



3 Quick Ways to Reduce Upper Shoulder Tightness

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As I was thinking about my topic for this week's tip, I started to notice my shoulders were getting tight and I realized "that's it". Like many people I tend to carry a great deal of tension in my upper shoulder and neck region, especially when I am sitting at the computer and typing. The primary reason for this tension is often related to the position we are holding ourselves in.

For example, sitting at the computer causes us to bring our head forward and elevate our shoulders creating the sensation "that my shoulders are in my ears." There are a host of muscles helping to pull you into this position but I am going to pick on a few specifically. The first group is your anterior cervical muscles which help you flex, extend and rotate your neck and head. It is also important to note that they are accessory breathing muscles. The second primary group is your upper trapezius muscles. These muscles are often the primary location for tension to reside. Finally, the levator scapula is a muscle that lies deep to the upper trapezius. Now that we have some understanding of the muscles we are targeting, let's talk about the exercises.

1. Shoulder Blade Squeezes

These are easily accomplished while sitting in a chair or standing. Simply pull your shoulder blades back and try to squeeze them together in your mid-back region. While in this position hold them together and take 5 breaths in your nose and out your mouth. The goal is emphasize reduction of some of the tone building up in your upper trapezius muscles through actively inhibiting them by engaging the middle trapezius and the rhomboids. Repeat this movement 5 times.

2. Levator Scapula/Upper Trapezius Stretch

Turn your head toward either direction and look down as if you are going to smell your arm pit. Once in this position, use the hand on that same side to pull your head down slightly more and you should feel a stretch along the opposite neck and upper shoulder region. Again, hold this position as you breathe in your nose and out your mouth 5 times. Relax and repeat 5 times on each side. The goal of this activity is to create a stretch inhibition of the upper trapezius and levator scapula muscle.

3. Balloon Blow

This exercise is best done on your back with your feet up, but can be performed sitting. If you can lie down, go onto your back and put your knees in a bent position with your feet flat on the floor so you are relaxed. Take a balloon with your left hand and hold it to your mouth. Proceed to breathe in the nose and out the mouth without taking your mouth off of the balloon. You should try to hold the air in the balloon by creating a seal by raising your tongue onto the roof of your mouth. If this is too difficult pinch the neck of the balloon between breathes. Focus on keeping your NECK RELAXED and breathe from your abdomen. The balloon provides resistance for your obliques and diaphragm and you should feel them engage. Perform 5 breaths then relax and repeat 5 times. The goal is to engage your primary breathing muscles and inhibit your accessory breathing muscle in the anterior neck. (If performing sitting, emphasis should be placed on the same thing and don't let your body start to lean forward due to the effects of gravity).

The final bits of advice I have is to take a break and change positions at least every hour and force yourself to think about relaxing your shoulders. This will allow your body to adjust and force you to engage some different muscles to move. If all else fails my final recommendation is some moist heat and a loving family member or friend to provide a nice relaxing massage, as that always seems to do the trick for me!