- Muscles

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What's up with...

a stiff neck

A heads-up on the culprits and how to get unstuck.

BY KAYLA BLANTON

When you wake up and can't even swivel to look at the alarm clock, you know something is wrong. Unlike neck pain caused by nerve damage, which feels sharp and achy, a stiff neck is reduced mobility caused by muscle strain, says osteopath Dr Liza Egbogah.

WHAT CAUSES THE CRICK?

In addition to injuries and arthritis, the lifestyle factors below can be culprits:

■ **STRESS** "We tend to store a lot of tension in the neck and shoulders," says Dr Egbogah. "This muscle tension can cause the neck to stiffen up."

■ **PHONE USE** "It's amazing how often we see stiff necks caused by chronic forward head-leaning for texting," says chiropractor Dr Karen Erickson. Cradling your phone between your ear and your shoulder can also cause stiffness and pain, adds Dr Egbogah.

■ **SLEEP POSTURE** Snoozing without proper neck support can cause muscles to tighten up and neck joints to feel stiff, says Dr Egbogah. This is especially true for those who sleep on their stomachs, as the position requires you to twist your neck, she adds.



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

WHEN A STIFF NECK IS MORE SERIOUS

Consult a doctor if your stiffness is due to an injury or lasts more than a few days. If you're also experiencing numbness or tingling in your arms or hands, fever, headache or difficulty breathing, seek help right away, as this could indicate a more serious condition such as a herniated disk or even meningitis.

HOW TO STOP THE STIFFNESS

Applying heat, using arnica cream (available from Chemist Warehouse), and gently massaging the spot can help ease pain, says Dr Erickson. To prevent stiffness in the first place:

■ **SET UP AN ERGONOMIC WORKSPACE** Keep your computer monitor at eye level, use a separate keyboard if you're on a laptop, and ensure that your desk chair is level with your typing surface to avoid hunching your shoulders.

■ **GO HANDS-FREE** Bluetooth earbuds or a speakerphone can help you avoid bending your neck over your phone.

■ **SLEEP SMART** Choose a pillow that's the right thickness to keep your spine aligned (look for one that's contoured or even adjustable), or sleep on your side with your neck supported so shoulders are positioned at a 90-degree angle to it. P