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"treating the cause of your problem, not just the symptoms"

Has Your Neck Seized?

Have you ever had the unfortunate experience of doing a casual task with your neck only to suddenly feel it seize with sharp pain and muscle spasm? It may occur while doing simple and passive things such as washing your hair in the shower, doing a shoulder check when driving, sleeping in an awkward position, or even just looking up at a beautiful sunset. The end result is acute muscle spasms and sharp pain in the joints of your neck that severely restrict your movement. Chiropractic and Medical Doctors call this "torticollis". I have always assumed that this name was created for people with this problem because their painfully restricted and slow neck movements look similar to that of a "tortise or turtle".

Each week, someone will enter my office with severe neck pain. They will be unable to move their neck at all due to the muscle spasm and stiff joints. However, what upsets them the most is that they feel that they "did not do anything to provoke this problem". I will then proceed to question them about how their neck felt for the week or more prior to their present symptoms. Most of the time, they will admit to experiencing very mild bouts of neck stiffness, muscle tension, or even headaches inconsistently for a period of time before the more severe symptoms began. These "preliminary" symptoms are often due to poor posture, stress at work or home, excessive work at a computer, or putting your neck through an activity it is not accustomed to. These early symptoms do not usually significantly interfere with your daily activities and are therefore often ignored. Patients in my office are taught what symptoms to be aware of so that they are able to recognize when their neck is beginning to stiffen up and become vulnerable to torticollis occurring again. These include: tension headaches located at the front sides or back of your head, tight and sore muscles in your neck and shoulders, inability to sleep due to your neck not being able to get comfortable, mild pain when you bend your neck backward or side to side, and an inability to do a proper shoulder check when driving.

At this point, you may be wondering what is actually causing the early symptoms that inevitably lead the torticollis. It is relatively a simple process. When your neck is exposed to physical or emotional stress, the muscles become tense. These muscles all attach to the vertebrae or bones of the neck. Therefore, when the muscles are tense, the

joints between the vertebrae are not able to move properly and they become stiff and tight. If left untreated, the joint stiffness will progress further until the nerves exiting the spine become irritated. These nerves are responsible for controlling the contraction of the muscles in your neck. The more these nerves become irritated, the more excited or hyperactive they become. This results in the muscles being told to contract or tighten even more, which even further limits the movement of the joints. This cycle of events occurs over and over, becoming amplified each time. For example, muscle tension causes a lack of movement in the joints of the neck, a lack of movement in the joints allows them to become stiff, these stiff and tight joints become inflamed and irritate the nerves exiting the spine, these irritated nerves become hyperactive and make the muscles tighten even more, which further restricts the movement of the joints, and the cycle starts all over again until it spins out of control.

The treatment for the preliminary symptoms or even the full-blown torticollis is virtually the same. All of the joints in your body must undergo regular movement to remain healthy. Therefore, the solution is to restore proper movement to joints within the neck. As well, the muscles need to be stretched and relaxed. This is done all day, every day in a Chiropractic Doctor's office by doing "adjustments" or "manipulation" to the joints and "trigger point therapy" to the muscles. It is also important for the person to be taught how to stretch the muscles on their own and to avoid physical or emotional stress.

For more info on torticollis or other neck problems, visit our website at www.merrittchiro.com or call me at my office.