

Is it okay to crack my neck? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

As a college student, I sometimes spend long hours reading books or looking at computer screens, and often my neck gets stiff. Like many of my joints that get stiff, sometimes I crack my neck, like I would crack my knees or fingers when they feel stiff. I often wind up doing this several times a day.

My question is, could I do irreparable damage to my spinal system if I continue using this method to soothe a stiff neck? Could I wind up a paraplegic if I continue to crack my neck? Leak spinal fluid, etc.?

Sincerely,

Stiff-Necked Student

Answer

Dear Stiff-Necked Student,

What a pain in the neck this must be! Cracking joints in the neck and fingers is a common habit for many. There hasn't been conclusive research on whether cracking your own neck poses risk to your health or contributes to long-term health problems. However, if neck cracking is done incorrectly or too frequently, it's possible to do harm and potentially cause more pain.

When you crack your neck (or any joint for that matter), the joint stretches and allows for the fluid in the joint capsule to spread out. This decreases the pressure in the joint and actually allows the liquid to turn into a gas, which causes the popping noise. Many people report a feeling of relief after this popping noise, as it may feel as though pressure is being released or the joint is better aligned. Whether this is just a placebo effect (the psychological belief that a treatment works) is up for debate. To return to your question about the harms, it's possible that cracking your neck may pinch a nerve leading to more pain or even break blood vessels in your neck leading to blood clots. The latter is very rare, but nevertheless serious.

If you find yourself frequently cracking your neck without relief, it may be time to see a

professional, one type being a chiropractor. Having your neck cracked by a professional is called cervical spine manipulation. The idea behind this is to correctly align the spinal joints and hopefully improve physical function and sense of well-being. During this alignment process, there is a small risk of compressing one of the major arteries bringing blood to the brain (the vertebral artery), which could lead to stroke. Although quite rare, this is a complication to be aware of before visiting the chiropractor and potentially a discussion point with your provider prior to receiving treatment through this method. With that said, the general consensus is that having a trained professional perform cervical manipulation and alignment procedures is low-risk and may be an effective treatment for neck and back pain.

In addition to visiting a health care provider, studies demonstrate that more conventional and at-home remedies to treat back and neck pain have similar results. Experiencing a stiff neck is a common affliction and may be very frustrating. If you're considering some tips for immediate short-term relief, some suggestions to try to treat a stiff neck:

- Take over-the-counter pain relievers such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen.
- Apply heat or ice to the painful area. One method is to use ice for the first 48 to 72 hours, then use heat after that (hot showers, hot compresses, or a heating pad).
- Stop usual physical activity for a few days, which may calm your symptoms and reduce inflammation.
- Perform slow range-of-motion exercises with your neck: moving the head up and down, side to side, and from ear to ear in order to gently stretch the neck muscles.
- Have a partner gently massage the sore or painful area.
- Try sleeping on a firm mattress without a pillow or with a special neck pillow. The goal is to align the head and neck with the rest of your body when laying down.

All this said, it may be helpful to think about how you may have gotten the stiff neck in the first place. Physical therapists try to prevent neck pain and stiffness by teaching correct posture and neck-strengthening exercises. You could try to be aware of your neck and body during a long day and keep your body in natural and comfortable positions as much as possible. If the cracking continues without relief, it may be worthwhile to talk with your health care provider about making an appointment with a physical therapist to ease the discomfort you're feeling now and attempt to prevent reoccurrence.

Lastly, if your pain is severe, doesn't go away in one week, or is accompanied by numbness, tingling, swollen glands, a lump in your neck, difficulty swallowing or breathing, seeing a health care provider in short order is advised. Additionally, if your pain was caused by a fall or other injury, gets worse when you lie down, wakes you up a night, or if you lose control over urination or bowel movements, seek medical attention right away is strongly suggested.

With that, hopefully you won't have to snap, crackle, pop those stiff joints much longer!

Alice!

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