

THE CENTER for CLINICAL MASSAGE

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Myofascial trigger points

Massage relieves radiating pain

Imagine this: you feel a deep, spreading pain at your right shoulder. It feels better after a good night's rest, but as your day progresses, the knot-like feeling creeps up on you without invitation. The pain is sometimes very intense and sometimes moderate. And you note that sometimes it travels to different areas of your body.

What are trigger points?

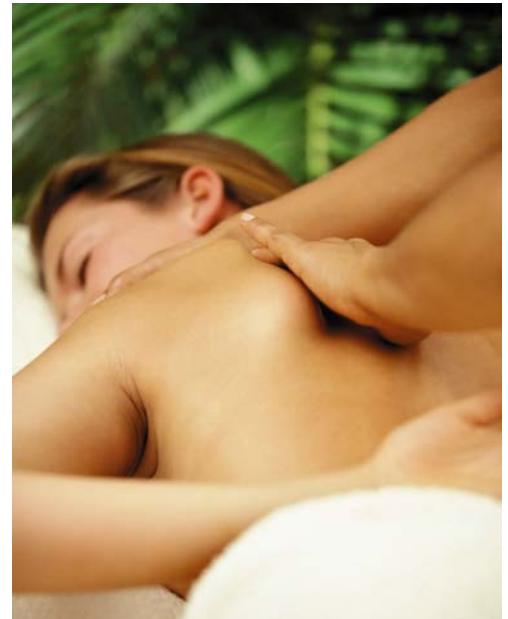
These annoying little knots in our muscles and connective tissues are called myofascial trigger points. The “myo” part of the word means muscle and “fascial” refers to the elastic, connective tissue that runs throughout the body.

There are two basic types of trigger points: active and latent. Latent trigger points don't cause pain except when pressed. When latent trigger points become triggered and awakened by stress or injury, they become active. Active trigger points radiate (or refer) pain from muscle or fascia in a characteristic pattern. For example, trigger points in the shoulders often send pain and tension throughout the shoulders and up into the

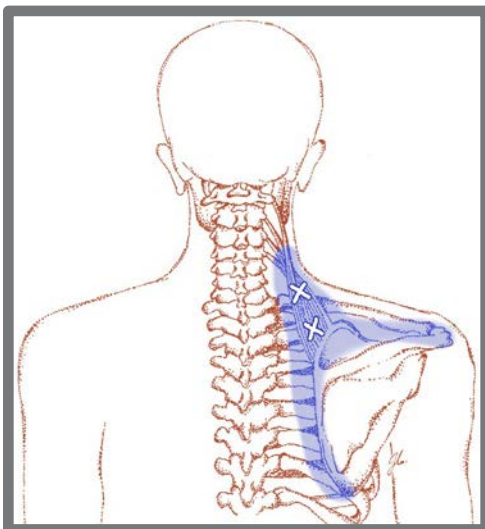
lower neck. Likewise, trigger points in your buttocks can refer pain down the leg just as in sciatica.

Massage can help

Two doctors, Dr. Janet Travell and Dr. David Simons, revolutionized our understanding of trigger points. They mapped out the entire body and standardized a pain referral pattern for each muscle. Trigger points usually follow these maps, though some people have unusual pain patterns. In either case, deep breathing, stretching, applications of heat or cold, and massage can help.



Trigger point therapy is a special kind of bodywork that often relieves pain, even in areas distant from the trigger point.



Releasing trigger points in the levator scapula muscle can relieve pain elsewhere in the shoulders and neck.

A case in point

The levator scapula, a problematic muscle

Levator scapula trigger points

Travell and Simons say that the shoulders are the area most affected by trigger points. The levator scapula muscle connects your shoulder blade to your neck and is responsible for elevating your shoulder blade. It is especially prone to trigger points, and can refer pain to the neck, around the shoulders and down into the mid-back. Note the picture of the shoulders to the left. If you have pain in the shaded area, you may have trigger points (indicated by the X's) in the levator scapula.

Releasing the levator scapula

To help relax this muscle, focus on the shoulder area. Breathe deeply and begin to let go of the tension with each exhale. Then inhale, shrug your shoulders up toward your ears, squeeze, and hold them to the count of three. Release them completely on the exhale. Repeat three to five times, then relax and breathe slowly and deeply.

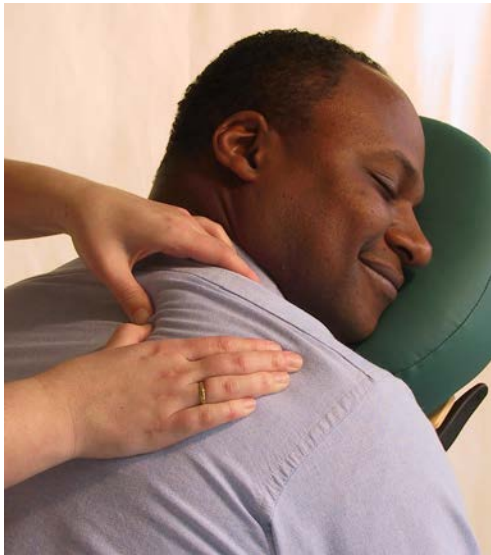
All the right points

Specific techniques to relieve pain

Myofascial trigger points can keep people from going about the daily activities of life. The good news is massage therapists are trained to prevent and reduce these knots and the pain that accompanies them.

One of the most effective treatments that therapeutic massage utilizes with trigger points is called “ischemic compression.” After locating the trigger point, the therapist applies direct pressure, producing pain within your comfort level. You may feel the pain locally or you may feel it radiate and travel away from the area being pressed.

Your therapist may instruct you to breathe deeply, consciously relaxing the area being pressed until the pain subsides. Next, the pressure may be slowly increased until the pain returns. This process may be repeated, followed by other massage techniques and hydrotherapy such as moist heat or ice massage.



Many people needlessly suffer pain for years without the knowledge that a few focused sessions in trigger point therapy can resolve their problem. That said, there is an old saying, “If you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always had.” Therefore, to ensure that your trigger points stay away, consider adding stretches, moderate exercise and relaxation to your daily habits.

Massage therapists apply pressure to trigger points to relieve new or long-standing pain.



Research by the acknowledged world experts on pain, Professors P. Wall and R. Melzack, has confirmed that while certainly not the cause of all pain, trigger-point activity is at least a part (often the major part) of almost all chronic pain situations and conditions.^{#12}
—Leon Chaitow, ND, DO, author of Fibromyalgia and Muscle Pain: Your Self-Treatment