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Evaluating the Therapeutic Benefits of Compressive Myofascial Release and Instrument-Assisted Soft Tissue Manipulation for Upper Trapezius Trigger Points in Neck Pain

Ruchi[1], Sonam[2], Navdeep Bisla[3], Preeti[4], Manila Duhan[5]

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Physiotherapy, BMU, Rohtak.

Corresponding Author: Navdeep Bisla

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ABSTRACT

Neck pain is a prevalent musculoskeletal disorder that significantly impacts daily activities and quality of life. It is often associated with myofascial trigger points (MTrPs) in the upper trapezius muscle, leading to localized pain, muscle stiffness, and restricted range of motion. Various manual therapy techniques have been employed to address these issues, with compressive myofascial release (CMR) and instrument-assisted soft tissue manipulation (IASTM) being among the most commonly utilized interventions. These techniques aim to alleviate pain, enhance muscle function, and restore mobility by targeting myofascial restrictions and improving blood circulation. This review critically examines the existing literature on the effectiveness of CMR and IASTM in managing upper trapezius MTrPs, with a focus on their underlying mechanisms, clinical outcomes, and practical applications. Additionally, this review highlights the comparative efficacy of these approaches, their integration into comprehensive rehabilitation programs, and potential future research directions to optimize treatment strategies for individuals suffering from myofascial-related neck pain.

Keywords: Myofascial release, Instrument-assisted soft tissue manipulation, Trigger points, Upper trapezius, Neck pain, Manual therapy

INTRODUCTION

Myofascial pain syndrome (MPS) is a chronic musculoskeletal disorder characterized by the presence of myofascial trigger points (MTrPs), which are hyperirritable nodules within taut bands of skeletal muscle. These trigger points can lead to localized and referred pain, muscle stiffness, and restricted range of motion, significantly affecting an individual's physical function and overall well-being (Shah & Gilliams, 2008). The upper trapezius muscle is one of the most commonly affected muscles in MPS, often contributing to neck pain and functional limitations. Neck pain, particularly when associated with myofascial trigger points, is a leading cause of disability worldwide, reducing quality of life and impacting daily activities (Hoy et al., 2014). The prevalence of neck pain and MPS has increased substantially due to modern lifestyle factors such as prolonged static postures, repetitive strain, and ergonomic deficiencies.

The economic burden of neck pain is considerable, influencing both healthcare

costs and work productivity (Cohen, 2015). Conventional treatment approaches for MPS include pharmacological interventions, physical therapy, and invasive techniques such as trigger point injections and dry needling. However, concerns regarding medication dependency, potential side effects, and limited long-term efficacy have led to increased interest in non-pharmacological treatment options. Manual therapy has emerged as a preferred approach for managing MTrPs, offering a safe and effective alternative to pharmacological interventions (Fernández-de-las-Peñas et al., 2019). Among the various manual therapy techniques, compressive myofascial release (CMR) and instrument-assisted soft tissue manipulation (IASTM) have demonstrated promising results in alleviating pain, improving muscle function, and enhancing mobility.

Compressive myofascial release (CMR) is a hands-on technique that applies sustained pressure to myofascial tissues to release tension, break adhesions, and improve local blood circulation. This technique is based on the principle that sustained pressure can induce viscoelastic and neurophysiological changes in the affected tissues, thereby reducing pain and improving mobility. Studies have shown that CMR can effectively modulate pain perception, decrease muscle tone, and restore normal muscle function (Ajimsha et al., 2015). In contrast, instrument-assisted soft tissue manipulation (IASTM) utilizes specially designed tools to apply controlled microtrauma to myofascial tissues, stimulating the body's natural healing response. IASTM is believed to enhance collagen remodelling, increase fibroblast activity, and promote tissue regeneration, ultimately leading to improved functional outcomes (Kim et al., 2017).

The mechanisms underlying these manual therapy techniques extend beyond their mechanical effects and involve complex neurophysiological interactions. Emerging evidence suggests that manual therapy can influence both central and peripheral pain modulation mechanisms, including mechanoreceptor activation, changes in muscle spindle activity, and alterations in local blood flow (Bialosky et al., 2009). These neurophysiological effects contribute to the analgesic benefits of CMR and IASTM, further supporting their role in myofascial pain management. Additionally, manual therapy techniques may facilitate changes in the central nervous system, reducing pain sensitivity and improving motor control through descending inhibitory pathways.

Given the multifaceted nature of MPS and the interplay between biomechanical and neurophysiological factors, it is essential to critically evaluate the efficacy of CMR and IASTM in managing upper trapezius MTrPs. This review aims to explore the underlying mechanisms of these therapies, examine their clinical outcomes, and assess their practical applications based on current research. By synthesizing existing literature, this review will provide insights into the effectiveness of CMR and IASTM, guiding clinicians in selecting appropriate treatment strategies for individuals suffering from myofascial-related neck pain. Furthermore, this review will discuss potential limitations, gaps in the current evidence, and future directions for research in the field of manual therapy and myofascial pain management.

Mechanisms of Action

1. **Compressive Myofascial Release (CMR):**
   CMR involves the application of sustained manual pressure to MTrPs, aiming to release muscle tension and improve blood flow. This technique enhances myofascial mobility, reduces muscle stiffness, and promotes relaxation by stimulating the autonomic nervous system (Fernández-de-las-Peñas et al., 2019). The sustained pressure may lead to a decrease in localized ischemia and the disruption of the pain-spasm-pain cycle, facilitating muscle relaxation and pain relief.

2. **Instrument-Assisted Soft Tissue Manipulation (IASTM):**
   IASTM utilizes specialized tools to apply controlled microtrauma to soft tissues, facilitating the breakdown of fascial adhesions and promoting tissue remodeling (Kim et al., 2017). This technique enhances fibroblast activity, leading to collagen realignment and improved soft tissue healing.

Clinical Evidence and Benefits

Several studies have investigated the efficacy of CMR and IASTM in treating upper trapezius MTrPs:

- A randomized clinical trial compared the effects of trigger point release (TPR) and IASTM using the M2T blade on patients with mechanical neck pain. Both interventions significantly increased neck lateral flexion and rotation immediately post-treatment and at follow-up, with no significant difference between the groups, suggesting that both TPR and IASTM are effective in improving neck mobility in patients with upper trapezius MTrPs (Saleh et al., 2021).
- A review article examined the effectiveness of IASTM in treating upper trapezius MTrPs. The review concluded that while IASTM shows promise in reducing pain and improving function, further research is necessary to establish standardized treatment protocols and confirm long-term benefits (Cheng et al., 2020).
- A randomized controlled trial compared the effects of IASTM and manual myofascial release (MFR) on pain, range of motion, and function in patients with upper trapezius MPS. Both treatments significantly reduced pain and improved function, with IASTM showing a greater reduction in pain intensity. However, improvements in pain pressure threshold, range of motion, and function were similar between the two groups, indicating that both IASTM and manual MFR are effective treatment options for upper trapezius MPS (Smith et al., 2023).
- A study by Huang et al. (2022) investigated the effects of combining IASTM with therapeutic exercise in individuals with chronic neck pain. The results showed a significant improvement in pain reduction, muscle strength, and function compared to therapeutic exercise alone.
- A meta-analysis by Lee et al. (2023) reviewed randomized controlled trials on IASTM and found that it consistently improved pain scores and range of motion in patients with MPS, further supporting its clinical efficacy.
- A case study by Williams and Thompson (2021) examined the use of CMR in professional athletes suffering from chronic upper trapezius pain. The findings highlighted significant reductions in muscle tightness and perceived discomfort after repeated sessions.

Clinical Applications and Recommendations

Based on the current evidence, the following clinical applications and recommendations can be made:

- For Acute Neck Pain: IASTM may provide rapid relief by increasing circulation and reducing fascial restrictions. Its ability to quickly modulate pain makes it a suitable option for acute cases (Kim et al., 2017).
- For Chronic Myofascial Pain: CMR is effective for sustained relief by addressing deep-seated muscle tightness and improving myofascial mobility. Its focus on releasing deep myofascial restrictions makes it particularly beneficial for chronic conditions (Fernández-de-las-Peñas et al., 2019).
- Combined Approach: Integrating both CMR and IASTM may optimize therapeutic outcomes, especially in patients with persistent neck pain. The complementary mechanisms of these techniques can address various aspects of

MTrP pathology, potentially leading to enhanced pain relief and functional improvement (Ajimsha et al., 2015).

CONCLUSION

Compressive myofascial release and instrument-assisted soft tissue manipulation are valuable interventions for managing upper trapezius myofascial trigger points associated with neck pain. Both techniques have demonstrated significant benefits in pain reduction, muscle relaxation, and functional improvement. A combined approach may offer enhanced therapeutic effects, making these modalities essential components of manual therapy for myofascial pain syndrome. Continued research is essential to refine these interventions and optimize patient outcomes.

Future Research:

Further studies are needed to establish standardized treatment protocols, determine the optimal frequency and duration of interventions, and assess long-term benefits. Research should also focus on identifying patient-specific factors that may influence treatment outcomes, such as the chronicity of symptoms and individual pain thresholds (Shah & Gilliams, 2008).

Declaration by Authors

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