

You've suffered whiplash: Know the symptoms and treatments

June 22 2023, by Ann Schreiber



Whiplash—an often underestimated injury that can strike in the

aftermath of a collision—inflicts injury and pain on its unsuspecting victims.

If you find yourself grappling with the relentless effects of [whiplash](#), you're not alone. Numerous legal websites estimate that at least 3 million Americans per year sustain whiplash injuries.

Here's what you should know about a whiplash injury, including what it is, and its causes, symptoms and treatments.

What is whiplash?

"Whiplash is a type of neck injury that occurs when an individual's head is jerked backward and then forward suddenly, similar to the cracking of a whip. It commonly happens during [motor vehicle accidents](#), particularly rear-end collisions, but it can also occur during [sports activities](#) or falls," said [Dr. Jeremy Smith](#), an orthopedic spine surgeon and director of the spine surgery fellowship at Hoag Orthopedic Institute in Southern California.

The unfortunate truth is that whiplash neck is no joke. The [Cleveland Clinic](#) indicates that whiplash is often dismissed as fleeting [pain](#), soreness or stiffness. However, the ramifications can be far-reaching, leading to long-term pain and complications. In the most extreme cases, whiplash has the potential to unleash severe spinal injuries, causing permanent disability or even proving fatal.

What causes a whiplash injury?

"The primary cause of whiplash injury is the sudden and forceful movement of the head and neck," Smith said. "This abrupt motion leads to the stretching and tearing of muscles, ligaments and other soft tissues

in the neck. The rapid acceleration and deceleration of the head can significantly strain the neck structures."

More specifically, the [Mayo Clinic](#) states that whiplash injuries can stem from various sources, including:

- Motor vehicle accidents: Rear-end collisions, in particular, pose a significant risk for whiplash, as the sudden impact can abruptly force the head and neck into extreme motions.
- Physical abuse or assault: Instances of punching or shaking can lead to whiplash injuries, with this type of trauma also observed in cases such as shaken baby syndrome.
- Contact sports: Engaging in contact sports like football, where forceful tackles and collisions are common, can occasionally result in whiplash injuries.

What are the common whiplash symptoms?

According to Johns Hopkins Medicine, [common whiplash symptoms](#) include:

- Neck pain and stiffness
- Headaches, often starting from the base of the skull
- Fatigue or sleep disturbances
- Dizziness or vertigo
- Blurred vision or visual disturbances
- Shoulder or upper back pain
- Arm pain or weakness
- Tingling or numbness in the arms or hands
- Jaw pain or temporomandibular joint (TMJ) disorders
- Difficulty concentrating or memory problems
- Anxiety or irritability

"Whiplash symptoms can vary from person to person, but some common ones include neck pain and stiffness, limited range of motion in the neck, headaches [often starting from the base of the skull], dizziness, fatigue, shoulder or back pain, tingling or numbness in the arms, and sometimes difficulty concentrating or sleeping," Smith said.

How long does whiplash last?

"The duration of whiplash symptoms can vary widely, depending on the severity of the injury and individual factors," said Smith. "In many cases, symptoms improve within a few weeks or months with appropriate treatment and self-care measures. However, some individuals may experience chronic pain or long-lasting symptoms that persist for several months or even years."

The Mayo Clinic concurs that some people continue to have pain for several months or years after the whiplash injury occurred.

Whiplash treatments

When it comes to the treatment of whiplash, a comprehensive approach is often necessary to address the diverse array of symptoms and promote healing. Health care professionals employ various strategies tailored to each individual's needs. Let's explore the range of treatment options available for whiplash, including whiplash injury self-care.

Cedars Sinai lists the following [treatments for whiplash](#):

- Pain management: Over-the-counter pain relievers, such as acetaminophen or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), can help manage mild to moderate pain. In more severe cases, [prescription medications](#), including muscle

relaxants or narcotics, may be prescribed for a limited duration under medical supervision.

- Physical therapy: Targeted exercises, stretching and manual therapy techniques prescribed by a physical therapist can help reduce pain, improve range of motion, and restore muscle strength and function in the neck and surrounding areas.
- Heat and cold therapy: An effective approach to [whiplash injury](#) self-care includes applying heat or cold packs to the affected area to help alleviate pain, reduce inflammation and promote relaxation of muscles.
- Neck immobilization: In some cases, a cervical collar or neck brace may be recommended, to limit neck movement and promote healing.
- Injection therapy: Corticosteroid injections may be administered directly into the affected areas to reduce inflammation and ease pain.
- Alternative therapies: Techniques like chiropractic care, acupuncture, massage therapy or transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) may be used as complementary treatments, to manage pain and promote healing.
- Psychological support: Addressing the emotional and psychological impact of whiplash is crucial. Counseling, cognitive behavioral therapy or relaxation techniques can help manage stress, anxiety or depression associated with the [injury](#).

"Whiplash treatment focuses on alleviating pain, reducing inflammation, promoting healing and restoring normal neck function. Initially, conservative measures such as rest, ice or heat therapy, pain medication and gentle neck exercises are typically recommended," Smith said.

"Physical therapy can also be beneficial in restoring strength, flexibility and mobility to the [neck](#)," Smith added. "In more severe cases or when conservative measures fail, interventions like corticosteroid injections or

even surgery may be considered, although surgery is generally reserved for rare cases with structural instability or nerve compression. It is crucial for individuals with whiplash to consult with a health care professional, such as a spine surgeon or orthopedic specialist, to determine the most appropriate treatment plan based on their specific condition."

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