

A large, light gray, stylized anatomical illustration of a human head and neck profile, facing left. The neck is highlighted with a white, ribbon-like shape. The background is a light gray gradient with a vertical orange bar on the left side.

# Neck Pain

Healthshare Information for Guided Patient Management

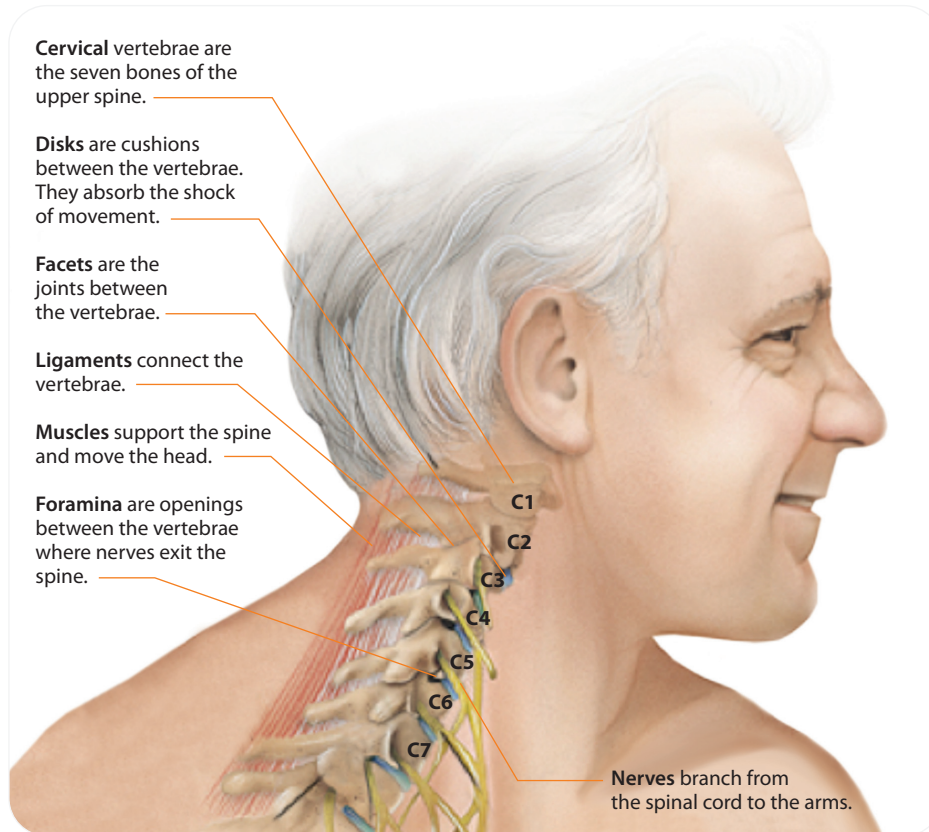
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## Introduction

Healthshare is committed to improving your health and wellbeing. This information leaflet is produced by health professionals who are expert in improving musculoskeletal conditions. The information is based on the latest available evidence from research in the field. If you are not sure of any of the given information, please contact our physiotherapy helpline for further information.

## The neck (cervical spine) anatomy



Your neck is formed by bones, ligaments, discs, nerves and muscles connecting the neck and shoulder. Due to the large number of structures around your neck it can be hard to pin-point the cause of pain. Even when changes can be seen on X-ray or MRI it is extremely difficult to be certain of which structure is causing the pain.

## What are the common types of neck pain?

<p><b>Non-specific neck pain</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This is the most common diagnosis and is caused by minor injuries or sprains to muscles or ligaments in the neck.</li> <li>• Poor posture when sitting in slouched, static positions for long periods of time can also cause non-specific neck pain. In these positions, excessive tension or fatigue of the muscles supporting the neck can result in neck pain and headaches.</li> <li>• An increase in general stress may also cause these muscles to tighten, causing neck pain and headaches.</li> <li>• In most cases the exact cause of neck pain remains unknown and the pain will often clear up after a few days.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Cervical spondylosis</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This is a common cause of neck pain and is the result of wear and tear over many years.</li> <li>• This wear and tear can differ from person to person. It causes the discs between the vertebrae to thin and the facet joints (joints between the vertebrae) to become stiff and sometimes painful.</li> <li>• Bony spurs (osteophytes) may also form at the edges of the vertebrae and facet joints.</li> <li>• Cervical spondylosis is a type of osteoarthritis of the neck and, depending on the extent of the degeneration, can also result in nerve irritation.</li> <li>• These changes in the cervical spine can be seen on X-ray and are present in almost everyone by the age of 65, however many people feel no neck pain despite these changes.</li> <li>• X-rays or MRI's are, therefore, rarely required in the diagnosis of neck pain.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Whiplash injury</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This is another common cause for neck pain following a collision injury, especially when you are hit from behind.</li> <li>• The rapid forwards and backwards movement of the head may cause overstretching of the soft tissues of the neck.</li> <li>• Following a whiplash injury, there is often a delay before the pain and stiffness start.</li> <li>• Although whiplash can cause neck pain, most people do not have any real damage or injury and often symptoms improve within a few weeks.</li> <li>• Keeping moving and exercising a little more each day can help to speed your recovery.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Acute torticollis</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This is a spasm of the muscles on the front and side of your neck.</li> <li>• This could cause your head to twist to one side and make it very painful to move your head.</li> <li>• It is thought to be due to minor injury or poor posture (e.g. while sleeping).</li> <li>• This usually clears after a few days.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Cervical radiculopathy (radiating arm pain)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This is when the root of a nerve is irritated as it passes out of the spinal column in the neck.</li> <li>• It may cause symptoms such as numbness, pins &amp; needles and weakness in parts of the arm that are supplied by the affected nerve in addition to neck pain.</li> <li>• This often follows from cervical spondylosis or a degenerating disc. Bulging discs are rare in the neck but are sometimes seen in the younger population.</li> </ul>

**Other serious causes**

- These include rheumatoid arthritis, bone disorders, cancers, and serious injuries that damage the vertebrae, spinal cord or nerves in the neck.

If you are experiencing any dizziness, blackouts, headaches, numbness, pins & needles or weakness in your arms or legs or anything else that you are concerned about it is important that you consult with your GP or physiotherapist for further assessment

### What are the common symptoms associated with neck pain?

<b>Pain</b>	This may be felt anywhere around the neck, upper back and shoulder region. Headaches with pain behind the eyes are also commonly associated with neck problems. Sometimes pain right down into the arm comes from a neck problem.
<b>Stiffness</b>	This is one of the most common problems. You may find it difficult to move your neck or feel that your muscles are very tight. Stiffness is often worse with rest or after sitting in one position for a long time. It is important that you try to keep moving and avoid too much rest.
<b>Joint crepitus or cracking</b>	When you have osteoarthritis of your neck you may sometimes experience cracking or grinding noises in your neck which are quite normal and generally doesn't require any treatment.
<b>Other symptoms</b>	Neck pain that disturbs your sleep can cause tiredness and severely affect your mood in the long term.

### What are the treatments available for neck pain?

Most neck pain improves within a few days and does not require medical treatment.

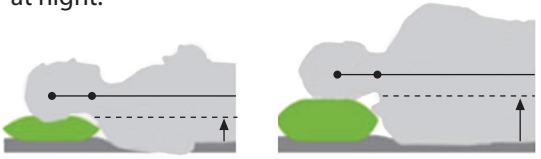
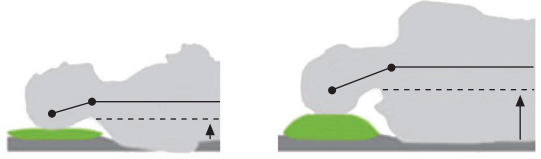

If you are suffering with moderate to severe neck pain, early advice and treatment can help to reduce the time spent off work or away from activities.

If you suffer with neck pain persistently, it is advisable that you visit your GP or physiotherapist for further examination.

The treatment for neck pain varies with the cause and with your particular circumstances. Most neck pain improves with exercise, joint and soft tissue manipulation and/or medication. Very rarely neck pain may require more invasive treatments such as injections or surgery.

**Medications**

- Paracetamol based pain killers often help by allowing you to continue with your normal activities. These can be bought over the counter but you should ask your doctor or pharmacist if you have any other medical problems.
- Anti-inflammatory medication can be helpful in reducing any inflammation which in turn helps to relieve pain. Ibuprofen based anti-inflammatory medication can be bought over the counter but you should ask your doctor or pharmacist if you have any other medical problems. Anti-inflammatory medication should also be taken as a course of treatment rather than one every now and then.
- Your GP may prescribe other anti-inflammatory medication such as Naproxen or Diclofenac if your symptoms fail to improve with Ibuprofen.
- Muscle relaxants are sometimes prescribed for a few days if your neck muscles are tense due to severe pain.
- Neuropathic medication: If you suffer with neck pain associated with nerve root irritation, your GP may prescribe medications such as Amitriptyline, Duloxetine, Gabapentin or Pregabalin.
- Steroids such as cortisone are also used to manage pain and inflammation via joint injection but these are used as a last resort.

<p><b>Modalities</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ice/heat therapy is often used as a home therapy to help relieve pain, reduce inflammation and reduce any muscle spasm that could be contributing to the pain.</li> <li>• Use a thin towel to avoid burning the skin when using ice or heat therapy and never place either directly onto the skin. Both can be applied for about 15 minutes at a time and can be repeated every 2 hours during the day.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Manual therapy/ Manipulation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This often helps to decrease muscle spasm, stiffness and inflammation and thereby pain.</li> <li>• It may also improve the mobility of your neck joints and your posture to help prevent neck pain in the future.</li> <li>• Your therapist may use joint and soft tissue manipulation techniques, manual stretches, exercises, acupuncture and other methods that help to relieve pain and improve function.</li> <li>• The extent to which these techniques will help very much depends on the specific problem and your willingness to take on board the advice and exercise recommended.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Exercises</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is important that you keep your neck moving as normally as possible from the beginning.</li> <li>• Exercise can ease neck pain, restore and maintain normal movement and prevent future pain.</li> <li>• At first it may be painful to move your neck but it is important to do some gentle exercises from the start and slowly increase your pain free movement, repeating this regularly throughout your day.</li> <li>• Research suggests that you are more likely to make a quicker recovery if you keep your neck moving rather than resting it for long periods of time.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Collars</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These are rarely recommended nowadays for neck pain.</li> <li>• Using a neck collar can lead to a slower recovery, muscle wasting and long-lasting neck pain.</li> <li>• There is limited evidence that they help with either acute or long-standing neck pain.</li> <li>• You may benefit from using a neck pillow if you feel that you need more support at night.</li> </ul> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: flex-start;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p><b>JUST RIGHT</b> Supports the head to allow it to align with the shoulders, hips and heels so now the body is supported in its aligned natural position.</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p><b>TOO THIN</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Causes the head to move out of alignment.</li> <li>• Adds pressure to the shoulder, which can cause shoulder stiffness.</li> </ul> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p><b>TOO THICK</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forces the head to move out of alignment.</li> <li>• Reduces the size of the airway, which can lead to snoring.</li> </ul> </div> </div>

**Surgery**

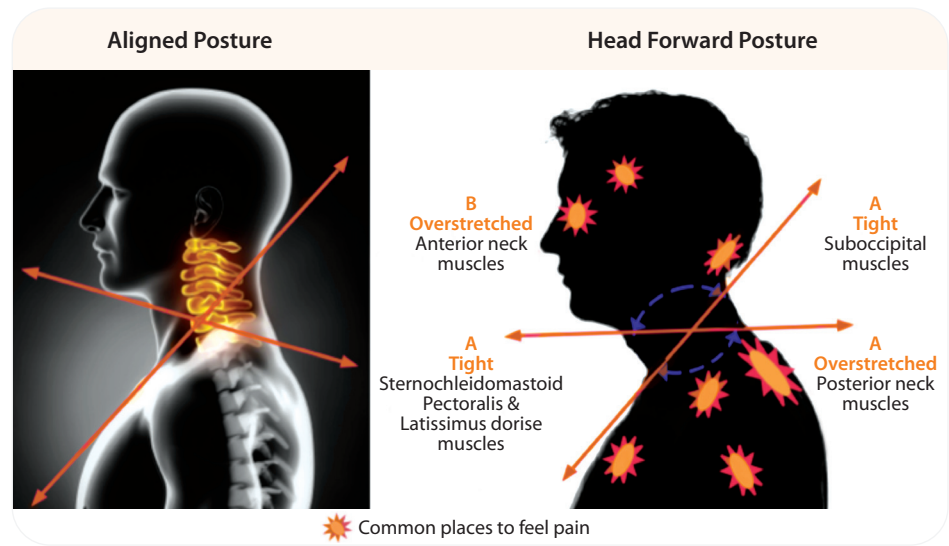
- Surgery is rarely beneficial for neck pain but may be useful if a nerve is affected and is causing weakness or severe pain down the arm which is not relieved by other methods.
- Surgery may also be required if there is any damage to the bones affecting your spinal cord resulting in weakness of your limbs.
- It is important to fully try all non-surgical treatment before considering any surgery for neck pain and/or cervical radiculopathy.

**Prevention**

There are ways in which you can look after your neck and work more at prevention rather than cure.

**Posture**

- Observe your everyday posture i.e. try not to slouch when sitting or standing. A good posture can help to both relieve and prevent neck pain.
- Maintaining a good neck and shoulder position strengthens the muscles that protect your neck from injury and reduces the pressure on the joints and soft tissues.
- Try to avoid sitting or standing in one position for long periods of time. It is important to regularly stand up or change position both at home and at work.



**Lifting technique**

- Try to pay close attention to your lifting technique. Keep objects close to your body and use your knees, keeping your back straight when lifting an object.
- Avoid lifting objects with outstretch arms regardless of their weight and bring them closer to your body before lifting.
- Try to use your feet to turn instead of twisting your spine
- Try not to lift with your arms in an awkward position as this may put undue stress on the joints and soft tissues in your neck, shoulders and lower back.

**Carrying**

- While carrying objects (e.g. parcels) try to carry them in both hands with similar loads on each side to avoid leaning.
- Also try to keep your elbows slightly bent as this puts the muscles in a better position to work more effectively.



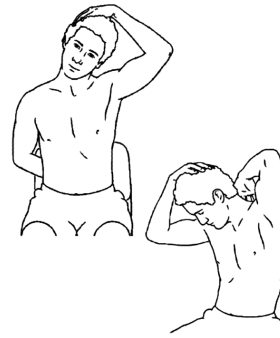
## Exercises for neck pain

1. Stretching and stability exercises should be done daily and regularly even when there is no pain. Make sure you perform these in a pain free range of movement
2. Over stretching may increase your pain, therefore only stretch up to a comfortable pain/stretch level.
3. It is normal to get some discomfort after exercise. If this continues for more than 24 hours it is important that you reduce the repetitions on your next session.

### Phase 1: Stretching exercises

#### Neck stretch (trapezius/levator/posterior neck)

1. Sitting on the edge of a chair with your right hand touching your left ear, gently bring your right ear towards your shoulder. Hold for 30 seconds x 5 reps on both sides.
2. Now rotate your head to 45°, place your right hand over your head so that your nose is facing your elbow. Gently lower your chin towards your collar bone. Hold for 30 seconds x 5 reps.
3. Now facing forwards with both hands touching the back of your head, gently bring your chin towards your chest. Hold this position for 30 seconds x 5 reps.



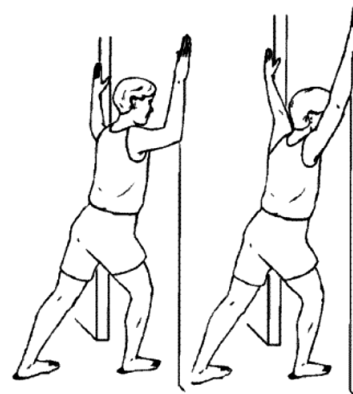
#### Pectorals stretch

Stand in a doorway or corner.

Bend your elbow and support the forearm against the door frame.

The stretch should be felt in the chest muscles.

Hold this position for 20 seconds x 5 reps.



### Phase 1: Mobility exercises

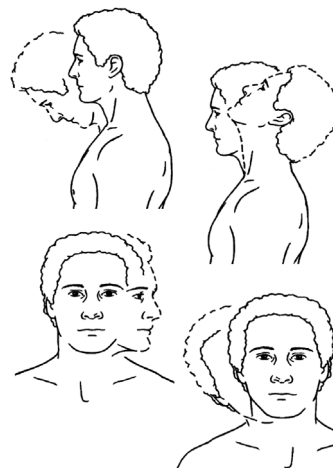
#### Neck mobility exercises

Sit on a chair in an upright position with your head in a neutral position. Chin in line with eyes and ears in line with shoulders. Now move your head in the following directions:

1. Forwards : Slowly move your chin towards your chest.
2. Backwards : Slowly look up to the ceiling as far as you can move.
3. Side Rotation: Slowly move your chin towards your shoulder.
4. Side bend: Slowly move your ear towards the shoulder.

Return to the neutral (start) position after each movement and do not try to combine these movements. Only go as far as you can pain free, even if the movement is very small.

Repeat 10 times in each direction.



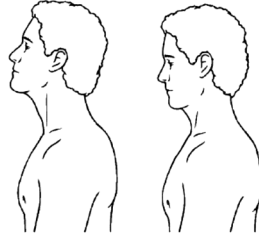
### Phase 1: Stability and strengthening exercises

#### Neck retraction exercise

Pull your head straight back keeping your jaw and eyes level.

Hold for 10 seconds and repeat 10 times.

This can be performed regularly throughout the day.



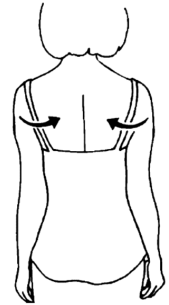
#### Scapular/posterior neck stabilisation

Sit straight without resting on the back of the chair and with both feet flat on the floor.

Keeping your shoulders level, slowly pull your shoulder blades towards each other.

Hold this position for 10 seconds and relax. Repeat 10 times.

This can be performed regularly throughout your day.



#### Prone flying

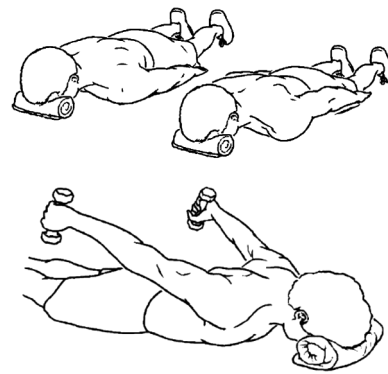
Lie face down with your forehead supported by a towel, arms against your sides with your hands turned outwards, i.e. thumbs pointing upwards.

Move your shoulder blades towards each other and at the same time lift your hands off the floor. Slowly bring your arms down.

Repeat this 10 times x 3 sets.

Look down at the floor while doing the exercise.

This can be progressed by holding small weights in your hands.

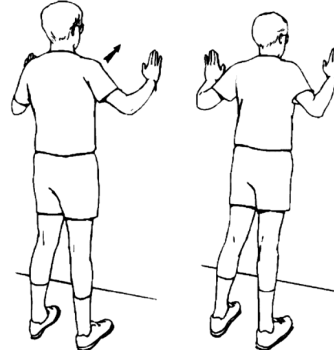


#### Wall push-ups

Stand facing a wall and place your hands against it at about shoulder level and shoulder width apart.

Take your shoulder blades down your back and slightly in towards each other and slowly do a push-up against the wall while keeping your shoulder blades in the same position.

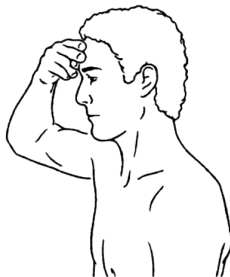
Repeat this 10 times x 3.



#### Static neck flexion

Sitting with your head facing forwards and in a neutral position i.e. chin under eyes and ears in line with shoulders. Use light pressure from your finger-tips on your forehead to resist bending your head forwards.

Hold for 5 seconds x 10 repetitions.



#### Static neck extension

Sitting with your head facing forwards and in a neutral position i.e. chin under eyes and ears in line with shoulders. Use light pressure from your finger-tips on the back of your head to resist bending your head backwards.

Hold for 5 seconds x 10 repetitions.

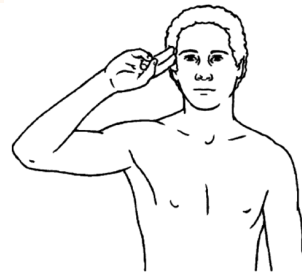


### Phase 1: Stability and strengthening exercises/contd

#### Static neck side flexion

Sitting with your head facing forwards and in a neutral position i.e. chin under eyes and ears inline with shoulders. Use light pressure from your finger-tips to resist bending your head to the side. Repeat on the opposite side.

Hold for 5 seconds x 10 repetitions.



### Phase 2: Stability and strengthening exercises

#### Head lifts

Lying on your stomach with your chin hanging over the end of the bed. Lift your head backwards/up keeping your chin tucked in and not pushing forwards. Hold that position for 5 seconds. Relax slowly and repeat.

Perform 10 repetitions.



#### Chin lifts

Lying on your stomach with your knees bent. Lift your head just off the floor, pulling your chin in towards your chest and hold it there for about 5 seconds. Relax down slowly and repeat.

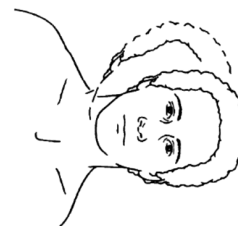
Perform 10 repetitions.



#### Side Lifts

In a side lying position, supporting your head with a cushion or your opposite arm. Lift your head up off the floor bringing your ear towards your shoulder.

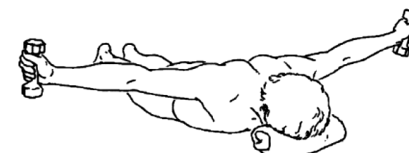
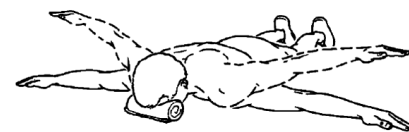
Hold for 5 seconds x 10 repetitions.



#### Prone flies 2

Lying face down, arms out at your sides in a T-position with your hands turned outwards, i.e. thumbs pointing upwards. Bring your shoulder blades down your back and slightly in towards each other and lift your hands off the floor while maintaining your shoulder blade position. Look down at the floor while doing this exercise. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat 10 times.

Progress this by lifting your trunk at the same time as raising your arms. Small weights can also be added in the hands.

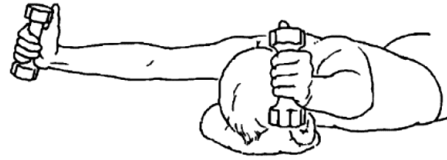


## Phase 2: Stability and strengthening exercises/contd

### Superman

Lying face down, with your arms above your head and in line with your body, and with your hands turned outwards i.e. thumbs pointing upwards. Bring your shoulder blades down your back and slightly in towards each other and lift your arms and upper trunk off the floor. Breathe normally during the exercise. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat 10 times.

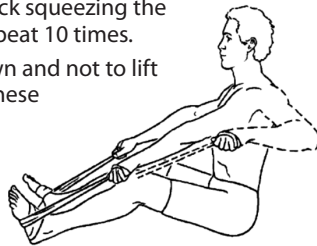
Small weights can be held in your hands to progress this exercise.



### Long sitting shoulder rowing

Sit with your legs straight out in front of you. Grasp the ends of your band in both hands. Loop the band around both forefeet. Pull both elbows back squeezing the shoulder blades together. Repeat 10 times.

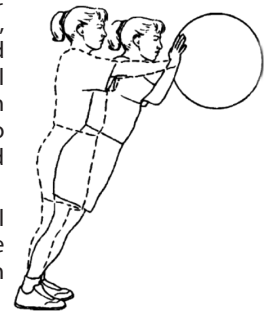
Be sure to keep your feet down and not to lift your shoulders while doing these exercises.



### Push-up plus retracting with ball

Perform as in phase 1, but this time place a fit ball against the wall, placing both hands on the ball and performing the push-ups. Control your shoulder blade position throughout the movement i.e. no shrugging. Hold for 10 second and repeat 10 times.

This can also be done in a normal push-up position on the floor while controlling your shoulder position throughout the movement.



### Upper back extension

Kneeling, sitting back on your heels (or leaning over a ball if you have one) with your arms crossed across your chest. Slowly unravel yourself by lifting your chin and head, opening the chest and bringing the shoulder blades in towards each other. Bend your elbows and bring them out to the side (i.e. 90° angles to your shoulders).

Hold for 10 seconds and repeat 10 times.

