

taming your tension

Muscle tension is like a car that's idling too fast. The car is revved up and working hard but nothing useful is happening. There's more wear and tear on the motor. Not only that, but the motor is burning more fuel and creating more pollution.

With muscle tension your muscles are working hard, but are not doing anything that's useful. The tension doesn't help you move and it certainly doesn't make your muscles stronger. It doesn't really accomplish anything at all.

It does, however, cause a lot of wear and tear on your body. It strains the tendons that hold your muscles to your bones. It pulls the joints tighter together which not only causes horrible grinding and crunching sounds, but also causes the cartilage in your joints to wear out. The tension limits your movement, interferes with your co-ordination and may make you more accident-prone.

The tense muscles burn up the fuel in your muscles, making you feel tired. They also create the equivalent of car exhaust - toxic waste products (called metabolites) that fatigue your muscles and make them feel sore and achy.

You know from experience - tension is not good.

It's important that you get your tension under control. Not only will you feel more comfortable, but you'll also prevent a lot of problems from occurring, from kinks in your neck to early arthritis. To manage your tension, it helps to know what causes it.

the culprits

Stress is one of the major sources of muscle tension. When under stress, you become like a turtle trying to pull its head into its shell. Your shoulders round forward and lift up as your head pulls back. If your stress level is high, you may actually notice your

shoulders around your ears. More often than not, the stress isn't quite so significant and the shoulder muscles simply tighten up.

Just sitting or staying still for periods of time will also cause your muscles to tighten up. By remaining static, you are in a sense training your muscles to lock your back or neck in a certain posture. When you begin to move, your muscles remain tense in an effort to maintain your position. It takes some time for the muscles to realize that they can let go and relax. The longer you sit without moving, the more you train your muscles to lock into position and the longer it takes to release them.

In looking at the way that tension is created, you can see that the areas that are most vulnerable to tension are your neck, shoulders and back. Although tension can develop in any muscle in your body, these are the areas that are most commonly affected.

massage to the rescue

Massage plays an important role in helping you deal with your tension. Your massage therapist, like a mechanic, can adjust how fast your "muscle motors" are idling.

Massage has a twofold action. First, it helps induce a relaxation response in your body. This reduces the common defensive reactions in your body, including that turtle-in-the-shell action of your

“A tense muscle will squeeze off its own blood supply and cause nerve-irritating metabolites to accumulate in the muscle”

Neck Rolls. *Drop your head straight forward toward the floor and let it hang for a moment. Be sure to keep your back upright. You may feel a slight stretch in your neck or upper back. Then slowly roll your head to the right. Continue until your head is tilted to the right as illustrated above. Let your head roll back down and continue the movement around*



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neck muscles. Relaxation causes your brain and nervous system to slow down and this in turn lowers the tension level of all the muscles in your body.

Secondly, with massage your muscles are pulled and stretched. This physically releases the muscle. In addition, the sensations that your muscles feel, both conscious and subconscious, give your brain information about the level of tension that exists in your muscles. This helps your nervous system to adjust your muscles to a normal level of tone.

The wonderful thing about massage is that its effect on tension is almost instantaneous. You feel the tension leaving your body immediately. You don't have to wait days or weeks to see results.

However, don't expect long-lasting results from just one massage. Although this may happen, factors like stress and a sedentary lifestyle are likely to perpetuate your tension. For this reason regular massage is important.

Typically, when you start to get massage, you may experience a great deal of discomfort and your therapist may have to work rather lightly. As your muscles relax and your circulation becomes more normal, the tenderness starts to decrease. Subsequent massages are usually much more comfortable. You may find that you have to ask your therapist to work deeper to get the same level of sensation.

If you find that your muscles are always tender when you visit your massage therapist, it's time to consider getting more frequent treatments and taking a more active approach to managing your tension.

Regular massage treatments will not only reduce your tension, but they will train your muscles to maintain a lower level of tension or to recover from tension more quickly.

Once your muscles learn what it's like to be relaxed, you can reduce

the frequency of your massage treatments. At that point, you can use massage more as a maintenance tool and schedule treatments for the year, just as you schedule regular tune-ups for your car.

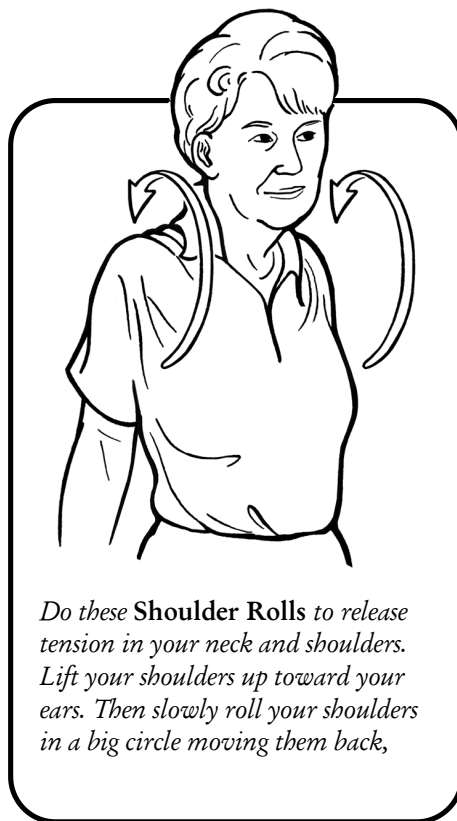
How often do you need a tune up? As a general rule, many therapists suggest monthly maintenance treatments. However, there are many factors that determine your need for massage. Since your massage therapist knows you and your body, it's best to ask for specific recommendations.

don't "trap" your tension

One of the areas most likely to get tense is the shoulders. The muscle that makes up the shoulders is called the trapezius - often referred to as the "traps". It's an easy name to remember because this is the muscle that traps your tension. You can help prevent tension from building up in this muscle.

If you are sitting or standing still for any significant period of time, be sure to move the muscle through a full range of motion once in awhile. We suggest the 20/20 Rule: For every twenty minutes that you are inactive, spend twenty seconds moving. This helps ensure that your muscles don't have the opportunity to lock into any particular position.

Use the two simple exercises in this newsletter to bring your traps through a full range of motion and to keep your muscles relaxed and tension-free.



*Do these **Shoulder Rolls** to release tension in your neck and shoulders. Lift your shoulders up toward your ears. Then slowly roll your shoulders in a big circle moving them back,*