

Trigger Point Self-Treatment



Diagnosis ➔ Confident diagnosis of trigger points (TrPs) is nearly impossible: they can only be *suspected* based on a critical mass of symptoms and an absence of other plausible causes of pain. There are no objective clinical tests.

The more of these symptoms you have, the more likely it is that trigger points explain your pain:

- ✓ You have sore spots in your soft tissues.
- ✓ Your pain usually occurs in specific areas of your body.
- ✓ It feels more like muscles than joints (a subjective judgement).
- ✓ Your pain is primarily dull, aching, and nagging.
- ✓ You feel a lot of stiffness as well as pain.
- ✓ Stretching is appealing, but not very effective.
- ✓ Hot showers and baths are usually helpful.
- ✓ Anti-inflammatory medications don't really work.
- ✓ Your symptoms tend to come and go erratically.

Some other diagnostic considerations:

- ✓ A taut, ropy band of muscle around the most sensitive spot.
- ✓ A muscle twitch when you press on a sore.
- ✓ "Referred pain" that spreads out from a sore spot, or surround it, like a diffuse glow. It may even occur in different location.
- ✓ Pressing on a TrP usually causes pain that feels both *familiar* ("symptom reproduction") and good (relieving, like scratching an itch).
- ✓ **But beware!** Please don't be overconfident—lots of normal anatomy and other problems feel like a sore bump! It's not necessarily a TrP.
- ✓ **Relentlessly worsening pain** is probably *not* caused by a trigger point.

Basic Self-Treatment ➔ Basic treatment consists primarily of self-massage with fingers, thumbs and simple massage tools like a tennis ball, and avoiding basic aggravating factors such as cold.

These basic methods will relieve many trigger points:

- ✓ Start with extremely gentle pressure, really just tugging the skin.
- ✓ Then ramp up a bit and press and *hold* and apply small *kneading* strokes.
- ✓ Keep your maximum pressure tame at first, even if you crave more! Aim for the Goldilocks zone: 5 out of 10, and mostly a "good pain" quality.
- ✓ Use simple tools (e.g. tennis ball) for hard-to-reach spots.
- ✓ Massage spots for about a minute each, 3 times/day for a few days.

Tips to improve your odds.

- ✓ Treat only a few knots at a time. Work only with the worst spots at first.
- ✓ Beware of excessive pressure—it's by far the worst amateur mistake.
- ✓ Stay warm! Chills are the top TrP aggravator.
- ✓ Lightly exercise treated muscles—just enough to increase circulation.
- ✓ Get some sleep soon after treatment.
- ✓ Better balls! Almost everyone has a tennis ball around, but other sizes or firmness can be game-changers.
- ✓ Recruit amateur help so you can relax during treatment.

Advanced Self-Treatment ➔ Many trigger points are not treatable. Advanced treatment involves better massage technique, adding other methods, troubleshooting common problems & eliminating perpetuating factors. Always remember: *any good massage is better than bad trigger point therapy!*

Experiment with these enhancements to your self-treatment:

- ✓ Don't just "chase pain" — some TrPs are located remote from the symptoms (often upwards and inwards). Many treatment breakthroughs happen when you find a spot you didn't previously suspect.
- ✓ More Swedish! Add more preparatory massage: broad lubricated strokes with muscle fibres, pushing tissue fluids towards the heart.
- ✓ Add gentle stretching and heat before, after, and/or during treatment.
- ✓ Add mobilizations — "massage with movement," plenty of rhythmic contractions and elongations of stiff and painful muscles.
- ✓ Add a topical anti-inflammatory medication (e.g. Voltaren® Gel).
- ✓ Work up to stronger pressures, very slowly over days or weeks.
- ✓ Try "TrP pressure release": slowly increase painless pressure up to slight resistance, hold until softening, then add more pressure. Repeat for about 90 seconds or until there's no more sensitivity.
- ✓ Experiment with more massage tools. The right tool is often a quirky choice, and can make a surprising difference. Try a "thumper."
- ✓ Bracket treatment with vigorous deep breathing.

Solve treatment problems and eliminate perpetuating factors:

- ✓ Identify and eliminate medical perpetuating factors, especially nutritional deficiencies, especially vitamin D—vital in many tough cases.
- ✓ Launch a campaign to eliminate classic medical factors like sleep loss, stress, postural strain, poor fitness, and smoking.
- ✓ Seek and destroy *all other* "perpetuating factors" — anything that tends to make *your* trigger points worse.
- ✓ Too many TrPs? Focus on the *worst first*. "Satellite" TrPs rarely yield while "primary" TrPs persist.
- ✓ Give up on treatments that aren't helping.
- ✓ If you are having negative reactions, determine if they are truly negative or just a "healing crisis." Drop treatment intensity *as much as needed*.
- ✓ If you have serious barriers to cure, such as unavoidable perpetuating factors, consider changing your goals from "cure" to "management."
- ✓ Combine self-treatment with some professional therapy—it's a great way to get ideas about what you like and don't like.

