

Cervical and Thoracic Dysfunction and Cervicogenic Headaches

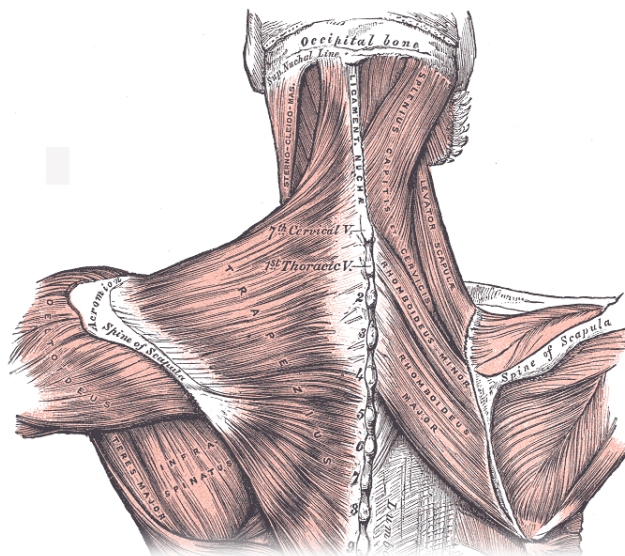
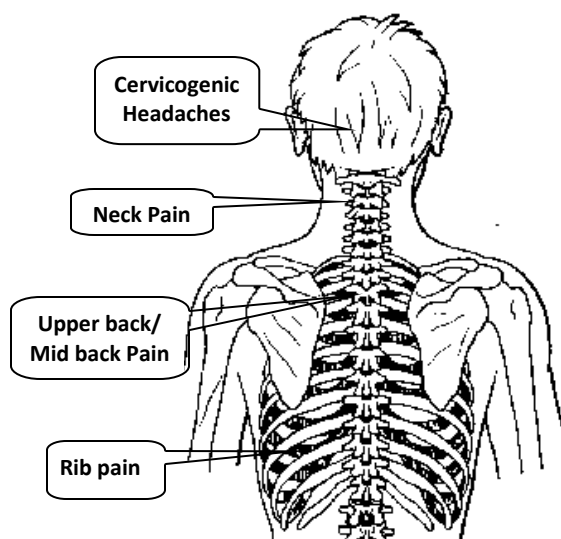
by James G. Halvorson, DC, DACAN

Signs and Symptoms:

- Pain is usually localized to the area of the spine that is affected. Cervical dysfunction usually results in neck pain. Thoracic dysfunction results in upper and mid back pain.
- Radiation of pain is possible—cervical dysfunction may cause radiation of pain into the shoulder, arm or head (cervicogenic headaches); thoracic dysfunction may give rise to pain radiating around the rib cage, into the shoulder blade or down the arm.
- If a costovertebral joint is affected (a joint between a vertebrae and a rib), there may be a sharp pain in the midback that hurts with every breath. It may feel like “a rib is out.”
- There may be a feeling of a “catch” or “kink” in the neck or mid back.
- If headaches are present, palpation of suboccipital trigger points often reproduces the headache but working them out can actually relieve the headache. I have also reproduced headaches by palpating trigger points in the supraspinatus and levator scapulae muscles.
- Restriction in the upper cervical spinal joints (cervical joint dysfunction/fixation) can perpetuate spasm and swelling (like a thorn in the foot) and may be the irritating factor that feeds the headaches.

Treatment:

- The **most effective treatment** for an acute exacerbation of cervical or thoracic dysfunction/fixation is **gentle manipulation of the cervical facet joints, ice to relieve the swelling, and exercises that stretch the cervical paraspinal muscles**. After the acute phase, deep tissue massage and myofascial release into the cervical paraspinals and suboccipital muscles may be very beneficial.
- Daily stretching of the neck and shoulder muscles and pressure point therapy (using tennis balls) throughout the day can keep the muscles loose and pain free.
- Because of the likelihood of this syndrome to recur, treatment has to include a lifetime of **strengthening and stabilization of the neck and shoulder musculature**. Also, **once a month manipulation** from your chiropractor will keep the joints and muscles free and clear of scar tissue.
- Duke University did a comprehensive systematic literature review on headaches (2001) and concluded, **“manipulation is effective in patients with Cervicogenic Headache.”** In the Executive Summary, the researchers added that **“these non-pharmacological treatments may be the first choice for most patients.”**

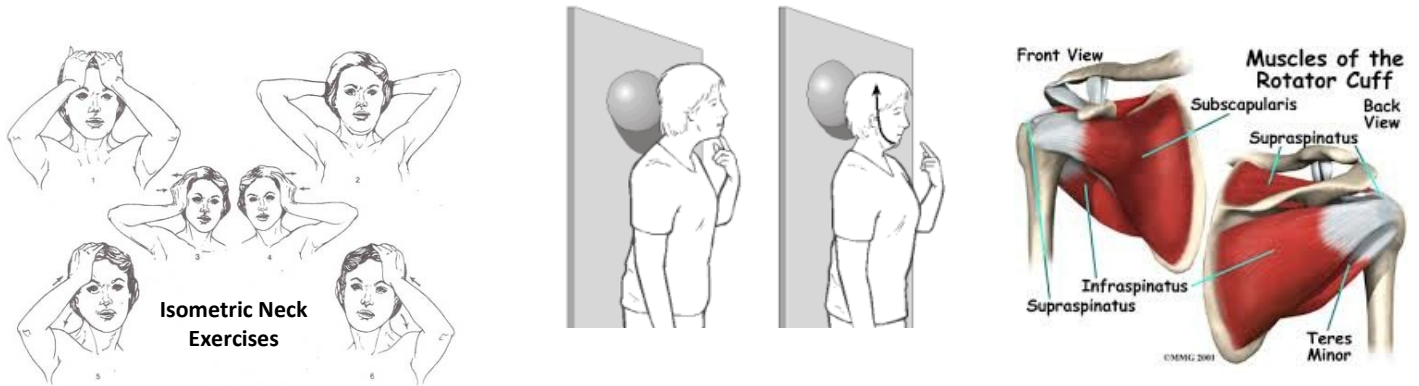


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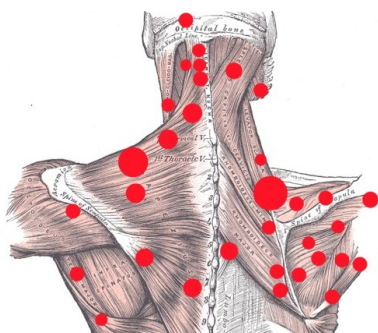
STRETCHING: DAILY—Hold the stretches for 10-15 seconds at a time. Always stretch out both sides.



Strength and Stabilization: at least 3x/week



PRESSURE POINT THERAPY (Myofascial Release): Myofascial trigger points are hyperirritable spots in the fascia surrounding skeletal muscle. They are associated with palpable nodules in taut bands of muscle fibers. One of the best ways to treat them is with massage or pressure. Lie on or lean back against tennis balls, softballs or baseballs (putting them into a long sock will help hold them together and allow you to reach all areas of the spine).



Common Trigger Points



Tennis Ball



If you like more pressure, Use a softball or baseball