

Neck Pain

Manipulating the Upper Back Helps Lessen Pain and Improve Neck Motion

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Neck pain is very common. In the United States, between 30% and 50% of people suffer from an aching neck each year. Although neck pain can be caused by injury, most of this pain results from more gradual stressors, such as particular sitting, standing, or work postures, lifting patterns, or sleeping positions. Typical neck pain can also cause headaches, pain between your shoulders, or a feeling of knots in your neck and upper back muscles. Although manual therapy,

sometimes called “manipulation,” is a common treatment for many types of spine pain, some people are uncomfortable having their necks manipulated. Recently, though, researchers have tested the benefits of a thrust manipulation of the upper back to treat neck pain. A study published in the September 2011 issue of *JOSPT* provides new insight and an evidence-based summary of the benefits of manipulating the upper back to ease and eliminate neck pain.



UPPER BACK THRUST MANIPULATION. The drawings above show how a therapist would manipulate your upper back while you are sitting and as you lie on your back.

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NEW INSIGHTS

In this study, the researchers evaluated published articles using a process called systematic review, which locates all relevant articles on a topic and selects those studies of the highest quality. Their initial search of the literature found 44 possible articles of interest. The researchers ultimately chose 6 high-quality articles that, when combined, included 187 patients who received upper back manipulation and were then compared to 173 patients who received another form of treatment. The research team found that performing upper back manipulations as part of the treatment resulted in less pain, increased neck motion, and improved function. These improvements were seen after the first treatment and continued up to 6 months after a 3-week treatment program that included several upper back manipulations.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

Patients with typical neck pain may benefit from a physical therapy program that includes upper back manipulation. Potential benefits are less pain, better neck motion, and improved ability to perform daily activities. This type of manipulation is very safe and may help you feel better faster. In addition to upper back manipulation, physical therapy treatment may include exercises to help improve the strength and endurance of the muscles around your neck, decreasing your chance of feeling neck pain in the future. Your physical therapist can help determine if you are a good candidate for this treatment as part of a program designed to help get rid of the aching in your neck. For more information on the treatment of neck pain, contact your physical therapist specializing in musculoskeletal disorders.

This *JOSPT* Perspectives for Patients is based on an article by Cross KM et al, titled “Thoracic Spine Thrust Manipulation Improves Pain, Range of Motion, and Self-Reported Function in Patients With Mechanical Neck Pain: A Systematic Review” (*J Orthop Sports Phys Ther* 2011;41(9):633-642. doi:10.2519/jospt.2011.3670)