

Abdominal Myofascial Pain

Overview: Myofascial pain is a term used to describe inflammation of the muscles. This inflammation can occur anywhere in the body including the abdominal area. The pain is often found in the upper abdomen just below the ribs or in the lower portion of the belly near the pubic bone. Most people with this disorder find the pain begins or increases when these muscles are stressed. Women may feel the pain coming from the vaginal area due to pelvic muscle irritation. Men can develop this problem after hernia surgery because it leaves the muscle less flexible due to scar tissue.

Diagnosis: Abdominal pain can result from a variety of disorders. The doctor will conduct a careful history and physical exam. The doctor may possibly order blood tests, urine analysis, and X-ray studies like ultrasound or computed tomography (CT scan) to rule out diseases affecting the internal organs. Once internal problems have been eliminated, the most likely diagnosis is fibrositis or abdominal muscle inflammation. This diagnosis can be confirmed through a physical exam, which shows the muscles to be painful to light touch. There are no X-ray or laboratory studies that determine if a patient has abdominal myofascial pain. These tests are only useful to rule out serious internal problems.

Treatment: In many cases, doctors can prescribe nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like Motrin and/or muscle relaxants for some relief. Heat and massage can also be helpful in relieving some of the pain, but will not do anything to improve the underlying condition. Injection of the muscles with local anesthetics and anti-inflammatory drugs can control long-term pain by decreasing the underlying irritation of the muscles. In addition, there are times when the cause of the pain comes from a group of nerves in the lower abdomen. In these cases injections may be given in the abdomen where the nerve is trapped in a scar, or in the back where it originates. Injections are usually given as a series of three over a period of weeks. All procedures can be given under light, intravenous sedation so there is no discomfort. If injections fail to relieve the pain, the doctor may prescribe an external electronic nerve stimulation device (TENS unit). These units work only for abdominal pain and not for pelvic or vaginal pain. While they do not cure the underlying problem, they can bring pain relief as long as they are worn. Physical therapists place these devices on patients and provide the necessary instruction for long-term use. Patients occasionally benefit from a behavioral and psychological analysis to determine whether there is something in their lifestyle or behavior contributing to the pain. This testing can reveal the emotional impact the pain is having, and whether it is aggravated by psychological or emotional problems. Some patients find biofeedback, stress reduction and muscle relaxation therapy beneficial for reducing symptoms aggravated by stress and emotional tension.

Prevention:

- Stress reduction
- Avoid smoking
- Maintain ideal body weight