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Perfect Balance Clinic

# CHOOSING THE CORRECT PILLOW FOR YOUR NECK



## ADVICE SHEET: CHOOSING THE CORRECT PILLOW FOR YOUR NECK

Since you will spend about one third of your life sleeping in a bed, the type of pillow you choose is an important part of preventing or managing neck pain. One of the most common causes of neck pain is having your neck twisted or bent too far in any direction for a long time. If you wake up in the morning with a painful neck, it may be because your pillow is not supporting your head and neck in the right position. It should be in what is described as a "neutral" position. This means that the normal slight curve of your neck is not changed.

### The Right Position in Bed

Even before going to sleep, one mistake that many people make is not supporting their head properly while reading or watching television in bed. Avoid propping yourself up on several pillows with your head bent forward. If you are reading, make sure your arms are supported and your head is in a neutral position. When it comes to getting some shut-eye, the best position for sleeping is on your back or your side. Avoid sleeping on your stomach, because this forces your head to be twisted into an unnatural position. If you are sleeping on your side or your back, you will need to make sure your neck is supported adequately and not too much or too little. A good rule of thumb is if your partner lays behind you or to one side, they should be able to draw a straight line between the back of your head, your neck and your upper back (thoracic spine).

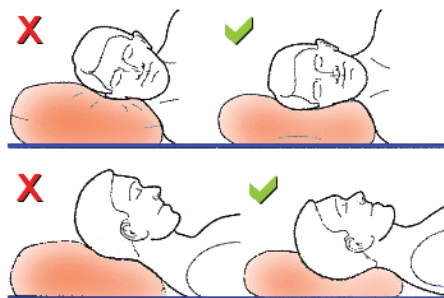


Figure 1: Correct and incorrect use of a pillow

### Picking the Right Pillow

Finding the right pillow can improve the quality of your sleep and prevent or reduce neck pain, according to studies on pillow use. If you sleep on your side, pick a pillow that just fills the space between your ear and your mattress without tilting your head. If you sleep on your back, your pillow should keep your head from tilting backward or forward.



Figure 2: Positioning of the head and neck using different pillows

There are many pillow options to choose from. The best is a pillow that gives you good support as well as a good night's sleep. The basic rule is to find a pillow that keeps your neck in that neutral position. See Figure 2 for an idea of how to choose the correct pillow (middle image). Here are some choices worth a test drive:

### Orthopaedic pillows

These are pillows that are designed to maintain the natural curve of your neck. Memory foam has been a popular choice in recent years and is certainly worth considering in most cases. However, this does not suit everyone and you should make sure you test it out before you decide to buy one as they can be very expensive.

### Feather pillows

The old-fashioned feather pillow may be the right choice for you, as long as you aren't allergic to down or other feathers. These pillows can be moulded to fit the shape of your head, and offer less resistance than foam.

### Cervical pillows

These are roll-shaped pillows designed to relieve neck stress and neck pain by maintaining the natural shape of your head and neck while you sleep.

### Water-filled pillows

Water pillows support your neck by absorbing and redistributing weight. A study done at Johns Hopkins University found that sleeping with a water-filled pillow had some advantages over standard down or foam pillows, or even cervical roll pillows, in reducing neck pain for some of the study participants. One advantage of the water pillow is that you can customise the amount of support it provides: the more water you add, the firmer the support, and vice versa.

If you are waking up with neck pain, or if you want to avoid it to begin with, or if it's been so long since you bought pillows that you don't even know how old yours are, you might want to do some shopping at your local bedding store. Since you spend a good chunk of your life sleeping, one of the best ways to ensure sweet dreams is to get the most comfortable pillows you can find. Ultimately, everyone's neck is different and it's important to make sure you get the right pillow for your neck. This includes looking at the shape, material and the height of the pillow. Make sure you try a pillow out in the store before you buy.



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