



Ouchy Shoulders and Slouchy Posture



GUEST CORNER

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In the realm of physical therapy and musculoskeletal health, the interplay between shoulder stiffness and posture is both intricate and significant. Stiff shoulders and poor posture are a widespread health issues that can significantly impact your daily activities and overall quality of life.

The chicken or the egg - do stiff shoulders cause poor posture, or does a poor posture lead to stiff shoulders? Understanding this relationship is crucial for effective treatment and prevention strategies.

Shoulder stiffness: Shoulder stiffness or tightness refers to a restriction in the shoulder joint's range of motion, often accompanied by pain or discomfort. This can result from various factors, including:

- Injuries: sprains, strains or trauma to tendons, muscles or joints can cause inflammation, such as rotator cuff tendinitis and bursitis.
- Joint Pathologies: such as frozen shoulder (adhesive capsulitis), arthritis, or overuse tendon tears (tendinopathy).
- Sedentary lifestyle where prolonged sitting is the biggest culprit that can result in muscle imbalances, weakness in shoulder and scapula stabilizers, and tightness in other muscle groups.

Poor posture: Posture refers to the alignment of the spine with the head, shoulders, and pelvis. Good posture keeps these parts of the body in a straight and relaxed position that minimizes stress on the muscles. Poor posture throws one or more body parts out of alignment, leading to a host of problems that can significantly impact your quality of life.

Forward head posture, rounded shoulders, and an exacerbated thoracic curve (kyphosis) are most common among individuals who spend long hours sitting at the computer or stooped over mobile devices. This can lead to:

- Muscle imbalance: Chest and neck muscles become tight, overactive and shortened and scapula, glutes and deep core muscles become underactive and weak.
- Increase load on shoulder joints and muscles: Poor alignment alters the normal biomechanics of the shoulder and increases the stress on the shoulder joint and surrounding structures. A normal head weighs about 10-12 pounds in a good, aligned posture. In contrast, with a hunching forward-leaning head, the head's weight (with gravitational pull) increases the stress on the affected muscles by 30-60 pounds.
- Reduced blood flow: Drooped shoulders can impede the circulation to the muscles that lead to muscle fatigue and stiffness.

Stiff Shoulders Leading to Poor Posture: Stiff or tight shoulder muscles can restrict the natural movement of the shoulder girdle, neck and upper back. When individuals experience discomfort or limited motion, they may adopt compensatory postures (e.g., rounding shoulders and slumped back). This can create a cycle where muscle stiffness exacerbates poor posture. Additionally, limited shoulder mobility can hinder proper scapula, shoulder and neck mechanics during movement, causing individuals to rely on faulty movement patterns that further contribute to postural deviations.

Most people start having trouble with daily activities, such as reaching overhead into the top cabinet in your kitchen, unable to sleep on the injured side, or reaching behind your body getting dressed.

Poor Posture Leading to Stiff Shoulders: Prolonged poor posture can lead to overstretching of certain muscle groups while others become tight. A hunching-forward posture may cause tightness in the chest (pectoralis muscles), while weakening the thoracic shoulder girdle muscles (lower trapezius, serratus and rhomboids). This imbalance can lead to stiffness and discomfort in the shoulders and neck region, reinforcing poor postural habits and often results in muscle fatigue and strain and chronic postural misalignments.

Over time it becomes more difficult to sit up straight, stand upright with an elongated posture and the negative chain reaction is set in motion.

Physical Therapy to the Rescue: Given the intertwining relationship between stiff shoulders and poor posture, physical therapy is a highly effective approach when using a bi-directional treatment to address both issues by using a combination of assessment, education, and therapeutic interventions.

- Assessment: Thorough evaluation of shoulder, neck and scapula mobility, strength, movement patterns, posture, and overall biomechanics to determine the root causes of discomfort.
- Manual, hands-on techniques and modalities to restore mobility and reduce pain: Gentle mobilizations to the shoulder, scapula and spine to reduce stiffness and improve flexibility. Soft tissue mobilization to reduce spasms, pain, enhance circulation and promote healing.
- Targeted strengthening exercises to the rotator cuff and postural scapular, core and hip muscles to enhance the strength and coordination of the muscles that control the shoulder blade to optimize shoulder mechanics and improve overall posture.
- Flexibility and stretching regimen: Incorporating stretching exercises of the chest and neck into a rehabilitation program to improve flexibility and reduce stiffness and tension.
- Postural education and awareness with correct breathing techniques to maintain optimal body alignment throughout the day. Recommendations may involve: Ergonomic adjustments



to workspaces; proper body mechanics for lifting and carrying objects safely.

- Treatment plan: Incorporating stretching and strengthening exercises in a tailored home exercise program to help reinforce the techniques learned during therapy to encourage continued progress.

The relationship between stiff shoulders and poor posture is dynamic and bi-directional. Each can influence the other, creating a cycle that can impact overall musculoskeletal health. Effective physical therapy interventions should address both posture and shoulder

stiffness, promoting better alignment, enhanced mobility, and improved daily function. By fostering awareness and implementing targeted strategies, individuals can break the cycle and work towards healthier movement patterns and postural habits.

If you experience any of the above symptoms, please contact your physical therapist to assist in addressing your unique needs and promote overall musculoskeletal health.

Lize Lubbe is the owner of Lize Lubbe Physical Therapy with its main practice located at 892 Route 35 in Cross River and a PT Studio in the premises of Apex Fitness (where her team focus on the rehabilitation of sports-related injuries). Learn more by calling 914-875-9430, emailing contact@lizelubbept.com or visiting www.lizelubbept.com.



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