

Dry Needling FAQs:

What is dry needling?

Dry needling is a therapeutic technique in which a trained physical therapist inserts small, sterile filament needles into the skin and muscle directly at a myofascial trigger point. This generates a twitch response, helping release muscle tension and pain.

What is a trigger point, and how did I develop one?

Active trigger points consist of multiple contraction knots within a muscle, and they can develop due to injury, musculoskeletal dysfunction and overuse. Active trigger points impair a person's ability to lengthen, strengthen or contract the muscle. As a result, the muscle shortens and compresses the structure around it, causing pain.

How can dry needling help patients?

Dry needling can be used to treat a variety of musculoskeletal issues, including: neck, back and shoulder pain; arm pain (tennis elbow, carpal tunnel, golfer's elbow); headaches (migraines and tension-type); jaw and dental pain; buttock and leg pain (sciatica, hamstring strains, calf tightness/spasms).

How does dry needling work?

Although the exact mechanisms of dry needling are not known, the technique has demonstrated both mechanical and biochemical effects. Pioneering studies by Dr. Jay Shah and his colleagues at the National Institutes of Health have shown that inserting a needle into trigger points can cause favorable biochemical change that can assist in reducing chronic pain issues.

Trigger points are known to have abnormal electrical activity and are surrounded by numerous chemicals known to cause inflammation. Research has shown that when a needle is successfully inserted into a trigger point and generates a local twitch response, over time, it can return the electrical and chemical environment within the muscle to its normal, relaxed state. Deactivated trigger points draw white blood cells and plasma cells into the area and create a healing response. Clinically, we see improved muscle length, strength, flexibility and a corresponding decrease in pain with our patients following dry needling treatment.

Is dry needling similar to acupuncture?

Although they use the same thin filament needles, acupuncture and dry needling are two very different treatments. In contrast to most schools of acupuncture, dry needling is strictly based on Western medicine principles and research. Acupuncture is used to treat Traditional Chinese Medical diagnoses of visceral and systemic dysfunction, while dry needling is used to assess and treat myofascial pain. Dry needling relieves pain by inactivating trigger points within muscles.

Acupuncture achieves pain relief through the release of endorphins and creating balance in the body's energy levels. Through the release of cortisol, acupuncture can also have an anti-inflammatory effect on the body. At PT Plus, our physical therapists are not licensed acupuncturists and do not practice acupuncture. Trigger Point Dry Needling and other physical therapy procedures are based on scientific neurophysiological and biomechanical principles.

Is dry needling painful?

The needle used in the procedure is very thin and most patients don't even feel it penetrate the skin. The twitch response usually elicits a very brief (less than a second) painful response. Some patients describe this feeling as a little electrical shock or cramping sensation. This twitch response is a positive and desirable reaction. Pain may also be felt in the referral zone, also and expected response to treatment.

Are the needles sterile?

Yes, we only use sterile, disposable needles.

Are there any side effects to the treatment?

Most patients report feeling sore following the procedure. Symptoms are usually described as sore muscles near the treatment area and in the areas of referred pain. Typically, the soreness lasts a few hours up to two days. Over this time, we may recommend applying heat or ice over the area, gentle stretching, and/or modifying your daily activities, depending on your individual response to the treatment and how sore you feel.

How long does it usually take to notice results?

Typically, patients notice a positive reaction within a few visits.

How does dry needling fit into the overall physical therapy treatment plan?

We've found that dry needling is most effective when used in conjunction with other physical therapy techniques and treatments. Dry needling is often especially useful early in treatment to help break the pain cycle. Once that is achieved, we may introduce additional physical therapy techniques.