Chapter 24: The Cervical Spine

Patient-Related Instruction 24-1

How to activate your cervical core muscles

What are the cervical core muscles?
The cervical core muscles work together to provide deep segmental stability of the cervical spine and maintain optimal posture of the head on the neck with dynamic extremity and trunk movements. They also enable specific, fine movements of the head on the neck. The cervical core consists of the deep cervical flexors and the deep cervical extensors.

How do you activate the cervical core muscles?
The cervical core muscles are the most common muscles to become weak for those who suffer from neck dysfunction; therefore, it becomes very important to teach. It is important for you to learn how to isolate the cervical core muscles without substituting larger, superficial muscle groups. Cervical core recruitment must be mastered before using them with more challenging exercises.

To contract the deep cervical flexors, gently nod the head so flexion occurs only at the junction between the head and the neck. Head motion should occur about an imaginary axis that runs through your ears. You can progress the movement down toward the middle of your neck. Do not allow superficial muscles such as the sternocleidomastoid and scalene muscles to activate. Your therapist will instruct you in palpating for the superficial muscles.

Slowly return to the neutral position. Think about moving one vertebrae at a time. Do not allow superficial neck extensor muscles such as the erector spinae to activate. Your therapist can teach you how to palpate for activity in these muscles as well if it is a problem for you.

Practicing to activate the deep cervical core muscles in many different positions is important before learning to use them with dynamic activities. You can practice cervical core activation in the following positions.

- Standing
- Backlying
- Sitting
- Stomach lying
- Sidelying
- Quadruped
- Squatting
- Walking