Stress is a pain in the neck ? literally! [1]

Alice,

When I worry/stress out, I find the muscles on one side of my neck (usually the right side) begin to tighten up to the point of acute pain. On occasion, the pain reaches from the back of my ear, down my neck (the most painful point), through my shoulder, down the arm, and in extreme cases to the tips of my fingers. Two questions:

1. How do I stop this?
2. How do I relieve the pain when it occurs?

I'm currently suffering from one of these neck aches, and can't turn my head, so I'd really appreciate your response.

Thanks from,
A Pain in the Neck

Answer

Dear A Pain in the Neck,

Stressors, worry, and anxiety all produce muscle tension. It's part of the natural fight-or-flight response, and is one of the ways that your body respond to threats and demands ? whether those challenges are actually happening, or if they're just in your head. Some people are more prone to feel this stress response in their muscles, while others may be dogged by fatigue, indigestion, or moodiness. Stress can also trigger and exacerbate existing conditions, like asthma, arthritis, sciatica, and prior muscle injuries. Any pain as severe and often as you describe warrants a visit to your health care provider, who will examine you for such ailments.

In the meantime, here are a few stress- and muscle tension-reduction suggestions:

- **Sharpen your awareness of your stress level.** Muscle pain is often the end result of a stress response, so if you notice the beginning of a tension-producer, you can break from it, preventing strain from turning into aches and paralysis. For example, lots of people develop headaches and tired, teary eyes after long days and nights in front of the computer screen. If they took a couple of minutes every half-hour to stop and rest their eyes, they'd likely ward off greater discomfort later on.
- **Massage yourself.** No, you don't need to strip in the middle of the street; but, when you start to feel tightness or pain in your neck, use your hands to gently stretch and
massage that area. Muscle tension builds when there is poor blood and energy flow. Self-massage helps to loosen pain-producing log-jams.

- **Visit a licensed massage therapist.** Massage can be a powerful tool and has been shown to have numerous benefits including relief of stress, pain, and stiffness. Ask your health care provider for a recommendation. Check out Seeking massage therapist [2] from the Go Ask Alice! archives for more information.

- **Exercise.** You've heard it before, but here it is again: aerobic activity is probably the best overall stress-reducer. Whether your stressors come from work, school, family, or friends, exercise helps relieve constant stress. Aerobic activities (i.e., jogging, cycling, swimming, etc.) also produce pain-killing hormones that may make your pain-in-the-neck a little less troublesome.

While these tips may help relieve stress, an appointment with your health care provider could rule out a medical condition that may be causing your frequent pain.

Feel better,

Alice!

Category:

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Medical Services (Morningside) [11]

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