



CHAPTER 4

HEADACHES THAT START IN THE NECK - PRACTICE PERFECT POSTURE

SIGNS OF A CERVICOGENIC HEADACHE

The medical term for headaches that start in the neck is “cervicogenic.” The Latin word for neck is “cervical,” and “genic” comes from the word “genesis”, or origin. Therefore, the source of cervicogenic headaches is in the neck, which includes the joints, nerves, muscles and discs.¹

The pain starts in the neck and projects from the back of the head to the eye and temple area. The pain tends to be one-sided but can occasionally expand to both sides of the head and may also extend into the shoulder and arm.²

How can you tell if you have a cervicogenic headache? If you have a cervicogenic headache, you may have a rounded upper back and shoulders with a forward head posture.³⁻¹⁰



Poor neck posture

With poor neck posture, the lower part of the neck bends forward unnaturally, which forces the upper neck to tilt upwards to keep the eyes looking straight ahead. The result is increased pressure on the upper neck which can cause major headaches! This poor posture occurs when neck muscles are weak,¹¹ and neck joints are stiff.

The movements of turning and bending the head to the right and left and looking up and down can become limited if you have a cervicogenic headache.¹²⁻¹⁴ Your limited neck motion may feel normal because the amount of neck movement you have lost may go unnoticed.

Try a simple experiment to see how the range of motion in the neck changes when you slump forward. Straighten your spine into a good posture with your head held upright over the trunk, eyes level, looking neither up nor down. Now, turn your neck to the right and to the left to see how smoothly it moves. Then slump forward. The joints in your neck become locked in place, and motion decreases. As you turn your neck in the slumped posture position, you will find it no longer turns as freely. When your posture is corrected again, neck motion will increase instantly. If limited neck joints and tight muscles are producing your headaches, you can get immediate headache relief by restoring normal neck motion.

Cervicogenic headaches usually stem from the upper three neck vertebrae, or bones, which produce over half the motion in the neck. However, lower neck vertebrae also can cause headaches.¹⁵⁻¹⁶

Two physical therapy tests can help determine if someone might have a cervicogenic headache. The flexion-rotation test measures the neck motion with a person lying flat. The neck is bent forward and turned right and left to determine if the rotation motion is limited, which will be the case with people who have cervicogenic headaches.¹⁷⁻²² The second test is the craniocervical (head-neck) flexion test which checks the function of some of the muscles attaching to the head and the neck. A pressure cuff is placed behind the upper neck, and the person is asked to push slowly and gently to nod the head into the cuff five times as the pressure of the cuff is slowly increased. The curve of the neck flattens as the front neck muscles contract, and a poor result in this test points toward a cervicogenic diagnosis.²³⁻²⁵

Another way to identify a cervicogenic headache is by the symptoms that are not present. The cervicogenic headache typically does not come

with nausea and vomiting like the migraine does. It tends not to be on both sides of the head like the tension headache. People with cervicogenic headaches may be sensitive to bright light, a phenomenon known as photophobia, or “fear of light.” However, this light trigger is even more pronounced with the tension and migraine sufferer. Dizziness and light-headedness may accompany the cervicogenic headache, which make treatment of the headache more difficult.²⁶

The cervicogenic headache can last anywhere from three hours to three weeks. People should not have to be afflicted for such a long time when self-help remedies can rapidly decrease the headache pain intensity and frequency. You may have slipped unconsciously into poor posture habits during your daily activities that have led you to developing cervicogenic headaches.

This chapter will demonstrate how to strengthen and stretch neck and shoulder muscles to improve posture and relieve cervicogenic headaches. The same muscles are also tender in tension and migraine headaches and are illustrated in chapter 5.

CAUTION: *Before trying these self-help techniques, you should make sure the headache is not the sign of a more serious problem. Consult chapter 2 before attempting any of these techniques. You should seek the advice of your physician and acknowledge that you are responsible for any actions taken and the result of those actions. The techniques, advice and strategies contained in this chapter may not be suitable for every individual and should be abandoned if your headache increases.*

LINE UP THE SPINE – IMPROVE WALKING POSTURE



Poor posture with forward head, shoulders rolled inward, and palms facing the trunk leads to headache and neck pain.



Squeeze the shoulder blades together and turn the arms outward, palms facing forward, chin tucked for proper posture.

Most people give up on the battle with gravity which slowly pulls the head forward into a slumped posture as the decades go by. The spine may lose up to 25% of its height over time, as the discs between the spinal vertebrae slowly dehydrate and shrivel up. Why add to that loss of height by slumping over?

A sedentary lifestyle reinforces the slumped posture. Simply squeezing the shoulder blades together to activate the muscles that straighten the spine helps fight this tendency. This simple change adjusts the entire walking posture and pulls in the stomach as well. With correct posture a person projects an air of confidence and even gains several inches of height.

LINE UP THE SPINE – SITTING POSTURE

The classic forward head posture

The millions of people who spend much of their day in this painful, hunched over position place considerable strain on their necks, which can lead to headaches. Slumping forward while sitting can increase the pressure on the discs in the neck and back. If these discs bulge out too far, they can pinch the spinal nerves, causing pain and tingling in the arms and legs.

Correcting posture can have the immediate effect of reducing disc pressure, helping the symptoms to move out of the arms and legs to prevent further damage. If the posture in the low back is corrected, the neck posture will fall into line naturally with little effort needed, which in turn reduces strain on the headache-producing muscles.

Strange as it may seem, flipping the office chair around and placing the legs apart has the effect of locking the lower back into a neutral or slightly arched backward position. The forward slumping position is now blocked, as the back of the chair supports the front of the trunk, preventing gravity from pulling it forward. A pillow can be placed in front of the chest for better comfort. I have observed in the clinic that the “Reverse Sit” position has helped relieve pain in nurses, teachers, factory workers, students and doctors.

Neck exercises are very helpful to correct poor sitting posture, which can decrease neck pain and the headaches that go along with it.²⁷⁻³¹



The classic forward head posture.



A back cushion produces perfect posture



The “Reverse Sit”

CHIN TUCK EXERCISES TO HELP POSTURE AND PAIN



Poor neck posture



Chin tuck exercise restores good posture.

The standard exercise to improve posture can be found in the McKenzie book, *Treat Your Own Neck*.³² McKenzie's self-help books for back and neck pain have been a valuable help for people with spinal pain for decades. McKenzie advocated pulling the head backwards, while keeping the chin tucked, in order to reach your best posture. You need to make sure that you do not tilt your head backwards, which is an easy mistake to make. Look straight ahead as you pull your head back.

The chin tuck exercise can relieve both headaches and neck pain. You may feel a pull in the back of your neck as you pull your head back. This pull in the back of your neck is not unusual if those neck muscles have been tight for a long time. If your neck and head have been in the wrong position for years, practice will be needed to get the right technique. It is helpful to look in a mirror while sitting. The correct, good-looking posture may feel abnormal and unnatural while the poor, slumped posture may feel normal and natural. If this chin tuck exercise (or any other exercise) hurts, **do not do it!**

The chin tuck exercise strengthens your weak muscles in the front of your neck that are needed to prevent gravity from pulling your head

forward. Your head may be pushed forward by the tight muscles in the back of your neck. The chin tuck will stretch these muscles. Rebalancing these front and back neck muscles can produce an immediate relief of cervicogenic headaches. These muscles are all pictured in Chapter 5.

To perform the chin tuck exercise, use one hand to gently push your neck further into the tucked position. Look straight ahead. Do not make the common mistake of tilting your head up. Your head must stay level. Your fingers can also be spread so that the web space between your thumb and index finger make contact just below your nose, with your thumb tip and fingertip on your cheekbone. As pressure is applied, a gentle stretch will be felt in the back of your neck, and your headache will gradually decrease with more chin tuck cycles. A variation of this exercise involves pushing backwards on the chin, but since pressure on the jaw can cause headaches as well, the technique of pressing on the bone above the jaw is shown here.



Chin tuck with overpressure

How long should this chin-tuck position be held? A general guideline I recommend is to hold for 10 seconds and then release. The pressure should be released after 10 seconds to make sure stiff and sensitive neck muscles are not overstretched from pushing too hard. During each pressure release, adjust the angle of elevation slightly until the headache feels the most relief. However, the time of the chin tuck hold to relieve headaches can vary, as one case study shows, from as little as two seconds up to three minutes.³³

A helpful technique is to coordinate the chin tuck exercise with your breathing cycle – pressure on while breathing out, pressure off when breathing in. Repeat this “breathing break” two to 10 times a day as needed to keep your headache under control.

Some problems are beyond the scope of this book and require consultation with one’s personal physician. Symptoms such as dizziness, arm pain, tingling, numbness or weakness indicate that there is more going on besides a cervicogenic headache. If pain radiates from the neck into one arm, the chin tuck exercise can “centralize” the pain, causing it to retreat from the arm to settle again in the neck, where it started. Typically, a bulging cervical disc, the spongy shock-absorbing structure between the neck bones, can produce this shooting pain by pressing against nerves that service the arm. The disc condition is most severe when the symptoms of burning pain, weakness, numbness, and tingling extend all the way into the hand.

The need for “centralization” is urgent to remove the symptoms from the arm as quickly as possible. Treatment with chin tuck exercises, taught by Robin McKenzie, can help the arm symptoms to retreat to the point of origin in the neck. If the symptoms “peripheralize,” or intensify further into the arm, stop the exercise, even if the neck feels better. Any exercise or activity that causes increased pain into either arm is a flashing red light telling a person to STOP what they are doing. For more valuable approaches to treat nerve conditions stemming from the neck, read McKenzie’s neck treatment books.³⁴ Seek out a McKenzie Mechanical Diagnosis and Therapy practitioner to help sort out what exercises will help your individual headache problems.



Chin tuck lying down

Another, easier chin tuck exercise method may be done lying down in order to eliminate fighting gravity. Use pillows to place your head in the chin tuck position. Pay attention to your neck position when lying down at night. If your habit is to look upwards when lying down, get into this chin tuck position to straighten out your neck. A towel roll behind your upper neck, or a magazine to help your neck slide, can be helpful to assist the chin tuck. Do not overdo it – a simple nodding of your head may be enough to stretch the sensitive upper neck muscles.

Why might this exercise relieve headaches? The important neck muscles that protect against headaches get better controlled contractions by doing the chin tuck. Also, the pressure on the headache-causing upper neck joints can be relieved.

Posture correction exercises initially require extra effort. It takes time for the tight neck muscles to regain flexibility. This remodeling can take one to two months if the muscles and joints are very tight.

As the posture and headaches improve, then the exercise frequency can gradually be reduced. To start a postural program, I recommend the following:

- **Frequency:** Stretch 5-10 times a day to help prevent the stiff muscles from returning to their previously tight positions.
- **Duration:** Stretch for about 10 seconds, though the time can be adjusted to get the best results. If specific neck muscles to the left and right are being stretched, a person would stretch to the left for 10 seconds, then to the right for 10 seconds. Repeat the stretch three times for one set.
- **Intensity:** Stretch gently so the hypersensitive neck muscles and nerves do not become irritated. No forcible neck stretching should be done. Slowly build up to peak stretch. A slow stretch gives a person warning signs of any adverse symptoms developing. Although rare, it is possible to feel increased dizziness or sharp pain in the neck, which means you should stop the exercise. The tissues will slowly adapt to the stretch force placed upon them. No lingering pain should be felt after the 10-second stretch is released.
- **Precautions:** The program should be performed diligently for the first one to two months to get the tight tissues to remodel back to their normal flexibility. People with past neck surgeries should seek guidance from a medical practitioner before embarking on a new stretching program. The neck segments that have been operated on will not move normally. Aggressive stretching could damage the remaining neck segments, since the operated on segments cannot help to absorb the stretching force. Patients who have rheumatoid arthritis, gout, neck injury, Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, are using steroids or have osteopenia with fragile bones should not stretch. You should be cleared by your doctor before beginning an exercise program for your head or neck.

STRENGTHEN WEAK NECK MUSCLES



Chin tuck with slight neck forward bend to strengthen front neck muscles

The chin tuck maneuver may be advanced a step further to strengthen the front neck muscles by using the weight of the head to provide resistance. Do not make the mistake of bending the head too far forward. A slight lifting of the head off the pillow is all that is needed. Go slowly and look downward with your eyes to help get exactly the right muscles to engage.³⁵ You want the neck bending muscles in the front of the neck, called the longus capitis and colli, to contract. You don't want the headache-producing muscle on the side of the neck, the sternocleidomastoid, to be activated.³⁶ These muscles are illustrated in Chapter 5.

Ease up on the chin tuck if you feel a considerable strain in the upper neck muscles in the back of the head. These muscles may have been stiff for a long time. The postural exercises may stretch them out, and they may hurt the next day if care is not taken.

THERABAND NECK STRENGTHENING EXERCISES

Chin tuck lying down with theraband

Place the theraband behind the back of the head and hold it with both hands. Lift the arms slightly to apply tension. In both the lying down and sitting exercises, try 5 second holds, 10 repetitions, gradually building up force until you reach about half of your available power. At the slightest sense of increased neck pain, lighten up your force, or stop the exercise. The advantage to working the neck muscles while lying down is that the neck is more stable with no gravity to contend with as there would be in a sitting position. The postural muscles in the front and back of the neck gain strength and control, which can decrease a headache on the spot. Use a scarf to support the back of the head if the theraband is too difficult for you to keep it in position.



Chin tuck lying down with theraband

Elbows forward with resisted chin tuck, sitting

Hold arms steady while gradually pushing your head back into the theraband. Do not let the theraband pull your head forward, which defeats the purpose of keeping your head lined up over your trunk.



Elbows forward with resisted chin tuck, sitting

Elbows back with resisted chin tuck, sitting

Put your arms out to the side and apply backward pressure with your neck and head into the stretched theraband. This exercise increases the level of difficulty by bringing your elbows further back to activate some shoulder blade muscles as well as your neck muscles. This exercise also straightens the typically slumped upper trunk.



Elbows back with resisted chin tuck in sitting



Chin tuck with ball

An alternative technique to use if you have a hard time keeping your arms up is to use a ball, or even a pillow, against the wall or sofa to do the same tuck and turn exercise.

Repeat for 3 sets of 10 repetitions with 5 second holds, using 60-80% of the maximum muscle contraction force, 3-5 sessions per week. A similar contraction set-up was found to produce significant increases in neck range of motion.³⁷

Tuck and turn exercise, sitting

With arms stretching the band out to the sides, push your head back into the band. Keep your arms stable. Try to get the band to cradle the back of your neck, rather than letting the theraband roll up behind your neck. Slowly, without forcing the turn, rotate your neck. Do not turn your neck as far as it will go, as just a partial turn is enough. Use a wide scarf or double the theraband if a single strand width is too narrow. The tuck and turn exercise will simultaneously work the postural and turning muscles of your neck. Excess force can cause increased pain, so proceed gently as you should with any neck exercise. *These activities may be harmful if done incorrectly, so please use caution and work with your licensed healthcare provider before attempting.*



Tuck and turn exercise

STRETCH TIGHT NECK MUSCLES

Neck turn right and left on a magazine, lying down

This exercise gently increases the neck range of motion without gravity compressing the neck spinal segments. Moving on a pillow or sheet may produce too much friction to get the proper glide necessary to work the muscles. Adding a magazine behind your neck is an innovative idea that helps to keep a pure turning motion without going side to side.³⁸ Make sure your neck rotates on a straight axis through the spinal segments, otherwise the neck joints will not glide properly. Holding each turn for 10 seconds before turning to the other direction should be enough time to get a beneficial stretch to your neck muscles.



Neck turn right and left on a magazine

Gentle neck rotation with self-massage to tight neck muscles, sitting

A gentle stretch while massaging tight muscles with your hand on the opposite side of your neck can help to improve the range of motion in the neck. Do not force the turning motion, but rather let the motion return slowly over time.

Hold a stretch for 10 seconds before turning the other way. Sometimes neck flexibility turning right decreases when your neck is being stretched to the left. Frequently changing direction every 10 seconds would help prevent that problem. Stop immediately if there is any dizziness or sharp pain with the exercise.

Do not allow your head to drift sideways as the pure turning movement will be lost. Keeping your head straight can be harder in the sitting position than it was in the lying down position. Do not let your head tilt upward, but rather do a slight chin tuck while turning. Muscles that generate headaches tend to tilt the head upwards. The muscles tilting the head backwards are displayed in the illustrations in Chapter 5.



Sitting neck rotation with self-massage to tight neck muscles.

Neck wrap-around technique for neck rotation

An advantage to this technique is that it allows neck muscles to be massaged during the turn, among them the sternocleidomastoid muscle, illustrated in Chapter 5, that are involved with many cervicogenic headaches.³⁹⁻⁴⁰ A sustained pressure to the muscles on the side and back of the neck tends to be more helpful than simply rubbing back and forth.



Sitting neck wrap-around technique for neck rotation with self-massage.



Neck rotation with hand pressure above the jaw

Neck rotation with hand pressure above the jaw

Pressure away from the jaw is important to avoid the temporomandibular joint irritation. This more gentle method is useful for those who find it difficult to use the opposite hand to cross over and get the stretch. Another successful method to stretch out the upper neck involves using a strap attached around the side of your face. After initial supervision by a physical therapist, a person can do the stretch independently at home.⁴¹⁻⁴²

Neck side-bending using hand as a pivot point

Headache-generating muscles and joints have a side motion component to them. Many times this exercise is not needed, as the neck turning exercise can automatically improve the side-bending component. On the other hand, freeing up a tight side-bending restriction can sometimes improve the neck rotation. Using the hand as a pivot point allows the weight of the head to be the force that releases the tight muscles and joints.



Neck side-bending using hand as a pivot point.

Apply pressure with the knuckle and pinky finger up and down the outside of the neck. As with any of the motion techniques, there should be no sharp pain. Be as specific as possible with the side-bending stretch. If you brace the right side of your neck, you may feel a stretch on the left side, and vice versa. Try to avoid over-stretching areas that do not need stretching. A guideline for frequency of this exercise is three times to the left and right sides, holding each for 10 seconds. Repeat three times per day, or as needed.

NECK TRACTION UNLOADS TIGHT TISSUES

Traction stretch pulling the head upwards

With elbows pointing out, lean backwards, as if to yawn, and place a thumb under each ear while the fingers cradle the back of the head. Lift up slightly as if trying to become a little taller by stretching the neck out. Tilt the head backwards slightly to reach the point which produces the most relief. Hold the position 10-30 seconds and repeat three times. The time held may be determined by one's arm strength.



Traction stretch pulling the head upwards.

Neck Traction has been reported to decrease headaches.⁴³ A person can also get a traction effect by lying down and having a machine in the clinic apply the traction force.



Neck traction with elbows facing forward

Neck traction with elbows facing forward

People who have shoulder pain or weakness may find improved leverage by putting their elbows forward.

NECK STRETCH FROM THE LOWER SPINE UP

Lower trunk rotation with neck turned in the opposite direction.

Since the entire spine may be stiff, the neck may never turn freely until the spinal segments below the neck loosen up first. To see how interconnected the spine is, sit up straight, put your hand behind your back, turn your neck and you will feel the low back vertebrae move under your fingertips.



To do the trunk rotation, put pillows behind your head to take up the slack in the neck muscles and joints. With arms flat on the mat, turn your neck first as far as is comfortable to the right until it becomes tight. Do not force the motion. Move your knees to the left. People who have tight spines will feel the lower trunk stretch all the way up the spine into the neck. Reverse the directions, turning your neck to the left before moving your knees to the right to stretch the lower trunk. Hold the stretch for 30 seconds; do three repetitions per side. STOP if any back or neck pain worsens. If you have had spinal surgeries, do not do this exercise.

FOAM ROLL TECHNIQUE



Full and half foam rolls

I have found that for many clients with headaches, lying on a half or full foam roll can rapidly decrease headaches. Some clients have told me that the foam roll is as effective as a pain medication. Do not underestimate how these simple-looking foam rolls can decrease not only headache pain, but also neck and shoulder pain as well. A welcome side benefit for those with a slumped posture is that additional height can be acquired after using the foam roll. Many clients climb off the foam roll exuberantly, as they realize they have become several inches taller. They are also surprised to realize that their neck turning ability has also improved.

Lay face up on the foam roll

Place the foam roll under the length of the spine. The foam roll, either half or full, will apply pressure to a slumped rib cage and straighten out slouched posture. It is more relaxing to lie on the rounded portion of the half roll without having to keep your balance as you would need to on the full foam roll. The rounded side is used when more force needs to be applied to the spine. If the rounded side of the half foam roll creates too much pressure, the increased surface area of the flat side of the foam roll may be more comfortable. The foam roll pressure counteracts the “humpback” effect by applying pressure to the rib cage.



Over time gravity tends to pull the head forward, tighten neck muscles and creates a slumped rib cage. If the rib cage area can be loosened up and straightened, both headache and neck pain fade in several minutes. Put a pillow under your hips to decrease pressure on your lower back.

To enhance the effect of the foam roll, put a pillow or two behind your head to activate more of your abdominal muscles. Press your lower back into the foam roll. Your neck should not be tilted backwards for this technique. Ten to fifteen minutes on the foam roll should be enough for you to benefit.

Lying on full foam roll with arms outstretched, keeping the back flat on the roll

Muscles called the pectorals tend to pull the shoulders forward when tight. One method to stretch these muscles is to stand in a doorframe corner with arms spread apart. However, the foam roll method lets gravity do all the work, while the pressure on the back of the rib cage helps correct the posture.

The vertebrae in the rib cage area may make a natural adjustment or “crack” from simply lying on the foam roll. The foam roll uses gravity, not a health care practitioner, to produce the adjustment in the spine. However, the pressure on the spine from the foam roll is not as specific as when a professional adjusts, or manipulates, the spine. These rib cage, or thoracic, manipulations have been shown to relieve both headaches⁴⁴⁻⁴⁵

and neck pain.⁴⁶⁻⁵⁰ While generally safer than neck manipulations, there can be hazards to manipulating the rib cage area.⁵¹ Any crack resulting from a spinal manipulation should NEVER hurt but always decrease the pain and help the neck to move more freely.



Before trying the foam roll, check with your physician to make sure that you do not have any condition that could have an adverse effect, such as a previous spinal surgery, rib fracture, weakened vertebrae, or simply experiencing discomfort from lying on the roll. Sometimes several layers of towels over the foam roll can soften and cushion the roll to create a relaxing effect. The foam roll is meant to be a gentle self-help tool for you to use as you see fit.

MAINTENANCE PROGRAM

People tend to keep up with the exercise program initially while the headache reminds them to. Once they have successfully eased the headache pain, that motivating factor is gone. People will then drift away from doing their neck stretching and strengthening exercises.

Do not stop the headache program! A certain level of maintenance needs to be continued, though the amount of exercise can be cut considerably once the headache relief has been stable for a few weeks. Even a day without stretching can make a difference. Remember, the tight muscles that have been stretched out may want to return to their stiffened position. Once these muscles become stiff again, the headache pain can return suddenly. The key is to keep the neck muscles strong and flexible so the headache will disappear.

Individual needs will vary based on the severity of the headaches, how much postural correction is needed and how quickly the neck and shoulder muscles tighten up. If a headache sufferer has been dealing with pain for a long time, the likelihood is that the tissues will try to slip back into their old, dysfunctional pattern. Ideally, as the tissues increase flexibility, the exercise frequency can be decreased to one or two times a day. Therefore, maintenance frequency once tissues are stretched and strengthened could be as follows:

- **Frequency:** 1-2 times per day may be enough to keep the normal neck movement and muscle control.
- **Duration:** 10 second stretches and chin tucks may be enough to keep the neck from re-stiffening.
- **Intensity:** A gentle stretch is always the way to go, and there should be far less stretching discomfort once the neck motion has been restored.

Be careful not to contract your neck muscles too vigorously when doing the chin tuck as you don't want to be sore later. A subtle looking downward of the eyes may be all you need to do to contract the deep postural neck muscles.

The chin retraction, neck rotation and sidebend exercises, should take less than five minutes. However, these exercise dosages are guidelines only.

If your headaches are fading, the frequency of exercise can be reduced. If your headaches are still flaring up, then the frequency should be increased. Do a "check-up from the neck up" occasionally throughout the day to make sure your posture is proper and your neck movements smooth and flexible.

A major study of 200 patients with cervicogenic headache shows how exercise can relieve headache intensity and frequency long term.⁵² These people had headache histories of 6.1 years on average, which shows that even people who have suffered for a long time can get relief. The study highlighted the importance of increasing the patients ability to control, not just strengthen, the longus colli and capitis muscles in the front of the neck, which are illustrated in chapter 5. The patients lay flat with an air-filled sensor placed behind their necks to monitor how much the longus colli flattened the neck curve. Other muscles were also trained, such as those that turn the neck and those that pull back the shoulder blade. When doing these postural neck exercises, care must be taken to not do the exercise too rapidly or aggressively.

Another major study of 180 female office workers with neck and head pain showed how the women had dramatic improvement in their pain level at a 12-month recheck following a program of neck exercises. While stretching is important, the relief was greater when endurance and strengthening exercises were added.⁵³

The takeaway message for those of you suffering from headaches is that exercise can be a very effective pain reliever for your head and neck pain. A physical therapist can help you develop a program to help you, even if you have had headache pain for a long time.