

Aching neck and shoulders



Almost every person with a desk-bound job experiences neck pain and headache periodically, especially when work gets stressful and there is not enough sleep. Neck pain can also result from an injury such

as whiplash from a traffic accident, or simply falling asleep in an awkward position results in a stiff neck upon waking up.

Apart from pain in the neck, some individuals may also experience pain around or between the shoulder blades, or in the arms. In addition, some numbness and tingling sensations may also be felt in the hands and fingers. There is usually some concern over whether this is due to a 'pinched nerve'.

As an osteopath working in the CBD, I tend to see many patients with posture-related neck and shoulders pain. Most of these patients have tried to cope with stop-gap measures ranging from sticking menthol plasters all over their backs, rubbing ointments and balms 24-7, buying expensive buckwheat pillows, to even getting their children to step over them! Their bodies are clearly calling out for some relief!

It is essential that a proper assessment be carried out to rule out any significant structural damage/ degeneration or nerve compression. In the majority of cases, the source of persistent neck and shoulder aches is not serious, and involves stiff joints and tight muscles amenable to manual treatment. One relatively under-diagnosed source

of pain comes from myofascial trigger points, or 'muscle knots'. These are over-contracted muscle fibres and they feel nodular within the muscle tissue. When pressure is applied, these points can produce localised pain or refer to surrounding areas. The diagram below shows the upper trapezius muscle with the common pain patterns from these muscle knots.

The problem with these trigger points is that they can linger on as dormant knots even when pain has subsided, only to recur when they are 'activated' by movement or postural strains subsequently. They also do not disappear with pain medication or muscle relaxants. By far the most effective way to treat trigger points is to manually loosen these knots or stimulate their release with dry needling. These methods are time and cost-effective, and only cause mild to moderate discomfort, when administered by a trained professional.

When these muscle knots are released, patients will be taught stretches and strengthening exercises that specifically target involved muscle tissues to minimise the problem from recurring. Osteopathy is also about preventative long-term care, apart from short-term pain relief.

