Taming a tense back [1]

Dear Alice,

The muscles in my back become extremely tense/tight throughout the term as I am cramped down studying all the time. What should I do?

? Posturing?

Answer

Dear Posturing,

Cracking the books can be a real pain in the neck ? or, in your case, back! You?re right that being hunched over and studying for extended periods of time ? often with bad posture ? can lead to muscle tension and tightness. Muscle tension in the back can be attributed to a number of causes including chronic stress (causing your back muscles to tighten up), tight hamstring muscles (shifting weight from the pelvis to your lower back), and back injuries among others. Also, a lack of physical activity, improper sleeping positions, incorrect lifting, poor posture, smoking, and being overweight can all put you at risk for back pain or injury as well. Back to your question though, there are a number of strategies that can help address prevent and relieve this pesky muscle tightness including proper work posture and getting a massage.

Here are some simple actions you can take in order to relieve and prevent back tension and tightness:

- **Get your workstation in tip-top shape.** Are you hunched over while reading or cranking out that paper? If you're working on a computer, it?s best to have the monitor at eye level and about 18 to 28 inches (or arm's length) away. Keep your elbows bent at an approximately 90 degree angle. Keeping your mouse close to your keyboard and avoiding slouching are also key to maintaining good posture. When you're sitting in your chair, make sure you have lower back support. You might keep a small pillow behind your back as a quick fix. The last joints to consider are your hips and knees. Are your knees parallel with your hips and are your feet flat on the ground? If not, you may try using a footrest to help keep your knees and feet at a comfortable position.
- **Take regular breaks.** When you're studying, take breaks every 15 to 20 minutes and stretch your muscles. Also, rest your eyes and change your position at similar intervals.
- **Keep stress in check.** Stressors, worry, and anxiety all contribute to muscle tension. It's part of the natural fight-or-flight response, and is one of the ways that your body
responds to threats and demands—whether they’re real or perceived. Each person responds to stress differently; some feel muscle tension, while others may experience fatigue, indigestion, or moodiness. Check out Stress is a pain in the neck—literally! [2] in the Go Ask Alice! archives for a few stress and muscle tension reduction strategies.

- **Get plenty of physical activity (and don’t forget about your core muscles).** Incorporating core-strengthening activities into your weekly routine can help prevent back pain or keep it from becoming a chronic issue. Additionally, regular exercise can help maintain a healthy weight, which can also help prevent back pain that may be a result of being overweight or obese.

- **Get a massage or back rub.** Not only do massages help knead out some of the tension that results from stress, but experiencing the human touch that comes with massages can produce feelings of caring and connection, which can also provide some stress relief. If you choose to get a massage, look for a Licensed Massage Therapist [3] who is specially trained to provide this service.

- **Use heating pads, warm moist towels, heat creams, or take a warm bath.** Different forms of heat can be used to help relax stiff joints and muscles. If that doesn’t help, over-the-counter pain relievers such as acetaminophen or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) can help relieve symptoms of a tense and tight back.

Tense muscles that result from stress or too much studying is nothing new. If, however, your back tension and tightness doesn’t subside after a week or two, you may want to speak with your health care provider to further investigate the cause behind the discomfort.

Best of luck relieving the tension!

Alice!

Category: General Health [4]
Aches, Pains & Other Ailments [5]

Related questions

- Stooped posture? [6]
- Can chronic eyestrain cause blindness? [7]
- Snap, crackle, pop? Scoliosis and back cracking [8]
- Back strain [9]
- Can’t study during the day…. [10]

Resources

- Medical Services (Morningside) [11]
- Dodge Fitness Center (Morningside) [12]
- Stressbusters (Morningside) [13]
- Medical Services (CUMC) [14]
- Bard Athletic Center (CUMC) [15]
- Stressbust Yourself Toolkit [16]

Published date:
May 01, 1994
Last reviewed on:
Jan 08, 2016