

Evidence Based Massage: Tension Headache

How your local Remedial Massage Therapist fits into the primary care paradigm

Recent studies have helped to validate the efficacy of manual interventions such as massage therapy in the treatment of chronic and episodic tension headache.

A team of researchers in Colorado investigated the effects of a standardised massage protocol specifically targeting the cranial and cervical muscles on a group of chronic tension headache sufferers.¹ Subjects received twice-weekly, half-hour massages for 4 weeks following a baseline period of 4 weeks with no treatment. Headache frequency was reduced within 1 week of massage treatment compared with baseline levels. This reduction was maintained during the 4 weeks of the treatment period. A trend toward a reduction in the average duration of each headache was also noted. The researchers concluded that massage therapy was an effective non-pharmacological intervention for the treatment of chronic tension headache.

In another study, researchers compared hardness in the trapezius muscle between chronic tension headache sufferers and healthy controls.² The study demonstrated that muscle hardness and muscle tenderness were permanently heightened in chronic tension type headache and not just a consequence of actual pain.

The influence of myofascial trigger points in the trapezius and suboccipital muscles has been the subject of several recent studies. Much of this recent study is based on the seminal work of Dr Janet Travell and Dr David Simons whose 2-volume manual **Myofascial Pain and Dysfunction: the Trigger Point Manual** became the definitive reference on myofascial pain for a generation of musculoskeletal specialists.

A 2006 Spanish study investigated referred pain and pain characteristics evoked from active trigger points in the upper trapezius muscle in 20 patients: the evoked referred pain and its sensory characteristics shared similar patterns as their habitual headache pain.³ In a related study, Spanish researchers studied a group of episodic tension headache patients and described the referred pain patterns evoked by active trigger points in the suboccipital muscles. Headache patients were compared against two healthy control groups. The researchers postulated that suboccipital trigger points might contribute to the origin and/or maintenance of headache.⁴

Your local Remedial Massage Therapist can assist in the primary treatment of tension headache by employing manual techniques aimed at reducing hypertonicity and active trigger points in the pericranial and cervical muscles. Remedial Massage Therapists are specifically trained to assess and treat soft tissue dysfunctions that may contribute to this kind of presentation in the family medical practice.

¹ C. Quinn, C. Chandler, A. Moraska, "Massage Therapy and Frequency of Chronic Tension Headaches", **American Journal of Public Health**, October 2002, Vol 92, No. 10, pp 1657-1661,

² M. Ashina, L. Bendtsen, R. Jensen, F. Sakai, J. Olesen, "Muscle Hardness in Tension Type Headache: relation to actual pain state", **Pain**, 79 (1999), pp 201-205.

³ C. Fernandez-de-las-Penas, Hong-You Ge, L. Arendt-Nielsen, M. Cuadrado, J. Pareja, "Referred pain from trapezius muscle trigger points shares similar characteristics with chronic tension type headache", **European Journal of Pain** 11 (2007) 475-482

⁴ C. Fernandez-de-las-Penas, C. Alonso-Blanco, M. Cuadrado, J. Pareja, "Myofascial trigger points in the suboccipital muscles in episodic tension-type headache", **Manual Therapy** 11 (2006) 225-230

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