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By Scott Gillman
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Spine & Sports: Recovering from whiplash

Rear-end car crashes, even at low speeds, create a forceful whipping of the head and neck. Called "whiplash," this injury can be completely disabling, and it can have long-term, residual symptoms that are frustrating for both patients and doctors.

Whiplash injury can cause symptoms that can linger for several years, and victims often feel as though they are never quite the same as they were prior to the injury.

So how can you get back to normal?

After a whiplash injury, avoid getting X-rays unless there is good reason to suspect something serious, like a fracture or dislocation. Also X-rays merely for determining "alignment" is not a valid concept and should be avoided. Whiplash mostly is a soft-tissue, sprain-strain injury to muscles, tendons, ligaments and connective tissues.

Neck pain, pain across the shoulders, headaches and numbness or tingling into the fingers are common. Whiplash can also cause a concussion, with typical symptoms like headaches, dizziness, memory loss and anxiety. This requires "brain rest" as the best medicine initially. That's why X-rays are often useless, wasting health-care dollars and doing nothing to change or improve the treatment plan.

Early on, pain-killing medicines might be the only way to mitigate the pain. But, taking various medicines, whether they be NSAIDs, muscle relaxants or narcotic medicines has its consequences if taken long term. Sooner or later, it's best to get off of them, especially narcotics, since it is easy to become addicted.

Exercising is key for rehabilitating. Engaging your neck and back muscles is therapeutic, so you're better off hitting the gym and working out in any way possible rather than sitting around. Resistance exercise in general, meaning weights, bands and various calisthenics, is stimulating to your muscles and tendons and is rehabilitative. Resist the urge to constantly stretch, since stretching is often ineffective or can worsen your condition. Swap static stretching for limbering exercise movements. You won't rehabilitate sitting idly at your work desk or on your sofa.

For temporary pain relief, a big bag of ice is best for killing pain. I recommend ice in a plastic bag, directly on the skin (no towels), for 15 to 30 minutes every few hours. Icing won't fix anything. It will just take the pain away temporarily, possibly making it easier to do other things, like exercise or sleep. Keep in mind that there is evidence to support that ice application can impair healing of damaged tissue, so do not apply ice too often or for too long. Maybe consider using various pain-relieving gels instead.

Experienced providers skilled in assessing and treating injuries, especially providers with advanced skills in soft tissue therapy (see faktr.com, for example), can help. Most credentialed sports chiropractors are trained to address injuries, and they have the soft tissue therapy base covered. Massage therapy and acupuncture treatment can also be very helpful in alleviating the pain. A good personal trainer at the gym can be the best avenue if you are not getting the right amount or type of exercise.

There is a psychological component to healing from any injury, whether it's a sports injury or a car crash injury. Fear-avoidance behaviors, like not going for a walk or to the gym for fear of worsening your pain, has clearly been shown to worsen outcomes. Thus, keep a positive outlook and don't be afraid to go about your normal routine.

Be patient. Whiplash can be very frustrating, but keep a positive attitude knowing that you will eventually heal if you take care of yourself.

Scott Gillman is a doctor of chiropractic in Natick, in practice since 1991. He is also a chiropractic sports medicine specialist with a Diplomate from the American Chiropractic Board of Sports Physicians. He can be reached at 508-650-1091 or through www.drgillman.com.



Scott Gillman