neck movement.
- One-sided head pain. It may start at the bottom of your head and radiate up one side, or start at the back of your head and radiate to the front, behind your eyes.
- Dull ache or pressure. This aching or pressure-like pain radiates from the neck to one side of the head.
- Movement-induced pain: "Pay attention to any pain that moves into your shoulder or arm, or any numbness or tingling in the arm or down into your hand coupled with your headache," Scheid says. "The spinal cord could be involved in this if you feel like your hands are weak or clumsy, you struggle to balance or walk properly, and again, that numbness or tingling in your appendages."

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How Is It Diagnosed?

Physical exam

Your practitioner will perform a complete physical exam of your neck, checking your range of motion, finding trigger points, and figuring out how the pain radiates.

A good history and a physical exam are still the basis of a diagnosis for headache with neck pain, says Law. "Most headaches don't need a scan. We order imaging or other tests based on the symptoms and whether there are warning signs."

"The pattern usually gives you clues," he says. "If the pain shows up after you've spent the afternoon hunched over a laptop or looking down at your phone, I'd think muscle strain first. If it comes with nausea, sensitivity to light or sound, or visual changes, that sounds more like migraine."

Law says he also zeroes in on what else is going on to reach a diagnosis. "Fever, a rash, confusion, fainting, weakness or numbness, trouble speaking, vision changes, or a lot of vomiting are red flags. Those need to be checked out immediately.

"And if you get a sudden, severe headache, especially one that feels different from anything you've had before, don't write it off as a tight neck. New or quickly worsening symptoms are a reason to see a doctor, not something to manage at home."

Imaging tests

"Imaging has to be interpreted in the context of the patient's symptoms and examination," says Siefferman. For example, a routine MRI can be useful, but it doesn't necessarily reveal how the cervical spine is behaving when you move.

For some people, dynamic X-rays, which capture motion with images rapidly shown in sequence, may provide more information.

A special MRI or CT scan of your blood vessels can help.

"If we suspect there is an issue with the blood vessels, a special MRI or CT

"If we suspect there is an issue with the blood vessels, a special MRI or CT scan of the blood vessels can be done to look for aneurysms or tears in the blood vessels," says Pak.

What Are the Treatments for Headache and Neck Pain?

There are many ways to treat cervicogenic headaches, Pak says. They include:

- Improving posture and using an ergonomic chair
- Physical therapy to help loosen tight neck and trapezius muscles
- Trigger point injections and nerve blocks to the affected areas to help loosen your muscles and reduce irritation around the occipital nerves
- Oral medications to help relieve nerve pain and relax your muscles

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"Over-the-counter pain medications like acetaminophen or ibuprofen can help, but need to be used carefully to avoid overuse headaches (another type of headache that can include neck pain!)," notes Juan Carlos Venis, MD, a family doctor and owner of INcircle Health in Indianapolis.

For migraines, treatment includes medications for an acute episode, such as triptans or other migraine-specific therapies, and preventive medications for people with frequent or severe symptoms, says Shasawat Kumar, MD, a board-certified internal medicine doctor at Medical Offices of Manhattan.

When Should I Consider Surgery?

Surgery can be considered when first-line treatments don't last or fail to ease symptoms.

Some surgeries, such as occipital release surgery, release affected nerves from surrounding connective tissue and muscles that may be compressing them. Cervical rhizotomy uses radiofrequency, cutting, or chemicals to damage specific pain-transmitting nerves in your neck.

Other surgeries include:

- A minimally invasive procedure that decompresses nerves and makes the vertebrae in your neck more stable or better aligned
- Vertebroplasty to repair fractures
- Cervical artificial disk replacement to swap damaged cervical disks

When to See a Doctor

These symptoms mean you should get urgent medical care:

- A sudden, severe headache unlike anything you've had before
- A headache along with new weakness in your body
- A hard time speaking
- Loss of consciousness
- Fever
- Major trauma

Key Takeaways

The head and the neck are very closely linked, so issues with the neck will often lead to headaches. A medical practitioner can not only treat the pain, but help figure out why your issue is happening.

There are four types of headaches linked to pain in the head and neck: cervicogenic headaches, occipital neuralgia, migraines, and tension headaches.

The causes range from poor posture and prolonged screen time to overwork and stress. Causes also include physical reasons like herniated disks, arthritis, bone spurs, strained muscles, rheumatoid arthritis, blood vessel tears or aneurysms, and spinal fluid leaks.

Headache With Neck Pain FAQs

What could be causing my headache and neck pain?

Things that increase your chances of having headaches with neck pain include muscle tension, prolonged computer use, poor neck/back posture, and not getting enough sleep. Neck pain isn't always just due to muscle or nerve pain of the neck, though, such as with migraine and other conditions.

Are cervicogenic headaches a cause for concern?

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Most cervicogenic headaches aren't dangerous. But if a headache is new, unusually bad, or the worst headache of your life, take it seriously. When in doubt, get it checked out. Don't assume it's just tension or your neck.

What are red flags for neck pain?

Get emergency care for:

- A headache that reaches full intensity within about a minute
- A headache with fever and a stiff neck
- New head and neck pain after an injury, even a minor one
- New one-sided head or neck pain with a drooping eyelid and a smaller pupil on one side
- Double vision, weakness, numbness, or trouble speaking can signal a tear in one of the neck arteries. That needs to be evaluated right away.

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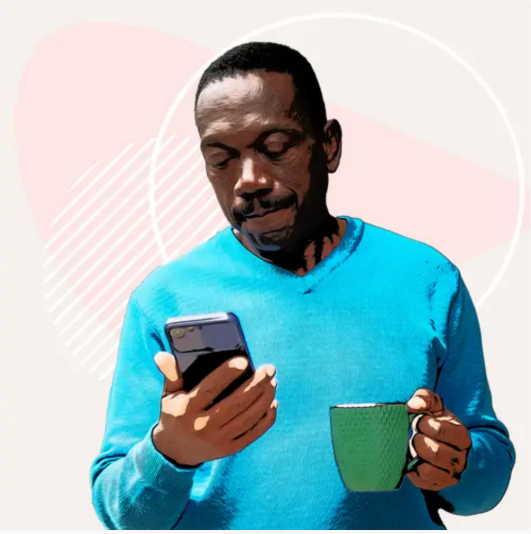
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