

## Stress is a pain in the neck — literally! <sup>[1]</sup>

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 can all produce muscle tension. It's part of the natural fight or flight response <sup>[2]</sup>, and is one of the ways that your body responds to threats and demands. 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, such as arthritis, sciatica, and prior muscle injuries. That being said, any continuously occurring pain may be best evaluated by a health care provider who could assess your experience and rule out any other conditions associated with muscle tension.

In order to reduce the pain that you feel in your neck as a response to stress, it could be helpful to incorporate some stress management techniques into your day. Some of these strategies include:

- **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 may be able to

prevent the feelings of tension from developing. It may be helpful to ask yourself: Are there certain stressors that cause this response? How long does this tension typically last? Knowing this information may help you identify when you're most likely to experience this response.

- **Rub the stress away.** Massage, be it a self-massage or from a licensed massage therapist, can help relieve the stress and pain being held in your neck. If you're doing a self-massage, you can use your hands to gently massage and stretch that area.
- **Get moving.** Physical activity releases endorphins, which are the neurotransmitters that help people feel good. Additionally, repetitive motion forms of physical activity (such as running or cycling) can have a meditative component, while any physical activity can improve mood. All of these components could help to reduce stress that causes tension in the body.
- **Try different relaxation exercises.** Techniques such as [body scans](#) [3] or [progressive muscle relaxation](#) [4] can help to make you aware of when and where tension is being held in your body and help you to release it. Additionally, activities such as [mindfulness meditation](#) [5] can help you to focus on the present and a specific meditation that you find to be helpful.

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. Additionally, if these strategies don't help you relieve your stress, you may find meeting with a mental health professional to be helpful as they may be able to provide additional strategies and coping mechanisms.

Feel better,

Alice!

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