

What Happens When You Get Whiplash in a Car Accident?

Protect your health – and your legal rights

A car accident may happen in a single moment of time, but it can cause injuries that linger for quite some time after the fact. One injury that's notorious for causing lingering pain and frustration is whiplash.

The negligence of another driver can have lasting consequences for your health and quality of life. If you have symptoms of whiplash, it's important to know what happened to your body in the accident – and the legal recourse you have under Oklahoma law.

How whiplash happens

Whiplash is a neck injury caused by sudden forward and backward motion of the head. The rapid bending of the neck can strain the muscles, discs, nerves, and tendons that make up the neck. Whiplash can occur in several situations, such as falls and contact sports, but it is most common in rear-end car accidents.

When a car is hit from behind, the back of the seat is pushed against the seated person's torso, and that force is transferred up the cervical spine, causing it to become compressed against the head. The torso moves forward while the head does not, so the top of the spine loses its shape and bends backward, putting stress on the joints and discs. Then the head moves backward (extension), hits the headrest, and bounces forward (flexion). Ligaments, muscles, and discs can all be torn by this violent movement, and the protective cartilage at the tips of the joints can be damaged.

Symptoms of whiplash

The neck is a complex joint and whiplash can damage it in a variety of ways. Some of the most common symptoms of whiplash include:

- Neck pain, ranging from mild to severe, sometimes radiating down the shoulder into the arm or hand.
- Neck stiffness or reduced range of motion, often due to pain or mechanical problems.
- Headache, usually caused by muscle tightening or irritated nerves.

- Neck instability due to torn or stretched ligaments.
- Shoulder or upper back pain, if soft tissue damage in the neck affects other soft tissues in nearby parts of the body.
- Tingling, weakness, or numbness radiating down the shoulder, arm, hand, and fingers.

Notably, some of the symptoms of whiplash may take hours or even days after the accident to become obvious. Inflammation and stiffness take time to set in. Moreover, in the immediate aftermath of a car accident, your “fight or flight” response is still engaged, which can reduce your ability to perceive pain.

That’s why it’s important to see a doctor as soon as possible after a car accident, even if you feel okay. Tell the provider who sees you exactly what happened and describe all your symptoms – don’t exaggerate, but don’t leave anything out either. Tests such as an X-ray or MRI may be needed to confirm the diagnosis. Follow your doctor’s instructions and go to your follow-up appointments as needed.

Know your legal rights if you have whiplash

While many people think of whiplash as a minor injury, it can lead to significant complications in some cases. Moreover, the violent head movement that causes whiplash can also cause more serious injuries such as damage to the spinal cord or traumatic brain injury. Even if you didn’t hit your head on anything, your brain may have hit the inside of your skull, and that’s enough to cause a concussion.

If you were rear-ended, fault for the accident probably won’t be disputed, but that doesn’t mean getting compensation for your injuries will be easy. The insurance company will likely downplay the extent of your injuries, especially if the crash happened at a low speed. That’s one reason it’s so important to see a doctor: it not only protects your health, but also creates a record of your injuries that the insurance company can’t dispute later. The longer you wait, the easier it is for the insurance company to argue that you’re faking or exaggerating, or that something happened after the accident to cause your injury.

It’s also why you need an experienced attorney on your side as soon as possible after a car accident. We can investigate and get to the bottom of what happened to you to hold the at-

fault driver accountable. Just as importantly, we know how to make the case for the full amount of damages (financial compensation) you deserve for your whiplash injury and any other injuries you may have sustained in the same crash. You only get one chance to get compensation for the full, long-term cost of your injury, so it's important to take your case seriously right from the start.

If you've been injured in a car accident in Oklahoma and have whiplash symptoms, talk to an attorney right away about your legal options. Contact us today to schedule your free consultation at our Oklahoma City or Tulsa office.