

Taming Your Tension – Part 1

Muscle tension is like a car that's idling too fast. The car is revved up and working hard; causing more wear and tear on the motor. Not only that, the motor is burning more fuel and creating pollution.

With muscle tension your muscles are working hard, but are not doing anything that's useful. It does, however, cause a lot of wear and tear on your body. It strains the tendons that hold your muscles to your bones. It pulls the joints tighter which not only causes grinding and crunching sounds, but also causes the cartilage in your joints to wear out. Tension limits your movement, interferes with your co-ordination and may make you more accident-prone.

Tense muscles will burn up the fuel in your muscles, making you feel tired. They also create the equivalent of car exhaust – toxic waste products (called metabolites) that fatigue your muscles and make them feel sore and achy.

It's important that you get your tension under control. Not only will you feel more comfortable, but you'll also prevent a lot of problems from occurring, from kinks in your neck to early arthritis.

The culprits

Stress is one of the major sources of muscle tension. When under stress, you become like a turtle trying to pull its head into its shell. Your shoulders round forward and lift up as your head pulls back. If your stress level is high, you may actually notice your shoulders around your ears.

Just sitting or staying still for periods of time will also cause your muscles to tighten up. By remaining static, you are in a sense training your muscles to lock your back or neck in a certain posture. When you begin to move, your muscles remain tense in an effort to maintain your position. The longer you sit without moving, the more you train your muscles to lock into position and the longer it takes to release them.

Don't "trap" your tension

One of the areas most likely to get tense is the shoulders. The muscle that makes up the shoulders is called the *trapezius* (traps). It's an easy name to remember because this is the muscle that traps your tension. You can help prevent tension from building up in this muscle.

If you are sitting or standing still for any significant period of time, be sure to shrug your shoulders periodically. I suggest the 20/20 Rule: For every twenty minutes that you are inactive, spend twenty seconds moving. This helps ensure that your muscles don't have the opportunity to lock into any particular position – reducing the buildup of tension.