

## Fit As Your Fiddle

Let's admit it. The violin was not designed to be easy to play.

It requires us players to contort ourselves into un-natural positions for long periods of time.

Sometimes playing well inflicts a painful cost on our bodies.

It does not have to be painful.

There are practical things we can do to alleviate and avoid suffering (and/or career ending trauma).

If you feel pain, do NOT take two aspirin and keep playing!

If your body is trying to tell you something, you should listen.

This area of the website has some advice, but it is not a one-size-fits-all, end-all-be-all of solutions.

Our bodies all behave different, which is why it is often best to seek professional help for any physical ailments whether that professional is a chiropractor, acupuncturist, Iyengar yoga master, physical therapist, masseuse, or your friendly family physician.

Additional resources:

"Playing (less) Hurt" - by Janet Horvath

click [here](#) to visit her website.

"The Musician's Survival Manual" - by Richard Norris, MD

click [here](#) to visit the website.

click [here](#) to view a pdf of "The Musician's Survival Manual"

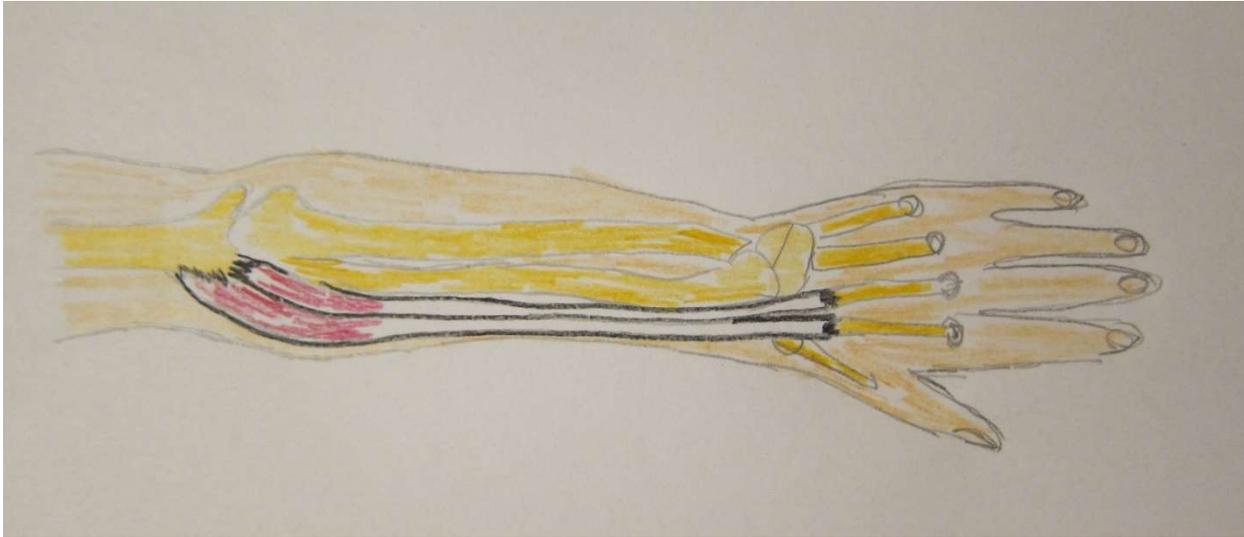
### **That pain in your wrist might not be the dreaded carpal tunnel syndrome...**

One cause of wrist pain for fiddle and violin players is because of our overuse of two muscles:

"Extensor Carpi Radialis Longus" and "Extensor Carpi Radialis Brevis"

Those are the long and short muscles of your forearm and they look a bit like this:

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These muscles are severely tested when we play the fiddle for long periods of time.

They can become overworked, irritated, swollen, and downright angry at us when we twist our left arm and actuate our fingers for hours on end.

These are not just muscles alone, they are part of a conduit of muscle and nerves. When these muscles become inflamed and swollen, they can pinch the nerves to the wrist and fingers, causing pain in your wrist and (eventually) numbness in your fingers.

There are some things we can do to correct this condition.

1. Massage pressure points to reduce swelling.
2. Apply cold immediately after playing, when the muscles are still "hot" from being used.
3. When not playing, when the muscles are well rested, apply heat to promote blood circulation and healing.
4. Periodically stretch the muscles.
5. Try to avoid long practice sessions. Have more, but shorter, practice session, and stretch in between practices.

### Massage

The Extensor Carpi Radialis muscle pressure points are easy to find and massage.

1. Run your right thumb up your left forearm towards your elbow.
2. If you feel a painful lump, you have most probably found an inflamed Extensor Carpi Radialis.
3. Gently massage the muscle until it loosens up.

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like this:



When to apply heat and cold

1. Apply cold when muscles are aching after having been heavily used. This will cool off overheated muscle tissue. No more than 10 minutes of applying a cold pack should be enough.

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### Minnesota Fiddlers

2. Apply heat when muscles are at rest. You should only need to apply heat for 10 minutes.

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### To Stretch Your Extensor Carpi Radialis

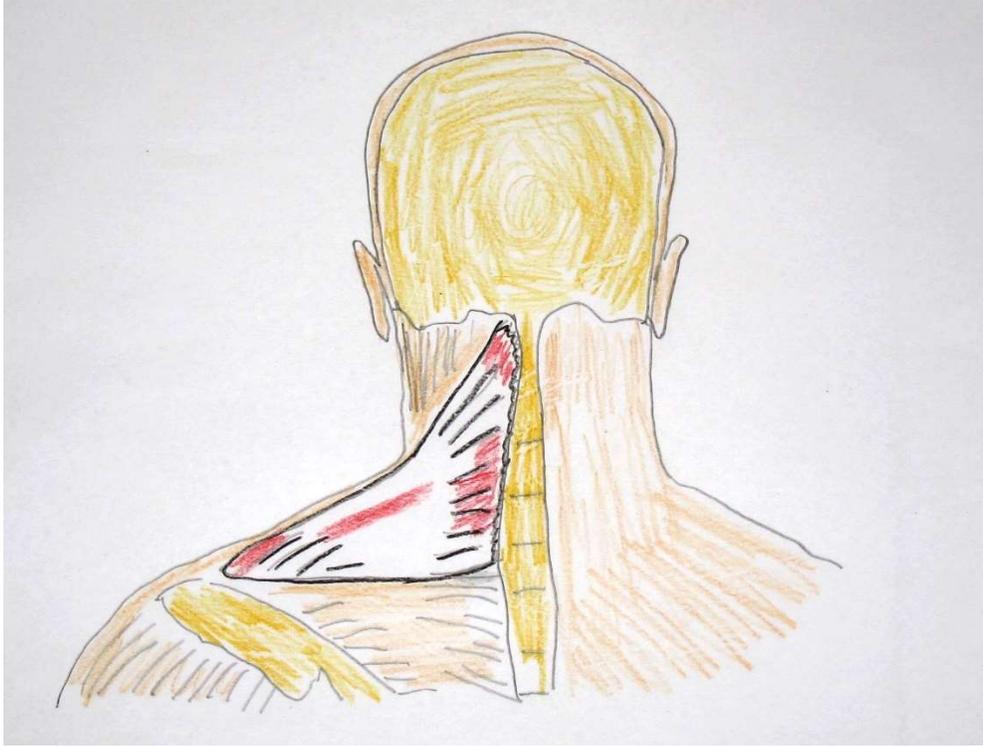
1. Straighten your left elbow in order to lengthen these muscles fully.
2. With your elbow straight and palm facing down toward the floor...
3. Use your right hand to pull your left hand down and out.

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## Shoulder Pain

Holding your arm upright for an hour or two at a time, while at the same time keeping your shoulder immobilized, puts a great deal of strain on your shoulder muscles. Of particular interest to us today is your left-hand Upper Trapezius:



This muscle connects your shoulder-blades to your neck and spine and is used to help hold your left arm (and violin) steady. Your right Upper Trapezius also gets a workout, but your right (bow) arm has freedom of movement - it is allowed to move. In particular your left-hand Upper Trapezius is held still and is often under tension. Keeping this muscle immobile and tense for long periods of time makes it very angry, and it expresses its anger with pain.

Steps to alleviate shoulder pain:

1. Massage the muscle to release tension.
2. Apply heat.
3. Periodically stretch.
4. Pay attention to your shoulder muscles and consciously relax your shoulders when playing.

Massage

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The Upper Trapezius is a bit hard to reach by yourself, so it might be easier to have a masseuse or chiropractor work this muscle.

Barring that, there are some ways to massage the pressure points of this muscle yourself.

There are a number of back-massage products on the market such as the "Thera Cane", which allows you to easily massage knots on your back and shoulder:



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### Apply Heat

The Upper Trapezius is a fairly large muscle, so it may require a bit more heat to aid in its healing. I would recommend applying the warm sandy beaches of Aruba or Bali in February to this muscle. If that is not possible, a second recommendation is to enjoy a hot-tub after having sipped a six ounce dose of fermented grape juice pain killer. If that solution is still not an option, I would finally recommend a hot bath, and you can splurge and add a cup of Epsom Salt and dream about Aruba and Bali for a steamy hour.

### To Stretch your Upper Trapezius

1. Place the back of one hand on your lower back making sure you are keeping that side shoulder down.
2. Place the other hand gently across the top of your head, while the head is looking straight forward.
3. Apply gentle pressure to your head pulling your head towards the hand on head side until you feel a good stretch, no pain. (Do not push down)
4. Hold the stretch for 20-30 seconds and perform for both sides 3 times.



### Play Relaxed

Now we get into the Zen of playing the fiddle. There are so many things to keep track of while playing: notes, bowing, bow location, bow pressure, left hand fingering, right hand wrist and elbow action, pitch, tone, and don't forget to breathe... and all this while we also need to relax!

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The main requirement here is an awareness of our own bodies. What does it feel like to be tense? What does it feel like when we have two muscles fighting each other to keep our left shoulder stationary? I would recommend reading the works of Kató Havas in dealing with stress and performance.

Some of her workshops are available on youtube:

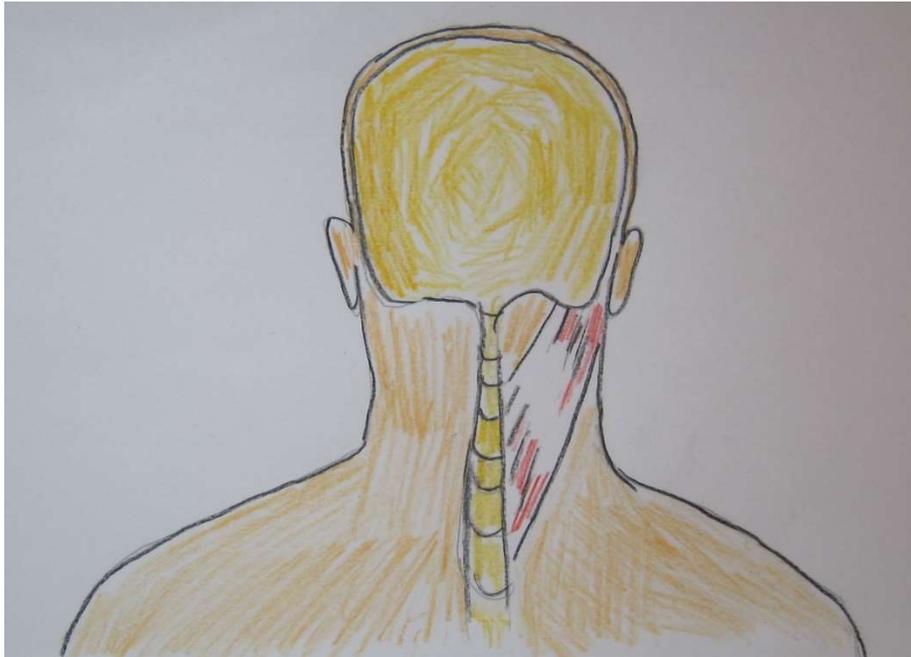
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### Neck Pain

Splenius Capitis is a broad, strap like muscle in the back of the neck.

It pulls on the base of the skull from the vertebrae in the neck and upper thorax.

It is involved in movements such as shaking the head... and holding a fiddle.



Now, to be fair, Splenius Capitis is only one of dozens of muscles in your neck that is used whilst playing the fiddle.

Consider for a moment what a marvelous creation your neck is!

Imagine all the different motions your neck is capable of performing. The head is where our brain is, and it is the brain that controls our fingers, our bow arm and our tapping feet. All nervous system signals are funneled through our neck to the rest of our body. All those nerves, muscles, bone, throat, and blood vessels are packed into a really narrow flexible conduit. So, neck problems can wreak absolute havoc on our playing, or just life in general.

Holding your neck muscles in shortened or extended positions for long periods of time puts a lot of strain on that important conduit called our neck. So, it is very important to avoid problems by keeping a "good posture", and not excessively straining your neck muscles.

That's right, we are here today to lecture you just like your mother used to (or perhaps still does):

"Sit up straight and don't slouch!"

So, if at all possible, don't play like this:

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(an example of bad playing posture)

Instead, play more like this:



Good Posture

Look, your head should be upright, shoulders horizontal - good, very good!

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If you have a shoulder rest for your violin, make sure it is adjusted to a height where your head is straight and upright when you play. But even more than that, be aware of how much pressure you exert on your chin rest.

Can you turn your move your chin off of the chin rest while you are playing?

Can you play relaxed enough to turn your head?



Not that you want to play like this all the time, but as a test, try turning your head while playing, if only to take stock of how tense your neck is while you play. Learn to recognize tension. Only by knowing what tension is can we relax those muscles.

To compensate for the pressure that we inevitably put on our necks, it is a good idea to do some head rolls before or after practicing and/or performing (preferably before to stretch the muscles before we make them work).