

Neck pain is often a result of improper positioning due to occupational ergonomics, whiplash, repetitive trauma...etc. In any case, there is a dominance of the SCM (sternocleidomastoid) and the levator scapulae, which in turn creates a weakness in the deep cervical musculature (longus coli & capitus). These deeper muscles are vital in proper neck positioning and have much to do with avoiding tension headaches.

Deep Neck Flexor Exercise (longus coli and capitus):

Lie face up on a flat surface (or in bed with no pillow), gently draw your chin back towards the floor while maintaining a long neck. Once you have this position, slowly lift your head off the floor (less than an inch) and hold. Make sure to keep your chin retracted (tucked back) as you hold. Try to hold this position as long as you can without recruiting the other neck muscles (typically the chin starts to tip up as the SCM is utilized - not what we want here).

*Perform at least 1-3x/day and hold as long as possible. Time yourself to see how you are progressing. Aim for 60 seconds and beyond! Keep at this exercise even if it seems like it isn't much - trust me it is.



Additional suggestions: Perform while at your computer or driving in your car - think about pressing through the top of your head (lengthening your spine) as your chin gently tucks back (retracts) ... get creative with it!

Lateral Neck Stretch (levator scapulae, trapezius, SCM, scalenes):



Seated or standing, start by either sitting on one hand or placing it behind your back (keeping the shoulder down). Tip your head away from that hand so that your ear is in line with your shoulders. A stretch may be felt already in which case, hold this position and take some deep breaths for as long as you are comfortable. To increase the stretch, place your other hand just behind your ear (contact the mastoid process - bony bump) and gently encourage the head up and out (see arrow in picture). Avoid placing too much weight on your head in this position, focus on pulling up and out to unload the spine.

Once a gentle stretch is felt, try to slowly tip your nose down to your armpit and then up to the sky (small movements are key here - only about 1-2 inches of actual movement is needed). This will include many of the different muscle fibers and improve your stretch. *Perform as often as needed (1-3x/day) and hold for about 10-30 seconds. Make sure to incorporate your breathing into your stretching, as it will help the muscles relax more readily.