

## **Massage Therapy Helps Whiplash**

*By Susan Jackson Grubb, NCMT, CNMT*

Whiplash is one of the most common injuries sustained in car crashes, but can also happen in contact and high-speed sports, or in other sudden movement accidents. It is caused by a sudden acceleration-deceleration movement of the head and can be mild, moderate, or severe.

The symptoms can occur within minutes, or develop later as progressive stiffness and neck pain. The sudden movement of the head, when the injury occurs, causes tiny areas of the muscle and ligament to tear. These torn areas then go into spasm in an attempt to do their job -- stabilize the neck and the head. They then start to affect the surrounding area creating a cycle of pain, spasm and more pain.

The direction of impact will determine which areas of the neck will feel tender. In the initial acute phase, any movement of the neck may cause intense pain, but it will usually start to decrease in a few days. It may resolve by itself, or persist.

Whiplash symptoms include headaches, blurred vision, ringing in the ears, jaw pain, fatigue and weakness, insomnia, tingling and numbness in fingers and/or arms, pain in face, head, neck, and/or back, sensitivity to noise, memory loss or forgetfulness, irritability, spasm, stiffness, difficulty swallowing, or dizziness and/or nausea. As a result, a sufferer may also feel depression, anger, frustration, anxiety, post-traumatic stress and/or social isolation.

### **Early Treatment is Important**

If a person is diagnosed with whiplash, it is critical to their recovery to:

- Commit to early treatment – be informed. It is vital to understand the definition, cause and associated conditions of whiplash and what to expect. It is possible to control the pain, reduce muscle spasms, improve range of motion and stabilize the muscles of the neck. In severe whiplash, treatments may need to address muscle

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tenderness, improved postural techniques, functional activities, ergonomic and lifestyle issues and new ways to cope with the pain.

- Become mobilized – Contrary to the treatment of whiplash in the past, the latest research shows that the most improvement occurs if the neck is mobile. Although soft collars may offer short-term relief, studies show poor results with long-term use. Collars are best used only for short periods, for temporary relief, or to protect the neck from further injury as when in crowds or riding in a car. It is important to get the neck moving as soon as possible. With guidance from a health professional, simple exercises can be learned, such as turning the head from the left to the right, or directing the chin towards the chest and then up at the ceiling. If pain develops when doing this, move slowly and massage that area of the neck. Do not let pain stop gentle movement of the neck.
- Apply hot and cold packs – In the first 48 hours after injury, heat may cause broken blood vessels to bleed and for this reason is not recommended. Cold packs for the first 48 hours, and then hot and cold packs on the neck can help reduce pain and swelling. Heat relaxes muscles; cold desensitizes nerves. Most people find that applying hot and cold packs, switching them every 15- 20-minutes, several times a day achieves the best results.

About 25 – 50% of whiplash injuries fail to resolve completely, but only 10% result in actual disability. In order to stop the pain from becoming chronic it is important to realize that this is a muscle injury and to get a good rehabilitation program started as early as possible. Massage therapy, exercises, relaxation, and gentle yoga are beneficial.

### **Massage Therapy Helps**

Massage therapy plays a key role in restoring pain-free range of motion, improving muscle strength, endurance and tone, eliminating swelling and reducing headaches. It helps since whiplash is a sprain or a strain. A sprain is a torn ligament while a strain is a torn tendon or muscle. Ideally, therapy should start as soon as the acute, inflammatory phase is over (about 72 hours after the injury).

Massage lowers muscle tension around the injury, which in turn lessens the stress on healing tissue, and helps coax the body into forming connective tissue (repair tissue) correctly. A massage technique called cross-fiber friction can be used to encourage the body to lay down the connective tissue in the same direction as the originally damaged tissue. This proper alignment causes smaller amounts of the connective tissue to be needed and allows for a fuller range of motion upon recovery

### **Trigger Point Therapy**

Muscle fiber tears can cause trigger points or tender points. They are similar. Both of them are a pinpoint area of the body that has a specific pain when pressure is applied. A trigger point goes one further; when it's pressed, the pain can be felt in other parts of the body in a somewhat predictable pattern. For example, a trigger point in the back of the neck at the base of the skull, when pressed, may refer a pain to the forehead.

The theory behind trigger point therapy is that the pressure on the trigger point stops blood from flowing into the affected area thereby starving the area of oxygen. After a long enough time (8 – 20 seconds), the trigger point releases due to lack of oxygen to the area. Once the pressure is released the tissue is able to resume normal function.

### **Reasons for Continued Problems**

Approximately 80% of whiplash patients are 80% better by 10 treatments of massage therapy. If the pain is not reduced by then, it is suggested that another form of treatment be explored. Some common causes of continued whiplash pain are:

- Weak or instable muscles, tendons, or ligaments: Tight muscles can be the body's way of trying to stabilize. Trigger points and tears from the injury cause weakness.
- Nerve irritation: Irritated nerves can tighten the muscles that they supply.
- Misalignment of the spinal bones: Misalignment can cause irritation of spinal nerves.

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A person should keep their health care provider informed if their pain is not improving or if it is getting worse. An x-ray of the neck, an MRI, or a CT scan may be prescribed.

Studies have shown that initial x-rays may miss injuries to the neck. A physician may also wish to use non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or a muscle relaxant.

The people who do best in recovering from whiplash are those who stay active and get their neck moving early, despite any discomfort. The long-term outlook is good, although it may take up to two years before the pain settles completely.

### *About the Author:*

Susan Jackson Grubb, President of Center for Neuromuscular Massage Therapy, Inc. in the Cherry Creek area of Denver is a graduate of the Boulder College of Massage Therapy and has been a massage therapist since 1984. All nine therapists at the center are graduates of massage therapy schools -- each with twice the state requirement for training, are nationally certified, are licensed with the City and County of Denver, and are members of the American Massage Therapy Association. For more information visit [www.cnmtmassage.com](http://www.cnmtmassage.com)