
Understanding Neck and Upper Back Pain: A Self-Care Guide

Neck and upper back pain are so closely connected that treating them together often yields better results. The pain you feel - whether at the base of your skull, along your neck, or between your shoulder blades - is typically caused by a network of interconnected muscles responding to postural stress.

Most of us spend hours daily with our heads forward and shoulders rounded, looking at screens or driving. This position creates a predictable pattern: chest muscles tighten and pull the shoulders forward, while neck and upper back muscles become overstretched and strained. The pain you feel is often your body's response to this ongoing imbalance.

The Connection Between Trigger Points and Acupuncture

Trigger points are small, sensitive areas in your muscles that can cause pain both at the point itself and in other areas of your body (referred pain). These points often correspond with traditional acupuncture points, which isn't surprising given our growing understanding of how the body's myofascial (muscle and connective tissue) system overlaps with traditional acupuncture meridians. When you apply pressure to these points, you stimulate the same nerve fibers that respond to acupuncture needles, making self-massage a powerful tool for home care.

Getting Started with Self-Massage

The key to effective self-massage is gentle, sustained pressure rather than aggressive rubbing. You'll need a massage ball - while a tennis ball works to start, I recommend the Yoga Tune Up therapy balls for their durability and perfect density. When working on a point:

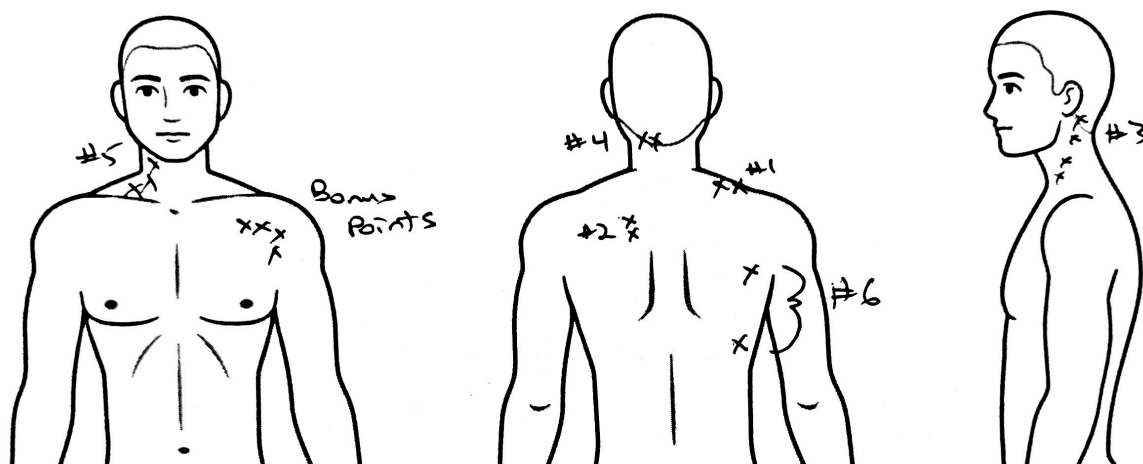
- Start with light pressure and gradually increase as the tissue releases
- If you find yourself holding your breath, that's a sign you're using too much pressure
- Spend no more than a couple of minutes on each area.
- Repeat every 2-3 days
- If you experience any nerve sensations (tingling, numbness, or sharp pain), adjust the position of the ball

Key Areas to Address

- Start with the three main neck muscles - trapezius, levator scapulae, and SCM. These muscles together to hold your head up. When one gets tired, the others compensate.
- Don't forget to check for tender spots in the muscles in the front of your neck and below the shoulder blades, as tightness in these areas often refers pain to the upper back.
- Rolling out the chest muscles can indirectly relieve upper back pain by releasing the forward pull on your shoulders.

See the illustration below for help locating the common trigger points. If you're currently working with me for acupuncture, I'll go over this at your next appointment. I've also included some helpful video links.

See the illustration below for help locating common trigger points.



#1 Trapezius
#2 Levator Scapula
#3 SCM
#4 Suboccipitals
#5 Scalenes
#6 Latissimus Dorsi and Teres Minor
Bonus Points: Pectoralis Major and Minor

Helpful Video Links

[Trapezius and Levator Scapulae](#)
[SCM and Suboccipitals](#)
[Scalenes and front of neck](#)
[Rolling out the chest](#)