

MUSCLE STRAIN — SPINE & CORE

Cervical (Neck) Strain

Understanding your injury and getting back to full speed

WHAT IS IT?

The neck's paraspinal and stabilizing muscles support and move the head. A cervical strain — including whiplash-type injury — is muscle and soft-tissue overstretch without nerve or bone injury.

A **strain** means muscle fibers were overstretched. We grade strains I–III: **Grade I** — mild, microscopic fiber injury; **Grade II** — moderate, a partial tear with strength loss; **Grade III** — severe, complete disruption.

HOW IT HAPPENS

Whiplash mechanisms (rear-end collision, contact sports), sleeping in an awkward position, or a sudden turning load.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

Neck pain and stiffness, worse turning or side-bending the head, muscle tightness into the shoulders, occasional headache from the base of the skull.

HOW LONG RECOVERY TAKES

- **Grade I:** a few days–2 weeks
- **Grade II:** 2–6 weeks
- **Grade III:** if pain persists past 6 weeks, re-evaluation and imaging are considered

TREATMENT

Almost all muscle strains heal without surgery. For the first 72 hours: relative rest, ice 15–20 minutes several times daily, compression, and *gentle* motion — complete rest slows healing. Then a progressive program: pain-free motion → isometrics → strengthening → **eccentric loading** (strengthening the muscle while it lengthens — the phase that prevents re-injury) → sport-specific work.

Early gentle motion beats a collar: range-of-motion exercises, deep neck flexor strengthening, and posture/ergonomic work. Prolonged immobilization slows recovery.

RETURNING TO SPORT

Return when strength is at least **90% of the other side**, motion is full and pain-free, and you can perform your sport's movements at full speed without hesitation. Returning before the muscle is re-strengthened is the main cause of re-injury.

PREVENTING THE NEXT ONE

Neck strengthening in collision-sport athletes, headrest positioning, workstation ergonomics.

WHEN TO CALL US

Arm pain, numbness, tingling, weakness, gait or balance changes, or severe pain after significant trauma — these need prompt evaluation, not home care.

CALL THE OFFICE RIGHT AWAY

Pain not controlled by medication, fever over 101.5°F, spreading redness or warmth, or new numbness or weakness. Direct office line (513) 441-5639; after hours (513) 354-3700.



SCAN FOR THE LATEST VERSION ONLINE

robertpettitmd.com/handouts/cervical-strain.pdf

This handout is for general patient education and does not replace personalized medical advice. Always follow the specific instructions given by Dr. Pettit and your care team.