

# **Ageing Doesn't Have To Include Words That End In "itis"**

By Mitchell Yass PT

If you are over the age of sixty I am sure you have seen your physician for some ache or pain you have noticed slowly growing in your neck back or other joint. An x-ray is performed and you are diagnosed with arthritis. If your complaint is at your hip or shoulder a cursory evaluation may provide you the diagnosis of bursitis or tendonitis. With the diagnosis in hand an anti-inflammatory is prescribed and you are told this should resolve the problem. A few weeks go by the pain does not resolve and another anti-inflammatory is given. No resolution of pain still and you are finally told there is nothing much that can be done for you. This is part of the aging process. This story has been told to me on many occasions from patients I encounter at my physical therapy and personal training office in Farmingdale NY. The level of frustration is evident. These people feel that their problems are not being addressed in a serious manner because of their age. I would like to set the record straight based on my experiences. The cause of most of these people's aches or pains is not from structural problems with their joints such as arthritis tendonitis or bursitis. In most cases they have muscle imbalances muscle weakness or flexibility issues that cause muscles to become inflamed and painful. It is not to say that most of the people diagnosed with arthritis don't have arthritis. They do but that is not the cause of their ache or pain. I recently had a woman note that she had pain at the anterior aspect of her upper shin. She saw her physician and informed him of the situation. The doctor felt around her knee and said it must be arthritis. The woman replied the pain is not at my knee; it is farther down on my shin. The doctor simply reaffirmed his belief that the cause was arthritis and the issue was dropped. This woman raised the issue with me during a visit for physical therapy she is receiving for her hip. I checked it out. It turned out to be a muscle on the front of her shin that was irritated. I massaged it gave her some exercise to do and the pain resolved that treatment. I was happy to have been able to assist this woman in the resolution of her pain but I can't see everybody. This is why I would like to provide some information to the elderly about how to resolve joint pain and possibly prevent it from even occurring.

The most common cause of neck pain I have determined is muscle imbalances between the front shoulder and chest region and the posterior shoulder and upper back region. Due to the natural tendency to hold and lift things in the front of our bodies the muscles of the front shoulder arm and chest naturally get stronger than the muscles of posterior shoulder and upper back. This causes a posture known as forward head and shoulder posture. The head is held slightly flexed forward indicated by the ear being in front of the shoulder when looking at the individual from the side. The shoulders being drawn forward by the stronger anterior muscles causes the shoulder blades to move to the sides away from the spine. As a result muscles that attach from the skull or spine to the shoulder blades become overstretched. The muscles do not tolerate this well and tighten causing pain and in some cases headaches. The appearance of a neck problem is in fact a shoulder/shoulder blade problem. Strengthening of the muscles at the back of the shoulders between the shoulder blades and the back of the arms will cause the shoulders and head to be pulled back in proper alignment. This causes the shoulder blades to be spaced proper distance from the spine. The muscles that attach from the skull and spine to the shoulder blades will be maintained at their proper length. This limits them from going into spasm and becoming painful. The maintenance of these muscles at their proper length also allows the muscles to function at their maximal efficiency making functional activities with your arms easier and creating less chance for injury at the neck and upper back region.

Shoulder pain is also commonly caused by a muscle imbalance. This one is between the front and posterior shoulder musculature combined with the imbalance between the chest muscles and upper back muscles. Again resolution of pain can typically be achieved by strengthening of the muscles of the posterior arm shoulder and upper back.

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The same situation of muscle imbalance holds true for the lower back. The muscles in question here are the muscles of the front and back thigh. The muscles of the front thigh have a tendency to be stronger than the muscles of the back thigh because they are used more for activities such as standing walking climbing stairs and sitting down. As a result of this imbalance between these muscles the front thigh muscles shorten. They attach to the front of the pelvis so they pull the front of the pelvis down. This causes an increased arching of the lower back region. This makes the muscles of the lower back shorten putting them into spasm and causing pain. Anytime someone describes lower back pain and knee pain or tightness at the front thigh you can almost bet that the cause of these symptoms are tight and strong front thigh muscles not being offset by equally strong back thigh muscles. The answer to the lower back pain is not an anti-inflammatory. It is strengthening of the posterior thigh and pelvic muscles known as the glutes and hamstrings. Strengthening of these muscles will keep the pelvis at a position where the lower back arch is maintained at the normal position. As a result the lower back muscles are maintained at their proper length. They will not go into spasm nor cause pain. Again they will support your torso with be achieve maximal efficiency limiting the chance for injury. This muscle imbalance between the front thigh and posterior thigh is also the main cause of knee pain with my patients.

Hip pain is often the result of muscle weakness of the muscles on the side of your thighs. These muscles are called the hip abductors. One muscle attaches from the top of your pelvis to the hip joint. The other muscle attaches from the side of the pelvis above the hip joint to the knee. Often times I have encountered the description of both hip and knee pain. This is usually a signal that these muscles are involved in the cause of the pain. These muscles are responsible for keeping the pelvis level when you weight bear on the leg you stand on when swinging the other leg forward with walking. These muscles must work very hard to perform this function. It is amazing to have experienced over my twelve-year career how many people have weak hip abductors.

This tendency to diagnose neck back and joint pain in the elderly as one of the itis' is rash and dismissive to these people. Their complaints are real and are more apt to be mechanical in nature than structural. Today people are living longer. Unfortunately our society creates an environment where growing older is celebrated with retirement and a decrease in activity level. This causes an effect on muscles known as disuse atrophy. The lack of use of these muscles causes them to weaken and tighten. This is the true cause of most neck back and joint pain. Whether you have aches or pain or want to prevent them from occurring the answer is strength training. Take responsibility for yourselves. Don't depend on medications to resolve these issues. Medications cost a lot of money. Get out of the loop of medicating for every ache and pain. Get off the couch. Get on your feet. Perform strength training and watch the aches and pains disappear.

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