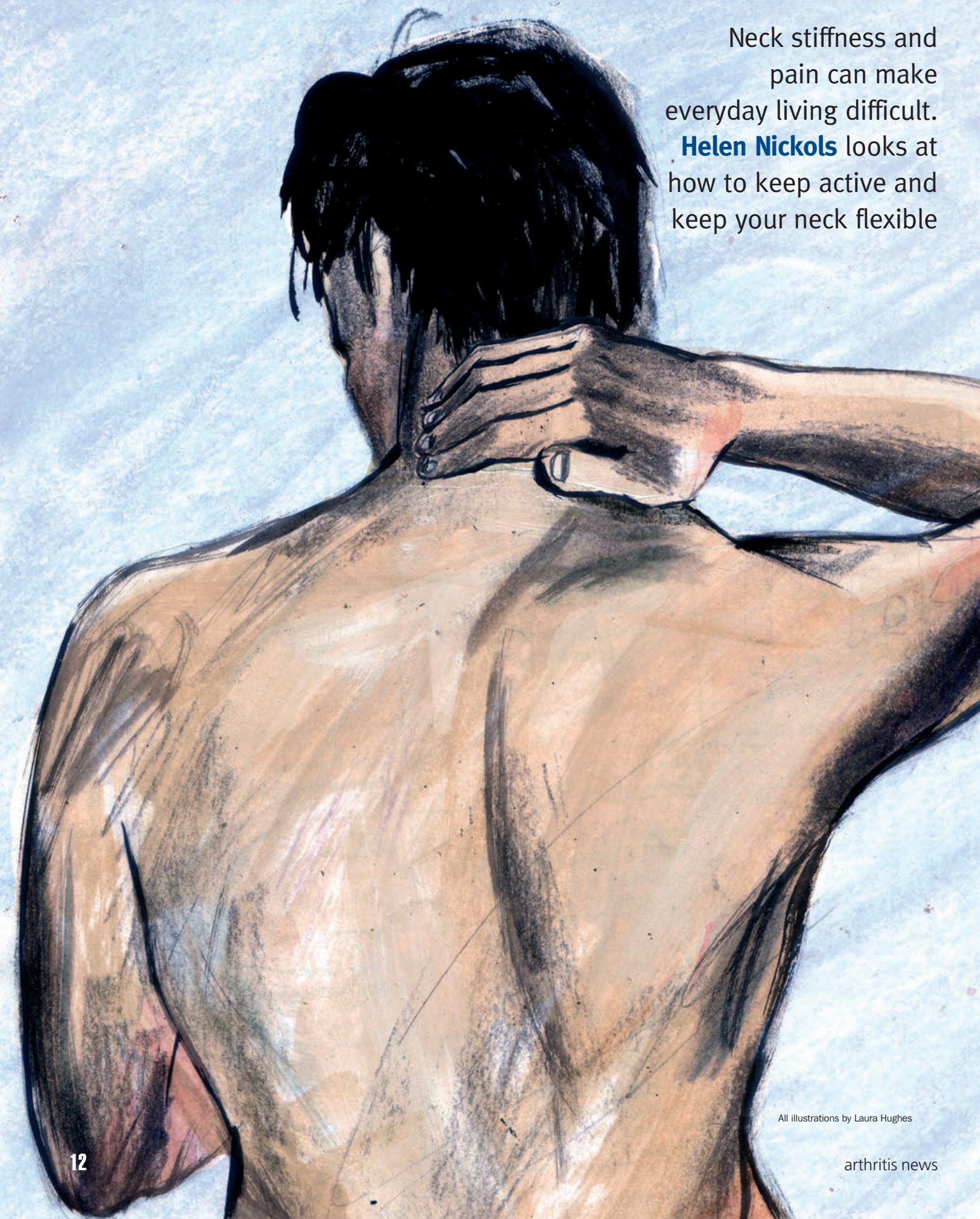


Holding your head high

Neck stiffness and pain can make everyday living difficult.

Helen Nickols looks at how to keep active and keep your neck flexible



All illustrations by Laura Hughes

We may not be aware of how much we use our necks, until stiffness and pain develop. Then everyday tasks like driving, using a computer or sleeping become difficult and painful. For Julianna Fejer, neck stiffness is nothing unusual. The 47-year-old has had osteoarthritis of the neck – cervical spondylosis – for the last 12 years: ‘When it seizes up really badly, I feel like the Tin Man from the Wizard of Oz.’

We ask a lot of our necks, which protect the nerves that carry information from the brain to the rest of the body. ‘The neck holds up the head, which is a really heavy weight to carry around,’ says occupational therapist (OT) Lucy Reeve.

When your neck becomes stiff, it can feel like you have been stopped in your tracks. For Sheilah Watson, 66, cervical spondylosis has turned driving into a nightmare: ‘Turning my head from side to side to look for traffic is very painful. I keep to short journeys.’ For 32-year-old Gerry Freeman,

sleepless nights from rheumatoid arthritis make his neck sore and painful by morning time.

But there are plenty of lifestyle changes you can make to reduce muscle tension, keep the neck flexible and help you feel calm and in control.

Causes of neck pain

The neck contains seven bones called vertebrae, with springy cushioning in between provided by discs of cartilage. The sides of the bones are linked by facet joints. Cervical spondylosis occurs when the cartilage discs become thinner and the facet joints become enlarged. The enlarged joints then become painful. Although this can develop over several years, the condition can occur in younger people as well.

There are other causes of neck pain. For instance, rheumatoid arthritis can affect the joints in the neck and people with polymyalgia rheumatica and fibromyalgia sometimes develop a stiff neck.

‘Prolonged muscle tension in the muscles of the neck and shoulders, often leads to neck pain. Ongoing stress, as a result of health problems or just daily life events, can create muscle tension in the neck, as can holding your neck in one position for too long,’ says Lucy.

‘The first step is to diagnose what is causing the pain,’ explains GP Rob Hicks.

Symptoms of cervical spondylosis can include tender spots on your neck and difficulty moving your neck or rotating your head. A doctor may test your reflexes, the nerves and muscles in your arms and legs or watch how you walk. Further scans can show injury and a spine or neck X-ray can highlight bone spurs.

Balancing movement and rest

When your neck is rigid and painful, even the slightest movement can seem unappealing, but keeping still can make it worse. ‘Fear of pain or damage often makes people do things in a tense, careful way. Unfortunately, this can increase muscle tension in the neck and reinforce the pain,’ explains Lucy.

This is something that Daniel Ashton, 52, knows too well of his osteoarthritis: ‘I used to only think about my neck when the pain was really bad. Now I know I have to relax properly and keep mobile to prevent pain.’

Movement maintains joint health and helps bring nutrition to the joints. Make sure you are supporting the neck whilst swimming, cycling or taking a Pilates class. Swimming on the back takes the strain out of breaststroke and front crawl.

It is a good idea to talk to your GP or physiotherapist before you start exercising. They can also give you tips on posture and the correct way to walk. ‘A lot of neck pain in the modern age is related to poor posture, not arthritis,’ says GP Rob Hicks. The Alexander technique is one way to grow awareness of balance and posture – for more information call 0845 230 7828 or visit www.stat.org.uk

If you have inflammatory arthritis you should take extra care. ‘Neck exercises for people with inflammatory arthritis are more difficult, as you need to be careful about cervical spine instability – where one vertebra can move or slide on another. Avoid tucking the chin in or looking down a lot,’ says Melissa Domaille, a physiotherapist who specialises in treating people with arthritis.

Neck exercises can target stiffness and are most effective done regularly and built up over time. Before you start, make sure you are sitting or standing tall. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Build up repetitions of the exercises slowly as you feel more confident. See the box on page 14 for some ideas to get you started.

For 35-year-old Lisa Madigan, resting is key to managing her juvenile arthritis: ‘If I spend a lot of time typing, driving or pushing myself in my wheelchair, my neck starts

to hurt. Taking regular breaks really helps.’ According to Melissa, headaches can be a sign that you are pushing yourself too far. ‘If exercise takes more than an hour to recover from or muscles are going into spasm, do fewer repetitions or lessen the effort,’ she says.

Meditation is one relaxation technique that can ease tension. Gerry is self-taught: ‘I get comfortable on a bed in a dark room and meditate for 20 minutes. It always helps me deal with anxiety and relaxes my muscles. It feels like I have come out of the other end of the pain.’

Julianna discovered acupuncture as part of an NHS pain management programme. The local health centre does the trick for Lisa: ‘A weekly massage eases the tension I get from pain, but it builds up again after a couple of days.’

Adapting your moves

Keeping the neck moving is great, but some positions should be avoided, such as keeping the neck stretched or bent for a long time. Avoid nodding off on the sofa with your head down in front.

You may be surprised just how often your neck is bent over. Take sleep, for example. Using too many pillows is the same as forcing your head forwards all day. ‘One pillow I tried was great when I was awake, but it was too hard so I moved off it in my sleep. My neck then had no support at all,’ says Sheilah.

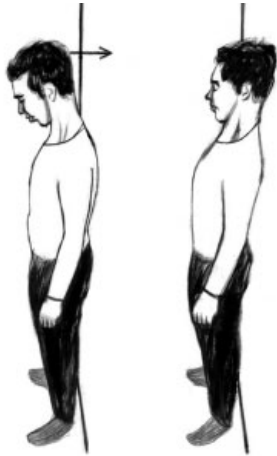
Supportive beds and pillows help you drift off and support your body whilst you are asleep. Occupational therapists advise on pillow positioning, which can work wonders. Daniel puts his new morning flexibility down to a new memory foam pillow: ‘My neck feels so supported.’

A good bed and pillow are a sound investment, but do not have to cost the earth. Melissa’s simple butterfly pillow is popular with the people with arthritis that she treats: ‘Tie a pillow in the middle and then put it back in the pillowcase. It cushions the neck and shoulders.’

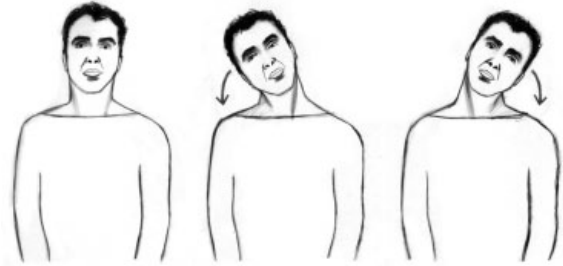
Keep vigilant of body positioning in leisure time. ‘Even in the evening when I relax and watch a DVD, I make sure I am propped up on the sofa,’ says Sheilah. Cinema-goer Julianna agrees: ‘Hobbies are a great distraction from pain but sitting too near the screen can be disastrous for me.’

There is usually more than one way of doing something but it can involve a bit of thought. An occupational therapist will have lots of ideas and you can learn from others. Pick up tips or share gems of wisdom at www.arthritiscare.org.uk/forum

NECK EXERCISES Do these exercises three or four times and build up to 10 if you feel able



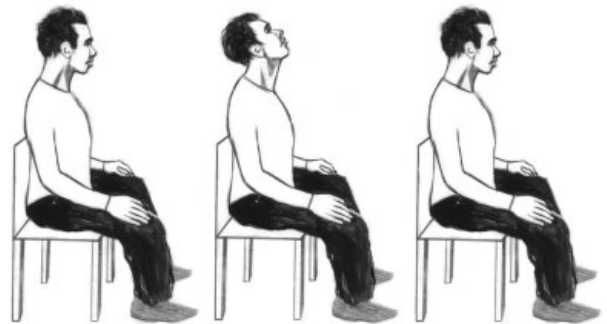
Standing exercise
Stand with your back to a wall. Tuck your chin down and try to get the back of your head to touch the wall. If it is difficult, use a pillow and push back into that. This should improve mobility.



Sitting exercise one
Push your bottom back against a chair to put your head in a good position. Tip your ear towards your shoulder. Watch yourself in the mirror to prevent you rotating your head.



Head turn
This can be done either sitting or standing. Keep your shoulders relaxed and your head upright. Slowly turn your head to look over your right shoulder, without tilting your head to the side. Feel a gentle stretch and tightness in your neck. Hold the position for five to six seconds. Do the same with your left shoulder.



Sitting exercise two
Face forwards and then look up the ceiling. Slowly bring your head back so that you are facing forwards.

➔ *continued from page 13*

Preparing for activities that can cause pain or discomfort may do the trick. 'I walk for half an hour before starting a car journey as a passenger,' says Julianna. Sheilah also prepares by allowing extra time for activities. 'I give myself plenty of time to park and drive to where there are more free spaces,' she says. An internal adapting mirror in your car can take the pain out of reversing.

'Resting your phone between your ear and shoulder will worsen strain, especially on long phone calls,' says GP Rob Hicks. Small changes can make a big difference. Headsets and hands-free kits can help – and may reduce hand strain. Get in the habit of reading off document holders at work or propping up your favourite novel or cookbook on a book rest to reduce the strain of leaning over.

Make the most of equipment by combining it with other lifestyle changes. 'If you are ironing, use a lightweight iron and set your ironing board to the right height, but also change your position regularly, alternate ironing with other tasks or rest breaks, and don't do it after a tiring day at work. Using an ergonomic chair at home or work is important, but you still need to move every 20 minutes,' says OT Lucy.

You may be eligible for equipment to help

you at work through the Access to Work scheme, such as help paying for adaptations at work or a support worker. Find out more at your local Jobcentre or equivalent.

Other treatments for neck pain

As with other joints, painkillers and anti-inflammatory drugs are effective in relieving pain and inflammation. Speak to your GP if you have severe or persistent pain as they may be able to prescribe you something stronger.

Neck collars can often relieve neck pain by resting the neck muscles and supporting your head in a good position. However, wearing collars all the time can weaken the neck muscle, and it is crucial that they fit your neck well. 'Always take advice from your GP, OT or physiotherapist,' insists OT Lucy.

It is unlikely that surgery will help most people as it is only considered if there is progressive damage that cannot be treated in any other way, or if symptoms worsen despite treatment.

Coming to terms with it

Neck pain can be frustrating. 'I cannot bend my head over for a long time so it takes ages to wrap parcels for my son in Afghanistan. It is difficult because I am independent – I just

want to get on with it,' says Sheilah.

Finding new ways of doing things still brings challenges. Changing your routine can make you feel that neck pain is in charge of your life. Acknowledge that losing mobility is challenging and if you feel like it is all getting on top of you, call Arthritis Care's helpline on 0808 800 4050 or email Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk

Accepting your limitations can ease the frustration. Lisa Madigan puts her energy into learning how to manage her neck pain. 'I have had arthritis since I was two and accept it now. I know that I can't solve it but I can learn to manage the pain.'

Self-management should help you maintain flexibility in your neck, but you may still need to ask for help. 'Negotiating with other people can be as difficult as dealing with pain. If I ask someone to reach something from a top shelf at the supermarket I feel they are thinking: "She is five foot 10, why doesn't she get it herself?"'

'Things seem to be within easy reach, but they are not,' says Julianna. This might be the biggest frustration of all with arthritis, but there is always something that can be done. It can take time to learn how to manage pain and find a balance that works for you. There is support out there for you along the way. 