

Experts break myth that there's a universal cure for neck pain

SUNNY CHAN
News Staff

According to research conducted by the University of Alberta-funded Neck Pain Task Force (NPTF), about 30 per cent of people have suffered from neck pain in the past month alone.

But according to Dr Linda Carroll, principle investigator and scientific editor of the NPTF, trying to understand the causes of the affliction is problematic because most health professionals and treatment providers don't have time to wade through thousands of relevant studies.

With the goal of filtering the information into an easily accessible format, Carroll said the task force took seven years to analyze all of the relevant material they found.

"We did what is called a best evidence synthesis, which is when you take findings from all the studies that are out there and try to figure out what they all mean. One study says one thing, another study says another thing, and sometimes, the findings conflict. So our job was to try and fit everything together to figure out what it is that we know about neck pain," she explained.

In the end, what the NPTF found was that neck pain is surprisingly common, and there's no cure-all for it.

"There are a lot of different treatments that can be helpful with neck pain, but the thing to remember with all of these treatments is that treatment effects tend to be modest at best, and they tend to be short-lived. So there's no "magic bullet" for treating neck pain," Carroll said.



KYLER ZELENY

CURE THE CRINK Dr Linda Carroll cautions against any quick cures to neck pain.

However, they did find that one factor is particularly important in alleviating neck pain: mobilization. According to the study, the neck collars that were once popularly prescribed for neck pain don't work and may in fact make matters worse. Moving a sore neck seems counter-intuitive, but Carroll explained that movement is essential to healing.

"When you have a sore neck, moving it hurts, so it seems logical that if you keep it still, it won't hurt. In fact, that does work in the short term, but in the long term, it makes your neck worse because necks are meant to be used. You end up with a sorer neck," she said.

Instead of collars, the study recommends trying different combinations of treatments, from massage and acupuncture to painkillers and analgesics. These methods are temporary, but can work together to allow more mobilization.

"A lot of these treatments help ease

the pain so that you can actually get on with your life and move your neck as usual, because keeping your neck moving really is the best long-term solution," Carroll said.

These valuable findings have been published by the NPTF in the health journal *Spine*, and a Knowledge Transfer and Exchange Committee is now working on getting the results of the task force's finding out to professionals and the general public. There are also plans for a future website that will host this information.

But Carroll stressed that there's no one-stop quick cure for neck pain.

"A number of different things may need to be tried because different things may work for different people. [Neck pain sufferers] should not expect too much, but just keep on being active and keep on moving as much as possible."

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