

# **Madigan Army Medical Center Referral Guidelines**

## **Cervical Pain / Stiffness**

### **Diagnosis/Definition**

Cervical pain that is muscular, discogenic, or arthritic in nature. Patient may be experiencing limited ROM of C-spine or have pain referred to the trapezius or upper extremity.

### **Initial Diagnosis and Management**

- History and physical examination.
- Radiograph of the spine if cervical pain started with trauma.
- MRI/CT not indicated initially.
- Initial Management:
  - NSAIDs.
  - Do not prescribe muscle relaxants as they are not effective.
  - Soft collar not recommended except for 1-5 days s/p high speed whiplash trauma (i.e., MVA).
  - Appropriate activity limitations on lifting, overhead work, heavy headgear, etc.
  - Ice packs every 20 minute q2h x 72 hours - then change to heat PRN.
  - Encourage gentle, pain-free ROM.

### **Ongoing Management and Objectives**

- Should observe a reduction in pain level within 5-7 days.
- Chronic upper trapezius tension may persist for up to 2 months.
- Expect increased AROM of C-spine and decreased muscle spasm within 2 weeks, complete resolution will take longer.

### **Indications for Specialty Care Referral**

- Specialty Care Referral (Physical Therapy):
  - No improvement after 7-10 days of initial primary care management.
  - If the patient has radicular symptoms.
- Specialty Care Referral (Neurosurgery or Orthopedic):
  - If the patient has neurological findings (motor, sensory, or reflex deficits) and/or has positive MRI findings. Positive MRI findings include significant disc herniations or degenerative changes with resultant nerve root impingement and/or canal stenosis. It does not include simple spondylosis (arthritis) or disk degeneration without canal or foraminal compromise.

### **Criteria for Return to Primary Care**

Chronic conditions with a stable neurologic exam in patients that have been evaluated by Orthopedics or Neurosurgery and are not surgical candidates.

Also see: **Neurosurgery Cervical Disc Syndrome** or **Neurosurgery Spinal Stenosis (Cervical)**

Last Review for this Guideline: **May 2010**

Referral Guidelines require review every three years.

Maintained by the Madigan Army Medical Center - Quality Services Division  
Clinical Practice and Referral Guidelines Administrator