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Dry Needling FAQ

What is dry needling? - Dry needling is an invasive procedure in which a thin (0.3mm), solid needle is inserted into the skin and muscle directly at a myofascial trigger point. A myofascial trigger point is an overly irritable area in a muscle that presents clinically as a "knot" and is involved in producing and maintaining pain.

Is dry needling similar to acupuncture? - There are many similarities and differences between dry needling and acupuncture. Dry needling is a "technique" while physical therapy and acupuncture are "professions". Dry needling is a technique that falls under the scope of practice of both the physical therapy and acupuncture professions. Physical therapists are not licensed acupuncturists and do not claim to practice acupuncture. Most schools of acupuncture are based on ancient Oriental medicine while dry needling as performed by physical therapists is strictly based on Western medicine principles and scientific research.

How does dry needling work? - The exact mechanisms of dry needling are not known. There are mechanical and biochemical effects. Based on studies conducted at the National Institutes of Health, we know that there is an excessive amount of pain-provoking chemicals in the area of a myofascial trigger point. Inserting a needle into a trigger point activates a "local twitch response" which causes an immediate decrease in the amounts of these chemicals, which can assist in reducing pain.

What type of problems can be treated with dry needling? - Dry needling can be used for a variety of musculoskeletal problems in which muscles are thought to be a primary contributing factor to the symptoms. Such conditions include, but are not limited to neck, back and shoulder pain, arm pain (tennis elbow, carpal tunnel, golfer's elbow), headache to include migraines and tension-type headaches, jaw pain, buttock pain and leg pain (sciatica, hamstrings strains, calf tightness/spasms).

Is the procedure painful? - Most patients do not feel the insertion of the needle. The local twitch response elicits a very brief (less than a second) painful response. Some patients describe this as a little electrical shock; others feel it more like a cramping sensation. Again, the therapeutic response occurs with the elicitation of local twitch responses and that is a good and desirable reaction.

Are the needles sterile? - Yes, we only use sterile disposable needles.

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What side effects can I expect after the treatment? - Most patients report being sore after the procedure. The soreness is described as muscle soreness over the area treated and into the areas of referred symptoms. Typically, the soreness lasts between a few hours and two days.

What should I do after having the procedure done? - Our recommendations vary depending on the amount of soreness you have and on the individual response to the treatment. Recommendations may include applying heat or ice over the area, gentle stretches and modifications of activities.

How long does it take for the procedure to work? - Typically, it takes several visits for a positive reaction to take place. Again, we are trying to cause mechanical and biochemical changes without using medication. Therefore, a cumulative response over time may be needed in order to break the pain cycle.

Why is my doctor not familiar with dry needling? - In the United States, dry needling is a relatively new method for treating myofascial pain, and not everyone is already aware of it. Feel free to share this handout with your doctor if they have questions about dry needling.

Where does dry needling fit in the entire rehabilitation program? - Dry needling is used in order to break the vicious cycle of pain causing muscle spasm causing more pain. Once that is achieved, your physical therapist will instruct you in simple exercises as well as other postural, behavioral, and lifestyle modifications that you can use to maintain this reduction in pain.

Once I am feeling better, how often do I need to come back to maintain my progress? - The musculoskeletal system is under constant pressure from gravity, stress, work etc. A regular exercise program, good posture and body mechanics, and a healthy lifestyle can prevent the recurrence of many problems. If the pain returns, you can call your physical therapist back as needed to schedule a follow-up appointment.

How can I get more information? – Contact Dave Candy, PT, DPT, OCS, ATC, CMTPT, FAAOMPT at [314-941-3970](tel:314-941-3970) or dave@M4LPT.com for further information.