Have you ever had a stiff neck, a headache, or pain moving down your arm from your neck? Most of these can easily be avoided with appropriate neck care.

The spine (neck and back) may be thought of as a structural beam that holds the body erect. That beam is comprised of three mechanical elements: the disc-vertebral unit, the facet joints which link the vertebra, and the connecting muscles and ligaments. These structures allow an individual to bend in many directions and also provide protection to the spinal cord and nerves. Strain, dysfunction and disease may occur at any of these three sites, and can cause significant pain and functional impairment. But there are things you can do to protect your neck.

The neck, like the lower back, has a normal curve to it. Poor posture over time can cause that 'normal' curve to change. This can progress to more serious problems, including arthritic changes in the discs and vertebrae, stretching of nerve roots, muscle spasm and pain. Any activity that causes you to bend your head forward for a length of time - such as deskwork, sewing, knitting, ironing, reading or computer work - may put too much strain on your neck, causing pain and stiffness.

To prevent this from happening, you should maintain that normal curve in your neck by holding your head erect at all times. This is especially true with prolonged activities like knitting or reading.

Prop your work up on a tilt board, or elevate your knitting or the book you are reading by placing pillows under your arms. Don't read in bed — it is almost impossible to do without straining your neck. Sit in a chair instead and use pillows in your lap to raise the book.

Try getting out of the sofa or recliner and into a straight hard chair when watching television. It is much harder to slouch in a straight chair. Be aware that bifocals tend to make you bend your head more - try progressive lenses next time, or just remember to use your eyes instead of bending your neck.
Using your arms overhead (e.g., washing windows or painting) is also a bad idea. Instead, try a ladder so your work is at shoulder height. Strengthening exercises for your arms may also be helpful.

The phone is another possible danger. Never hold the receiver with your shoulder, always with your hand. If you need the hand to write, consider using a headset.

If your neck hurts more when you first get out of bed, you need to look at your bed posture. Your pillow should be soft and fairly flat. One feather or down pillow is best but if you are allergic, try a soft fiberfill one. Don’t sleep on your stomach, and do not put your arms or hands under the pillow or over your head. If your shoulders bother you, try hugging a pillow. Never sleep in a chair or on a sofa.

Stress itself can cause your neck to hurt. Try ice or heat along with taking a few minutes devoted just to ‘you’ to relax. Regular exercise like walking, swimming or biking* is good for your neck. Just remember to pay attention to posture, maintaining the normal curves in your neck and back.

If you follow these suggestions and don’t improve in a few days, call your rheumatologist. You may need additional studies looking for underlying arthritic changes in your spine.

**REMEMBER:**
- Watch your posture
- Don’t slouch - keep your head erect and maintain the normal curve in your neck
- Avoid stomach sleeping
- Use the right pillow
- Never sleep in a chair or sofa
- Exercise regularly, but always with attention to posture and maintenance of the normal curves in your neck and back.

* For more specific information regarding exercising, please see our newsletters on biking (#63), walking (#69) and swimming (#70).