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# What's causing that pain in my arm?

By Bob Cairo Special to the Coastal Point  
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Causes of arm pain are numerous; see a doctor if yours is persistent.

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So many of us have experienced pain in an arm and it's something I hear about from patients all the time. Everyone would prefer a simple answer, but the fact is that if your arm hurts, there could be a number of different causes for it.

One potential cause is cervical radiculopathy. You're probably more familiar with the simpler name often used, which is a pinched nerve. Cervical radiculopathy is such a common issue that we are going to take a look at the problem together so you or someone you care about will have a better understanding of this painful issue.

There are a number of ways that cervical radiculopathy can occur. In those of us who are middle-aged or older, there are degenerative changes in the discs that are the result of the normal wear and tear that happens over the years. But that normal wear and tear can cause pressure on nerve roots. Injuries can result in this issue across age groups. In younger people cervical radiculopathy can come from herniating a disk. If you think about it, it makes sense because herniated disks often are the result of activities that put strain on them like lifting, twisting, bending, or pulling. When a herniated disk occurs the resulting inflammation of the nerve root leads to that pain people experience.

A pinched nerve can often develop from repeated irritation, too. If you're a person who sits for long periods of time, you're a prime candidate. People who have arthritis in the neck region are also at risk. You will also see people who repeatedly engage in behaviors that impact those disks like people who deliver heavy packages, people who are in construction and have to lift heavy materials, people who are manual heavy laborers, and athletes in a number of sports who are impacting that region of their neck over and over again in practice as well as in the actual playing of the sport.

There are some signs that usually are associated with cervical radiculopathy. The pain that results will begin in the neck and move down the arm. People often say the pain feels like a sharp or burning sensation. People also often complain of experiencing muscle weakness in the shoulder, arm, or hand. Sometimes there is a loss of feeling that can be very disruptive for the simplest everyday activities. People dealing with cervical radiculopathy can also have problems when they turn their head or stretch their neck. These movements often result in increased pain.

So, what do you do? By now, there should be no mystery about what I'm going to tell you next. Don't let the problem go on and don't self-diagnose. Go see your doctor. Make the right preparations. Bring a list of all your current medications and any other supplements or products you are taking including vitamins and write down the dosage you're taking next to each one. You need to also be prepared to answer questions your doctor could ask. Those questions can include did you have a recent injury, how did the problem start, what kind of discomfort do you have and where is it. Your doctor will also likely ask you what types of movements cause you pain and whether you are having trouble with any of your normal activities. There can be a number of questions you are asked to try and get to the bottom of what's going on. In addition to an exam, your doctor may also want to do some tests like X-Rays.

There's a good chance your doctor will send you to a physical therapist to help you recover because most people tend to find their cervical radiculopathy problem is solved with a physical therapy program. And here's a bonus. Most folks find they also wind up with better function and greater strength.

Your physical therapist will create a treatment program designed for your specific needs and take into account issues including any other health concerns that might come into play. The program could very well include exercises aimed at helping to relieve the pain. Other exercises might be included to improve your range of motion. Still others may focus on strengthening the muscles in your neck, shoulder, and arm as well as your upper back. Your physical therapist may also provide hands on therapy as well as traction to address both the nerve and muscle problems in your neck. Don't be surprised if you are also given homework. Doing exercises at home can be very important to your recovery.

When all is said and done, obviously, you don't want to go through another episode of cervical radiculopathy. It hurts, recovery is time consuming and you're likely going to have some frustration with the impact on your daily life. That's why your physical therapist will likely also work with you to help you understand what you can do to prevent this problem from coming back again.

If you sit a lot, spend time sitting at a desk or regular periods of time in the car, your physical therapist may help you with changes that can result in your maintaining the proper posture. If you're a person who spends a lot of

time on the computer, you may be given suggestions to change how your computer monitor is positioned so you're not twisting your neck often or stretching your neck.

Don't be surprised if your physical therapist gives you an exercise program to keep up at home to maintain strength, particularly in your neck and upper body, help you keep up your range of motion and keep your muscles flexible.

Now, there's one other area your physical therapist may discuss with you and that's getting to a healthy weight and maintaining it. I get that this is an unpleasant topic for some people, and I understand. But it's important for you to understand that when you keep a healthy weight you are reducing the strain on your neck and spine that can cause cervical radiculopathy to crop up again and again. That is not something you want to look forward to happening.

Some of the things you can do like sitting for long periods of time or spending a lot of time on the computer can lead to cervical radiculopathy. Let's be real here. The pandemic caused many people to change their typical activities and quite a few of us found ourselves spending a whole lot more time sitting and getting on the computer. I am seeing more patients with this problem and when we talk about their activities this often comes up. It's no surprise but getting better and moving on means you have to adjust.

We're going to move forward together and we'll keep up our talks here in the Coastal Point to work on tackling problems so you can live your best life.

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