

Charley-horses come in many forms

It's 5:00 in the morning, and you are awakened abruptly by a sharp, stabbing pain in your lower leg. Once you get your bearings, you realize that you have a severe cramp in the muscle on the back of your leg...a "charley horse." If you have some training in SCUBA-diving, you understand that the only way to break the spasm is to stretch out the muscle, however painful that might be. For most of us, instinct directs us to stand up on the leg and try to "walk it off," which is the body's way of stretching out the muscle. What has occurred is that a bundle of muscle fibers within that muscle has decided to contract out of sequence with the rest of the muscle, which cause excruciating pain. Unfortunately, this can happen to any skeletal muscle in the body, including those in the head, face, and neck.

A skeletal muscle can be thought of as a large group of rubber bands that typically work together as one unit to move body parts. When working properly, all of the muscle fibers ("rubber bands") work in harmony to contract to move a bone. There are nerves that direct the teamwork of the individual muscle fibers, much like the helmsman on a rowing team. Occasionally, some of the muscle fibers decide to go rogue and contract out of sequence to the rest of the muscle. When this happens, pain occurs.

In many muscles, small groups of muscle fibers stay



Dr. Kevin Huff
Dentist

When trigger points occur in the chewing muscles, they can cause severe headaches, tooth pain, dizziness, ringing in the ears, and sensitive teeth. Once trigger point pain is identified, predictable and effective treatment can be initiated.

chronically out of harmony with the rest of the muscle and can be felt when the muscle is palpated. These painful "balls" of muscle may stimulate pain to occur at a distant site, and they may be painful to touch themselves. Dr. Janet Travelle, President JFK's personal physician, described these as "trigger points".

When trigger points occur in the chewing muscles, they can cause severe headaches, tooth pain, dizziness, ringing in the ears, and sensitive teeth. It is not uncommon for me to see patients who have had multiple root canals in a certain area of the mouth only to be discouraged that they are still experiencing tooth pain. Often this pain is related to the "charley horses" that are occurring in one or several of their chewing muscles.

Recently, for example, I saw a patient who had been seen by multiple physicians for severe headaches

and who has had several root canals done in recent months in all of his upper left teeth because of pain. He still had the tooth pain when he came to see me, which got worse while eating. The physicians had ruled out medical problems through bloodwork, various medication regimens, MRIs, and CT scans. Upon examination, I could easily palpate chronic muscle trigger points in his left temple and neck that directly shot pain to his teeth, recreating the dental pain that had been the reason for the root canal therapy.

Once trigger point pain is identified, predictable and effective treatment can be initiated. Typically, treatment involves bite splint therapy where a custom-made hard plastic appliance is worn during sleep. Sometimes muscle relaxant medication is prescribed. Often, appropriate bite splint therapy is quickly effective in controlling trigger point pain in the muscles of mastication. Bite splints basically allow the body to work out the muscle cramps much like it does by getting us up to "walk off" a charley horse in the middle of the night.

Dr. Kevin Huff is a general dentist in Dover, holds the status of "Master" in the Academy of General Dentistry, and is a clinical instructor at the Case School of Dental Medicine.

For questions about dental health or to schedule a complementary consultation, call 330-364-2011, visit www.doctorhuff.net, or ask your regular dentist.