

Myofascial Pain: A Common Yet Overlooked Musculoskeletal Disorder

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Introduction

Musculoskeletal pain is one of the most frequent health complaints worldwide, affecting people across all ages and professions. Among its many causes, myofascial pain syndrome (MPS) stands out as a prevalent yet often underdiagnosed condition. Characterized by localized muscle pain, stiffness, and the presence of "trigger points," myofascial pain can interfere with daily activities, limit mobility, and reduce quality of life. Unlike acute muscle strain, this pain persists and can become chronic, underscoring the need for awareness, timely diagnosis, and effective management.

What Is Myofascial Pain?

The term "myofascial" refers to muscles ("myo") and the connective tissue covering them ("fascia"). Myofascial pain arises when sensitive areas within tight muscle bands, called trigger points, develop and cause referred pain in predictable patterns. For example, a trigger point in the shoulder muscle may cause pain that radiates to the neck or arm.

Myofascial pain can be localized or widespread, and while it may appear after acute injury or overuse, it often develops insidiously over time due to poor posture, repetitive strain, or stress.

Causes and Risk Factors

Several factors contribute to the onset and persistence of myofascial pain:

Muscle overuse or injury: Repetitive movements, sports injuries, or sudden strain.

Poor posture: Prolonged sitting, especially with improper ergonomics.

Stress and anxiety: Increased muscle tension can promote trigger point formation.

Sedentary lifestyle: Lack of regular stretching or strengthening weakens muscle resilience.

Sleep disturbances: Inadequate rest impairs muscle recovery.

Underlying conditions: Disorders like fibromyalgia, arthritis, or

spinal problems may exacerbate symptoms.

Symptoms of Myofascial Pain

Key features of myofascial pain include:

Trigger points: Palpable knots in muscles that are tender to touch.

Localized pain: Pain confined to specific muscles or regions.

Referred pain: Pain radiating from trigger points to distant sites.

Muscle stiffness and tightness: Difficulty moving the affected area freely.

Reduced range of motion: Limitation in flexibility due to muscle tension.

Sleep disturbances or fatigue: Chronic pain can disrupt rest and worsen symptoms.

Diagnosis

Diagnosing myofascial pain is largely clinical, based on history and physical examination. Physicians palpate muscles to identify trigger points and reproduce referred pain patterns. Unlike arthritis or fractures, imaging tests such as X-rays or MRIs usually appear normal. In some cases, ultrasound or electromyography (EMG) may help rule out other conditions.

Treatment Approaches

Effective management of myofascial pain typically combines pharmacological, physical, and lifestyle-based strategies.

Pharmacological Options

Pain relievers: NSAIDs or acetaminophen help reduce discomfort.

Muscle relaxants: Provide short-term relief for muscle tension.

Antidepressants: Low doses may be prescribed to modulate chronic pain.

Trigger point injections: Local anesthetics or corticosteroids directly into trigger points can provide significant relief.

Physical and Rehabilitation Therapies

Physical therapy: Stretching, strengthening, and posture correction exercises.

Massage therapy: Relieves muscle knots and improves circulation.

Dry needling or acupuncture: Stimulates trigger points to release tension.

Heat therapy: Increases blood flow and promotes muscle relaxation.

Ultrasound or electrical stimulation: Helps reduce pain and muscle tightness.

Lifestyle and Self-Management

Stress management: Relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, or breathing exercises.

Regular exercise: Low-impact activities like swimming or walking improve muscle flexibility and endurance.

Ergonomic adjustments: Proper workplace setup to avoid repetitive strain.

Adequate sleep: Essential for muscle recovery and pain control.

Prognosis and Outlook

While myofascial pain can be persistent and frustrating, most patients experience improvement with a comprehensive management plan. Early recognition and treatment are key to preventing chronicity. In some cases, untreated trigger points may contribute to long-term postural problems, secondary pain syndromes, or reduced quality of life.

Conclusion

Myofascial pain is a common yet frequently overlooked cause of chronic musculoskeletal discomfort. Characterized by trigger points, localized and referred pain, and stiffness, it affects millions of people and often interferes with daily activities. By understanding its risk factors, recognizing symptoms, and adopting a multidisciplinary treatment approach—including medication, physical therapy, and lifestyle changes—patients can achieve meaningful relief and restore function. Increasing awareness of myofascial pain among both healthcare providers and the public is essential for timely diagnosis and effective management of this widespread condition.