What’s at the ‘core’ of your neck problems?

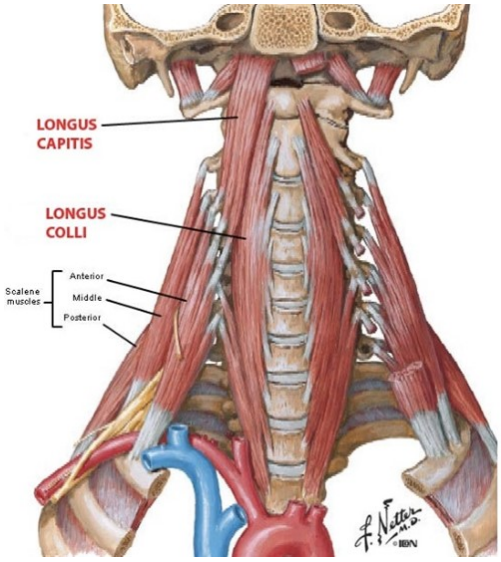
If you haven’t heard of your ‘core muscles’ you’ve probably been hiding under a rock for the past 20 years. The term ‘core muscles’ to describe the stabilising muscles of the trunk, has been hugely popular and the centre of much discussion over the past years, particularly in reference to their importance in preventing back pain. In fact, for quite some time, improving the strength of your ‘core’ was proposed to be an important component of rehabilitating almost all musculoskeletal complaints.



It seems that we may have gotten a little carried away with this being the holy grail of back pain and musculoskeletal injuries generally. While certainly an important group of muscles, your ‘core’ muscles are simply the deep stabilising muscles of the trunk and simply part of a system of muscles that runs throughout the joints of your body.

Broadly in the body, we have 2 systems of muscles, stabilising muscles and movement muscles. While this description is an oversimplification and many muscles have functions spanning both groups, generally the deeper muscles in the body play a greater stability role and the more superficial muscles more of a movement role.

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The deeper system, of muscles tend to be a little more slow twitch, endurance fibres which are great at working for longer periods at lower levels to keep us upright and stable. The movement muscles of the body tend to be more fast twitch and work in shorter more explosive intermittent bursts to produce movement, resting in between contractions.

In the neck, there is an important group of stabilising muscles called you deep neck flexors. This group of muscles sits deep under the throat, at the front of the spine and work together to keep your neck upright, essentially the 'core muscle' of your neck. Research shows that often with pain and injury to the neck, this deep system of muscles can be switched off and become weak. When this happens, the faster twitch, more superficial neck muscles can try to take over but are just not well designed for this role, resulting in a poorly controlled painful neck.

Without specific exercises to retrain the activation and strength of your deep neck flexors, pain and dysfunction of the neck develops into a chronic and often debilitating state. The tricky part with these muscles is that much the same as your 'core', they have generally worked in the background for years without you having any awareness at all of what they are doing.

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Learning how to turn these muscles on and to re-train them is quite a subtle and can often initially be a little confusing. Your physiotherapist should be able to perform some simple test to ascertain the degree of potential weakness of these muscles and guide you through some very gentle exercises to learn how to activate your deep neck flexors and strengthen them up. Many of the cues to activate these muscles are not dissimilar to cues for maintaining good posture of the neck and upper back and in the presence of neck pain, this is always a good place to start. Ultimately, improved strength and function of these important stabilising muscles will support your head and neck and have you moving pain and injury free.

If you have been experiencing pain and dysfunction of your neck and would like guidance on appropriate exercises to get you back In Balance book an appointment with one of our experienced physios today.

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