

IS MYOFASCIAL RELEASE AN EFFECTIVE TREATMENT FOR FROZEN SHOULDER?

To answer this question we will define frozen shoulder and debunk some myths. We will explain how apparent frozen shoulder can have different causes and the effectiveness of myofascial release in the treatment of frozen shoulder.

HOW COMMON IS FROZEN SHOULDER?

Frozen shoulder affects about 3% of the adult population and is most common in women aged between 40 – 70. It is also associated with conditions such as diabetes, cardiac disease and thyroid issues.

THE DIAGNOSIS MYTH

Frozen shoulder is not really a condition but more of a catchall term for a range of symptoms affecting the shoulder. Although many people are given a diagnosis of frozen shoulder they can experience a wide range of symptoms and have a number of different causes. As with many soft tissue conditions, very little is known about the causes of frozen shoulder, and medical diagnosis is often based on just the described symptoms and range of movement tests.

WHAT IS FROZEN SHOULDER?

The medical term for frozen shoulder is 'adhesive capsulitis' which more accurately describes the 'true' condition. In cases of adhesive capsulitis the joint capsule surrounding the shoulder becomes inflamed and thickened. This

can lead to scar tissue inside the joint capsule which literally gums up the joint and which may require surgery to release in extreme cases. However many people experience the same symptoms as adhesive capsulitis but caused by restrictions forming in the soft tissues that support the joint, not the capsule itself.

Medical treatment includes medication, physio exercises and steroid injections into the joint capsule.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF FROZEN SHOULDER?

The main symptom of frozen shoulder is pain on movement. This can be from the individual moving their shoulder or someone else moving it for them. Range of movement is also severely restricted as the pain on movement is sharp and intense. This stops people from doing many everyday tasks such as brushing their teeth or hair, putting on coats or sweaters, or reaching up into cupboards.

Frozen shoulder very typically goes through a three stage pattern over 2-3 years:

Freezing – a slow onset of pain and restriction over 2-9 months.

Frozen – intense pain which gradually reduces but stiffness can remain. This stage lasts 4-9 months.

Thawing – shoulder movement gradually returns to normal over 5-26 months.

However for many people the medical approach does not resolve their symptoms and they are left with restricted movement and residual pain with certain movements.

SOME OTHER CAUSES

For many people their frozen shoulder symptoms are not caused by problems with the joint capsule. The shoulder is a shallow ball & socket joint and is the most mobile in the body. This is because it is primarily supported by 17 different

muscles that allow full 360° range of movement. This freedom to move comes with a greater risk of injury and damage. Sometimes shoulders are injured through contact sports, or through the repetitive movements of sport such as tennis or swimming. Often shoulders become restricted through general overuse such as computer work, manual jobs or hobbies. Stress also plays a big part in shoulder problems as stressed people are much more likely to unconsciously tense their shoulders. One reason why so many middle-aged women develop shoulder pain is their years of multi-tasking and worry which build up to the point of overload.

Frozen shoulder symptoms can equally be due to soft tissues, aka the muscles and fascia supporting the shoulder, which become tight and restricted over time. This changes the fascia from its normal fluid and free moving state into a sticky and dehydrated tissue that sticks to itself and other structures and restricts everything contained within it. These soft tissue restrictions act in a similar way to snags in a sweater – they pull on and restrict movement which irritates the nerve endings and triggers pain.

HOW CAN MYOFASCIAL RELEASE HELP?

Clients who come to us with a diagnosis of frozen shoulder have usually tried the medical approach first – they have taken painkillers and possibly other medication such as anti-depressants in an attempt to change the mind perception of their pain; they have diligently done their physio exercises; they may have had steroid injections which gave them temporary relief; and some of them have even had surgery. They come to us because they still have pain and stiffness in their shoulder.

At Pain Care Clinic we provide effective trigger point myofascial release for frozen shoulder symptoms. Because we do not diagnose, we just work with the symptoms people present with. Our clients are mainly middle-aged women, but we also see men and women of all ages who have similar shoulder issues.

Treatment includes trigger point therapy and myofascial release to release soft tissue restrictions in all of the tissues supporting the shoulder. We work on both sides – the affected side and the non-affected side because people with chronic one-sided pain often overcompensate by using the non-affected side more. This can lead to restrictions in this side too which need to be released to help the whole of the shoulder girdle release and rebalance. We also give our clients simple myofascial self-care exercises to do at home.

Clients typically report decreased pain and increased movement within 4 to 6 sessions. Generally they progress to a pain-free life but notice that the pain will return, albeit at a lower level, whenever they become stressed and/or stop self-care. Many have found that regular yoga or pilates helps, as does relaxation and/or meditation.

CONCLUSION

My conclusion, based on research, my own clinical observations, and talking to clients about their diagnosis and medical treatment, is that the symptoms of frozen shoulder are often not caused by issues with the joint capsule, but rather by tightness in the muscles and fascia surrounding the shoulder, restricting movement and producing the typical pain patterns. Releasing these restrictions can help to resolve the pain and restricted movement typical of all shoulder issues.

FOLLOWING UP

Please feel free to contact Amanda Oswald in confidence by telephone or email to discuss how we can help.

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