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NECK VS. MACHINE

As if the Chicago traffic and pothole epidemic wasn't bad enough, the trucker tailing you who, thinking he had mastered the skill of driving with his knees while holding a cell phone in one hand and admiring the center-fold of "Big Rig" in the other, just drove his grill into your backseat. A couple of crumple-zones later and you're left with a collar full of neck pain. Here is a brief overview of what hap-

pens to the neck during a typical minor collision, the conservative treatments available, and some extra helpful hints.

A rear-end collision produces a cervical acceleration-deceleration (CAD) injury to the neck. The initial impact accelerates the neck back towards the head rest which is quickly followed by your neck

whipping forward as it decelerates. During this event, the thin long muscles in the front and back of the neck take turns being hyper-extended and flexed. The soft tissues of the neck (muscles, ligaments, tendons) are violently forced past their normal range-of-motion and the result is an assortment of soft tissue damage. Damaged tissue sets off a cascade of inflammation, muscles spasms, and a neck that feels two inches shorter.

At best, minor CAD injury symptoms include neck pain and swelling (commonly back and side of neck and may include shoulders), a decrease in neck movement, headache, and possibly numbness and tingling in the arms. More severe injuries like loss of consciousness, any sensory disturbances, and exquisite pain with inability to move all warrant a trip to the emergency room. Symptoms can differ from one side of neck to the other depending on a person's position prior to impact. Slightly turning the head, what shoulder the seat belt was on (driver or passenger), and even a person's response (bracing for impact) all contribute to the final presentation of pain. The symptoms are the result of damage to soft tissue and the body's reflexive response to the injury. Simply put, CAD injuries cause micro tears of the soft tissue of the neck, which leads to inflammation and swelling, and therefore causes the muscles of the neck to spasm in an attempt to protect the region from further injury. Unfortunately, passing nerves (like those supplying the arms and parts of the head) get the triangle choke from hell and can cause headaches and arm pain.

Treatment for CAD injuries starts with damage control. Occasionally symptoms aren't immediate, but trust me, there's a storm of pain brewing. The first couple of treatments consist of modalities to manage inflammation and decrease pain. In addition to ice (used to decrease pain and swelling) patients may receive light electric stimulation, ultrasound, kinesiotaping, acupuncture, and soft tissue massage during this sensitive time. More aggressive use of therapies just mentioned along with traction, spinal

adjustments, muscle stretching are added to the treatment protocol as symptoms subside. As healing further progresses, physical rehabilitation and muscle re-education come into play. This is to minimize the long-term effects a CAD injury can have on a patient's neck biomechanics. The length and outcome of treatment varies depending on the severity of initial injury, but getting in fast and sticking with treatment can only improve the situation.

The best advice I can give a CAD injury patient is to seek treatment soon after an accident. The length and success of treatment truly depend on it. Next, consider the above natural treatment to complement pain medication. While pain killers will get you through the day/night, they won't fix the damage done. The harms of whiplash can have lasting effects on one's posture and wreak havoc on cervical biomechanics. Therefore, conservative treatments as described above are the best route for these injuries with heavy emphasis on physical rehabilitation. These treatments may be more time consuming and can add to the financial load after an accident, but you'll stand a better chance against developing ongoing residual problems. Some good news; treatment sessions are fairly short and most car insurance policies provide MedPay or "no fault" healthcare coverage just for this reason. So don't hesitate to make the time and financial investment in your health when it comes to CAD injuries.

Your turn signal is still on,
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