An ICON Overview on Physical Modalities for Neck Pain and Associated Disorders

Nadine Graham*,1, Anita R Gross1, Lisa C. Carlesso2, P. Lina Santaguida3, Joy C MacDermid4, Dave Walton5, Enoch Ho1 and ICON§

1School of Rehabilitation Science, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
2Department of Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
3University Evidence-based Practice Centre, Department of Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
4School of Rehabilitation Sciences, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario and Hand and Upper Limb Centre, St. Joseph’s Health Centre, London, Ontario, Canada
5School of Physical Therapy, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada

Abstract: Introduction: Neck pain is common, can be disabling and is costly to society. Physical modalities are often included in neck rehabilitation programs. Interventions may include thermal, electrotherapy, ultrasound, mechanical traction, laser and acupuncture. Definitive knowledge regarding optimal modalities and dosage for neck pain management is limited.

Purpose: To systematically review existing literature to establish the evidence-base for recommendations on physical modalities for acute to chronic neck pain.

Methods: A comprehensive computerized and manual search strategy from January 2000 to July 2012, systematic review methodological quality assessment using AMSTAR, qualitative assessment using a GRADE approach and recommendation presentation was included. Systematic or meta-analyses of studies evaluating physical modalities were eligible. Independent assessment by at least two review team members was conducted. Data extraction was performed by one reviewer and checked by a second. Disagreements were resolved by consensus.

Results: Of 103 reviews eligible, 20 were included and 83 were excluded. Short term pain relief - Moderate evidence of benefit: acupuncture, intermittent traction and laser were shown to be better than placebo for chronic neck pain. Moderate evidence of no benefit: pulsed ultrasound, infrared light or continuous traction was no better than placebo for acute whiplash associated disorder, chronic myofascial neck pain or subacute to chronic neck pain. There was no added benefit when hot packs were combined with mobilization, manipulation or electrical muscle stimulation for chronic neck pain, function or patient satisfaction at six month follow-up.

Conclusions: The current state of the evidence favours acupuncture, laser and intermittent traction for chronic neck pain. Some electrotherapies show little benefit for chronic neck pain. Consistent dosage, improved design and long term follow-up continue to be the recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Neck pain, review of reviews, modalities, knowledge synthesis.

INTRODUCTION

Description of the Condition

Neck pain is common, can be disabling and is costly to society. Twenty-six to 71% of the adult population can recall experiencing an episode of neck pain or stiffness in their lifetime [1-3]. Although most people with neck disorders experience a low level of disability, Cote 1998 found that 5% were significantly disabled. The prevalence of neck pain is higher in females [4-7]. The results of The Bone and Joint Decade 2000-2010 Task Force on Neck Pain reveal 12-month neck pain prevalence estimates ranging from 30% to 50% in the adult general population generally rising to middle age and then declining in later life [7]. In a U.S. study from the National Ambulatory Medical Care Survey, an average of 10.2 million visits to health care facilities for neck pain was reported [8]. Neck pain has a large impact on health care expenditure, attributed to visits to healthcare
providers, sick leave and is responsible for significant disability and loss of productivity [9-11].

**Description of the Intervention**

The primary approach to neck pain is conservative management. Physical modalities are often a component of these management programs. Interventions may include various forms of heat and cold application, electrotherapy, ultrasound, mechanical traction, laser and acupuncture. Ultrasound is one of the most widely used modalities yet conflicting or limited evidence exists regarding its effectiveness [12, 13]. Previous to this current overview, Gross 2002 [14] and Spitzer 1995 [15] found thermal agents to be commonly used in addition to manual therapy, exercise, education and drug therapies for acute and chronic neck pain. Since physical agents are used as adjunctive interventions, it can be difficult to determine what contribution they make to augmenting treatment effects. Previous reviews have questioned the benefit of physical agents. Gross 2007 [16] found evidence of no benefit for the use of hot packs for both intermediate and long-term relief of chronic pain or improved function. In addition, infrared light and spray and stretch did not aid in short-term pain reduction. Two systematic reviews, one examining non-invasive treatment for trigger point pain [17] and the other on conservative treatment for acute neck pain not due to whiplash [18] did not report on any studies that included heat or cold therapy. Electrotherapy [Electrical Nerve Stimulation, Electrical Muscle Stimulation, Pulsed Electrical Magnetic Field] has been commonly used as one of the physiotherapeutic options to treat neck pain for many years [19]. Little is known about the efficacy of most of these subtypes as sound empirical evidence is lacking. An updated Cochrane review [19] still could not evaluate the unique contribution of electrotherapy since studies had not examined their effects in isolation. Mechanical traction is another treatment with limited evidence of effectiveness [20-24]. According to a number of existing reviews, moderate evidence suggests that acupuncture is effective in the short term for relieving neck pain [16, 25-28]. LASER is a conservative method of treating neck pain that has received relatively limited attention in the scientific literature to date.

**How the Interventions Might Work**

We consider the different physiological and clinical rationale for the use of various physical modalities used by clinicians.

**HEAT AND COLD**

Heat and cold can be applied in multiple ways ranging from in-clinic devices to home applications, with varying thermal properties that can influence physiological effects. Therapeutic applications may include cold packs, evaporative cooling spray, superficial moist heat, shortwave diathermy, infrared heat and hydrotherapy. These therapies can assist in the healing process by providing physiological changes to a range of tissues [29] including changes in blood flow, nerve conduction, and metabolic function. Since the biophysical properties differ across cold and heat agents, the capability of reaching particular target tissues varies across modalities [29-32].

**ULTRASOUND**

Therapeutic ultrasound is a form of acoustic energy (sound) that has been used in rehabilitative medicine for over fifty years [33]. It is used for the purpose of stimulating soft tissue repair and inflammation management thereby resulting in the relief of pain [34] and also for bone healing [35]. Ultrasound is considered a ‘deep heating modality’ as it is able to increase the temperature of tissues at a much greater depth than superficial heat through the mechanical effects of sound vibration. It should be noted however, that ultrasound can be used without producing a significant rise in tissue temperature [34]. It is believed that ultrasound application increases blood flow and metabolism at the site of injury, and can thereby decrease pain and increase the rate of healing [33, 34].

**MECHANICAL TRACTION**

Mechanical traction for the cervical spine involves a longitudinal force applied to the neck via a mechanical system that is delivered intermittently or continuously [36]. It is often used as an adjunct therapy in outpatient rehabilitation [29]. The physiological effects of mechanical traction for the cervical spine may include separation of vertebral bodies, movement of facet joints, expansion of intervertebral foramen and stretching of soft tissue [29, 36].

**ELECTROTHERAPY**

Electrotherapy treatment may include: Direct current (DC), iontophoresis, electrical nerve stimulation; electrical muscle stimulation; transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS); pulsed electromagnetic fields, repetitive magnetic stimulation and permanent magnets (albeit extremely small current). Treatment by DC or Galvanic current, reduces pain by inhibiting nociceptor activity [37]. The main indication for Galvanic current is the treatment of acute radicular pain and inflammation of periarticular structures such as tendons and ligaments. Alternating electrical current (AC) or modulated DC (Galvanic stimulation) may be effective by inhibiting pain-related potentials on the spinal and supraspinal level. Pain relief can be obtained through possible endorphinergic mechanisms of analgesia with the use of electrical muscle stimulation, TENS, or other forms of electrical nerve stimulation [38].

**ACUPUNCTURE**

Acupuncture has been increasingly used as an alternative to more traditional treatments for musculoskeletal pain. It is defined as the stimulation of a certain point(s) on the body, by the insertion of needles, to achieve a desirable effect. It is believed to prevent or modify the perception of pain or to alter physiological functions, including pain control for the treatment of certain diseases or dysfunction of the body [39]. One theory from western scientific research suggests that acupuncture promotes the release of endorphins from the brain through the stimulation of peripheral nerves. These endorphins then block pain pathways in the brain [40]. Traditional Chinese Medicine tracing back thousands of years, encompasses the ancient philosophy of Taoism and the concept of universal balance between Yin and Yang. To balance one’s energy by either sedating or stimulating acupuncture points, promoting the flow of Qi (life’s energy) and thereby restoring health [41, 42].
We acknowledge and respect the variations in the underpinning theory and practical application of acupuncture and related challenges it poses to our evaluation of this intervention and potential subtypes.

**LASER**

The term LASER is an acronym for light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation—a form of photonic therapy that uses monochromatic light with either high or low power [34]. Low power LASER devices have little to no thermal effects and are used to treat an array of musculoskeletal conditions to decrease pain, inflammation and soft tissue scars, and to promote fracture healing [34, 43-45]. Three main types of LASER are used clinically: helium-neon (HeNe wavelength 632.8nm, tissue penetration 0.8mm), the gallium-arsenide (GaAs 904nm, penetrating 5cm) and the gallium-aluminum-arsenide (GaAlAs 830nm, penetrating 2-3cm) [34, 43]. Many mechanisms of action have been proposed for LASER including the slowing of transmission of nociceptive signals, regulation of serotonin and norepinephrine and may limit the release of pro-inflammatory mediators [34, 46-48].

**MULTIMODAL TREATMENTS**

Multimodal treatment plans are common in outpatient rehabilitation with physical modalities often used as a component of the total intervention. Modalities are typically not used exclusively. For that reason, many randomized trials do not examine the use of modalities in isolation but rather in combination with other treatments such as exercise or manual therapy. It is common to see one group of interventions compared to a completely different set of combined interventions. These types of studies may determine a treatment grouping that is more effective than another. Although this makes clinical sense, the independent contribution of a particular modality alone cannot be evaluated and designs that might disaggregate the separate treatment effects are rarely used [49]. Clinically, these various modalities are used for improving physiologic functions that promote healing; or, short-term pain reduction, improved joint and muscle motion. Also, modalities are sometimes used prior to exercise to improve exercise tolerance.

**Why it is Important to do this Overview**

Conflicting or unclear evidence regarding the effectiveness of physical modalities for whiplash-associated disorders (WAD) remains prominent in the literature due in part to poor methodological quality of efficacy trials [23, 50]. Despite more recent studies over the last decade with sound methodology, the best evidence for treatment of WAD patients remains relatively unchanged [51]. The evidence for treatment of cervicogenic headache and radiculopathy are underrepresented in the current literature and there is no evidence of the optimal dosage of non-invasive treatments [51]. Chronic neck pain accounts for $150-$200 billion US each year in economic loss due to lost work days and rehabilitation, yet relatively little is known about how best to manage this condition [16, 52, 53]. Overall, limited definitive knowledge as to what modalities including dosage is most effective to address the management of neck pain.

The purpose of this overview was to systematically review existing reviews and to establish the evidence-base recommendations on the treatment of acute to chronic neck pain (specific and non-specific) with physical modalities. These included heat and cold application, electrotherapy, ultrasound, mechanical traction, laser and acupuncture. We specifically focused on evidence that evaluated use of physical modalities for reducing pain and improving function, quality of life, patient satisfaction or global perceived effect compared to a control with immediately post treatment to long term follow up.

**METHODS**

Our systematic overview process included comprehensive computerized search strategies including MEDLINE, EMBASE, CINAHL, ILC, CENTRAL and LILACS from January 2000 to August 2010, selection criteria (Table 1). Independent assessments by at least two members of our review team were performed for a systematic review of methodological quality using the AMSTAR tool [54], qualitative assessment of the strength of evidence using the Grading of Recommendations, Assessment, Development and Evaluation (GRADE) approach [55, 56] and the recommendation presentation. Two separate searches were performed, one for treatment and one for harms. This methodology is detailed in our International Collaboration on Neck (ICON) methods report.

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**Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Set a Priori**

| PICOS | Criteria |
|-------|----------|
| Participant | Adult (≥18 year), acute to chronic neck pain with or without cervicogenic headache or radiculopathy or whiplash |
| Intervention | Acupuncture, electrotherapy, laser, cold or heat, mechanical traction, ultrasound as single treatment |
| Comparison | Control or comparison (i.e. standard care, another treatment) |
| Outcomes | Primary: Pain, function, disability, work related, quality of life  
Secondary: global perceived effect and patient satisfaction |
| Study Design | Systematic reviews of randomized trials; narrative reviews were excluded |
| Study Timeframe | Immediate post-treatment (IP), short-term (ST: closest to 3 months); intermediate term (IT: closest to 6 months; long term (LT: closest to 1 year) |
include full search terms; this protocol was not registered. Further, we complemented this search by identifying on-going systematic reviews near completion such as Cochrane Reviews up to July 2012, by contacting our expert panel and by systematically checking reference lists of primary studies to minimize the risk of missing relevant reviews and trials.

Data extraction was performed using pre-piloted forms by one reviewer and checked by a second with disagreements resolved by consensus. We systematically extracted data from selected reviews and developed evidence tables. Extractable data from the reviews included the following: author, year of publication, disorder type with duration of symptoms, the intervention, the type of comparator (placebo, no care, usual care, other treatment), the search period, the original authors of primary studies, the AMSTAR score, the effect direction, effect size for reported primary outcomes with duration follow-up period, reported harms, quality ranking system, evidence statement and final GRADE. Harm information was summarized qualitatively from both the treatment reviews that reported any adverse events and directly from the harms reviews.

We utilized the following triage rules (set a priori) to guide decisions and to group treatment reviewed:

1) **Type of treatment** was used to group reviews by physical modality (heat and cold application, electrotherapy, ultrasound, mechanical traction, laser and acupuncture).

2) **Within a treatment modality** we grouped review data with respect to comparator treatments.

3) Once the studies had been grouped by these two categories, a decision was made per grouping; if there were **few reviews** within a treatment category and with unique comparators, we did not eliminate any further reviews.

4) If there were **several reviews** on the same treatment and comparator, we prioritized to obtain the best quality reviews by considering the approach recommended by Whitlock et al. [58] as follows:

   - **Year of publication.** Within the group of systematic reviews
     - i. If there were reviews that were very similar across multiple years, we focused on reviews that were the most up-to-date AND if the studies included in the older review were also INCLUDED in the more recent review.
     - ii. We cross-checked to ascertain that the conclusions were similar to the more current systematic review.

   - **AMSTAR- Risk of Bias.** Reviews were considered low risk of bias if they scored 8 or higher on the 11-point AMSTAR scale, moderate risk of bias if scored between 5 and 7, and high risk of bias if scored 4 or under. We used this process to focus on the best quality reviews. These were synthesized in a summary of findings table to help provide definitive summaries to inform clinical practice (Table 2). Inconsistency and discordance were highlighted and discussed in our methods paper [57].

5) **Effect Size estimates:** We selected the effect size as the primary summary measure for our overview. We determined that within a grouping for treatment and comparator, we selected a review to represent the BEST estimate of effect size or related meta-analysis and as needed reported the range of estimates for other included reviews. In cases where there was discordance between reviews, we reported the combined results of the individual included studies. Additional data on magnitude of effect such as number-needed-to-treat (NNT) and weighted mean difference (WMD) were extracted when available.

6) **Strength of Evidence using GRADE approach:** We used this same representative systematic review or meta-analysis from which to judge an overall GRADE for the strength of the body of evidence for treatment. This did not include the harms evaluation that was observational. The selected reviews may have already had a GRADE table. We estimated the quality of the evidence using the GRADE approach for primary trials within reviews using reported information on: design [randomized controlled trials (RCT), immediately post treatment to long term follow-up]; risk of bias (equivalent methodological criteria for risk of bias reported in the review i.e. JADAD [59] or PEDro [60]); imprecision (sample size); inconsistency; indirectness; and reporting bias.

We excluded reviews that did not meet our inclusion criteria with rationale for exclusion. Multimodal treatments were not included if contributions of individual interventions could not be determined. Once reviews were deemed relevant and of at lower risk of bias, we extracted and reported individual trial findings by “overall strength of evidence” using GRADE approach and stratified by “treatment category” for the Summary of Findings Table (Table 3). Conflicting evidence was recorded (Table 4). The final core recommendations are reported in Evidence-Based Recommendations (Table 5).

### RESULTS

From 117 reviews that were identified for the entire ICON treatment category, 103 were screened for eligibility. From these, a total of 48 reviews evaluated the physical modalities of interest, with 20 reviews included (Fig. 1 – PRISMA diagram). Eighty-three reviews were excluded, detailed reasons can be found in APPENDIX 1.

Those systematic reviews that scored less than six on the AMSTAR assessment were not included. The AMSTAR assessment disclosed that the most common methodological limitations included incomplete reporting on: publication bias; conflict of interest; and complete reporting of excluded studies [57]. The primary reviews included in our analyses evaluated the evidence on the following physical modalities: thermal, electrotherapy, ultrasound, mechanical traction, laser and acupuncture. Treatment parameters varied across interventions and some were not reported at all. Treatment dosages have been reported when available.
Table 2. AMSTAR Rating

| Ref# | Author                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|------|-------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|
| 107  | Baxter et al. 2008      | Y | N | Y | N | N | Y | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 4408 | Bronfort et al. 2009    | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 157  | Bronfort et al. 2010    | Y | N | Y | N | N | N | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 1737 | Chow & Barnsley 2005    | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N  | N  | N  |
| 15   | Chow et al. 2009        | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | Y  | N  | N  |
| 1747 | Conlin et al. 2005      | Y | N | Y | N | N | Y | Y | Y | Y  | N  | N  |
| 25234| Ernst et al. 2011       | Y | CA| Y | N | N | Y | N | NA| NA| N  | N  |
| 106  | Fu et al. 2009          | Y | Y | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | N | Y  | N  | N  |
| 20018| Furlan et al. 2010      | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N  | N  | N  |
| 87   | Graham et al. 2006      | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | Y  | N  | N  |
| 46   | Graham et al. 2008      | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y  | N  | N  |
| 20024| Graham et al. 2008      | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N  | N  | N  |
| 69   | Gross et al. 2007       | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N  | N  | N  |
| 5    | Gross et al. 2010       | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N  | N  | N  |
| 20041| Gross et al. 2012       | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | Y  | N  | N  |
| 36   | Haines et al. 2009      | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y  | N  | N  |
| 83   | Haraldsson et al. 2006  | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y  | N  | N  |
| 53   | Hurwitz et al. 2008     | Y | N | N | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 193  | Itoh & Kitakoji 2007    | Y | Y | Y | N | N | Y | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 166  | Kay et al. 2009         | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y  | N  | N  |
| 12   | Kroeling et al. 2009    | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y  | N  | N  |
| 20048| Kroeling et al. 2013    | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y  | N  | N  |
| 1445 | Las Penas et al. 2005   | Y | N | Y | N | N | Y | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 7575 | Leaver et al. 2010      | Y | Y | Y | N | N | Y | Y | Y | Y  | N  | N  |
| 149  | Lee et al. 2010         | Y | Y | Y | N | N | CA| Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 145  | Lin et al. 2009         | Y | Y | Y | N | Y | CA| N | NA| N  | N  | N  |
| 303278| Lin et al. 2012         | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 6020 | Miller et al. 2010      | Y | Y | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y  | N  | N  |
| 3333 | Peake & Harte. 2005     | Y | N | Y | N | N | Y | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 495  | Pelosi et al. 2007      | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y  | Y  | N  |
| 1432 | Reid & Rivet 2005       | Y | CA| Y | N | N | Y | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 226  | Rickards 2006           | Y | N | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 241  | Teasell et al. 2010     | Y | N | Y | N | N | Y | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 11690| Teasell et al. 2010     | Y | N | Y | N | N | Y | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 25360| Trinh et al. 2006       | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y  | N  | N  |
| 213  | Trinh et al. 2007       | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | Y | Y | Y  | N  | N  |
| 170  | Tsakitzidis et al. 2009 | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 185  | Verhagen et al. 2007    | Y | Y | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | Y | N  | N  | N  |
| 75   | Vernon & Humphreys 2007  | Y | N | Y | N | N | Y | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 413  | Vernon & Schneider 2009 | Y | N | Y | N | N | Y | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
| 1736 | Vernon et al. 2005      | Y | CA| Y | N | N | Y | Y | Y | NA| N  | N  |
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We found acupuncture to be more beneficial for chronic neck pain than massage (1 RCT, 177 participants) [65] immediate post treatment and in the short term and better than traction (2 RCTs, 589 participants) [78, 79] for global perceived effect immediately following treatment.

We found acupuncture to be more beneficial than multimodal physical therapy (details not reported) (1 RCT, number of participants not reported) [80] for radicular pain in the short term. We found acupuncture to be more beneficial than the injection of lidocaine (2 RCT, number of participants not reported) [81, 82] for non-specific neck pain in the short term.

**Ultrasound**

Continuous ultrasound was better than a control immediately post treatment and in the short term (2 RCTs, 150 participants) [83, 84] for myofascial pain. High-powered pain threshold with the probe placed over the trigger point and held motionless was more beneficial than conventional ultrasound (1 RCT, 60 participants) [84] for myofascial pain immediately post treatment.

**LASER**

HeNe-632.8nm with exercise (1 RCT, 60 participants) [85] was shown to be better than placebo for chronic myofascial pain immediately post treatment but not at intermediate follow-up of six months. GaAlAs-830nm or 904nm (4 RCTs, 196 participants) [72, 74, 75] was better than placebo for subacute/chronic neck pain with associated osteoarthritis. 905nm-red (1 RCT, 60 participants) [86] was shown to be better than placebo for improving disability in acute neck pain with radiculopathy immediately following treatment. GaAs-904nm was better than placebo (1 RCT, 60 participants) [87] for reducing myofascial neck pain, improving function and quality of life immediately post treatment and in the short term.
### Table 3. Summary of Findings by GRADE (Quality of Evidence)

| Rx | Treatment Details, Comparison & DISORDER TYPE | Primary Authors (REVIEW Reference) | Quality of Evidence (GRADE*) |
|----|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| **EVIDENCE of BENEFIT** | | | |
| **Electro** | **TENS vs placebo for WAD**<br>CHRONIC MYOFASCIAL<br>Dosage range: 14-20 minutes, 1 or 8-10 sessions over 2-5 weeks | b) Hsueh 1997 [38]<br>b) Smania 2005 [88]<br>a) Flynn 1987<br>(GROSS 2007 [16], KROELING 2009 [19], 2013 [126], RICKARDS 2006 [17]) | IP/ST pain, function and disability |
| **Electro** | **TENS + another treatment vs that same treatment:**<br>a) infrared, b) hotpack/exercise, c) collar/exercise/analgesic<br>for a) CHRONIC b) MYOFASCIAL c) ACUTE<br>NECK PAIN<br>Dosage range: 15-30 minutes, 1 or 12-19 sessions over 6 weeks | a) Chiu 2005 [108]<br>b) Hou 2002 [101]<br>c) Nordemar 1981 [109]<br>(KROELING 2009 [19], 2013 [126]) | b) IP pain<br>c) ST pain<br>a) IT pain |
| **Electro** | **EMS vs placebo for CHRONIC MYOFASCIAL NECK PAIN**<br>Dosage: One 20 minute session | Hsueh 1997 [38]<br>(KROELING 2009 [19], 2013 [126]) | IP pain |
| **Electro** | **Ultra-reiz vs standard physiotherapy (ice, home exercise, advice)**<br>for ACUTE WAD<br>Dosage: 15 minutes, 5 sessions over 1 week | Henriks 1996 [90]<br>(KROELING 2009 [19], 2013 [126], VERHAGEN 2007 [13]) | ST pain (very low) |
| **Electro** | **Pulsed Electromagnetic Field vs placebo (all studies) or standard treatment [127] for CHRONIC OA**<br>WAD<br>Dosage range: 30 minutes, 18 sessions over 4-6 weeks, full body mat [128], 2x/day for 3 weeks, technique not reported [129], 16 minutes local magnet, 8 minutes full body mat 2x/day for 2 weeks [127]<br>c) 3x in 3 weeks, collar [130] | Trock 1994 [129]<br>Surbeyaz 2006 [128]<br>Thuile 2002 [127]<br>Foley-Nolan 1990 [131]<br>(CONLIN 2005 [132], KROELING 2009 [19], 2013 [126], VERHAGEN 2007 [13]) | IP pain, GPE, disability<br>ST pain<br>IP pain<br>IP pain |
| **Electro** | **Repetitive Magnetic Stimulation vs placebo for CHRONIC MYOFASCIAL PAIN**<br>Dosage: 20 minutes, 10 sessions over 2 weeks | Smania 2003 [133]<br>(GROSS 2007 [16], KROELING 2009 [19], 2013 [126], RICKARDS 2006 [17]) | IP/ST pain |
| **LASER** | **GaAlAs-830nm or 904nm vs placebo for CHRONIC MND/DC (OA)**<br>Dosage range: 0.15 to 200 seconds/point, 10-14 sessions, 2-7 weeks | Ceccherelli 1998 [113]<br>Özdemer 2001 [74]<br>Taverna 1990 [76]<br>Soriano 1996 [75]<br>Chow 2006 [73]<br>Gur 2004 [87]<br>GROSS 2007 [16] and 2012 [134], CHOW 2005 [135], 2009 [136], LEAVER 2010 [137], RICKARDS 2006 [17]) | IP/IT pain<br>IP/IT pain<br>IP/IT pain<br>IP/IT pain<br>IP pain, function, QoL, GPE<br>IP, ST pain, function, QoL |
| **LASER** | **GaAs-904nm vs placebo for CHRONIC MYOFASCIAL PAIN**<br>Dosage: 180 seconds/point, 10 sessions over 2 weeks | | |
| **LASER** | **HeNe-632.8nm vs placebo for MYOFASCIAL PAIN**<br>Dosage: irradiation time not reported, 3 sessions/week for 4 weeks | Ibuldu 2004 [85]<br>GROSS 2007 [16] and 2012 [134], CHOW 2009 [136], RICKARDS 2006 [17]) | IP pain, physical activity |
| **LASER** | **905nm (red) vs placebo for ACUTE NECK PAIN WITH RADICULOPATHY**<br>Dosage: 120 seconds/point, 5 sessions/week for 3 weeks | Konstantinovic 2010 [86]<br>(GROSS 2012 [134]) | IP pain, function, QoL |
## Table 3: Evidence of Benefit

| Rx | Treatment Details, Comparison & Disorder Type | Primary Authors (Review Reference) | Quality of Evidence (GRADE*) |
|----|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| **EVIDENCE OF BENEFIT** | | | Strong | Moderate | Low |
| **Traction** | Intermittent Traction vs a) no treatment b) placebo for CHRONIC MND, NDR, DC Dosage: a) not reported b) 10 seconds on/off, 15 minutes, 2x/week for 6 weeks | a) Goldie 1970(62), b) Zyberbergold 1985 [71] (GRAHAM 2006 [21] and 2008 [138], GROSS 2007 [16], KAY 2009 [139]) | a) ST GPE b) ST pain |
| **Ultrasound** | Continuous Ultrasound vs active control (stretching) for MYOFASCIAL NECK PAIN Dosage: a) 1-5 sessions over 4 weeks b) 10 sessions over 2 weeks | a) Maljesi 2004(76), b) Esenyel 2000 [83] (GRAHAM 2008 [140], GROSS 2007 [16], PELOSO 2007 [141], RICKARDS 2006 [17]) | IP/ST pain IP pain |
| **Acupuncture** | Acupuncture vs sham acupuncture a) Japan Style for SUBACUTE/CHRONIC MND & WAD b) Electro-acupuncture for CHRONIC MND & DC c) TCM approach CHRONIC NECK PAIN d) Trigger point approach for CHRONIC NECK PAIN Dosage range: 10-30 minutes, 3 to 14 sessions over 3-12 weeks | a) Birch 1998 [61], b) White 2000 [64], c) Zhu 2002 [63], d) Nabeta 2002 [142] (FU 2009 [143], GROSS 2007 [16], TRINH 2006 [144] and 2007 [27]) | ST pain |
| **Acupuncture** | Acupuncture vs sham (LASER, TENS) for CHRONIC NECK PAIN TCM approach, dry needles Standard points TCM approach Western approach Dosage range: 20-30 minutes, 1 to 8 sessions over 3-4 weeks | Irmich 2002 [66], Petrie 1983 [67], Irmich 2001 [65], White 2004 [145] (FU 2009 [143], TRINH 2006 [144] and 2007 [27], GROSS 2007 [16], HARALDSSON 2006 [146]) | ST pain |
| **Acupuncture** | Acupuncture vs a) wait list b) no treatment for CHRONIC NECK PAIN a) TCM approach b) Superficial dry needling on pressure points Dosage: approximately 10 sessions over 3-4 weeks, timing of each session not reported [69] No dosage reported [77] | a) Coan 1982 [69], b) Edwards 2003 [77] (GROSS 2007 [16], FU 2009 [143], FURLAN 2012 [147], TRINH 2006 [144] and 2007 [27]) | a) ST pain b) ST pain |
| **Acupuncture** | Acupuncture vs comparison treatment a) massage b) and c) traction for CHRONIC NECK PAIN a) and b) TCM approach c) electro-acupuncture Dosage: 30 minutes, 5 sessions over 3 weeks | Irmich 2001 [65] (FU 2009 [143], FURLAN 2012 [147], TRINH 2006 [144] and 2007 [27], HARALDSSON 2006 [145]) | a) IP, ST pain b) and c) IP, GPE |
| **Acupuncture** | Acupuncture vs comparison treatment (physical therapy for RADICULOPATHY) -Traditional Chinese Medicine approach Dosage: not reported | b) Guangyue 2001 [79], c) Loy 1983 [78] (GRAHAM 2006 [21], TRINH 2006 [144] and 2007 [27]) | ST pain |
| **Acupuncture** | Acupuncture vs lidocaine injection for NECK PAIN -Traditional Chinese Medicine approach Dosage: not reported | Zhou 2006 [148], (FU 2009 [143]) (FURLAN 2012 [147]) | ST pain |
| **Acupuncture** | Acupuncture vs wait list b) no treatment for NECK PAIN and associated disorders a) TCM approach b) Superficial dry needling on pressure points Dosage: approximately 10 sessions over 3-4 weeks, timing of each session not reported [69] No dosage reported [77] | a) Coan 1982 [69], b) Edwards 2003 [77] (GROSS 2007 [16], FU 2009 [143], FURLAN 2012 [147], TRINH 2006 [144] and 2007 [27]) | a) ST pain b) ST pain |
| Rx | Treatment Details, Comparison & DISORDER TYPE | Primary Authors (REVIEW Reference) | Quality of Evidence (GRADE*) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **EVIDENCE of NO BENEFIT (vs control) or No DIFFERENCE (vs another treatment)** | | | |
| Ultrasound | Pulsed Ultrasound vs placebo for a) CHRONIC MYOFASCIAL PAIN | a) Gam 1998 [91] b) Flynn 1987 [89] (GRAHAM 2008 [140, 146], GROSS 2007 [16], KROELING 2009 [19] and 2013 [126], RICKARDS 2006 [17], VERNON 2007 [149]) | a) IP pain, function, GPE |
| Ultrasound | Pulsed Ultrasound vs active treatment a) ultra-reiz b) mobilization for a) ACUTE WAD b) SUB-ACUTE/CHRONIC MND | a) Flynn 1987 [89] b) Coppieters 2003 [92] (GRAHAM 2008 [140], GROSS 2010 [150], KROELING 2009 [19] and 2013 [126]) | b) IP pain a) IP pain |
| Ultrasound | Continuous Ultrasound vs placebo or active treatment (electrotherapy) for NON-SPECIFIED MYOFASCIAL PAIN Dosage: not reported | Lee 1997 [100] (RICKARDS 2006 [149]) | IP pain |
| Thermal Agents | Hot pack vs active control (mobilization, manipulation, EMS) for CHRONIC MND Dosage: not reported for hot pack, treatment for 6 weeks | Hurwitz 2002(84) (heat, mob vs mob) (heat, manip vs manip) (heat, mob, EMS vs mob, EMS) (heat, manip, EMS vs manip, EMS) (GRAHAM 2008 [151], GROSS 2010 [150], KROELING 2009 [19] and 2013 [126], VERNON 2007 [149]) | IT pain IT function IT patient satisfaction |
| Thermal Agents | Infrared light vs sham TENS for SUBACUTE/CHRONIC MND/DC Dosage: not reported | Lewith 1981 [94] (GRAHAM 2008 [151] GROSS 2007 [152], HARALDSSON 2006 [146]) | ST pain |
| Thermal Agents | Spray & stretch vs a) active control b) placebo c) active treatment comparison (heat, education, exercise) for chronic MYOFASCIAL NECK PAIN Dosage: not reported | a) and b) Snow 1992 [102] c) Hou 2002 [101] (GRAHAM 2008 [151], GROSS 2007 [152], HARALDSSON 2006 [146]) | IP pain |
| Electro | Modulated Galvanic Current (Diadynamic Current) vs placebo for CHRONIC NDR/NDH Dosage: 4 minutes each of 3 trigger points for 5 days | Philipson 1983 [106] (GROSS 2007 [16], KROELING 2009 [19] and 2013 [126]) | IP pain IP GPE |
| Electro | Iontophoresis vs a) placebo; b) Interferential Current c) multimodal for ACUTE WAD Dosage: not reported | Fialka 1989 [107] (KROELING 2009 [19] and 2013 [126], VERHAGEN 2007 [131]) | IP pain |
| Electro | TENS vs a, b) manual therapy, c) ultrasound for ACUTE NONSPECIFIC NECK PAIN or SUBACUTE/CHRONIC MND Dosage range: 14-30 minutes, 8 to 10 sessions over 2 to 4 weeks | a) Nordemar 1981 [109] b) Escottell-Mayor 2011 [110] c) Flynn 1987 [89] Farina 2004 [111] (KROELING 2009 [19] and 2013 [126], RICKARDS 2006 [17]) | a) ST pain b) IT pain c) IP pain |
| Electro | TENS vs another form of TENS-FREMS (frequency modulated neural stimulation) for MYOFASCIAL NECK PAIN Dosage: 20 minutes, 10 sessions, 5 days/week but over 7 weeks | | ST pain, disability (very low) |
### EVIDENCE of NO BENEFIT (vs control) or No DIFFERENCE (vs another treatment)

| Rx                | Treatment Details, Comparison & DISORDER TYPE                                                                 | Primary Authors (REVIEW Reference)                                                                 | Quality of Evidence (GRADE*) |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| **Electro**       | Magnetic Necklace (Static Magnet) vs placebo for chronic MND Dosage: 24 hours daily for 3 weeks                  | Hong 1982 [153] (GROSS 2007 [16], KROELING 2009 [19] and 2013 [126])                            | IP pain                      |
| **Electro**       | EMS vs EMS + other treatment (mobilization or manipulation, heat) for SUBACUTE/CHRONIC MND, NDR, NDH Dosage: unclear | Hurwitz 2002 [93] (EMS, manip vs manip) (EMS, mob vs mob) (EMS, heat, manip vs heat, manip) (EMS, heat, mob vs heat, mob) | IT pain, function ST patient satisfaction |
| **Electro**       | EMS for CHRONIC MYOFASCIAL PAIN vs TENS Dosage: 1 session for 20 minutes                                       | Hseuh 1997 [38] (GRAHAM 2008 [151], GROSS 2007 [16] and 2010 [150, 146], KROELING 2009 [19], 2013 [126], RICKARDS 2006 [17]) | IP pain                      |
| **Electro**       | Pulsed Electromagnetic Field vs placebo for CHRONIC NECK PAIN Dosage: 8 hours daily for 12 weeks                 | Foley-Nolan 1992 [130] (KROELING 2009 [19] and 2013 [126], VERHAGEN 2007 [13]) | IP pain                      |
| **Electro**       | TENS vs manipulation for CHRONIC CERVICOGENIC HEADACHE WITH DEGENERATIVE CHANGE Dosage: 20 minutes every other day for 10 sessions vs exercise, infrared for CHRONIC NON-SPECIFIC NECK PAIN Dosage: 30 minutes, 2 sessions over 6 weeks | Chen 2007 [154] (GROSS 2010 [150]) Chiu 2005 [108] (KROELING 2009 [19] and 2013 [126]) | ST pain (very low)            |
| **LASER**         | GaAs-830nm vs placebo for SUBACUTE/CHRONIC MND (MYOFASCIAL) Dosage: 180 seconds/point 3 sessions/week for 2 weeks for CHRONIC MND (myofascial) Dosage range: 30-60 seconds/point, 6 to 14 sessions over 2 to 7 weeks | Thorsen 1991 [112] Chow 2004 Thorsen 1992 [114] Seidel 2002 [105] (CHOW 2009 [134], GROSS 2007 [16] and 2012 [134], LEAVER 2010 [137]) | ST pain | IP pain, QoL, GPE |
| **LASER**         | HeNe-632.8nm vs placebo for CHRONIC MND (myalgia) Dosage: 15 seconds/point 2 sets of 5 daily consecutive sessions with 6 week break between for MYOFASCIAL PAIN Dosage: timing for each point not reported, 3 sessions over 4 weeks for ACUTE WAD Dosage: only reports treatment for 3 weeks | Waylonis 1988 [155] Ilbuldu 2004 [85] (CHOW 2009 [136], GROSS 2007 [16] and 2012 [134]) Aigner 2006 [156] (CHOW 2009 [136], VERHAGEN 2007 [13]) | IP pain | IT pain, physical function |
| **Traction**      | Continuous Traction vs placebo for ACUTE TO CHRONIC MND, NDR, DC Dosage range: 15-30 minutes, 12 sessions over 4 to 6 weeks | Brewerton 1966(63) Klaber Moffett 2006 [96] Zylbergold 1985 [71] (GRAHAM 2006 [21] and 2008 [138]) | ST pain | ST function |
Electrotherapy

TENS

TENS (3 RCTs, 88 participants) [38, 88, 89] was more beneficial for pain reduction when compared to placebo for myofascial pain or WAD of unspecified duration immediately following treatment. Ultra-Reiz, a form of TENS (1 RCT, 16 participants) [90] was more beneficial for reducing acute WAD pain when compared to standard physiotherapy including ice, home exercise and advice in the short term. TENS was beneficial for reducing chronic myofascial neck pain (1 RCT, 60 participants) [38] when compared to electric muscle stimulation immediately post treatment.

EVIDENCE OF NO BENEFIT (VS CONTROL) OR NO DIFFERENCE (VS ANOTHER TREATMENT)

Moderate Evidence

Ultrasound

Pulsed ultrasound was no better than placebo (2 RCT, 79 participants) [89, 91] at changing function or global perceived effect immediately post treatment in patients with either acute WAD or chronic myofascial neck pain. Also, ultrasound was inferior to mobilization (1 RCT, 20 participants) [92] for subacute/chronic neck pain immediately post treatment.

Thermal Agents

There was no difference between hot packs (1 RCT, 269 participants) [93] and an active control (mobilization, manipulation or EMS) at improving pain, function and patient satisfaction in the intermediate term for patients with chronic mechanical neck disorder. There was no difference when infrared light was compared to sham TENS (1 RCT, 26 participants) [94] for subacute/chronic neck pain in the short term.

Continuous Traction

There was no difference when continuous traction was compared to placebo (3 RCTs, 606 participants) [71, 95, 96] for improving pain or function in patients with acute to chronic neck pain in the short term.

Low or Very Low Evidence

Acupuncture

There was no difference found when electro (1 RCT, 62 participants) [97] or non-stimulated acupuncture (1 RCT, 132 participants) [98] for chronic mechanical neck disorder...
| GRADE Symbol | GRADE* and Recommendation | Clinical Importance | Reported Adverse Effect or Side Effects |
|--------------|---------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
|              |                           | Magnitude of Effect | Duration of Effect                     |                                  |
| ✓            | Evidence of Benefit:      | not applicable       | not applicable                         |                                  |
|              | (Strongly recommend use)  |                     |                                       |                                  |
|              | No recommendation.        |                     |                                       |                                  |
| ✓            | Evidence of NO Benefit:   | not applicable       | not applicable                         |                                  |
|              | (Strongly recommend not to use) |               |                                       |                                  |
|              | No recommendation         |                     |                                       |                                  |
| Moderate     | Evidence of Benefit:      | Best to Lowest Estimates depicted from 9 RCTs | minor, transient, reversible     |
|              | (Suggested use)           |                     |                                       | such as slight pain, nausea or   |
|              |                           | SMD: -2.52 (95% CI Random -3.49 to -1.54) vs | low blood pressure               |
|              |                           | SMD: -0.25 (95% CI Random -0.62 to 0.13) vs |                                       |                                  |
|              |                           | inactive treatment   |                                       |                                  |
|              |                           | NNT: 3 to 13         |                                       |                                  |
|              |                           | SMD: -0.78 (95% CI Random: -1.36 to -0.21) | not reported                        |
|              |                           | NNT: not reported    |                                       |                                  |
|              |                           | PAIN                 |                                       |                                  |
|              |                           | WMD: 95% CI 22.07 (17.42 to 26.72) MA | tiredness, nausea, headache,      |
|              |                           | DISABILITY           | and increased pain, but were        |
|              |                           | SMD: 95% CI 1.38 (0.39 to 2.37) MA | mild similar in both groups        |
|              |                           | NNT: 2 to 4          |                                       |                                  |
| Moderate     | Evidence of NO Benefit:   | not applicable       | not applicable                         |                                  |
|              | (Suggested not to use)    |                     |                                       |                                  |
| Moderate     | PULSED ULTRASOUND         | a) no better than placebo (2 RCT, 79 participants) for acute WAD immediate post treatment | minor discomfort in manipulation group |
|              |                           | b) or chronic myofascial neck pain/function and GPE immediate post treatment. |                                      |                                  |
| Moderate     |                           | c) is not better than mobilization (1 RCT, 20 participants) for subacute/chronic neck pain immediate post treatment. |                                      |                                  |
| Moderate     |                           |                      |                                       |                                  |
| Moderate     | CONTINUOUS TRACTION       | a) no difference when hot packs (1 RCT, 269 participants) were compared to an active control (mobilization, manipulation or EMS) for chronic neck pain, function and patient satisfaction in the intermediate term. | not reported                        |
|              |                           | b) no difference when infrared light was compared to sham TENS (1 RCT, 26 participants) for subacute/chronic neck pain in the short term. |                                      |                                  |
| Moderate     |                           |                      |                                       |                                  |
| Moderate     |                           |                      |                                       |                                  |

GRADE*: study design, within study risk of bias, consistency of results, directness (generalizability), precision (sufficient data), reporting bias (publication, language, funding, other); open symbol= no benefit; closed symbol = beneficial; duration of effect noted by number of symbols: one = IP, two = ST, three = IT, 4 = LT; diamond (●) = high GRADE; dot (●●) = moderate GRADE.

Clinically Important is determined by considering the following factors: minimal detectable change, minimal clinically important difference (≥ 15%), large magnitude of effect (weighted mean difference, number needed to treat, absolute benefit, treatment advantage), high dose response gradient, duration of the effect (IP – immediate post treatment, ST - short term for about 3 months, IT – intermediate term for about 6 months, LT – long term for about 1 year).

Key: WAD – whiplash associated disorder; MND – mechanical neck disorder; SMDp – Standard Mean Difference pooled; WMDp – weighted mean difference pooled; RR – relative risk; NNT – number needed to treat; 95% CI – 95% confidence interval, GPE – global perceived effect.
with degenerative changes was compared to manipulation or medication-tenoxicam (NSAID) with ranitidine or diazepam respectively for improving pain or function immediately following treatment. Additionally, no difference was found between acupuncture and manipulation for chronic neck pain (1 RCT, 69 participants) [99] at long term follow-up.

**Ultrasound**

Pulsed ultrasound was inferior to ultra-reiz (1 RCT, 21 participants) [89] for acute WAD immediately post treatment. Continuous ultrasound was not beneficial when compared to placebo and inferior to an active treatment (electrotherapy, type not specified) (1 RCT, 26 participants) [100] for reducing myofascial neck pain immediately post treatment.

**Thermal Agents**

No difference was found when spray/stretch was compared to an active control, placebo or active treatment (heat, education, exercise) (2 RCTs, 72 participants) [101, 102] for reducing chronic myofascial neck pain immediately post treatment.

**LASER**

For Helium Neon 632.8nm (1 RCT, 55 participants) [103] there was no benefit for pain relief when compared to placebo immediately following treatment for chronic...
myofascial pain syndrome. For pain reduction, GaAs 830nm was inferior to manipulation (1 RCT, 38 participants) [104] for cervicogenic headache or acupuncture (1 RCT, 12 participants) [105] for chronic tendomyositis both in the short term.

**Electrotherapy**

Modulated Galvanic Current

There was no benefit for improving chronic neck pain and global perceived effect (1 RCT, 40 participants) [106] compared to placebo immediately post treatment.

Iontophoresis

There was no benefit when iontophoresis was compared to no treatment, interferential current and was inferior to a multimodal approach of traction, exercise and massage (1 RCT-3 arms) [107] for improving pain in patients with acute WAD with cervicogenic headache immediate post treatment.

**TENS**

There was no benefit when TENS was compared to placebo (1 RCTs, 53 participants) [88] for reducing pain in patients with chronic mechanical neck disorder immediately post treatment.

There was no benefit adding TENS to other treatments (infrared, hotpack/exercise, collar/exercise/analgescic, and standard physiotherapy of ice/home exercise/advice) [90, 101, 108, 109] for various disorder types and various follow-up periods in very small trials. There was no difference when TENS was compared to manual therapy (2 RCTs, 107 participants) [109, 110] or ultrasound (1 RCT, 14 participants) [89] for reducing subacute/chronic neck pain immediately post treatment. Also, when different parameters of TENS were compared to each other the results were similar for pain at short term follow-up (1 RCT, 40 participants) [111].

**CONFLICTING EVIDENCE**

**Laser**

830nm or 904nm for myofascial pain had varied evidence (5 RCTs, Ceccherelli 1989, Gur 2004, Seidel 2002, Thorsen 1991, Thorsen 1992) [87, 105, 112-114] with meta-regression (2 RCTs, 81 participants, Ceccherelli 1989 and Gur 2004) [87, 113] suggesting drive technology (super-pulse) may be most successful in treating this subgroup albeit an independent clinical trial is needed to demonstrate this. We have also recorded trials with conflicting/unclear evidence in Table 3.

**ADVERSE EVENTS**

We found minor, transient, and reversible side effects consisting of increased pain, headache, tiredness or nausea to be occasionally present when reported for physical modalities. Most trials did not report adverse events at all or if so, collection of data was not described adequately.

**DISCUSSION**

Although the evidence continues to improve with respect to the use or not of physical modalities as a treatment choice for management of neck pain, there is still a lack of strong evidence to base recommendations that address meaningful outcomes in a standardized way. The core recommendations based on moderate evidence may be strengthened or refuted by results from larger trials with sound methodological quality. These recommendations supporting the use of acupuncture, laser and intermittent traction but not pulsed ultrasound, hot packs and continuous traction are summarized in Table 5.

Some modalities especially acupuncture and laser, utilize a broad spectrum of doses that may be beneficial while others appear to be of no benefit for pain management. Specific dosage trials are essential. Data on function/disability and quality of life is limited or completely absent. Many studies focus on pain as the primary outcome and to a lesser extent function typically using differing outcomes. Unless there is consistent use of the same pain and disability outcomes in these clinical trials it will be difficult to undertake meta-analyses and provide clinicians with a summary estimate of the expected benefit when considering these two outcomes. Further, since physical agents can be used for a variety of adjunctive benefits such as enhancing tissue extensibility to improve motion gains during mobilizations or exercise; or general healing effects then short term pain measures may not capture their benefit.

A number of reporting and design issues are consistent across neck clinical trials and have been detailed in Goldsmith et al. 2011 [115]. However, there are design options and clear criteria that can be used to improve the feasibility and quality of future clinical trials in this area of neck pain but also in rehabilitation generally. In particular, future research should ensure adherence to reporting standards of CONSORT [116, 117] and PRISMA guidelines, and should look beyond the basic two group design commonly used in clinical trials as well as consistent use of similar impairment and disability outcomes. Since rehabilitation often includes multiple interventions, it is recommended that researchers use factorial design methods to not only evaluate the effectiveness of independent treatments but also the impact on various combinations within the same trial. A core set of patient reported outcomes and key participation indicators (such as return to work) are needed and the community at large should consider setting initiatives, similar to the International Classification of Functioning (ICF) core measures [118]. Additionally, most studies in this overview assessed the outcome immediately following treatment up to six months. There is a need for more long-term follow-up.

There is general agreement between reviews. Some of the primary studies in one review may differ from another due to inclusion/exclusion criteria or search strategies.

Consistent reporting of side effects and how this information was collected is poor in the majority of trials. Accurate prospective collection of adverse event data is fundamental to these trials; there has been work done to define categories of severity and types of events considered adverse within the musculoskeletal area [119-121]. A move toward more active methods of capturing harms (rather than spontaneous reporting) would be necessary. Although our search did not retrieve any reviews of harms for physical modalities specific to neck pain, we can look to reviews pertaining to other musculoskeletal conditions or the general use of some physical modalities such as acupuncture.

A
review on the safety of acupuncture was reported by Wheway et al. [122] after analyzing the National Reporting and Learning Database of the National Patient Safety Agency in the United Kingdom. The authors reported the following adverse events related to 325 patient incidents: retained needles (31%), dizziness (30%), loss of consciousness/unresponsive (19%), falls (4%), bruising or soreness at needle site (2%), Pneumothorax (1%) and other adverse reactions (12%). More than 95% of the incidents were categorized as low or no harm. Other reviews have reported more serious adverse events related to acupuncture [123] however these findings should be questioned due to the use of unclear and unsystematic review methods that may have produced biased results. As it is well known that acupuncture treatment can be similar in technique regardless of the condition treated, it is conceivable that the aforementioned adverse events could manifest in patients with neck pain.

In a systematic review of conservative treatments for lumbar disc herniation, traction was related to 16 adverse events ranging from increased pain, anxiety, and fainting to lower limb weakness [124]. As there are many differences in the application of traction to the neck and low back, these specific results may not be directly relevant. While these adverse events appear to be minor and transient, they are perhaps an indication of the susceptibility of the spine when forces are applied in less specific and less controlled ways i.e. external machines, than with the sensitivity afforded by manual techniques. A physical modality such as hot packs for example, lacks strong evidence of benefit but harm is minimal and may still be considered since they are cost effective, easy to apply in a self-management program and may provide an element of comfort to the patient. Even though supportive evidence is lacking, it is only one component of evidence-based practice to be considered in the development of an individual treatment plan but decision making also requires the therapist’s clinical experience and the patient’s wishes [125].

We had several strengths regarding our approach to summarizing this literature. We used a comprehensive, librarian-assisted search and multiple databases. Two independent reviewers determined article relevance, assessed the AMSTAR methodological and verified data extraction. Consensus was used both by the internal data abstraction team and an interdisciplinary external panel consensus to validate the GRADE of evidence and recommendations.

CONCLUSION

Final Evidence-Based Recommendations (Table 4)

For chronic mechanical neck disorders, the recommendation from moderate evidence suggests using acupuncture or intermittent traction for short term pain reduction. In addition, this evidence suggests using LASER 830nm and 904nm for pain reduction, improving function/quality of life and to maximize global perceived effect up to the intermediate term (approximately six months). For both acute WAD and subacute/chronic neck disorders (including myofascial pain), the evidence suggests there is no benefit using pulsed ultrasound for reducing pain, improving function or global perceived effect immediately following treatment. Thermal agents (hot pack and infrared light) for chronic neck pain immediately following treatment or in the short term are also not suggested. Lastly, the evidence suggests there is no benefit in continuous traction for acute to chronic neck disorders for short term pain relief and improved function. Some electrotherapies (magnetic necklace, galvanic current) may not be beneficial for chronic neck pain. Dosage, design and long term follow-up continue to be the recommendations and essential elements when designing future trials.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors confirm that this article content has no conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX 1

Excluded Studies Categorized by Reason for Exclusion

| Excluded for Laser |

**Design**

Tsakitzidis G, Remmen R, Peremans L, Van Royen P, Duchesnes C, Paulus D, et al. Non-specific neck pain: diagnosis and treatment. Good Clinical Practice (GCP). Brussels: Belgian Health Care Knowledge Centre (KCE) 2009; Report No.: KCE Reports 119C.

**Low AMSTAR rating**

Brønfort G, Haas M, Evans R, Leininger B, Triano J. Effectiveness of manual therapies: The UK evidence report. Chiropractic and Osteopathy 2010; 18: 3.

Hurwitz EL, Carragee EJ, van der Velde G, Carroll LJ, Nordin M, Guzman J et al. Treatment of neck pain: noninvasive interventions: results of the Bone and Joint Decade 2000-2010 task force on neck pain and its associated disorders. Spine 2008; 33(4 Suppl): S123-S152.

Fernandez-de-Las PC, Alonso-Blanco C, Cuadrado ML, Pareja JA. Spinal Manipulative Therapy in the Management of Cervicogenic Headache. Headache 2005; 45: 1260-70.

Teasell RW, McClure JA, Walton D, Pretty J, Salter K, et al. A research synthesis of therapeutic interventions for whiplash-associated disorders (WAD): Part 2-Interventions for WAD. Pain Res Manage 2010; 15(5): 295-304.

Vernon H, Schneider M. Chiropractic management of myofascial trigger points and myofascial pain syndrome: A systematic review of the literature [review] J Manipulative Physiol Ther 2009; 32(1): 14-24.

**Excluded for Acupuncture**

**Intervention**

Conlin A, Bhogal S, Sequeira A, Teasell R. Treatment of whiplash-associated disorders-Part 1: Non-invasive interventions. Pain Res Manage 2005; 10(1): 21-32.
Wang YW, Fu WB, Ou, AH, Fan L, Huang YF. A systematic review of randomized controlled clinical trials of abdominal acupuncture treatment of cervical spondylosis [Chinese] 2011; 36: 137-44. [abstract only]

Exclude for Thermal

### Intervention (Multimodal, Thermal Agent Part of Cluster Treatment – Dosage and/or Contribution of Each Unclear)

Brønfort G, Nilsson N, Haas M, Evans RL, Goldsmith CH, Assendelft WJJ, Bouter LM. Non-invasive physical treatments for chronic/recurrent headache. Cochrane Database Syst Rev 2004; 3: CD001878.

Haraldsson BG, Gross AR, Myers CD, Ezzo JM, Morien A, Goldsmith C, et al. Massage for mechanical neck disorders. [Review] [114 refs]. Cochrane Database Syst Rev 2006; 3: CD004871.

Kay TM, Gross A, Goldsmith CH, Hoving JL, Bronfort G. Exercises for mechanical neck disorders. Cochrane Database Syst Rev 2009; (4).

Miller J, Gross A, D’Sylva J, Burnie SJ, et al. Manual therapy and exercise for neck pain: A systematic review Man Ther 2010; 15: 334-54.

Verhagen AP, Scholten-Peeters GGGM, van Wijngaarden S, de Bie R, Bierma-Zeinstra SMA. Conservative treatments for whiplash. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2007; 2: CD003338.

Vernon H, Humphreys K, Hagino C. Chronic mechanical neck pain in adults treated by manual therapy: a systematic review of change scores in randomized controlled trials. J Manipulative Physiol Ther 2007; 30: 215-27.

### Comparison (Thermal Agent was Active Control or Co-Intervention)

Conlin A, Bhogal S, Sequeira A, Teasell R. Treatment of whiplash-associated disorders-Part 1: Non-invasive interventions. Pain Res Manage 2005; 10(1): 21-32.

Haines T, Gross A, Burnie SJ, Goldsmith CH, Perry L. Patient education for neck pain with or without radiculopathy. [Review] [123 refs][Update of Cochrane Database Syst Rev 2008; (4): CD005106; PMID: 18843681]. Cochrane Database Syst Rev 2004; 3: CD001878.

Haines T, Gross A, Burnie SJ, Goldsmith CH, Assendelft WJJ, Bouter LM. Non-invasive physical treatments for chronic/recurrent headache. Cochrane Database Syst Rev 2004; 3: CD001878.

Vernon H, Humphreys K, Hagino C. Chronic mechanical neck pain in adults treated by manual therapy: a systematic review of change scores in randomized controlled trials. J Manipulative Physiol Ther 2007; 30: 215-27.

### Design

Ernst E, Lee MS, Choi TY. Acupuncture: does it alleviate pain and are there serious risks? A review of reviews. Pain 2011; 152(4): 755-64.

Itoh K, Kitakoji H. Acupuncture for chronic pain in Japan: A review. Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine 2007; 4(4): 431-8. [neck studies included were non-RCTs]

Tsakitzidis G, Remmen R, Peremans L, Van Royen P, Duchesnes C, Paulus D, et al. Non-specific neck pain: diagnosis and treatment. Good Clinical Practice (GCP). Brussels: Belgian Health Care Knowledge Centre (KCE) 2009; Report No.: KCE Reports 119C.
Intervention (Manual Traction)

Gross A, Miller J, D’Sylva J, Burnie SJ, et al. Intervention (Manual Traction) Physiol Ther 2009; 32(1): 14-24.

Teasell RW, McClure JA, Walton D, Pretty J, Salter K, et al, A research synthesis of therapeutic interventions for whiplash-associated disorders (WAD): Part 3-Interventions for WAD. Pain Res Manage 2010; 15(5): 305-12.

Vernon HT, Humphreys BK, Hagino CA. A systematic review of conservative treatments for acute neck pain not due to whiplash. J Manipulative Physiol Ther 2005; 28(6): 443-8.

Vernon H, Humphreys BK, Hagino C. The outcome of control groups in clinical trials of conservative treatments for chronic mechanical neck pain: A systematic review. BMC Musculoskeletal Disorders 2006; 7: 58.

Vernon H, Schneider M. Chiropractic management of myofascial trigger points and myofascial pain syndrome: A systematic review of the literature [review] J Manipulative Physiol Ther 2009; 32(1): 14-24.

Low AMSTAR Rating

Hurwitz EL, Carragee EJ, van der Velde G, et al. Treatment of neck pain; noninvasive interventions: results of the Bone and Joint Decade 2000-2010 Task Force on Neck Pain and Its Associated Disorders. Spine 2008; 33(4 Suppl); S123-S152.

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Exclude for Electrotherapy

Exclude for Traction

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