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SPINE & SPORTS: Stop cracking your own neck!

You've all seen this, and maybe you've all done this from time to time: twisting your own neck in order to get a few pops.

I often see young people yank their heads one way and then the other, each providing a barrage of cracking sounds. While this will offset a feeling of stiffness, pain or other discomfort, the desire to do it means that there is something wrong.

People that repeatedly self-crack their necks usually have neck pain or headaches. The "cracking" is stimulating. It dulls the feeling of pain or stiffness, but never gets at the problem. The audible cracking sound, called cavitation, occurs when the joint unsticks itself. Joints have wet surfaces at their connections, so it's like a suction cup unsticking from a wet surface. Cavitation is stimulating, just like rubbing your head after banging it against a cabinet is stimulating. It dulls the pain.

The problem with self-cracking is that it only gets the mobile, movable joints and not joints that are very stuck. Getting at those really stuck joints takes skilled intervention. People who feel the need to self-crack their necks multiple times during the day have a neck problem, and with the proper professional treatment they often lose their desire to self-crack.

The best way to go about fixing this problem is to have a thorough hands-on physical examination by a doctor of chiropractic, doctor of osteopathy current on manual therapy procedures, or a physical therapist with advanced training in spine care. X-rays are not necessary unless there is suspicion of fracture, tumor or some other disease process. Taking X-rays to assess for arthritis or spine alignment is not valid. Those with headaches might require more careful examination, and this is why a doctor with appropriate training should be doing the evaluation.

The desire to self-crack often comes from stiff neck joints and their surrounding muscular knots and adhesions. When these irritating joint and soft tissue lesions are worked out, there is less stiffness, less discomfort and thus less desire to self-crack. Skilled joint manipulation in combination with various soft tissue massage treatments, exercises, and ergonomic changes is the best medicine.

Research has proven that spinal joint manipulation, when performed by those with the most appropriate and extensive training (e.g. doctors of chiropractic), is quite safe - safer than drugs routinely taken for pain. So instead of sloshing your own neck around, get your stuck joints worked out by an expert and learn the exercises and good ergonomics to help keep your neck healthy and feeling good.

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