

Ever been for a relaxing massage only to be told your shoulders were more tense than an episode of *Squid Game* (and those knots in your back might as well start paying rent)? Or found yourself clenching your jaw without even realising it? We've all been there. It's surprising how much tension our bodies can carry without us even realising it, but why does it happen and, more importantly, is there anything we can do to help ease it?

'Muscular tension is when a muscle stays tight or contracted for a long time, even when it's not actively working,' explains Hayley Jennings, senior physiotherapist at the Royal Orthopaedic Hospital's physiotherapy department. 'Every muscle has a certain capacity (how much load or activity it can cope with comfortably). If that capacity is regularly exceeded, like sitting too long in one position, or doing more than usual, like repeating a

movement without enough rest, the muscle can develop increased tension.'

And the culprits aren't just physical. Everyday stress and feelings of anxiety can manifest physically, causing us to subconsciously clench our jaws, hunch our shoulders, or carry a tight feeling in our chest. This is especially true during busy times in life, when it feels our to-do lists are endless and there's little time to stop and breathe (we're looking at you, Christmas).

We're often quick to shrug off tension, but we should take the pain and tightness it creates seriously.

Ready to release? Here's where tension often builds and what we can do about it.

Jaw clenching

THE CAUSE: Clicking, clenching and grinding. Sound familiar? You're not alone. According to research by Bupa, one in 10 people have a problem with

their jaw joint, known as temporomandibular jaw disorder (TMJ). This can cause tightness, jaw clicking, toothache and even cracks in the teeth.

'Tension in the jaw is one of those things people overlook until it starts causing real damage,' says dentist and orthodontic expert, Dr Madhur Sharma. 'I see it every week, with people coming in with cracked fillings, sensitive teeth, or headaches, not realising they've been clenching their jaws for years.'

'One thing people don't realise is how jaw clenching links to other areas. When you grind your teeth, the force isn't small, it can be up to 250 pounds of pressure. That force doesn't just stop at the teeth, it pulls on the jaw joint, the neck muscles, the base of the skull. I see patients with tight shoulders or temple headaches, it's their bite muscles overworking every night.'

THE SOLUTION: Dr Loven Ganeswaran, lead dentist and CEO of Sunninghill Dental Clinic, suggests doing a stocktake of your daily stress levels. 'Managing everyday stress is essential and, from a dental perspective, we often recommend custom night guards to protect the teeth,' he says. 'In chronic cases, botox is suggested as it can relax the overactive masseter muscles and help reduce clenching.'

Other lifestyle solutions include applying a warm face flannel to your jaw before bed to help it relax or a cold pack wrapped in a flannel, whichever feels better. Some find face rollers (try *Super Facialist Cryo Ice Roller Facial Massage Globes*, £15), before bed helpful for unclenching, alongside relaxation techniques like meditation. →

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FEEL THE

Writer Jessica Barrett explores how tension is playing havoc with our health – and how we can find that sweet release



If you're worried about teeth grinding, the *DenTek Maximum Protection Dental Mouth Guard*, £30, can help protect them. Speak to your dentist if it's ongoing and to rule out bite misalignment.

Shoulders, neck & back

THE CAUSE: Do you have slouching shoulders, a hunched back and a head tilted downwards throughout the day? You could be suffering from 'tech neck'. Research shows sitting for more than six hours a day increases the risk of neck pain by nearly 88%, while using a mobile phone increases it by 82%*.

'Sitting for prolonged periods, especially slumped or slouched, can place additional strain on the muscles,' explains physiotherapist Hayley. 'When you hunch over, the "flexor" muscles on the front of your body like your chest and hips are maintained in a shortened position and over time can become tight. At the same time, the "extensor" muscles on the back of your body like your upper back, shoulders and spine, work hard to keep you upright, which can make them tense.'

THE SOLUTION: No choice but to sit at a desk all day? Hayley recommends setting up your desk so your screen is at eye level, feet flat and elbows at 90 degrees – your body should feel supported, not strained. Break up long periods of sitting with 'movement snacks' every 30 to 60 minutes, even

standing or walking briefly can help. Or try some easy stretches like chin tucks, shoulder rolls and thoracic extensions (like cat/cow pose). And embrace health tech. *Bodi-Tek Neck & Shoulder Massager*, £49.99, uses infrared heat and electrical muscle stimulation to relieve tightness and you can wear it sitting at your desk.

Head & temples

THE CAUSE: Tension headaches are the most common type of headache, with more than 70% of us experiencing them at some point (and women are slightly more susceptible)**. Tension headaches can feel like a pressing or tightening of the muscles in the head and neck, and are usually caused by feelings of everyday stress, neck and eye strain, TMJ or sleep problems.

THE SOLUTION: They're usually treated with pain relievers like ibuprofen or paracetamol. Applying heat or cold packs to your neck and head, like *Neo G Universal 3D Hot & Cold Therapy Pack*, £10, may also help. Relaxation techniques, such as massage, yoga, or

meditation, can also be effective and provide more long-term benefits. While tension headaches are common, see a GP if you have several headaches a week or they're severe.

Stomach tensing

THE CAUSE: We all get the sensation of butterflies in our bellies from time to time, but if you're experiencing

something more than this – but it's not quite painful – it could be stomach tensing. Tension in your tummy typically reflects everyday stress, feelings of anxiety, or nervousness, but it can also be linked to physical strain, irritable bowel syndrome or posture.

'Some patients clench their stomach muscles when they're anxious and forget to breathe properly,' says Dr Sharma. 'I can't count how many times someone has told me they wake up holding their breath, feeling wired before the day even starts.'

THE SOLUTION: If a tight stomach is a persistent issue, it's important to see your GP to try to ascertain if there's an underlying cause.

Other steps you can take to help ease symptoms is deep, slow belly →

'Sitting for prolonged periods can place strain on the muscles'





breathing as it ‘can be effective at calming the nervous system’, says Five Element acupuncturist, Johnny Childs.

According to the NHS, people who are tense often breathe using only the top part of their lungs and tend to ‘hold’ the breath. This is where belly or diaphragm breathing comes in. You’re aiming to breathe right down into the bottom of your lungs. The big band of muscle that is underneath the lungs, called the diaphragm, then pushes down and this makes the belly expand. Take slow, gentle deep breaths down into the bottom of your lungs – as if you are blowing up a balloon in your belly. Your belly should be moving more than the top of your chest. As you exhale, imagine you’re breathing out all that tension and tightness with each breath.

A roll-on scent like *This Works Stress Check Breathe-In Roll-On*, £21 (8ml/£26.25 per 10ml), with eucalyptus,

frankincense and lavender oils, can remind you to pause for a moment, take a breath and release that tummy.

Foot clenching

THE CAUSE: We often refer to incidents as ‘toe-curling’, but this can literally happen to our feet when our bodies have an emotional reaction.

‘It’s usually about fear or uncertainty. It’s like the body trying to grip the ground for safety,’ says acupuncturist Johnny.

Tension in the feet can also come from wearing flat shoes that your toes need to grip to walk (think flip-flops and pumps).

THE SOLUTION: Exercises like walking barefoot at home or a massage ball can help. Standing with one foot on the ground,

place the other foot on top of a massage ball, like *Hyperice Hypersphere Go Portable Vibrating Massage Ball*, £99, and slowly roll from toe to heel. You can also use this ball

on other tense areas of the body, such as back and shoulders.

As for those worn-in pumps? It might be time to try a pair with a subtle supportive foot arch (they look less orthopaedic than you think) or embrace the boot but ease the pressure with a foot insole like *Boots Everyday Gel Insoles*, £12.99.

Arm & leg tension

THE CAUSE: Repetitive movements you might do in your job or when looking after kids, such as rocking a baby, can all lead to muscle fatigue and tightness in the arms and legs.

This fatigue or tightness isn’t the same as when you’ve just done a new workout. Those sore muscles are how muscles adapt and get stronger, physiotherapist Hayley tells us. We’re talking about the kind that comes from daily, repetitive use of muscles we’ve not warmed up or aren’t giving them any time to recover.

THE SOLUTION: ‘Being physically active helps muscles cope better with daily demands, helping build endurance and reducing the risk of tension,’ says Hayley. She advises a routine that includes strength, range of movement and cardiovascular exercises so your muscles fare better when it comes to those inescapable, repetitive tasks.

Hayley suggests changing position often and taking short breaks where possible to move around. For relief, try gentle stretches or heat pads.

She adds: ‘Staying active, strong and mobile is one of the best ways to keep muscle tension under control.’

‘Staying active is a great way to keep muscle tension under control’

Words: Jessica Barrett. Photography: Alamy and Getty Images. *Study published in BMC Public Health. **World Health Organization. Follow the Royal Orthopaedic Hospital, Birmingham, on social media @ROHNSFT

