Whiplash
Are You at Risk for Ongoing Pain or Disability?

Have you recently sustained an injury and been diagnosed with whiplash or a whiplash-associated disorder (WAD)? If so, you may be wondering what your recovery will be like. The good news is that more than half of people with a whiplash injury recover well and are essentially free of pain or disability 6 months after injury. Unfortunately, this also means that many others have more trouble recovering from their injuries. If health care providers could identify, soon after the initial injury, which patients would probably improve naturally over time and which ones would not, they could better manage the patient’s treatment in the early stages of recovery. A study published in the April 2015 issue of JOSPT provides new insights into this challenge, which may help improve decision making for providers and outcomes for patients.

Researchers studied individuals between 18 and 65 years of age who were diagnosed with WAD after a motor vehicle accident. The researchers used 2 questionnaires to gather the information they needed to identify study participants at either low or high risk for ongoing pain and disability after whiplash. They found that patients who were younger than 35 years old, had a low level of disability soon after the injury, and had a low score on the questionnaires had a better chance of achieving a full recovery. Patients who were 35 years or older; had a higher level of disability; and whose questionnaires indicated they had trouble sleeping, were irritable, had difficulty concentrating, were overly alert, and were easily startled soon after the injury had a lesser chance of completely recovering.

PRACTICAL ADVICE
Recent research suggests that physical therapists or other health care providers who specialize in WAD may be able to use your age and the results of 2 simple questionnaires as part of a comprehensive examination to suggest the proper approach to treatment for your particular circumstances. You should clearly communicate your medical history to your physical therapist or other health care provider so that they can make the best decisions about your treatment. For example, a prior whiplash injury or previous neck pain may affect your outcomes. For more information on the treatment of neck pain and whiplash, contact your physical therapist specializing in musculoskeletal disorders.

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