

PHYSIO TIPS

IN JUNE

WHY DO MUSCLES FEEL TIGHT?



Physio Tips is a monthly newsletter aimed at educating the public regarding the latest evidence in injury management, without all the medical jargon. We will keep it simple and concise, but full of knowledge gems in order to empower and equip you.

REACH OUT TO US

We have all experienced the sensation of a muscle feeling tight or stiff, but what does it mean when muscles feel tight? Does it mean that the muscle is short or can't relax? And what can be done to relieve the sensation of tightness? In this month's newsletter we

will unpack these questions and find possible solutions. The biomedical model of thinking has taught us that this means the muscle must have a knot or is not flexible enough and therefore the only solution would be to 'loosen it' - we do however need to reframe our thinking to a more biopsychosocial approach in order to accurately answer these questions.



Tightness is a sensation

The feeling of tightness is just that - a feeling. It is not a mechanical condition, but rather a sensory output from the brain. This sensory output can be as a result of many different factors and is often not even associated with physical/mechanical tightness. You can have muscle stiffness/shortness/tension without feeling tight, and you can feel tight without the muscle actually being physically stiff/shortened.

Tightness and range of movement

Just like pain (a sensation) is not always an accurate indicator of tissue damage (see our previous newsletter), the same way the feeling of tightness is not an accurate indicator of loss of range of movement in a muscle/joint. Ballet dancers can also feel tightness, despite being able to achieve extreme ranges of movement!



Tightness and muscle knots

The feeling of tightness is also not an accurate indicator of the existence of tight knots in a muscle. You can feel tight, but when someone then presses the muscle their might not be any knots or excess tension in the muscle. Sometimes the muscle can even have very low tone/tension and still feel tight.

So what does the feeling mean?

So what if there's no physical sign of tightness but the feeling is still there? What is this feeling trying to convey to us? We can regard the sensation of tightness as a subconscious alarm system which goes off when it perceives a potential threat. Most of the time the feeling of tightness is trying to tell us to move differently or change our posture because our muscles are not getting enough blood flow. This alarm system can also become more sensitive when there are other 'threats' present (eg. weakness in the muscle, elevated stress levels, negative associations with the present posture/movement).



Factors that could signal the sensation of tightness

- Lack of blood flow caused by a lack of movement or exercise, or overuse of a muscle
- Elevated stress levels
- Lack of physical rest
- Weakness in a muscle
- Loss of mobility in a joint

What about trigger points?

Although it is true that tender points exist, the pathology or explanation behind trigger points has been under dispute for quite some time. Although certain areas of a muscle can become hypersensitive, there is no evidence that these tender spots are caused by pathological changes in the muscle. Therefore the idea that these tender spots require deep pressure as a treatment is questionable. Tender spots should rather be seen as an area that has become oversensitive and the underlying reason for that sensitivity needs to be addressed.



So what can be done to get relief from feeling tight? Here are a few possible solutions:



Strengthening

When there are no physical signs of stiffness or increased tone, the muscle usually feels tight because it is weak. Therefore strengthening, rather than instinctive stretching, will be much more effective in providing relief - especially for long term relief. It is important to strengthen gently and not overload the muscles, and to strengthen through a large range of movement. If you are unsure about this, get a physio to instruct you in some good strengthening exercises.

Stress management

When we are stressed our brain produces less 'pain killers' which can turn down the volume of signals coming from our muscles. Therefore, the sensation of tightness might not always present itself when we are relaxed, but rather when we are stressed. It is always important to keep this in mind, and monitor whether your symptoms are worse in times of low mood or increased pressure. You might then find that relaxation strategies (eg. breathing, reading, exercise, laughing, taking time off) provides the most relief.

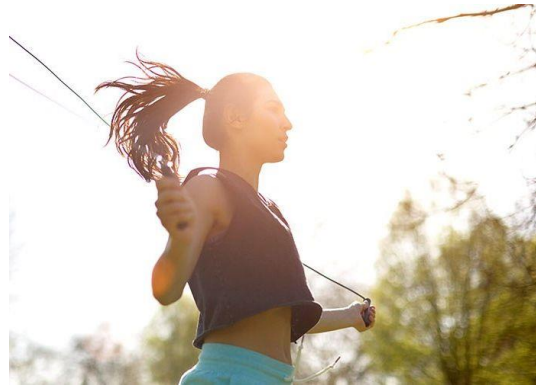


Cardiovascular exercise

Exercise has the wonderful ability to produce feel-good hormones, increase circulation and enhance breathing. These positive outcomes have a further spiral effect of improved body perception, posture and muscle function. As a result, our muscles are more resilient and 'happier' and will therefore be less likely to feel tight. We all have different capacities for exercise - choose something you enjoy and don't increase your exercise load/amount too drastically in order to allow your muscles to adapt gradually.

Move more (and stretch)

Since the feeling of tightness is often triggered by a lack of blood flow to the muscle, a good solution would be to restore good blood flow through movement. This means taking regular breaks from sitting, changing postures regularly, contracting /squeezing and relaxing your muscles, and even gentle stretching. These stretches do not have to hurt or be sustained for long periods - stretch in a way that feels good and move through stretches rather than holding the stretch.



Massage and mobilisation

There are various soft tissue treatments like deep tissue massage and foam rolling, intended to lengthen short tissues or break adhesions. This is very likely impossible. But these treatments could decrease sensitivity and make someone feel less tight. If it feels good, then do it, but it's an option not a necessity, and will likely only provide temporary relief. There is no need to go through painful deep pressure if it does not feel good - gentle massage can be just as effective in achieving relaxation!

THE BOTTOM LINE

"When you feel stiff, remember it is a feeling, and not necessarily a physical condition of shortness that needs an aggressive structural solution. Like other feelings, you feel it more when you are sensitive. And like other forms of sensitivity, it will go down if you improve your overall fitness, strength, awareness, motor control and health."

Todd Hargrove

Credit to the wonderful insights of a blog written by
Todd Hargrove on Physio Network: "Why do muscles feel tight"
<https://www.physio-network.com/why-do-muscles-feel-tight/>

WHEN YOU FEEL TIGHT, DO WHAT FEELS RIGHT - FOR YOU
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Where You Can Find Us



4 Herold Street

021 8829148 or 021 8832516

3A Arun Place, Sir Lowry's Pass Village Road

021 8527711 or 021 8527751

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