

## Neck and Shoulder Pain? Here's Why We Assess Both



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Does your neck or shoulder hurt? Do you ever wonder where your pain is coming from and how you can find relief for your pain?

There are numerous factors that contribute to your pain. There are countless connections between your neck and shoulder involving your bones, muscles, and nerves. When these all work properly, you are able to move your head, work at your computer, and lift things overhead without difficulty. However, problems with any one of these areas can result in dysfunctions that change movement, flexibility, and strength, which can lead to neck or shoulder pain. These dysfunctions can occur with something as simple as changes in posture.

Computers, phones, and increased sitting time have become part of your daily routine. Upright posture is becoming less of a habit. As you sink into your chair, your upper back and the muscles in the neck elongate and become lazy. The muscles in the front of your neck, chest, and shoulders continue to work, which can cause tightness.

This can result in rounded shoulders and forward curvature of the spine or having the head and neck protrude forward. Consequently, elevation and tightness in the upper shoulders and the back of the neck can occur, which could lead to increased pain in the neck or upper back.

Think of your body as a house. Your skeleton is the framing that allows you to stand and sit tall. The posture of your head should be

aligned with your ears over your shoulders. When you start to slouch, or hang your head, your body's framing changes with it.

With your framing upright and aligned, everything is level. However, walls are needed to provide support to your home. Otherwise, you risk having crooked walls and a leaning structure. Your ligaments, tendons, and muscles are like the walls, contributing to the stability of your skeleton and allowing freer and more controlled movement. Similar to your skeletal framing, your muscles also require a balance to keep you upright.

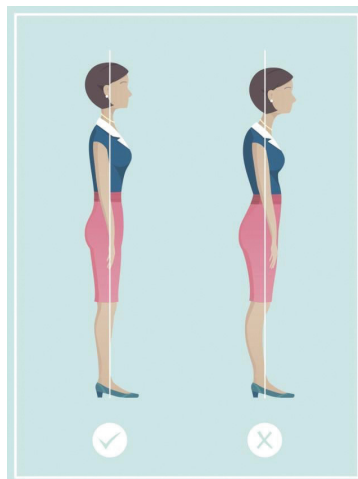
If you feel slouched right now, try sitting or standing in the tallest posture as if there was a string from the ceiling holding you up; it should go straight down from the crown of your head and body. Now pinch your shoulder blades back like you want to hold something in between them. Allow yourself to relax after 15 seconds but don't slouch back.

Simple movements like these each hour throughout the day can activate the muscles of the upper back and shoulders to help maintain proper posture. They allow the muscles in the front to stretch, while activating and shortening the muscles in the back to provide support and create proper alignment.

With the walls up and the framing well supported, your house requires electricity. This is the responsibility of your body's nerves. Your brain and spine, stored within your neck, are the central information hub. When you hit the light switch, that information gets sent out from the main hub to illuminate the room. When a wire is damaged, the lights flicker or don't even turn on.

Your nerves work rapidly, sending signals about what you are feeling or what desired movement you are trying to achieve. When your nerves are impinged or damaged, those signals cannot be sent to the desired area of the body or act as efficiently as they would if

they were intact. Sometimes, this can even result in muscle weakness and pain in the neck, shoulder, or arm.



Nerve pain may not always feel like a dull ache or tightness. Sometimes nerve pain can feel like burning, numbness, or tingling, or what we call paresthesias. Depending on the area from which the nerve pain is coming, there are patterns that can be felt not just in the shoulder and neck but also down along the arm and hand as well. That can explain

why a sore neck or poor sleeping postures can cause numbness down the arm.

For example, one common level of the cervical spine that is affected is the sixth cervical level. If the nerve at this level is inflamed or impinged, sensations can be felt in the neck and can potentially radiate down the side of the shoulder and along the side of the forearm all the way to your thumb.


Posture can also affect your nerves. If you have poor posture, the nerves may not be in optimal position, which can result in the nerve getting pinched and possibly presenting with nerve pain in the neck or down the shoulder and arm.

Since any of these factors can cause movement dysfunctions and pain, it's your physical therapist's job to assess all potential regions of involvement including the neck, thoracic spine, and shoulder to improve the stability of your "house".



Posture is a significant part of our assessment of the neck and shoulders. Our evaluations assess range of motion, strength, neural testing, flexibility, and certain special testing to help differentiate between neck and shoulder deficits or possible injuries or influences from both regions. From what we observe and measure, we provide a program to improve postural awareness and exercises to strengthen and stretch specific areas that are impacting your daily activities. We can also use modalities or manual therapies to help reduce pain.

If you have neck pain, upper back pain, shoulder pain, or a combination, please contact us to schedule an appointment with WWS Physical Therapy.



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