



Trigger Point Dry Needling Informational Guide

What is a trigger point?

A trigger point, often referred to as a muscle knot, is a tight, sensitive band within a muscle that can cause pain and restrict movement. This pain may be localized or referred to other areas of the body. Trigger points typically develop due to muscle injury, overuse, poor posture, or prolonged stress and tension.

A helpful way to visualize this is to think of a smooth, stretchable rubber band—this represents a normal muscle fiber. Now, imagine tying a knot in the band and trying to stretch it. The movement becomes restricted, and the stretch isn't as smooth. This knot is similar to a trigger point in a muscle, which can lead to discomfort, tightness, and reduced flexibility.

What is trigger point dry needling?

Trigger point dry needling (TDN) is a therapeutic technique where a trained physical therapist inserts a sterile, solid, monofilament needle into the skin and muscle to target trigger points. As the needle is manipulated, it helps release the trigger point, reducing muscle tension and pain. During the process, a local twitch response (a brief muscle spasm) may occur—this is a normal and desired reaction, as it indicates the trigger point has been effectively treated. The term “dry” refers to the fact that no medication or fluid is injected during this treatment—only the needle is used to stimulate muscle relaxation and healing.

Are dry needling and acupuncture the same thing?

Although both dry needling and acupuncture use the same type of needle, they are fundamentally different techniques. Dry needling is based on Western medical principles and focuses on treating musculoskeletal pain and dysfunction by releasing trigger points in muscles. Acupuncture, on the other hand, is rooted in traditional Chinese medicine and aims to balance the body's energy flow (Qi) through specific meridian points. Additionally, dry needling falls within the scope of practice for physical therapists, while acupuncture is performed by licensed acupuncturists.

Is dry needling safe for everyone?

While dry needling is a safe and effective treatment for many individuals, it may not be suitable for everyone. There are contraindications (do not perform) and precautions (proceed with caution) for dry needling that should be considered prior to treatment.

Contraindications include: malignant tumors, medical emergencies or in the place of surgical intervention, unstable blood pressure, active infections, blood disorders, open skin lesions, and internal organ diseases.

Precautions include: use of blood thinners, pregnancy, fear of needles, cognitive impairments, metal allergies (specifically nickel), immune disorders, diabetes, pacemaker, and bleeding disorders.

If any of these apply to you, you should discuss it with your physical therapist before proceeding.



Is soreness normal after dry needling?

Yes, mild soreness is a common and expected response to dry needling. This occurs due to the body's natural inflammatory response, which helps facilitate healing. Soreness typically lasts up to 48 hours and is often followed by a noticeable reduction in pain and muscle tension. Ice, heat, massage, and stretching can be effective tools to help decrease the soreness. Bruising may also occur, especially in areas with more superficial blood vessels, but this is a normal and temporary side effect. It is recommended to continue with your normal activities as tolerated after treatment to help reduce post-session discomfort..

What are the risks of dry needling?

Like any treatment, there are possible complications. Complications related to dry needling are infrequent and do not usually require additional medical treatment. The main risks and complications associated with dry needling include: bruising, hematoma, nerve injury, infection, and increased pain. Bruising is a common occurrence and should not be a concern unless you are taking a blood thinner. Temporary soreness is also a common occurrence and is expected to go away within 48 hours. As the needles are very small and do not have a cutting edge, any significant tissue trauma from dry needling is unlikely.

The most serious risk associated with dry needling is accidental puncture of a lung (pneumothorax). If this were to occur, it may only require a chest x-ray and no further treatment as it can resolve on its own. The symptoms of pneumothorax are pain and shortness of breath that may last for several days to weeks. A more severe lung puncture can require hospitalization and re-inflation of the lung. This is a rare complication, however, if you feel any related symptoms, immediately contact your dry needling provider, your physician, or go to an emergency room. If a pneumothorax is suspected you should seek immediate medical attention from your physician or if necessary go to the emergency room.

How many sessions will it take for me to feel better?


This varies from person to person. Some individuals experience relief after just one or two sessions, while others may require multiple treatments to achieve the full benefits. The number of sessions depends on factors such as the severity of the condition, the body's response to treatment, and overall health. Your physical therapist will assess your progress and recommend a treatment plan tailored to your specific needs. Ultimately, you decide how many sessions you'd like to continue with.

What if I have more questions about dry needling?

Feel free to reach out to:

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