

Arm pain (brachialgia)

There are of course many causes of arm pain relating to local problems in the limb e.g. osteoarthritis, fractures, but when considering neck problems one has to ask about any symptoms that may be present in the upper limbs. Indeed, it may be that a patient has absolutely no symptoms in the neck and only has arm pain.

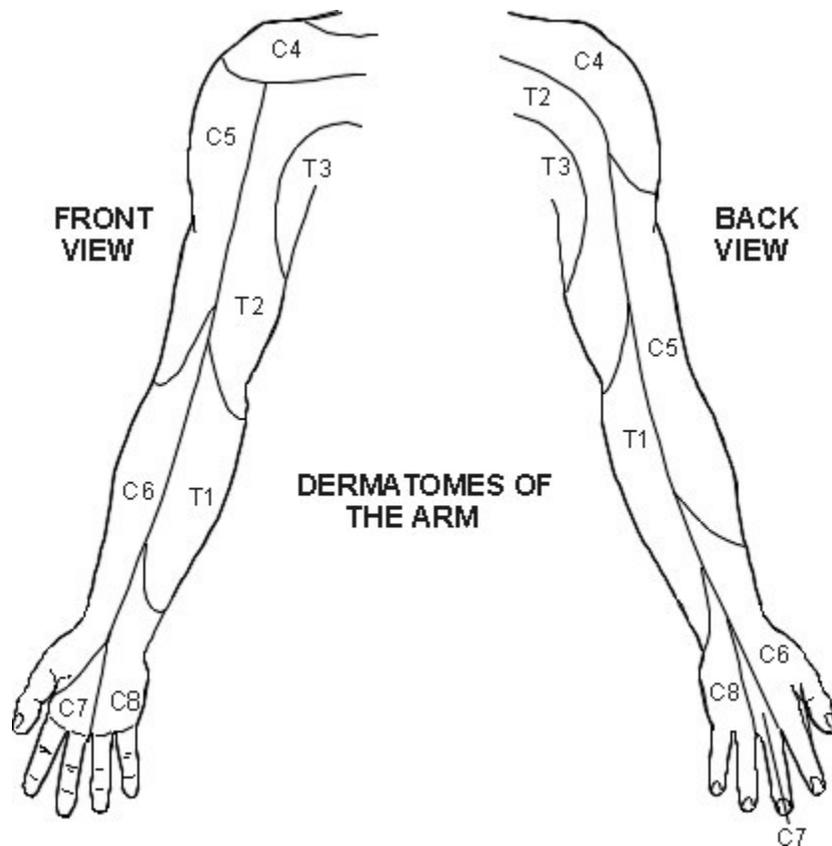
The reasons upper limb pain can come from the neck are twofold. Firstly, the nerve roots that go to the arms from the spine can be compressed causing pain in a particular distribution – known as a dermatome. In some patients this is in a ‘classic pattern’ but sometimes there is cross wiring and the presentation can be atypical. The second cause of upper limb pain due to a spine problem is referred pain. This is much less specific and often does not have a consistent pattern, although some patients (especially with pain around the shoulders) describe a pain that is referred from the spine where there may be marked degenerative changes.

Assessment

Following a full history and examination investigation may be indicated. MRI scanning is useful in ruling out serious pathology and also shows the state of the discs and facet joints in detail together with any evidence of neurological compression. Xray is often needed, and sometimes special views are needed to assess the mobility of the spine. Sometimes, if further invasive treatment is to be considered then diagnostic injections may be used. These either numb an area or provoke pain in an area to pin down the exact site of pain and to correlate the abnormality on an MRI scan with the pain. To numb the nerve leaving the spine is called a nerve root block and is particularly useful in patients where more than one nerve is compressed on the scan but we want to find out which one (or both!) are causing the symptoms.

Because compression of nerves in the arms themselves is relatively common it is important to rule this in or out and so nerve conduction tests may be requested if there is clinical suspicion

The nerves leaving the spine are named after the vertebra that they are next to and the images below show the typical distribution of pain in the arms.



Common causes of nerve compression include a prolapsed disc, osteophyte and spinal stenosis,. Rarer causes include tumours, fractures and infections. More information can be found on these by clicking the links on the conditions page.

Treatment

This of course depends on the diagnosis, any association with leg pain, the impact it has on the patient's life and what has been tried already. More information can be obtained on the treatment page help sheets.