

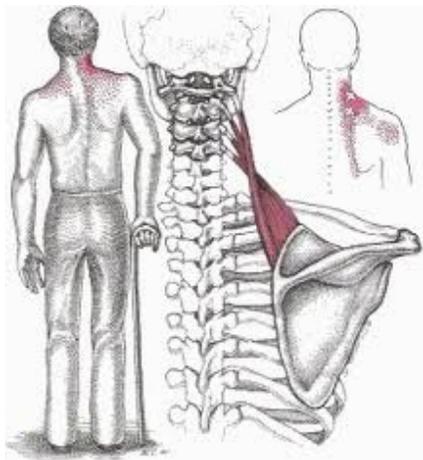
The Classic "Stiff Neck"

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There are many causes of neck pain, from acute trauma such as car accidents or falls, to the less obvious cumulative strain from everyday repetitive activities. There can also be conditions such as herniation or bulging discs, a stenosis (narrowing of spinal or nerve canals), or arthritic changes.

Neck pain can radiate into your upper limbs down to the hand and fingers, it can feel sharp or dull, it can feel like a burning sensation into the upper back or shoulders, it can even feel like a creeping sensation as if a spider is crawling on your skin. It can also cause headaches, known as cervicogenic headaches

Neck problems can also result in spasming of the muscles around the neck and shoulders, causing what many people may call a **"stiff neck"** or a **"crick in the neck"** medically known as **"adult torticollis"**. This can be debilitating and last anywhere from 3 days to months.



People tend to blame the air-conditioning or a fan blowing on their neck, poor sleep positions, even stress. However, these things merely trigger the problem which already lies within the body, whether it be an old injury causing scar tissue and misalignment or repetitive habits which accelerate the wear and tear of the spinal structures. Cold air nor stress can cause a stiff neck. The body merely responds to the irritation of an already weakened or unstable area of the spine by trying to protect it with spasm. The brain goes into a self-defense type mode, trying to prevent the area from moving too much. This is your typical stiff neck.

Neck spasm usually involves a tightening of the Levator Scapula muscle (see picture above left) which travels from the upper neck area to the shoulder blade, and controls the turning and tilting of the head. This is why it hurts and is difficult to perform these movements while you have a stiff neck. Many times it is the contracture and spasm of this muscle in particular which results in the feeling of pain and an inability to move your head and neck in certain directions. The Levator Scapula muscle originates in the upper cervical region, and inserts on the upper angle of the scapula (shoulder blade). B3/8:3/ moving the neck with rotation and tilting to the same side, this muscle is also responsible for raising the shoulder. The pain can range from the upper neck down to

the corner of the shoulder blade, as well as radiating down the border of the shoulder blade and along the upper thoracic spine. This is one of the more common complaints that brings patients to our office, especially when I was practicing in Manhattan, where a majority of my patients working in an office setting at sedentary jobs that are very stressful.

As an interesting side note, the act of subconsciously and repetitively elevating your shoulders has some primitive origins in the "fight or flight" mechanism of our body's physiology. Stressful situations in the past were usually dangerous and life threatening, if you could imagine a primitive human's stress being a tiger attack, or some other physical harm. Humans usually protect themselves from physical harm by tucking their head against their chest and raising their shoulders (probably to minimize head injury). Our brains respond similarly to physical and mental stress, so today's society's mental stress can be activating this physical reaction (turtle head tucking, shoulder raising) on a daily, hourly or even constant basis. This can cause a tremendous amount of repetitive strain in the muscles of the neck and shoulder, especially the famous Levator Scapula muscle we mentioned above. This results in increased tension in these muscles, which bring you closer to triggering the all out spasm episode we refer to as a "stiff neck".

In addition to stress, poor posture can also cause this tensioning of the shoulder and neck muscles. Forward positioning of the head as in the illustration to the right, creates abnormal stresses on the muscles connecting your head to the rest of your body, such as again, the Levator Scapula and the larger Trapezius Muscle. Physics tells us that further a weight (the head) is from its anchor point (the torso) the greater the force of that weight downwards with gravity. This heavier force equals more strain on the neck and back muscles.



There are many other biomechanical problems which can result in the classic "stiff neck". Those stated above are the most common. As a chiropractor I want the complaint to be addressed and the pain reduced with treatment. But I would also like the source of the problem corrected for future benefit as well. A combination of traditional chiropractic manipulation to correct misalignments and fixated or restricted segments in the spine, deep muscle work with soft tissue treatments such as Myofascial and Active Release, Tool Assisted Graston Technique, posture analysis and correction with muscle endurance strengthening, stretching and body awareness, along with ergonomic review of the patients work environment are used to help ease the pain of an acute episode of neck pain/stiffness, as well as prevent future reoccurrences.

Let a chiropractor be the detective to help interpret the signals your body is giving you.

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