



Neck and Shoulder Pain

If your shoulders have been bothering you, your neck may be to blame. Neck and shoulder pain are often related and doctors will usually examine your neck when you complain of shoulder pain.

The shoulder is a complex joint made up of muscles, ligaments, tendons, and bones. Most shoulder pain originates from injury to the soft tissues of the shoulder, but in some cases, especially when you experience both neck and shoulder pain, cervical disk disease or a problem with the bones or nerves in your neck may be the source of your problem.

Neck and Shoulder Pain: Cervical Disk Disease

Cervical disk disease is a condition of the cervical spine, meaning the part of your spine in your neck. Your cervical spine is comprised of seven spinal bones, or vertebrae. These bones are separated by intervertebral disks — flexible tissue that absorbs shock and allows you to move your neck with ease. Cervical disk disease affects these disks and can place stress on the nerves in your neck, which, in turn, can affect your shoulders.

Types of cervical disk disease include:

- **Herniated disk.** When you have a herniated disk, also known as a slipped disk, one of your disks has been pushed out of place. This may result from injury or age-related disk degeneration. A herniated cervical disk can place pressure on spinal nerves, resulting in neck and shoulder pain as well as numbness or tingling in the arms or shoulders.
- **Bone spurs.** In advanced cases of disk degeneration, bone spurs may form. Bone spurs are tiny growths on the bones in your spine that can irritate the spinal nerves, resulting in pressure and irritation and causing pain in your neck, shoulders, and arms.
- **Arthritis of the neck.** Also called cervical spondylosis, neck arthritis can happen as a result of disk degeneration. This condition causes problems with the ligaments and disks of the spine, and may constrict the nerves, resulting in neck and shoulder pain as well as numbness or weakness in your arms or legs.

Neck and Shoulder Pain: Other Causes

Sometimes neck and shoulder pain is a sign of something more serious. While not common, these conditions might include:

- **Spinal cord tumor.** When spinal cord tumors arise in the cervical region of the spine, they usually cause neck pain, and may eventually trigger pain in the shoulders, arms, or legs as the tumor grows and compresses different nerves.
- **Meningitis.** One of the primary symptoms of meningitis, a life-threatening infection of the central nervous system, is neck pain and stiffness, along with other symptoms like fever and vomiting. In some cases, meningitis can also cause pain and stiffness in the shoulders.
- **Previous neck injury.** A past injury or trauma to your neck can result in lasting damage that affects the nerves leading to your shoulder, causing shoulder pain. That's why your doctor will take a careful medical history as part of your evaluation.

If you have chronic shoulder pain, talk to your physician about whether an underlying neck problem could be to blame. Neck-related shoulder pain can be a sign of a serious problem, but it could also just be due to a minor condition like a muscle spasm.

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