

Chapter 1 – Neck (Levator Scapulae)

Symptoms of tightness

- ✓ Kink in the neck
- ✓ Difficulty rotating the head
- ✓ Difficulty placing the chin on the chest
- ✓ Headache at the back of the head

Anatomy of a muscle

The levator scapulae muscle originates on the top four cervical vertebrae and inserts into the upper part of the shoulder blade. It is a thick, flat muscle located just below the upper part of the trapezius. It rotates and tilts the head and rotates the shoulder girdle downward. When both sides of the muscle work together, they raise the shoulder girdle and bend the head backward.



Causes of tightness

1. Bad posture (forward shoulder)
2. Permanently raising the shoulder girdle
3. Holding a phone between the ear and the shoulder
4. Since the levator scapulae raises the shoulder girdle, it also works statically in times of stress as the shoulders are often raised in response to tension

Flexibility test

- ✓ You should be able to rotate the head approximately 90 degrees to each side
- ✓ You should be able to tilt the neck between 35 to 45 degrees to the side

The fix

A four-step process will release, strengthen, and add flexibility to this muscle.

The steps include:

1. Static release – minimizes trigger points and adhesions
2. Dynamic release – breaks up the stickiness of the muscle through a range of motion
3. Strengthen – allows the muscle to better handle the stresses placed upon it
4. Stretch – lets the muscle track through a larger range of motion without injury

Testing the pain-free range of motion is a good way to tell if a muscle is responding to a program. To test the levator scapulae do this:

1. Stand with your shoulders against a wall as an anchor point
2. Slowly rotate your head to each side stopping once the pain starts or you cannot go further
3. Note how far you have turned your head by looking down your nose at a spot on either the floor or the wall. You will be retesting after each section

Static Release

1. Stand with your back against a wall
2. Take a tennis ball, lacrosse ball or softball and place it just above your scapulae on one side of your spine
3. Keeping the ball against the wall, step forward approximately 6 to 10 inches or until you feel a pain threshold of between 5 to 8 on a scale of 1 to 10, ten being excruciating. The point here is to cause enough tension on the muscle to release trigger points
4. Stay on this spot between 30 seconds to 2 minutes or until you feel the muscle release
5. Repeat other side



Retest the pain-free range of motion to see if improvement has been made.

Dynamic Release

1. Stand with your back against a wall
2. Take a tennis ball, lacrosse ball or softball and place it just above your scapulae on the right side of your spine
3. Keeping the ball against the wall, step forward approximately 6 to 10 inches or until you feel a pain threshold of between 5 to 8 on a scale of 1 to 10, ten being excruciating
4. Bend your knees so the ball is slightly above the trigger point and there is slightly less discomfort
5. Turn your head to the left and drop your chin toward the left hip pulling the trigger point through the pinned area to release it
6. Hold for a count of 2
7. Return to the starting position and repeat for a total of 8 to 15 repetitions
8. Repeat other side



Retest the pain-free range of motion to see if improvement has been made.

Strengthening Exercise

1. Stand with your back against a wall
2. Turn your head to the right until you reach a pain point then back off a little
3. Take your right hand and place it on the right side of your chin (bite down slightly to set your jaw)
4. Without moving your head, contract your neck muscles by trying to rotate your head to the right while pushing your hand into your chin and hold 5 seconds. The exertion level should be 3-5 with a 10 being all-out
5. Without moving your head, relax the contraction for 2 seconds
6. You should be able to rotate your head a little more to the right
7. Repeat steps 4 thru 6 for a total of 10 repetitions
8. Slowly rotate your chin to the left until looking forward
9. Repeat on the left side

This exercise should be done 5 to 10 times a day to ease pain and increase range of motion.



Retest the pain-free range of motion to see if improvement has been made.

Stretch

1. Sit on a chair with your back and abs slightly tightened. Reach behind you with your right hand and grab the edge of the chair. Lean your upper body to the left while keeping your head upright until you feel a light pull in your right shoulder or upper arm
2. Try to lift your right shoulder toward the ceiling and hold for five seconds. Do not allow your body to move sideways. Relax for a couple of seconds and then lean your upper body a little more to the left side. This is the correct starting position for the stretch
3. Rotate your head approximately 45 degrees to the left and place your left hand over the top of your head and gently let the weight of your hand pull your head toward your left hip and hold for 10 seconds
4. Contract your neck by carefully pushing the back of your head into your hand and hold for 5 seconds
5. Relax the contraction and move to a new stretch point and hold 10 seconds
6. Repeat steps 4 and 5 two more times
7. Slowly raise your head to the starting position
8. Repeat other side



Retest the pain-free range of motion to see if improvement has been made.

Chapter 1 from: Banish Neck Pain – A step-by-step guide to elimination of aches and pains caused by poor posture

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Published by Ken Belveal

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ISBN: 978-1-7374021-0-7 (eBook)