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# Protecting your neck

■ BY MATT BRZYCKI

The last time someone challenged you to “make a muscle,” you probably didn’t loosen your shirt collar and flex your neck. Because the neck isn’t a “show” muscle – like the biceps and triceps – neck exercises are typically de-emphasized or neglected altogether. Yet, having a strong neck is extremely important. Why so?



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If you ever had to respond to a hostage standoff or civil disturbance wearing some type of helmet for a lengthy period of time, you know that your neck can fatigue. And fatigue, of course, increases the potential for poor reactions and bad decisions. Another great reason for exercising the neck is that it can offer substantial protection from things like a stiff neck, a neck sprain/strain (a “whiplash”) or an injury that’s much more severe such as damage to the spinal column.

## BASIC ANATOMY AND MUSCULAR FUNCTION

The muscles on the front of the neck can be collectively referred to as the “neck flexors.” These muscles are used in neck flexion (bringing the head toward the chest), neck lateral flexion (bending the neck to the side) and neck rotation (turning the head).

The back of the neck contains several muscles that can simply be grouped as the “neck extensors.” These muscles are used in neck extension (bringing the head backward).

The trapezius is a kite-shaped muscle that covers the uppermost region of the back and posterior section of the neck. The “traps” are used in shoulder elevation (shrugging the shoulders), scapulae adduction (pinching the shoulder blades together) and neck extension (bringing the head backward).

## GENERAL GUIDELINES

You should train your neck 2 - 3 times per week on nonconsecutive days. It’s best to do neck exercises at the beginning of your workout while you’re fresh, both physically as well as psychologically.

A good repetition range for the neck is 8 - 12. Doing sets of less than about 8 repetitions significantly increases your risk of injury; doing sets of more than about 12 repetitions gradually becomes a test of muscular endurance rather than muscular strength.

## EXERCISES

What follows are descriptions for three exercises that you can do to strengthen the muscles of your neck. Two of the exercises – neck flexion and neck extension – are usually performed with a machine (either selectorized or plate-loaded). Unfortunately, most fitness centers don’t have this particular piece of equipment. Therefore, these two exercises are described here using manual resistance in which the workload is provided by another person or “spotter.”

### Neck Flexion

This exercise works your neck flexors. Lie supine on a bench and place your feet flat on the floor. Position your head over the end of the back pad, interlock your fingers and place them across your chest. The spotter should apply resistance against your chin with one hand and your forehead with the other.

To do the exercise, pull your head as close to your chest as possible as the spotter applies resistance evenly throughout the full range of motion. Pause briefly in this mid-range position (your chin near your chest) and then resist as the spotter pushes your head back to the start/finish position (your chin away from your chest).

### Neck Extension

This exercise targets your neck extensors and trapezius. Lie prone on

a bench and place your hands and feet on the floor (or place your legs across the back pad). Position your head over the end of the back pad. The spotter should place one hand on your back and apply resistance against the back of your head with the other.

To do the exercise, extend your head backward as far as possible as the spotter applies resistance evenly throughout the full range of motion. Pause briefly in this mid-range position (your chin away from your chest) and then resist as the spotter pushes your head back to the start/finish position (your chin near your chest).

## Shoulder Shrug

This exercise isolates your trapezius. Stand and hold dumbbells against the sides of your upper legs with your palms facing each other. Straighten your arms and spread your feet about shoulder-width apart.

To do the exercise, keep your arms fairly straight and pull the dumbbells up as high as possible. Pause briefly in this mid-range position (your shoulders near your ears) and then lower the weight to the start/finish position (your shoulders away from your ears). This exercise can also be done with a barbell and trap bar in a similar manner as described here.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Neck exercises are highly beneficial and, as a result, are a recommended addition to your program. ♥

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