

Personal Training by Robert J. Bovee

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IS SLEEPING A PAIN FOR YOU?

Is neck or back pain something that follows you to the breakfast table? If so, it could be the way you sleep at night. When someone sleeps every night with the head turned to one side, it extends and rotates the cervical spine. Eventually physiological changes occur in the neck. The ligaments and tendons in the neck actually reeducate themselves, lengthening on one side and weakening on the other. This reeducation can alter the entire biomechanical function of the cervical spine. Structures can shift their weight-bearing workload to others that are not designed to routinely handle this particular load. As a result, secondary problems usually develop. The person may experience signs of nerve compression. These signs include numbness down the arm, headaches, pain in the neck and back region, and tension in the muscles (typically in the trapezius). This tension in the muscles is a physiological response of the muscle to its nerve supply being compressed. The longer the nerve is compressed the longer the spasms or tension remain. This wide range of ailments is due to the fact that the affected areas are designed to function in a certain plane. When this plane is altered, other structures have to compensate for the deficit; thus the development of a secondary injury. If the problem goes uncorrected for years, low back pain can be the result.

The solution to this problem is quite simple. The person needs to get into the habit of sleeping on his or her side or back, instead of their stomachs. This simple solution however can be quite difficult. Usually what will happen is that the person will start out on their side or back and wake up on their stomachs from force of habit. A good remedy may be sewing something on the chest of a T-shirt, worn at night, such as a small rubber ball. When the person rolls over on their stomach, the lump is sensed by the person as uncomfortable during their sleep, causing them to shift. The person will turn on their back or side and eventually that will become their regular sleeping position.

Do not count yourself out for a neck injury if you already sleep on your side or back. You can still injure the neck by incorrect use of pillows. By placing more than one pillow underneath your head, you can hyper flex the neck which can leave you at risk for a cervical spine injury. How you place the pillow is also very important. The ideal position is under the neck just resting on the top of the shoulders. This will support the neck while you sleep. If you place the pillow under the back of your head, it allows the cervical spine to be unsupported, leaving it at risk for injury.

Something else to be aware of while you sleep is to avoid cold drafts. Sleeping under an open window or having a fan or air conditioner vent blowing across you can cause an extremely painful condition known as torticollis. When cold air blows on the muscle it contracts to conserve heat. Then when you move during the night, you pull the muscle fibers that in some cases actually tear them.

A good supportive sleeping surface is also crucial to a good night's sleep. It is important to evaluate your current sleeping surface. If your mattress is older and has a dip in the middle or where you sleep, get rid of it. Find whatever gives you good support, whether water, foam, or regular innerspring. Just remember with an innerspring to turn it over every three to four months to prevent a wear pattern. Remember that when your head hits the pillow, your body is looking forward to a peaceful rest. If you're forcing your body to work overtime by sleeping incorrectly it will let you know. By getting a good night sleep will leave you refreshed and ready to enjoy the day.

For more information, please contact Robert J. Bovee at (585) 330-0614.