

Whiplash

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What Is Whiplash?

Whiplash is a neck injury that occurs when the head is suddenly forced forward and backward, similar to the cracking of a whip. It most commonly occurs during motor vehicle accidents but can also result from sports injuries, falls, or other traumatic events. This rapid movement can strain or injure the muscles, ligaments, joints, discs, and other soft tissues of the neck. **Also Known As:**

- Whiplash-Associated Disorder (WAD)
- Cervical Acceleration-Deceleration Injury

Common Symptoms

Symptoms may begin immediately after the injury or may develop over the next several days.

Common symptoms include:

- Neck pain and stiffness
- Difficulty turning or moving the neck
- Headaches
- Shoulder, upper back, or arm pain
- Tingling or numbness in the arms or hands
- Fatigue
- Dizziness

Some people may also experience:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Memory problems
- Sleep disturbances
- Irritability or mood changes
- Ringing in the ears
- Blurred vision or other visual disturbances

How Is It Diagnosed?

Diagnosis begins with a review of your symptoms, medical history, and a physical examination.

Because whiplash often involves soft tissue injuries, X-rays may appear normal. Imaging studies such as X-rays, CT scans, or MRI scans may be recommended if a fracture, nerve injury, or other serious condition is suspected.

Treatment

Current research supports staying as active as possible and returning to normal activities as tolerated. Early movement and activity often lead to better outcomes than prolonged rest.

Treatment may include:

- Therapeutic exercises
- Stretching and mobility exercises
- Soft tissue treatment
- Chiropractic care when appropriate
- Home exercise programs

Other Treatment Options

- Over-the-counter pain relievers
- Anti-inflammatory medications
- Muscle relaxants
- Referral to a medical specialist when necessary

Prognosis

Most people experience significant improvement within the first **2 to 3 months** after injury. Recovery times vary depending on the severity of the injury and individual factors. Remaining active, following treatment recommendations, and maintaining a positive outlook are associated with better recovery.

Typical Duration of Care

Treatment plans vary based on symptom severity:

- Mild cases: 8–15 visits over 6–8 weeks
- Moderate cases: 12–24 visits over 8–12 weeks
- Persistent cases: 20–30 visits over 3–6 months

When to Seek Immediate Medical Attention

Seek prompt medical care if you experience:

- Significant weakness in the arms or hands
- Loss of balance or coordination
- Loss of bowel or bladder control
- Severe or worsening neurological symptoms
- Severe pain that continues to worsen
- Symptoms following a high-speed collision or significant trauma