

chiropractic/acupuncture

Ribs: an unexpected source of back pain

by: Dr. David Lee, BSc, BA, Chiropractor/ART Provider

History

Sara M., a 32 year old female, was experiencing pain and restricted movement in her mid and upper spine. She did not report a specific incident or traumatic event that triggered her pain, rather it was something that happened slowly over time for no apparent reason. Sara has no medical conditions or relevant medical history.

Symptoms

Sara was experiencing pain in her mid and upper back which she described as a dull ache that came and went throughout the day. She also felt a restriction in her spine which continued to wrap around and caused a tight pull across her chest. Sara only began experiencing back pain for 2 weeks, but felt the restriction in her spine for the past 2 years. The pain was aggravated by prolonged sitting, and felt better when she moved around.

Previous treatments rendered

Sara had received Chiropractic and Active Release Therapy in the past. While these treatments did give her some relief, it never fully resolved the problem.

Physical examination

I did not observe anything unusual about Sara's appearance, with no major muscular imbalances or deformities. Her range of motion in the upper back was full without any restrictions. My primary observation with Sara was the lack of movement in her rib cage when I asked her to take deep breaths. Other than that, everything else seemed unremarkable.

Diagnosis and treatment

As with each unique and individual case, determining the root cause of my patient's pain is a challenge but always my first priority. From my clinical experience, I've observed that the site of a patient's pain is not always the initiating site of their problem. For many cases, the site of a patient's pain can be caused by numerous external structures that contribute to the problem. This would explain those patients who receive therapy or treatment at the site of their pain but only experience temporary relief that can never be fully resolved. Sara's case was no different.

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My treatment for Sara consisted primarily of Active Release Technique (ART), a specialized soft tissue technique that breaks up the adhesions accumulating in a dysfunctional muscle, as well as some Chiropractic manipulations. I worked on several muscles including the muscles along her mid and upper spine, the rhomboid muscles which are inside her shoulder blades, the trapezius muscles located on her upper shoulders, as well as her pectoral muscles across her chest. I then followed up with some adjustments along her spine, focusing primarily on the costal-vertebral joints where the ribs attach to the spine.

Although Sara felt pain primarily through her spine and back where she received previous treatments, I observed that the main muscles causing much of her dysfunction were actually her intercostal muscles (little muscles found between the ribs). These muscles are responsible for contracting and expanding the rib cage during breathing. If these muscles don't function properly, they prevent the rib cage from expanding, which can translate to pain in your back as they attach to your spine.

Sara responded very well to therapy as the pain in her back subsided significantly. We observed a significant improvement in the mobility of her rib cage as she was now able to take full deep breaths. However, her problem still did not resolve fully. Although most of her pain had subsided, she still experienced some tension across her back and chest. Upon further discussions with Sara, I concluded that Sara was under a tremendous amount of stress in her daily life, which I felt was the main reason for tension in her back and chest. In order to address the "stress" component of her pain, I referred her to our Acupuncturist Dr. Jummy Kim.

Dr. Kim has had a tremendous amount of success with treating stress related illnesses through acupuncture. After just one treatment with Dr. Kim, Sara's stress had been significantly reduced, and the tension across her back and chest had finally subsided.

Final Thoughts

Sara's case is one that I have seen several times in my office. When a patient complains of pain just inside their shoulder blades, or mid-back pain associated with tension across the chest, I immediately look at the rib joints and intercostal muscles. These are areas of the body which many practitioners tend to ignore, but has been the root cause of many of the cases that I've treated.

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Other than with trauma, most people assume the intercostal muscles between the rib cage do not become dysfunctional. Just like any other major muscle, intercostal muscles can become tight because they are used 24 hours a day during breathing. This problem can be amplified with stress, and also with people who do not breathe properly. Many adults breathe with their chest and not with their diaphragm. The diaphragm muscle is one that sits underneath your rib cage. As you breathe, your diaphragm should drop allowing the bottom third of your lungs to inflate.

Examples of people who breathe properly with their diaphragm are singers, professional marathon runners, and babies. If you watch a baby as they sleep, you will notice the belly, not the chest, rise and fall. Proper breathing techniques are important not only for professionals, but also for every individual as it allows us to draw in more air and reduce tension. Pilates and

Yoga classes are a good place to learn proper breathing techniques and you will immediately notice the reduction in tension throughout your body as you begin taking deep full breaths from the diaphragm.

Sara's case is also a perfect example of how important it is to integrate treatments with other health care practitioners. Integration is one of the core values at the Adelaide Health Clinic as we believe that no one health specialty can fix all problems, but as a team we are able to combine all our expertise in order to provide the most comprehensive care for our patients.

Sara's Testimony

"After a few weeks of experiencing pain and restriction in my mid to upper spine, a friend suggested that I make an appointment with Dr. David Lee. During my first appointment Dave indicated that he felt the issue was more with my ribs, which is where he focused his attention. He illustrated this through a breathing exercise which made me realize that I couldn't inhale deeply, as well stretches that I had difficulty with.

After a few sessions, my back felt great and I started being able to take deep inhalations for the first time in a long time, but I was still experiencing tension in the soft tissue between my ribs. Dave used active release technique to relieve the tension, which helped, but wasn't fully clearing up the problem. Knowing that I had been under a lot of stress, Dave suggested I see his colleague, Dr. Jummy Kim for acupuncture, as he suspected that stress was the root cause of my issue.

After one session of acupuncture the tension between my ribs was gone, and has not returned since. By the morning after my first acupuncture session, my stress level had dropped significantly to a point where I almost felt like a new person! It was like a weight had been lifted. The combination of chiropractic and acupuncture treatment was perfect for me. The difference is night and day!"



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