

Cervical Whiplash

Condition: Cervical whiplash is an injury to the neck that occurs when the head is jerked forward and back very quickly.

Background: Whiplash can cause injuries to the bones, ligaments, muscles, tendons, and joints in the neck.

Risk Factors: Most whiplash injuries result from car accidents. Falls, hard hits during contact sports such as football, and diving accidents also may cause whiplash.

History and Symptoms: Patients with whiplash injuries may have neck and upper back pain. Sometimes they also have headaches, dizziness, weakness, blurred vision, and trouble concentrating and remembering things. These symptoms may occur right away, or a few days after the injury. Most patients recover quickly, but sometimes pain and other symptoms can last for a year or more. A physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) physician, also known as a physiatrist, can best assess how whiplash is affecting your daily activities, including how it affects your household, job, and hobbies, and how it impacts in your life, including your mood, sleep, and physical activities.

Physical Exam: A PM&R physician will check to see if you have pain in your neck and upper back, and if you can move your head and neck normally, and if these movements reproduce any other symptoms, like weakness, numbness or tingling sensation down your arms, even difficulty walking

Diagnostic Process: X-rays may be done to make sure there is no more serious damage to the spine. Other imaging tests are usually only done if the symptoms do not go away or a more severe injury is suspected. Also, electrodiagnostic studies can be considered if symptoms persist, to evaluate for possible damage to nerves that go from your neck to your arms. The physiatrist will also evaluate how disabled you are by the pain, including your mood and capacity to function in activities of daily living, with questionnaires if necessary.

Rehab Management: The PM&R physician will focus on helping you do the things you normally do by leading an interdisciplinary team of therapists, social worker, pain management experts, and others. Rest, ice, and/or heat, along with over-the-counter pain medicines such as acetaminophen may help. Exercise may be recommended to keep the neck flexible as early as possible. If symptoms last more than 1-2 weeks, physical therapy, manual manipulation, local injections, or acupuncture may help.

Other Resources for Patients and Families: Families can help by getting patients to take part in physical activities and rehab programs. Modifications to the motor vehicle, like seatbelts and headrest, should be considered for adequate height adjustments and prevention of new injuries.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is PM&R?

Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R), also known as physiatry, is a primary medical specialty that aims to enhance and restore functional ability and improve quality of life to those with injuries, physical impairments or disabilities affecting the brain, spinal cord, nerves, bones, joints, ligaments, muscles and tendons. PM&R physicians, known as physiatrists, evaluate and treat the whole body, maximize patients' independence in their daily life and are experts in designing comprehensive, patient-centered treatment plans to empower patients to achieve their goals. By taking the whole body into account, they can accurately pin-point problems, decrease pain, assist in recovery from devastating injuries and maximize overall outcomes and performance with non-surgical and peri-surgical options. To learn more, visit www.aapmr.org/aboutpmr.

What makes PM&R physicians unique?

PM&R physicians' training focuses not just on treating medical conditions, but on enhancing the patient's performance and quality of life in the context of those medical conditions. They focus not only on one part of the body, but instead on the development of a comprehensive program for putting the pieces of a person's life back together – medically, socially, emotionally and vocationally – after injury or disease. PM&R physicians make and manage medical diagnoses, design a treatment plan and prescribe the therapies that physical therapists or other allied therapists perform or that are carried out by the patients themselves. By providing an appropriate treatment plan, PM&R physicians help patients stay as active as possible at any age. Their broad medical expertise allows them to treat disabling conditions throughout a person's lifetime.

Why see a PM&R physician?

A PM&R physician will thoroughly assess your condition, needs, and expectations and rule out any serious medical illnesses to develop a treatment plan. By understanding your condition and goals, you and your PM&R physician can develop a treatment plan suited to your unique needs.

How do I find a PM&R physician near me?

Visit www.aapmr.org/findapmrphysician or contact your primary care physician for a referral.

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