

Neck Pain

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What Pillow Should I Use?

My patient's with neck pain frequently ask what type of pillow they should use, and the answer is one I used to give hesitantly. Choice is an individual one, and for any of the numerous styles available, there will be someone who swears by each. I do say, however, that while contour pillows are widely prescribed by health professionals, I have never understood the reasoning behind their design. In my opinion, it is the head, not the neck that needs support, and a sensitive neck may object to having pressure applied to it all night. My personal preference has always been a standard, medium latex pillow. Since a recent study on pillow-type supported this opinion, I have been more inclined to offer advice.

A team of Adelaide physiotherapists studied 99 volunteers with chronic neck pain (worse on waking). They were all side sleepers. The study compared use of the subject's own pillow to: 1. polyester, 2. regular foam, 3. contour foam, 4. feather, and 5. latex. They looked at degree of night pain & waking pain, the quality of the sleep obtained, & how they rated the pillow for comfort. They found the following:

- The shape of the pillow made no difference to waking pain or abolition of night pain.
- The contour pillow was less comfortable & provided poorer quality sleep.
- The feather pillow was a consistent poor performer in all outcome measures
- The latex pillow performed consistently well & was a better performer than the subject's own pillow in all outcome measures.

The authors concluded that if the patient is after advice on an alternative to the pillow they currently use, the latex pillow is the most likely to provide the best performance.

When asked now, I tell my patient's that a medium density, medium thickness latex pillow is the best option for the majority of people. I also advise that if they are supine or prone sleepers, and have persistent neck pain that is worse on waking, that they should try to train themselves to become side sleepers.

Reference: Gordon, S et al (2009) Pillow use: the behaviour of cervical pain, sleep quality and pillow comfort in side sleepers. *Manual Therapy*, 14, 6, 671-678.

Information on physiotherapy management of injuries is available at:

<http://www.cssphysio.com.au/forpatients.html>



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