

Getting To Know You're Aching Neck & Shoulders

Perhaps the No. 1 reason people seek massage therapy is to help relieve pain in the neck and shoulders. There are several muscles that comprise this region: scalenes, splenii, trapezius and many more. Today we are going to look at the mighty levator scapula so called because it elevates our scapulae, or shoulder blades. It also is responsible for neck rotation to the left and right (checking traffic during a lane change), as well as craning our ear to our shoulder (aka, lateral flexion, as in holding the telephone while still typing on the keyboard you've never done that, right?).

The levator scapula is a mighty beast, and literally, a pain in the neck. It's because we're upright and forward-facing individuals — this causes chronic tightness in the neck and shoulder area, particularly when we are sitting still for most of the day. So, its safe to say that this muscle is supposed to be tight. In fact, the only time I've felt one completely lax is on an individual who was in a really bad car accident.

That said, the muscles surrounding the levator scapula should not be chronically tight, and since the upper back/ shoulder area is poorly vascularized (has a proportionately low blood supply in relation to other body parts), when something does tighten up. we notice it rather quickly. Since we use our neck quite a bit to turn our heads, or talk on the phone, check the blind spot in traffic, look down and see if we can find our toes, etc., these muscles get used a lot, and occasionally, some will "stick" or adhere together in small parts. Think of these adhesions as traffic jams blood supply slows down, oxygen can't get in, and CO2 can't get out, among other things. Massage therapy helps loosen up adhesions and helps muscle fibers align properly, and more importantly, it helps you feel your best!

If you've got a hectic schedule and can't quite get in for a massage, here's an easy tip to help loosen up your neck and shoulders: Next time you're in the shower, wrap a hand towel behind your neck, letting it drape over your shoulders. The towel will trap the hot water and help release restrictions a bit more deeply than if you just stood in the shower. Want extra credit? Grab a handful or two of Epsom salt and apply it directly to your skin, then secure the salt in place with your hand towel and let the hot water dissolve. You'll notice you have a bit more range of motion than before you started the shower and feel free to repeat as needed. Then give your friendly neighborhood massage therapist a call to really get those muscles worked out.

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