
7 Muscle Strain Mistakes We Make Daily *And How to Avoid Them!*

Special Report



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I am sure you have had one of those mornings where you wake up all stiff and achy but don't know what you did to cause your muscles to be so grumpy.

The fact of the matter is that you probably did do something to cause it, but it wasn't a catastrophic event. Rather, it was a slow, progressive overuse of an area, which eventually just couldn't take any more abuse, and had to let you know! These are often activities that we do every day, without noticing any negative repercussions at the time.

So let's look at a few common muscle-stressing activities we do every day without giving them a second thought (until now, of course!)

1. Grocery Bag Warrior

Do you find that you have to challenge yourself to see how many grocery bags you can carry in from the car at one time? Unless you get groceries really often, and only come home with one or two bags, you are probably guilty of grocery bag misconduct (I know I am).

When you load yourself up with 6 or 7 grocery bags, it is not only the combined weight that is the issue, but also the fact that they are awkward to carry, so you have to hold your arms out to your sides. This puts a lot of pressure on your shoulders, forearms and wrists. Then there is the act of trying to get the door open with two armloads of baggage, (because I am assuming that if you just spent 10 minutes getting all these bags placed correctly, you are not willing to take them off just to open the door!) This is often the step that puts the finishing touch on a minor irritation and turns it into an overworked and angry flare up. But the job isn't even done yet, especially if your kitchen is on the second floor like mine is! So then you trudge up the stairs with an extra 30 pounds of weight dragging you down. As long as you have strong legs to begin with this can actually be a great workout, but of course you are trying hard not to bang the bag with the mango's and eggs against the wall as you climb the stairs. If this is the only form of exercise you get in a week, then the thirty or so extra pounds might just be a bit too much for your knees to handle, and they can get inflamed and sore if unaccustomed to such activity.

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So you finally get them onto the counter (yet more lifting and straining), and then, after getting them all put away, decide to reward yourself with a game of free cell. You feel your knees ache a little as you sit down at the computer, and then can't play more than one game as your forearms start aching after 10 moves. But why, all you did was get a few groceries?

I challenge you to time yourself the next time you "load up", and then see how long it takes to bring your bags in two at a time. Chances are it takes about the same amount of time, but with much less stress to your body. And if you have a flight of stairs to go up, you get the bonus of extra steps to climb – soooo good for the toosh!

If it is just too tempting to pile all those plastic bags onto your forearm in one go, then start asking for paper bags – they are more environmentally friendly and you can only carry one in each arm!

2. Mouse Madness

Ah, you arrive home after a long day at the office (or getting groceries), and decide to relax by doing a little online surfing. But not five minutes into it you have to stop because your forearms are sore.

Been there? We ask so much of our poor little hands and wrists these days, and give them no respect in return! Most of the muscles that control your finger movement start in the elbow area, and extend down your forearm and into your hands. So with every word you type and every click of the mouse you make, you are working all these muscles. We all know that if we walked for a solid 8 hours a day, our legs and feet would probably be tired, so why do we assume that we can use our hands all day and expect a different outcome?

Typing is bad enough on your forearms and wrists, but at least you are using different fingers (unless, of course you are a two finger wonder!) Using the mouse, on the other hand, is almost exclusively a one-finger job, and you do it over and over and over again. Then there is the vice-grip hold of the mouse, as if it is going to run away if you let go! So with mousing, you have a double whammy, with repetitive

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movement of the index finger, combined with a static contraction of the muscles in the thumb and pinky or ring finger to grip the mouse.

This sets your forearm and wrist area up for tight, stagnant muscle tissue, which is the perfect environment for trigger points to set in! (Now comes referring pain into the wrists and weak "dead" arms). But how can this be, you only played for 5 minutes!

You might be thinking that there is nothing you can do about this – I mean, you have to work, right? You need to start with a few changes at work – every time you are on the computer for more than a half an hour, take **one minute** (or slightly longer if possible), stand up, shrug your shoulders, turn your head side to side, and front to back, reach your arms above your head and give them a shake, do any other movements that feels necessary, and then sit down and get back at it. I guarantee you that the moments lost to do this will be recovered because you are more refreshed and functioning just a little better!

When you get home, spend a few minutes doing some self-massage to your forearms and hands, then fill the kitchen sink up with cold water and plunge your forearms and hands into it for 30 seconds. This really does revive tired achy forearms. If you do use a computer all day at work, try to cut down a bit on the time spent online at home – save it for the weekends, or do something else for a while first – go for a walk, or relax with a book. Give your hands and forearms a little rest. If you must go online, make sure you take frequent breaks as described above, and ice your forearms for 5 minutes when you are done (or do another cold arm bath).

3. Lop-Sided Driver

This one is for all you guys out there! Have you ever sat for 30 minutes with a one-inch book under one butt cheek? This is basically what you do every time you drive or sit with a wallet in your back pocket.

I tried this, in the name of science, and here is what I felt (I had the book under my right side):

The right side of my waist felt like it was collapsed over to the right. My lower ribs felt like they were sticking out slightly on the left, but

my upper back felt like it was leaning to the right. My neck felt cricked over to the left side, and I started to feel some pain there (left side of my neck) after about 20 minutes. This was messed up! Basically, my spine was in a bit of an S-curve to compensate for the crooked start it was getting in the hips, all in an effort to keep my head straight! (Note: this isn't the same as having a "leg length discrepancy". Your body compensates for that much more effectively. When you are sitting with a wallet under your hip, your hips are fixed in the misaligned position, with no natural give, due to the firmness of the wallet. The only way your body can overcome this tilted position is by tilting the other way somewhere farther up your spine. With a leg length discrepancy, your hips are even when you are sitting, and when standing and walking, the natural give and fluid motions of your body help absorb and compensate for the discrepancy.)

So the next time your friend is complaining about a pain in his neck, ask him if he drives with his wallet in his back pocket! Please guys, take your wallets out of your pockets when you sit down or drive, or buy yourselves a nice man-purse!

4. High Heel Horror

And now for the ladies, the dreaded high heel lecture! It is true that high heels make your legs look long and beautiful, but they wreak havoc on the rest of your body, by throwing your center of gravity off, so that your muscles have to work extra hard to keep you upright. This causes tightness in the low back and calves, draws your head and neck forward, stressing muscles in the front and back of your neck, and puts increased force on the forefoot and inner knee, possibly leading to degenerative changes over time. Heels also cause your hips and gluteal muscles to work harder to help maintain balance. It is kind of like being pregnant without the belly, but it doesn't end after 9 months, you just keep doing the damage, day after day, month after month, and year after year.

If you just can't stand being your actual height, try wearing the lowest heel possible. If the 3 inch stiletto's are a must have in your wardrobe, then at least wear flats to your destination, and then slip on the calf enhancers before you make your entrance! Give your calves

and feet a little stretch and massage when you return home, and try not to wear them every day.

5. Stationary Stan

Sometimes you can feel pain and discomfort, and think that you didn't do anything, and the truth is that you didn't do anything! That is the problem – you didn't do **anything**! Your body was made to move, to the point that your body needs to move in order for it to function properly. Muscle contractions in the legs help move blood up the veins and back to your heart. Muscle contractions and range of motion movements lubricate and nourish your joints and tissues. Without movement, toxins cannot be released from your tissues, and oxygen and nutrients cannot get in. The tissues then become stagnant and unhealthy, and call out for oxygen, and they do this by hurting! When an area becomes painful, your body responds by increasing tension in surrounding muscles to help splint and protect the area. This protective spasm causes even less blood flow to be able to get into the area, and therefore more toxins build up, the muscle gets even more unhealthy, and complains even louder! Now you are in the middle of a nasty tension – pain – tension cycle, and it perpetuates itself!

One of the best ways to deal with this is to not allow yourself to get here in the first place! Your body was indeed made for movement, so please move it! You don't have to join a gym or run a marathon, just get out there and be active! Go for hikes, play tennis with a friend, work out in the yard, go to the playground with a child, and play!

If you are caught in the middle of this cycle, you may want to look into some therapy first, to help reduce the spasm and trigger points. This will make activity a lot more comfortable, and ensure that you stick to it. Another great way of "sticking to it" is to enlist a partner. I know that I wouldn't run half as much as I do now if it weren't for my running partner. (Thanks, Maria!)

If you do nothing else, at least perform a few range of motion exercises when you first get up in the morning, or if you have been sedentary for a period of time (like after watching TV or sitting in front of your computer). Get on all fours and do some cat stretches for your back – just arch your back up and then relax it down. Roll your neck

and shoulders, and then lie on your back and raise your legs up and down (flexing at the hip), one at a time. Even this little bit of movement will help get the blood flowing and make your muscles happier!

6. Telephone Trauma

Have you ever watched someone play the violin and asked yourself or someone next to you “doesn’t his/her jaw and neck hurt from holding that thing like that?” Well, the next time you have the telephone wedged between your ear and shoulder, so that you can do 10 other things while talking on the phone, run down the hall to the bathroom and look at your head and neck positioning. I bet you will ask the same question that you asked of the violinist!

When you hold the phone between your ear and shoulder, you have to kink your head and neck over to the side, and raise your shoulder up to meet it. Sustaining this position for periods of time can therefore have some significant effects on your neck and shoulders. The muscles and ligaments in the side of your neck that cradles the phone get squished together and can become a little bound up on one another. Then, when you finally hang up, they will more than likely not want to straighten up quite as quickly as you want them to!

The muscles in your shoulder will probably protest even louder, as they are fairly strong muscles, and are a favorite spot for trigger points to flare up in! The upper trapezius and levator scapulae muscles are the big two in this area that lift your shoulder up towards your ear, and that is exactly what they do to help keep that phone in the right place! Trigger points in these muscles are almost a guarantee after prolonged contractions of this sort, and can send pain around your shoulder blade area, and up into your neck, back of the head, and behind the eye. Doesn’t sound very nice, does it!

It is so easy to hold the phone this way and get a bunch of chores done at the same time, but you really owe it to who ever you are talking with to be there in the moment with them through the conversation. And you owe it to yourself to protect your neck and shoulders from such pointless trauma! If you just can’t stop this habit,

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get yourself a head set, or opt for a phone that has a speaker phone, and go hands free that way!

If you ignore these suggestions, and find yourself aching and stiff due to telephone trauma, get some heat on the area to relax the muscles, do some gentle massage to help release any trigger points, and stretch or mobilize the neck and shoulders to help loosen everything back up and keep it loose! If that doesn't do the trick then it is time for some professional massage therapy help!

7. Barely Breathing

How can breathing cause muscle strain, you might ask? Well, it might not directly cause muscle strain, (unless you are breathing so hard that you fatigue your breathing muscles) but it will affect how your muscles respond to strain! With only shallow breathing, your muscles will not receive enough oxygen to function optimally, as oxygen is required for the production of energy through aerobic metabolism. Metabolic waste products, produced during muscle activity, will not be carried out of the muscles, and only limited amounts of nutrients will be able to enter. This means that your muscles may not have enough energy to perform everything you want them to, and it will be more difficult for any muscle strains that do occur to heal!

Breathing fully is not only crucial for muscle function, but also for function on every cell in your body!

Although we have conscious control over breathing, it is a body function that we often seem happy to leave up to our subconscious processes. The problems arise when we, through stress and anxiety (and laziness), begin to breath shallow and listlessly, only filling a small portion of the lungs. If you do this enough, the amazing adaptive processes of your body will accept this as your new pattern for breathing, which then becomes your *normal* subconscious way to breath. This is why it is so important to regain conscious control over breathing again, so that you can breath fully and deeply, taking full advantage of the power of oxygen! Once you breath deeply for long enough, it will be hardwired into your brain as the *norm*, and allow you to breath this way without having to consciously think about it.

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So how do you do this? The easiest way to make fuller breathing automatic is to pick one activity you do every day, and practice your deep breathing every time you do this activity. It could be driving to work, taking a shower, preparing dinner, whatever you want. Just pick one activity, and breath deeply every time you perform this task. (You don't have to do it the entire time – if your commute to work is an hour, just do it for a few minutes every once in a while during your trip). After about three weeks of conscious effort, you will find that you are breathing deeper without even thinking about it! Once you get to this point, pick a new task you do every day, and start deep breathing every time you perform this task. Continue this process until you have a few tasks that you are doing every day without having to pay attention to your breath. You will find that your energy levels increase, your mind will be clearer, and your muscles will be thanking you!

A few words of caution about full breathing, this is meant to be **relaxed breath**, not forced. If you are trying this and start to get dizzy or numb and tingly, then ease up (we don't need you passing out on the way to work!) All you need to do here is be more aware of filling your lungs a little fuller. Start by breathing in through your nose, feeling your abdomen inflate (yes ladies, let those bellies expand). Then keep filling into your chest, allowing your ribcage to expand all the way around and all the way up. (Did you know that your lungs go all the way up to your collarbones when inflated)! Once you have taken a **comfortable** full breath, let the air exit your nose without forcing it out. Repeat this 5 to 10 times the first time you try it, and then add a few more times once that feels OK.

Please check with your doctor before trying full breath exercises if you have any chronic lung conditions, anxiety, or any other serious illness or condition that you think might be problematic.

And there you have it! These of course are not the only muscle straining activities we do every day, but they are some very common ones. If you can avoid these repetitive no no's, and be more conscious of movements and activities you are doing on a daily basis which might pose a problem, you will be much less apt to down time due to painful achy muscle strains!