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The Phenomenon of Referred Pain

It usually begins with a question as I apply pressure to a tender knot in the hips. “Is it possible that I feel that in my foot?” Often clients are a little embarrassed to ask me the question as they think I may question their sanity.

For our discussion referred pain is a pain or sensation that is felt distant from the area being treated. It is common for trigger points in the hips to refer pain down the thigh and leg, and for trigger points in the trapezius muscle on top of the shoulder to refer pain up the side of the neck into the temporal area. A striking example of referred pain is phantom limb pain in which a person who is missing part or all of an extremity struggles with pain in the very part that is absent.

In describing referred pain to clients I use the example of pinching a dog on the tail as it barks way at the other end!

Janet Travell, MD, President Kennedy’s personal physician, was one of the first physicians to discover the common referred pain patterns created when skeletal muscles contain active trigger points (muscle knots). Her initial work involved injecting irritants into specific

muscles and then having subjects draw where they felt the pain. To her surprise, the major pain was often located a great distance from the injection site. Even earlier, various emergency room physicians were aware that angina (chest pain) was often not a cardiac issue, but arose from a tight group of muscles in the front of the neck called the scalenes.

Being able to locate trigger points that refer pain to a distant area or that recreate a pain previously felt is generally considered a good sign that there is a muscular component of the client’s symptoms. Usually, as sessions progress and the tissues become more pliable and oxygenated the referred pain sensations begin to subside. It helps for clients to understand referred pain so they can better understand why therapy techniques may be applied to areas distant from their symptoms.

Therapists are also wise to understand referred pain patterns as well to insure they are not neglecting trigger points that may be causing symptoms elsewhere. I am reminded of the man who lost his keys in the house but looks for them in the street because the light is better there. Till next time,

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-John C. Gifford, CBPM, NCTMB
Owner, Motionwise®



John Gifford has performed over 40,000 sessions as an approved provider of sports massage and a unique style of bodywork called Bonnie Prudden Myotherapy® and Exercise Therapy®. His mission as a clinician, lecturer, consultant, and author is to empower people to lead more active, successful, and fulfilling lives through the reduction and prevention of their muscular pain and tension.