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Dry Needling Information

What is Dry Needling?

Dry needling is a technique used by trained physical therapists and other medical professionals for the treatment of pain and movement impairments. It is a simple, but invasive procedure in which a “dry” needle, a tiny solid needle that does not inject medication, is inserted through the skin and into the myofascial trigger points, muscles and connective tissues. This technique allows the therapist to treat tissues more quickly than using other “traditional” methods. Dry needling may also be referred to as trigger point dry needling or intramuscular manual therapy.

What conditions can be treated with Dry Needling?

Common Conditions that may benefit from Dry Needling: most acute and chronic pain, lower back pain, sciatica, headaches, whiplash, hip/knee pain, tendonitis, disk problems, neck/back pain, shoulder pain, tennis/golfer’s elbow, TMJ disorders, fibromyalgia, bruising and swelling

How does dry needling work?

The benefit of dry needling is that it works on the local area being treated (i.e. muscles, fascia, and soft tissues) as well as stimulating the nervous system. It does this in the following ways:

1. The tiny needle creates a micro-lesion as it penetrates the treated tissue. This creates a mild, healthy inflammatory response and improved circulation that activates the body’s natural healing process.
2. As needle penetrates the muscle, the muscle spasm cycle is broken, thereby reducing pain and normalizing muscle tone.
3. It also acts on the central nervous system to inhibit pain signals to the brain, normalizes inflammation, and release endorphins (your body’s natural pain killer.)

The combination of local and whole body systemic effects produced creates an environment that enhances the body's ability to heal, which ultimately reduces pain. This allows for improved motion, normalized body mechanics and normalized posture. It can also improve tolerance to other therapy interventions.

Is Dry Needling the same thing as acupuncture?

No, dry needling is not acupuncture. While both dry needling and acupuncture use monofilament needles to cause positive changes in the body, they are performed by different practitioners with different training.

Based on Western medicine principles and research, dry needling provided by physical therapists is used to treat local neuro-muscular conditions. Theory is based on neuro-muscular anatomy, physiology and research based pain models. Therapy dry needle evaluations consider pain patterns, posture, movement patterns, function, and orthopedic tests. Needle insertion points are determined by signs such as muscle tone, edema, and neuro-anatomy. Therapists reassess subjective and objective effects after the treatment. Dry needling treats muscle and nerve tissues, and its goal is to reduce pain, reduce trigger points and restore function. It is rarely a standalone treatment, but rather, is a part of a broader PT plan of care.

By contrast, acupuncture is based in traditional Chinese medicine and is performed by acupuncturists to work on balancing energy and whole body systems. In traditional acupuncture medical examinations and medical diagnosis are not applicable. Needle insertion is according to Chinese philosophy of non-scientific meridians, and objective changes are not immediately anticipated. Many people experience excellent results with traditional acupuncture for a wide array of physical, emotional, and other systemic concerns. The physical therapists at McKinney Physical Therapy are NOT licensed acupuncturists and do NOT practice acupuncture, use acupuncture theory, meridians, diagnostic techniques, or terminology.

Why would I want to include dry needling in my physical therapy plan?

Dry needling has been shown to reduce pain relief in 87% of sites needed. Results of dry needling include a decrease in subjective complaints, increased range of motion, a reduction in the need for medication, and decreased stiffness. It can be a great way to "jump start" the healing process.

How many treatments will I need?

Your treatment plan will depend on factors such as your diagnosis, chronicity, natural self healing ability, etc. However, positive effects should be noticed after two to three treatments. Typically, 4-10 treatments are required for optimal results in the average client. Dry needling is frequently utilized in the initial sessions to break the pain cycle and increase tolerance to other interventions.

How is this used in the “big picture” of my Physical Therapy treatment?

Most likely, dry needling is just one modality used as part of a holistic physical therapy treatment plan. It is used in conjunction with the variety of manual therapy techniques and prescriptive exercises to restore optimal physical function.

We address various neuro-muscular conditions such as muscle imbalances, postural dysfunctions, muscular flexibility limitations, strength deficits, swollen or stiff joints and many other conditions. Most of these conditions will require much more than just dry needling.

What patients may have special considerations regarding dry needling treatments?

The following conditions will be treated with care, but are not absolute contraindications: pregnancy, low blood pressure, extreme frailty, earlier than 6 week post-surgery, malignant tumors, or blood thinners.

Is Trigger Point Dry Needling covered by insurance?

No, most insurances choose not to cover dry needling.

Are the needles sterile?

Yes, we only use sterile disposable needles. Physical therapists wear gloves and appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) when dry needling, consistent with Standard Precautions, Guide to Infection Prevention for Outpatient Settings, and OSHA standards. The sterile needles are disposed of in a medical sharps collector.

Is the procedure painful?

The needles used are very thin, solid, and flexible. This allows for the them to be pushed through the skin versus cutting it, and helps reduce any discomfort that may occur with the procedure. Many times, people do not even feel the insertion at all. However, it is typical that insertion into pathological tissues is a bit more uncomfortable and you may experience an ache or cramping or shock sensation. Sometimes, insertion causes a muscle twitch- this is actually desirable and therapeutic response. We will make every effort to make your experience comfortable and therapeutic.

How will I feel after the Trigger Point Dry Needling treatment?

This will vary, however, many patients experience immediate relief of their symptoms and an increase in range of motion. Many patients report being sore after the procedure. This is often described as muscle soreness over the area treated and into the area of referred symptoms. This soreness typically lasts from a few hours to up to two days.

It is possible that the treatment may temporarily increase your symptoms. This is not unusual, as it accelerates your body's natural healing process. However, if this continues past the 1–2 day window, inform your PT so that they can modify your next treatment. Mild bruising may occur at the needling sites and is more prevalent in certain parts of the body. Larger bruising may also occur, but is less common. Many people feel very relaxed after their treatments.

How can I use dry needling in my pre/post athletic performance?

Dry needling can be used for both sports pre-performance and for non-injury post-sport recovery. For sports performance, the treatment is typically performed two to three days before the event. The purpose of the pre-performance session is to normalize the body's muscle tone and postural alignment so that the athlete has optimal muscle length.

Sport recovery sessions are performed as soon as possible within zero to three days after the event. The focus of this session is to normalize/ reduce swelling in the stressed muscles and accelerate the body's healing process.

We hope this answers most of your questions regarding Dry Needling so that you can make a decision about whether or not this modality may be right for you. We are more than happy to answer any questions you may have about this procedure, please do not hesitate to ask!

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