

Matthew Axtman, DO
Corewell Health Orthopedics

Shouldering the Pain

Have you ever been on a run or brisk walk and noted a burning, throbbing or stabbing pain in your neck or around a shoulder blade? Did you ask yourself why this was occurring? Shoulder and neck pain are very common in runners and walkers. We think of both running and walking as activities that primarily involve the lower part of the body, but running and walking also require muscle and joint involvement from the upper body, including your shoulders. The big question is why shoulder pain develops initially and what to do about it.

The neck and shoulder area is a very complex region of the body. There are many muscles, tendons (for attaching muscle to bone) and ligaments (for attaching bone to bone) that help the shoulder function properly. Major muscles include the rotator cuff (a group of four muscles that allows your shoulder to move in all directions), scapular stabilizers (to hold your shoulder blade in place and aid in smooth movements), and deltoid, pectoral, paraspinal (neck) muscles. All of these muscles need to work together. If they don't, pain may ensue. Some of the diagnoses that can lead to shoulder pain are tendinitis (acute irritation of tendons), tendinosis (chronic irritation of tendons), scapulothoracic dysfunction (the shoulder blade not working properly due to abnormal muscle function or weakness) and myofascial pain syndrome (the covering around the muscle becoming tight and pulling on the muscles, causing painful trigger points).

Before you can treat shoulder pain, the challenge is isolating its source and location. Here are a few reasons that shoulder pain can develop.

- **Posture while exercising:** This is typically the main cause for shoulder pain. Pushing your chin or neck forward or looking down at the ground during your run or walk can put tension on your neck muscles, specifically your trapezius muscle that travels from the base of your skull and neck and inserts on your shoulder blade. Try to keep your gaze straight forward. Look at the horizon and pull your chin back so that your spine is in as much of a neutral alignment as possible.
- **Tight shoulders or excessive shoulder swing:** Holding tension in your shoulders to the point where you feel like you are in a constant shrug can lead to excessive muscle tightness, overactivation of muscles and pain. Shoulder pain can also occur if you swing your arms too much or move them across your body as you exercise. Instead, you should keep your shoulders back and chest out while holding your elbows at about a 90-degree angle. As part of this correction, you also need to relax your hands, keeping them open and loose. Clenching your fists can lead to tightening of the muscles in your arms and shoulders. Proper shoulder function can decrease exercise fatigue and improve energy conservation to allow for peak performance.
- **Poor running/walking gait:** Even a small abnormality in your gait can lead to abnormal mechanics and function. An abnormal gait can be affected by stride length, heel strike, heel whip and hip hiking, to name a few. To compensate, arm swing and shoulder tightness may result.
- **Fatigue:** During longer or more intense runs/walks, you will find yourself starting to fatigue at some point. Fatigue will change your running gait and may lead to abnormal mechanics that cause tension in the shoulders. Running and walking should be fluid movements so it is important to be cognizant of your gait and maintain the same stride throughout your session, even if fatigue sets in.

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- **Intensifying your workout:** As you increase the intensity/speed/distance of your runs or walks, you may note an onset of shoulder pain. This can occur if you progress too quickly or if your body is not conditioned to handle the additional stresses. Also, adding high intensity intervals with sprints, increasing your distances too quickly or adding inclines and hills may contribute to fatigue, abnormal gait and increased tension. If you are going to intensify your workout, it's important to condition your body to the increased stressors.

Now that we have reviewed some of the causes of shoulder/neck pain, let's discuss how can you treat and eliminate the pain. In addition to addressing alignment, conditioning and running gait, here are some other treatments for shoulder pain and discomfort.

- **Heat:** Typically, the first topical modality we reach for is ice. Ice is good for temporary pain relief, but it can also lead to increased tightness in the muscles. Heat is a better long-term option and can loosen the musculature around the neck and shoulders. Heat also stimulates blood flow to the area to decrease pain.
- **Stretching:** Athletes often stretch the lower body before and after exercise, but it is just as important to stretch your upper body, too. Simple stretches before and after exercise include arms swings and circles, stretching your arm/shoulder across your body, stretching your neck side to side, and putting your hand behind your neck and in between your shoulder blades while pushing down on your elbow with your opposite hand.
- **Massage:** Manual releases to the muscles can address trigger points that contribute to shoulder and neck pain. It is difficult to reach the areas of shoulder pain and sometimes the pain is deep in the muscles. Thera Cane, a hooked self-massaging tool, is great for reaching your back and shoulders. You can find it online or in many retail stores.
- **Physical therapy:** If simple remedies do not help to eliminate your pain, I am a big proponent of physical therapy. First and foremost, a physical therapist will be able to identify and work to correct any abnormalities in your gait and posture. A therapist can also address your shoulder pain with manual techniques and provide a customized stretching and strengthening program.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding an injury or pain, please reach out to one of our experienced sports medicine physicians at Corewell Health Medical Group Orthopedics at (616) 267- 8860. You can also find more information about our orthopedic program and providers on our [website](#).
