

This patient page is excerpted from an article on KnowYourBack. Find more about injury prevention, spine conditions, and treatments at [knowyourback.org](http://knowyourback.org).

**Important:** If you have had an accident that started your neck pain or if you have pain, numbness, tingling or weakness in your arm that is worsening, you should see your physician before starting any exercises.

### The Importance of Exercise for the Neck

Spine experts agree that physical activity is important for people with neck pain. You can even reduce your pain by being active. Activity can also then protect you against your neck pain returning in the future.

So how do you stay physically active without making your pain worse? Many people are surprised that carefully selected exercises can actually reduce pain. The exercises described here can often provide quick and significant relief, speed your recovery and keep your pain from returning.

Once pain lessens or disappears, other exercises can help restore neck movement and muscle strength. These can help you gain optimal recovery and help protect you against future episodes. If it is difficult to reduce your pain, many doctors believe returning to your activities is worthwhile. Even if pain increases, as long as that increase ceases as soon as the activity stops, that temporary additional pain is acceptable. Try to stay active.

### Selecting Exercises to Relieve Pain

It is important to choose exercises carefully to avoid making your neck pain worse. One way to know if your neck problem is getting worse is if your symptoms spread away from the neck itself and into your shoulder or down your arm. This can happen during certain exercises or common activities such as driving, reading or using a computer for a prolonged period of time.

The good news is that the opposite is also true! Symptoms can move out of your arm or shoulder so they are felt closer to the center or midline of your neck (called symptom "centralization"). When this happens, you are improving and moving toward recovery! You may be able to identify exercises and positions that can intentionally make that happen. When that is the case, once all symptoms have returned to the center of your neck, they will often decrease and disappear with continued exercise. Or if you only have pain in your neck, these same exercises will often eliminate that pain. Numbness or tingling usually recovers as well, but usually more slowly than the pain.

Four simple exercises often help centralize and reduce neck-related symptoms. When doing these exercises, as well as any other activities, monitor your pain and any numbness and tingling. Make sure they are moving toward the middle of your neck (centralizing), becoming less intense, or at least remaining the same.

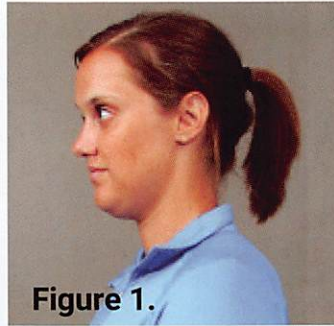


Figure 1.

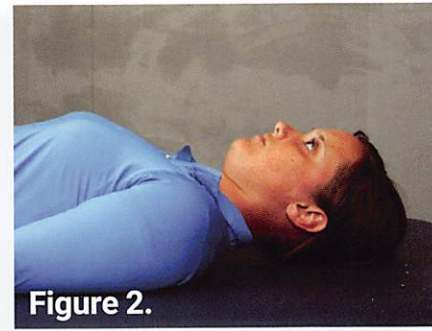


Figure 2.

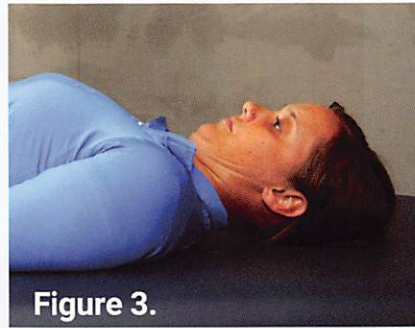


Figure 3.

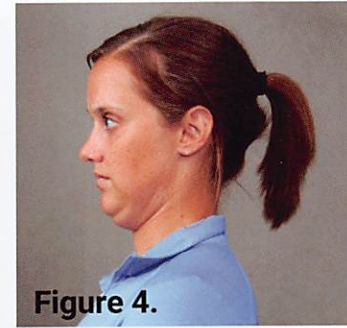


Figure 4.

Please visit [KnowYourBack.org](http://KnowYourBack.org) for more information about an array of spine-related topics or to find a NASS provider.

If they are moving further away from your neck, stop the exercise. Continue with those that help your pain the most; abandon those that aggravate your pain.

### Simple Exercises (see [KnowYourBack.org](http://KnowYourBack.org) for full descriptions and images):

**Walking straight with head in neutral position (Figure 1):** Make an effort to "walk tall" (chest up, shoulders back) and with your head positioned with your ears aligned directly over your shoulders.

**Supine neutral head position (Figure 2):** Lying on your back with as thin a pillow as is comfortable, or no pillow, let your head fall backward so your ears move toward being aligned with your shoulders and hips as much as you comfortably can. Spend 5-10 minutes in this position.

**Supine retraction (Figure 3):** Lying on your back with your head in neutral position, place your fingers on your chin and push downward so your chin tucks and your head is pushed downward into its resting surface. Repeat that stretch 8-10 times.

**Standing or sitting neck retraction (Figure 4):** Place your fingers on the front of your chin to help push your head backward as far as it will go, but maintain your face in a forward-direction. Hold that "retracted" stretching position for 1-2 seconds and then release, repeat 8-10 times.

Tear this page out and use it as a resource to educate your patients about cervical exercise. Use [KnowYourBack.org](http://KnowYourBack.org) for more patient information.