

Discover The St. John Method of Neuromuscular Therapy

The human body maintains life and health in an amazing way. Each individual cell performs an activity that contributes to the body's overall function. Nerve impulses transmit information to maintain a balanced internal environment – called homeostasis. Every day, life situations threaten to disrupt that balance. Physical traumas, strains and emotional stress undermine homeostasis. This imbalance leads to aches and pains which left untreated may result in physiological dysfunction.

There are ways to get at the roots of these imbalances and alleviate much of the pain and dysfunction. The St. John Method of NMT, developed by Paul St. John in response to his own constant, debilitating pain, is one such method. It is based on research that identifies the fundamental causes of pain.

The St. John Method of NMT is a comprehensive program of soft tissue manipulation techniques that balance the central nervous system (brain, spinal cord and nerves) with the structure and form of the musculoskeletal system (skeleton and muscles of the body). The St. John Method of NMT is based on neurological laws that explain how the central nervous system maintains homeostatic balance. Accordingly, these same laws dictate how the central nervous system initiates pain responses.

One law that applies, Arndt's Law⁷ represents how pain originates in the body. Simply stated, it says that different levels of stimuli to the nerves affect physiological activity. At homeostasis (balance) nerves transmit impulses very slowly. Injury, trauma, postural distortion, or stress cause nerves to speed up their transmissions, inhibiting equilibrium and making the body vulnerable to pain and dysfunction. It is necessary to stabilize low levels of neurological activity to maintain homeostasis and thus overall health.

The St. John Method of Neuromuscular Therapy considers five principles that cause pain.

1. Ischemia
2. Trigger points
3. Nerve compression or entrapment
4. Postural distortion
5. Biomechanical dysfunction

Ischemia is a lack of blood supply to the soft tissues, which causes them to be very sensitive to touch. Typically, if less than 5 to 10 pounds of pressure causes tenderness, the tissues are in an ischemic state. This is one of the first conditions a neuromuscular therapist analyzes.

Trigger points occur when the nerves fire impulses at a rapid speed into an area of the body other than that which has been traumatized. Because of trigger points, the cause of serious pain may often be far removed from the actual site of the pain. This, in turn, inhibits proper blood flow, which causes ischemia and often leads to more pain and discomfort.

Nerve compression or entrapment is pressure on a nerve by bone, cartilage or soft tissue. The role of the soft tissues in nerve compression is vital. Realigning vertebrae without treating associated soft tissue frequently treats the symptom and not the cause. Spinal nerves are subject to intrusion when any of the vertebrae are dislocated or spinal disks herniated. Treating the surrounding soft tissues that cause or rehabilitation and alleviation of pain.

Whiplash often causes nerve entrapment by the soft tissues. The nervous system initiates tightening of the muscles to stop bleeding in the tissues caused by violent snapping of the neck backward and forward. This tightening results in muscular spasm. After bleeding stops, the spastic response, initially a curative one, will continue if intervention is not made. This muscular spasm causes pressure on nerves and creates its own painful condition.

Nerve entrapment is the most common type of pain and always causes ischemia. Ignored, it can produce associated trigger points.

Postural distortion is an imbalance of the muscular system resulting from movement of the body off the coronal, midsagittal and horizontal planes. Gravitational force (33.5 lb per square inch) is constantly pulling the body toward the Earth. If there is an imbalance in the structural system, gravity causes the body to compensate in an effort to retain balance. Trauma, gravitational pressure or psychological patterning causes the soft tissues to assume a weight-bearing function and thus become thicker, denser and harder. Muscle contraction, body distortion and pain are the results of compensations the body makes in order to maintain structural homeostasis. By determining why the compensations have occurred the distorted patterns can be eliminated, proper posture restored, and associated pain diminished or eliminated in most cases.

Other body distortions are caused by muscles contracting and shortening while others lengthen in an effort to hold the body upright as a result of “righting reflexes” these reflexes respond to messages from the inner ear, eyes, muscles or skin to bring the body into equilibrium.

Biomechanical dysfunction is an imbalance of the musculoskeletal system resulting in faulty movement patterns. Repetitive strain of certain soft tissues results in adapted movement patterns that become muscular “habits” and must be reeducated.

The Origin of the St. John Method of Neuromuscular Therapy

Paul St. John had a vested interest in studying and researching soft tissue pain and musculoskeletal dysfunction. He was seriously injured three times in his life: he broke his back in three places in a high school football game, was injured in Vietnam, and was in a head-on auto accident. For nearly four years, he awakened to headaches and unceasing pain. Thousands of dollars in medical expenses left him without relief. He found that by pressing on the tissues of his neck, back and shoulders, he was able to get temporary relief. Frustration and fear lead him to medical libraries where he began his investigation of pain. He discovered a great deal of literature on soft tissues and the interrelationship between muscles, tendons, ligaments and fasciae, and the role they play in causing pain. From his research, he became familiar with a technique called receptor tonus technique and incorporating his knowledge of the body into his work, training other individuals in his method so they could treat him. For the first time in four years, he was pain free. He then attended massage therapy school while expanding on his own treatment technique. In 1978, he developed the St. John Method of Neuromuscular Therapy and began teaching seminars while maintaining a clinical practice to further his research.

Neuromuscular Therapy has been presented to healthcare professionals at such institutions as Johns Hopkins University, the University of North Carolina, and to The Kentucky Dental Society and the Atlanta CranioMandibular Society. NMT has also been presented before the Physical Medicine Research Foundation; the American College for Advancement in Medicine; the American Academy of Head, Neck and Facial Pain; at American Massage Therapy Association conventions; and at the Institute for TemporoMandibular Regulation in Germany.

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