

Diagnosis and Management of Neck Pain

Neck Pain Amenable to Conservative Care		
Condition	Common Management	
	Essential	Optional
<p>1. Common Neck Pain: (e.g., non-specific neck pain, cervical strain/sprain, facet joint irritation, mechanical cervicalgia, WAD I-II, osteoarthritis, myofascial pain).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signs/Symptoms: Sharp, dull, shooting, or aching pain in neck region; aggravated by movement; muscle stiffness/spasms; may include head, trunk or arm pain. • Exam: Pain reproduced by tests; no neurological deficits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education and reassurance • Maintain normal activities • Address yellow flags • Self-care (proper diet, exercise, sleep, stress management) • Social and work activities • Ongoing follow-up to ensure alignment with treatment goals • Criteria for discharge/referral: achieved goals, worsening symptoms, failed treatment (e.g., no improvement after 6-8 weeks). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise therapy • Manual therapy (e.g., SMT, mobilization, soft tissue techniques) • Medications (e.g., acetaminophen, ibuprofen) • Electrotherapies (e.g., low-level laser) • Psychological or social support • Mind-body interventions (e.g., mindfulness, meditation) • Needling therapies • Multicomponent biopsychosocial care (e.g., exercise therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, structured education and social support)
<p>2. Neck Pain with Radicular Pain/Radiculopathy: (from disc pathology, WAD III)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signs/Symptoms: Neck pain radiating down arm; sharp, shooting, or burning pain; numbness, tingling, or weakness associated with a nerve root. • Exam: Positive tests (e.g., Spurling's, cervical distraction, Bakody, upper limb tension tests); sensory deficits, muscle weakness, altered reflexes. 		
Red Flags: Immediate Emergency Care Referral		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cervical Myelopathy: Gait disturbances, hand clumsiness, non-dermatomal numbness/weakness in upper and lower extremities, bowel/bladder dysfunction. 2. Meningitis: Neck stiffness, severe headache worsening with neck flexion, fever, vomiting, rash, altered mental status, photophobia. 3. Spinal Infection: Immunosuppression, recent infection/surgery, TB history, unexplained constitutional symptoms (e.g., fever/chills), IV drug use, poor living conditions. 4. Intracranial/Brain Lesion: Sudden intense headache (thunderclap); unexplained headache, dizziness, visual changes. 5. Vertebral/Carotid Artery Dissection: Severe neck pain/headache (worst pain ever); double vision; difficulty swallowing, speaking, walking; facial numbness; drop attacks; nausea; nystagmus. 6. Traumatic Spinal Fracture: Age ≥ 65 years, dangerous mechanism (e.g., pedestrian struck, high-speed collision), extremity weakness/tingling/burning, inability to rotate neck 45° left and right, midline cervical spine tenderness (Canadian C-Spine Rule). 		
Referral to Medical Provider		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Spinal Fracture: Sudden severe neck pain, osteoporosis, corticosteroid use, female sex, age >60, history of spinal fracture/cancer, possible extremity weakness/tingling/burning. 2. Spinal Malignancy: Progressive pain, cancer history, systemic symptoms (fatigue, weight loss, night pain), headache worsening with exertion. 3. Inflammatory Arthritides (e.g., spondyloarthropathies, rheumatoid arthritis, systemic lupus erythematosus): Morning stiffness >1 hour, systemic symptoms (fatigue, weight loss, fever), symmetrical joint pain, joint swelling/deformity, skin lesions. 		
<p>Orange Flags (Psychiatric Disorders): Major depression, personality disorders, PTSD, substance addiction and abuse.</p> <p>Action: Refer to appropriate provider/psychiatric specialist.</p>	<p>Yellow Flags (Psychosocial Factors): Fear of movement, poor recovery expectations, depression, anxiety, work-related or family issues, litigation or compensation claims, maladaptive coping mechanisms.</p> <p>Action: Address these as part of conservative care, co-manage, or refer to an appropriate provider.</p>	