

Pain in the Back - Upper Back Tension

by James Bone

Nagging pain or tightness between the shoulder blades or upper back area?

Read on – this article is for YOU!!!

And if you don't have a problem there – read on anyway – it may help you to PREVENT getting the problem in the future.

Just a word of WARNING

If you suddenly get pain in this area, feel unwell, perhaps start sweating, get pins and needles, feel breathless or any other related symptoms and it goes on beyond 15 minutes, you should call an ambulance – it may be related to your heart.

If nagging pain is getting worse, feels deep, or you have other symptoms such as a cough, or digestive issues, you should have your doctor check you over, in case the problem is related to some internal problem which is referring to your back.

Or see a doctor if you feel the problem just doesn't feel right.

The relationship between Posture, Stress and Emotions

Having said that – the problem of tension or pain in the upper back or between the shoulder blades is often commonly related to 2 main factors: Posture, Stress and/or Emotions.

There are other possible causes, but they are beyond the scope of this article.

Poor Posture

There are 2 main postural imbalances here:

- The rounded back and shoulders with collapsed chest – this is common to many who work at the desk, with computers, teenage students, and those who are depressed.
- The overly extended spine, which is flat, with shoulders drawn back military like – this often occurs with flexible yoga students, as they try to over do the good posture thing.

Poor posture often originates from our genetics, poor daily habits, and muscle imbalances.

Weakness vs Tightness – the role of imbalance

One common cause of upper back tension lies with tightness in the muscles at the front of the chest, especially a muscle called the Pecs Minor. It attaches the front of the shoulder blade to the ribs, and when tight, causes the shoulder blades to be drawn up and forward – rounded shoulders. The upper back

muscles try to resist this movement and so become WEAK and over stretched, so they become tense and painful.

The problem is because the upper back muscles feel tight, we tend to want to stretch them, and this just ends up causing more problems. Better to **stretch** the muscles on the front of the chest, and **strengthen** the back muscles.

People with an overly flat back, often feel the need to crack their spines – this in fact can end up making the problem worse, as they need stability, not more flexibility. With respect to the flat upper back, the key here is to find balance. Allow the upper back to find a more neutral slightly rounded position – this may come from strengthening the abdominal muscles and trunk stability practices.

Balance within the shoulder blades also needs to be found – the shoulder blades should rest snugly to the rib cage, neither squeezed back, pressed down, tensioned upward or rotated. This may come from awareness of positioning, and strengthening the muscles of the shoulders blades with arm weight bearing practices.

This restoration of balance is NOT always easy and usually requires patience, vigilance and GUIDANCE from a health practitioner, such as your physiotherapist, or a yoga therapist.

Stress!!!

One could ask “What doesn’t stress affect?” Any way especially for some, the upper back can be a major place where they hold their stress. This is often the cause of tension in the upper back muscles, because we hold the breast bone and heart area rigid – this can be from shallow breathing, from habit, or due to emotional reasons.

If you focus only on loosening the upper back, without first releasing the heart and breastbone area, your progress may be poor. The back is more likely to need **strengthening**, rather than stretching. The key here is **breathing and softening** the heart area.

Emotional Issues are another major factor affecting the upper back area. Emotions which are suppressed, not acknowledged, or not dealt with properly can create tension in your muscles, biochemical changes to your physiology, and may even in the long term affect the health of your organs.

5 simple strategies you can use to help correct the problem:

- **Massage** the heart/breast bone area with your palm slowly 21 times.
- **Breathe** – long slow and deep. Inhaling, feel the breast bone, ribs and upper abdomen expand, then exhale slowly fully and completely, allowing your breast bone and heart area to completely soften....
- **Stretch** the chest muscles – if tight – the “hands behind the back” stretch is good for this. Holding a belt about hip width apart, with hands and belt behind your back (buttocks) – draw your shoulder blades open at the front and draw the

lower ends of the shoulder blades down your ribs, as though trying to press your hands to the ground (NOT backwards). Avoid arching your upper back, and feel the stretch to your front upper chest. Hold for 5 to 10 slow breaths....

- **Strengthen** your back and abdominal muscles..... see your physiotherapist, yoga teacher or exercise instructor for this.

- **Listen** to your emotions. From a yoga perspective, emotions are best seen like energy. Energy needs to move, emotions need to move, be expressed, acknowledged, and allowed to be let go..... Reflection during meditation can be a great way to address your emotions.

See your health practitioner if all this doesn't help - for more specific guidance for your personal needs.