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OrthoBethesda Therapy Services

Dry Needling (DN) – Information for Patients

What is Dry Needling (DN)?

DN involves the insertion of sterile, single-use acupuncture needles directly into myofascial (muscular) trigger points. Trigger points are composed of taut bands within the muscle, which cause and contribute to pain. Research studies have shown that inserting such needles into trigger points causes biochemical changes within the body, which help reduce pain.

Is DN the same as acupuncture?

Although DN uses the same needles as acupuncture, it is not the same technique. DN is strictly based upon Western medicine principles of treating myofascial trigger points, which are different from traditional acupuncture points.

How does it work?

Pioneering studies by Dr. Jay Shah and colleagues have shown that inserting needles into trigger points causes biochemical changes which alleviate pain. It is essential to elicit local “twitch” responses within the muscle, which are the first step to breaking the pain cycle and releasing tight trigger points within muscles.

Is it painful?

The initial insertion of the needle does not usually cause any discomfort. The local twitch response can cause a brief painful reaction. Some patients describe this as an electric shock or a cramping sensation. It is important to remember that the therapeutic effect only occurs by eliciting the twitch response. Therefore, it is the desirable reaction. Most patients describe treatment as feeling uncomfortable, but not painful.

Are the needles sterile?

Yes. We only use sterile, single-use, disposable needles.

Are there any side effects/How quickly will it work?

It is common to feel some soreness post treatment as with many manual therapy techniques, however, once this soreness has subsided there should be an improvement in the initial symptoms. Typically, soreness can last anywhere between 1 hour and 2 days post treatment. Some patients require 1-2 DN sessions, while others require 8-10. Individual results will vary.

What can I do after the treatment?

You may be advised to use heat or ice over the area after DN to help alleviate post-treatment soreness. You may need to temporarily modify your exercises or activities for 1 or 2 days afterwards. DN is only one part of your treatment. Other therapy techniques will also be used, as appropriate, to gain the best results. You will be advised on the correct exercises to perform in conjunction with your treatment and these will be progressed over time in order to complete your rehabilitation.

Which conditions can be treated with DN?

DN can be used to treat a variety of musculoskeletal problems. Examples of conditions that can be treated successfully with dry needling include:

- Back and neck pain, including postural problems and tension
- Arm pain (shoulder impingements, tennis or golfer's elbow)
- Headaches
- Buttock and leg pain (including sciatic pain)
- Hamstring strains
- Knee pain
- Calf tightness or cramps